

SERMON XVII.*

God the best portion of the Christian.



PSALM lxxiii. 25.

WHOM HAVE I IN HEAVEN BUT THEE ? AND THERE IS NONE
UPON EARTH THAT I DESIRE BESIDES THEE.

THE Psalmist, in this psalm, relates the great difficulty that he met with in his own mind, from the consideration of the prosperity of wicked men. He tells us, ver. 2 and 3, “As for me, my feet were almost gone ; my steps had well nigh slipt. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” In the 4th and following verses, he informs us, what it was he had observed in the wicked, which was his temptation. In the first place, he observed, that they were very prosperous, and all things went well with them. He then observed their behavior in their prosperity, and the use which they made of it ; and that God, notwithstanding such an use or abuse, continued their prosperity, as in the 6th and following verses. Then the Psalmist tells us by what means he was helped out of this difficulty, viz. by going into the sanctuary, verses 16, 17 ; and proceeds to inform

* Dated April, 1736.

us what considerations they were which helped him, viz. these three :

1. The consideration of the miserable end of wicked men. However they prosper for the present, yet they come to a woful end at last, ver. 18, 19, 20

2. The consideration of the blessed end of the saints. Although the saints, while they live, may be afflicted, yet they come to an happy end at last, ver. 21, 22, 23, 24.

3. The consideration, that the godly have a much better portion than the wicked, even though they have no other portion but God; as in the text and following verse. If it be so, that the wicked are in prosperity, and are not in trouble as other men; yet the godly, though they be in affliction, are in a state infinitely better than the wicked, because they have God for their portion. However they may have nothing else, this is enough, without the enjoyments of wicked men; they need desire nothing else; he that hath God, hath all. Thus the Psalmist professes it was with him, in the sense and apprehension which he had of things: *Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee.*

In the verse immediately preceding, the Psalmist takes notice how the saints are happy in God, both when they are here in this world, and also when they are taken to another world. They are blessed in God in this world, in that while here God *guides them by his counsel*; and when he takes them out of this world, they are still happy, in that then God *receives them to glory*. The Psalmist having thus taken notice of the happiness of the saints in God, both while here upon earth, and also when removed into another world, was probably by this observation led, in the next verse, which is the text, to declare that he desired no other portion, either in this world or in the world to come, either in heaven or upon earth.

DOCTRINE.

It is the spirit of a truly godly man, to prefer God before all other things, either in heaven or on earth.

I. A godly man prefers God before any thing else in heaven.

1. He prefers God before any thing else that *actually is* in heaven. Every godly man hath his heart in heaven; his affections are mainly set on heaven, and what is to be had there. Heaven is his chosen country and inheritance. He hath respect to heaven, as a traveller who is on occasion abroad in a distant land hath to his own country. The traveller can content himself to be in a strange land for a while, until his present occasion and business be over; but his own native land is preferred by him to all others. Heb. xi. 15, &c. "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned: But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly."

So also the respect which a godly person hath to heaven, may be compared to the respect which a child, when he is abroad, hath to his father's house. He can be contented abroad for a little while; but the place to which he desires to return, and in which to dwell, is his own home at his father's house. Heaven is the true saint's father's house. John xiv. 2. "In my Father's house are many mansions." John xx. 17. "I ascend to my Father and your Father."

Now, the main reason why the godly man hath his heart thus in heaven, is because God is there; that is the palace of the most high God; it is the place where God is gloriously present, where he is to be seen, where he is to be enjoyed, where his love is gloriously manifested, where the godly may be with him, see him as he is, and love, serve, praise, and enjoy him perfectly. It is for this chiefly that a godly man desires heaven. If God and Christ were not in heaven, he would not be so earnest in seeking it, nor would he take so much pains in a laborious travel through this wilderness, nor would

the consideration that he is going to heaven when he dies, be such a comfort to him under the toils and afflictions of the world, as it now is. The martyrs would not undergo those cruel sufferings which are brought upon them by their persecutors, with that cheerfulness in a prospect of going to heaven, did they not expect to go and be with Christ, and to enjoy God there. They would not with that cheerfulness forsake all their earthly possessions, and all their earthly friends, as many thousands of them have done, and wander about in poverty and banishment, being destitute, afflicted, tormented, in hopes of exchanging their earthly for an heavenly inheritance, were it not that they hope to be with their glorious Redeemer and heavenly Father in heaven.

If God and Christ were not in heaven, however beautiful the place be, and whatever excellent creature inhabitants there be there, yet heaven would be but an empty place, it would be but an unlovely place. The believer's heart is in heaven, because his treasure is there; and that treasure is Jesus Christ, the same that we read of in Matth. xiii. 44, which is there called "a treasure hid in a field, which, when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all he hath, and buyeth that field."

2. A godly man prefers God before any thing else that *might be* in heaven. Not only is there nothing actually in heaven, which is in his esteem equal with God; but neither is there any thing of which he can conceive as possible to be there, which by him is esteemed and desired equally with God. Those of some nations and professions suppose quite different enjoyments to be in heaven, from those which the scriptures teach us to be there. The Mahometans, for instance, suppose that in heaven are to be enjoyed all manner of sensual delights and pleasures. Many things which Mahomet has feigned are, to the lusts and carnal appetites of men, the most agreeable that he could devise; and he flattered his followers with promises of such enjoyments in heaven.

But the true saint, if he were to contrive such an heaven as would suit him best, could not contrive one more agreeable

to his inclination and desires, than such an one as is revealed in the word of God; an heaven of the enjoyment of the glorious God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, where he shall have all sin taken away, and shall be perfectly conformed to God, where he shall have a perfect acquaintance with God, and shall spend an eternity in exalted exercises of love to God, and in the enjoyment of his love. Such an heaven is to the saint better than any Mahometan paradise; it is the best heaven that can possibly be; there is no happiness conceived of, that would be better, or that would appear so desirable to him, as this. If God were not to be enjoyed in heaven, but, instead of that, there were vast wealth, immense treasures of silver and gold, and great honor of such kind as men obtain in this world, and a fulness of the greatest sensual delights and pleasures; all these things would not make up for the want of God and Christ, and the enjoyment of them there. If it were empty of God, it would indeed be an empty melancholy place.

The godly have been made sensible, as to all creature enjoyments, that they cannot satisfy the soul, and that happiness is in God; and therefore nothing will content them but God. Offer a saint what you will, if you deny him God, he will esteem himself miserable. His soul thirsts for God, to come and appear before God. God is the centre of his desires; and as long as you keep his soul from its proper centre, it will not be at rest. The true saint sets his heart on God as the chief good.

II. It is the spirit of a godly man to prefer God before all other things on the earth.

1. The saint prefers that enjoyment of God, for which he hopes hereafter, to any thing in this world. He looketh not at the things which are seen, and are temporal, so much as at those things which are unseen and eternal, 1 Cor. iv. 18. It is but a little of God that the saint enjoys here in this world; he hath but a little acquaintance with God, and enjoys but a little of the manifestations of the divine glory and love. But God hath promised to give him himself hereafter in a full en-

joyment. And these promises of God are more precious to the saint, than the most precious earthly jewels. The gospel which contains these promises, doth therein contain greater treasures, in his esteem, than the cabinets of princes, or the mines of the Indies.

2. The saints prefer what of God may be obtained in this world before all things in the world. They not only prefer those glorious degrees of the enjoyment of God which are promised hereafter, before any thing in this world; but even such degrees as may be attained to here in the present state, though they are immensely short of what is to be enjoyed in heaven. There is a great difference in the spiritual attainments of the saints in this world. Some attain to much greater acquaintance and communion with God, and conformity to him, than others. But the highest attainments are very small in comparison with what is future.

The saints are capable of making progress in spiritual attainments, and of obtaining more of God than ever yet they have obtained; and they are of such a spirit that they earnestly desire such further attainments. Not contented with those degrees to which they have already attained, they hunger and thirst after righteousness, and, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that they may grow thereby. It is their desire, to know more of God, to have more of his image, and to be enabled more to imitate God and Christ in their walk and conversation. The appetite of the soul of a godly man is after God and Jesus Christ, as appears by many places of scripture; as Psalm xxvii. 4. "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple." Psalm xlii. 1, 2. "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: When shall I come and appear before God?" Psalm lxiii. 1, 2. "O God thou art my God, early will I seek thee; my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; to see thy power

and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary." See also, Psalm lxxxiv. 1, 2, 3, and Psalm cxxx 6. "My soul waiteth for the Lord, more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning."

Though every saint has not this longing desire after God to the same degree that the Psalmist had, yet they are all of the same spirit; they have a spirit earnestly to desire and long for more of God, to be nearer to him, to have more of his presence and of the light of his countenance, and to have more of God in their hearts. That this is the spirit of the godly in general, and not of some particular saints only, appears from Isa. xxvi. 8, 9, where not any particular saint, but the church in general speaks thus: "Yea, in the way of thy judgments, O Lord, have we waited for thee; the desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee. With my soul have I desired thee in the night, and with my spirit within me will I seek thee early."

It appears also to be the spirit of the saints in general, by some expressions of the spouse or the church in the Cantic; as chapter iii. 1, 2. "By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth; I sought him, but I found him not. I will rise now, and go about the city; in the streets and broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth." So chapter v. 6, 8. "I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I am sick of love."

The saints are not always in the lively exercise of such a spirit; but such a spirit they have, and sometimes they have the sensible exercise of it: They have a spirit to desire God and divine attainments, more than all earthly things. They desire and seek to be rich in grace, more than they do to get earthly riches. They seek and desire the honor which is of God, more than that which is of men, John v. 44. They desire communion with God, more than any earthly pleasures whatsoever. They are in some measure of the same spirit which the apostle expresses in Philip. iii. 8. "Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss, for the excellency of the

knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord, and do count them but dung that I may win Christ."

3. The saint prefers *what he hath already of God* before any thing in this world. That which was infused into his heart at his conversion, is more precious to him than any thing which the world can afford. The knowledge and acquaintance which he hath with God, though it be but little, he would not part with for any thing that the world can afford. The views which are sometimes given him of the beauty and excellency of God, are more precious to him than all the treasures of the wicked. The relation of a child in which he stands to God, the union which there is between his soul and Jesus Christ, he values more than the greatest earthly dignity; he had rather have this, than to be the child of a prince. He would not part with the honor which God hath been pleased to put on him by bringing him so near to him, to be set upon an earthly throne, or to wear an earthly crown, though it were the most splendid that ever was worn by any earthly potentate.

That image of God which is instamped on his soul, he values more than any earthly ornaments. It is, in his esteem, better to be adorned with the graces of God's Holy Spirit, than to be made to shine in jewels of gold, and the most costly pearls, or to be admired for the greatest external beauty. He values the robe of the righteousness of Christ, which he hath on his soul, more than the robes of princes. The spiritual pleasures and delights which he sometimes has in God, he prefers far before all the pleasures of sin, Psalm lxxxiv. 10. "A day in thy courts is better than a thousand: I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness."

A saint thus prefers God before all things in this world.

1. As he prefers God before any thing else that he *possesses* in the world. Whatever temporal enjoyments he has, he prefers God to them all. If he have pleasant earthly accommodations; yet it is with respect to God, and not his earth-

ly accommodations, that he saith, as in Psalm xvi. 5, 6. "The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance, and of my cup: Thou maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen to me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage." If he be rich, yet he chiefly sets his heart, not on his earthly, but his heavenly riches. He prefers God before any earthly friend, and the favor of God before any respect that is shown him by his fellow creatures.

Although a godly man may have many earthly enjoyments, yet in his heart he sets God above them all. Although he may give these room in his heart, and too much room; yet he reserves the throne for God; Luke xiv. 26. "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

2. He prefers God before any earthly enjoyment of which he *hath a prospect*. The children of men commonly set their hearts more on some earthly happiness for which they hope, and after which they are seeking, than on what they have in present possession. They very much live upon vain hopes of happiness in earthly things, an happiness which they imagine is to be obtained by and by. But a godly man prefers God to any thing which he has in prospect, or is seeking in the world. He may, indeed, through the prevalence of corruption, for a season be carried away and swallowed up, with some enjoyment which he is pursuing; however, he will again come to himself; this is not the temper of the man, he is of another spirit.

3. It is the spirit of a godly man to prefer God to any earthly *enjoyment* of which he can conceive. He not only prefers him to any thing which he now possesses; but he sees nothing possessed by any of his neighbors, or any of his fellow creatures, that he has such an esteem of, as he has of God. If he could have as much worldly prosperity as he would, if he could have earthly things, just to his mind, and agreeable to his inclination; he values the portion which he has in God, above such a portion as this: He prefers Christ to earthly kingdoms.

APPLICATION.

1. Hence we may learn, that whatever changes a godly man passes through, he is happy ; because God, who is unchangeable, is his chosen portion. If he meet with temporal losses, and be deprived of many of his temporal enjoyments, or of all of them ; yet God, whom he prefers before all those things which he hath lost, still remains, and cannot be lost. While he stays here in this changeable, troublesome world, yet he is happy, because his chosen portion, on which he builds, as his main foundation for happiness, is above the world, and above all changes. And if he die and go into another world, still he is happy, because that portion, which he prefers to all that is either in this or another world, yet remains. Whatever he be deprived of, he cannot be deprived of his chief portion ; his inheritance remains sure to him.

If worldly minded men could find out a way to secure to themselves some certain earthly enjoyments, on which they mainly set their hearts, so that they could not be lost, nor impaired while they live, how great would they account the privilege, though other things which they esteem in a less degree were liable to the same uncertainty as they now are ? Whereas now, those earthly enjoyments, on which men chiefly set their hearts, are often most fading. But how great is the happiness of those who have chosen the Fountain of all good, and prefer him before all things in heaven or on earth, as they can never be deprived of him to all eternity !

2. Let all by these things examine and try themselves, whether they be saints or not. As this which hath been exhibited is the spirit of the saints, so it is peculiar to them : None can use the language of the text, and say, *Whom have I in heaven but thee ? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee*, but the saints. A man's choice is that which determines his state. He that chooses God for his portion, and

prefers him to all other things, is a godly man, for *he* chooses and worships God as God. To respect God as God, is to respect him above all other things ; and if any man respect God as his God, his God he is ; there is an union and covenant relation between that man and the true God.

Every man is as his God is. If you would know what a man is, whether he be a godly man or not, you must inquire what his God is. If the true God be he whom he respects as his God, i. e. to whom he hath a supreme respect, and whom he regards above all ; he is doubtless a godly man, a servant of the true God. But if the man have some other god, something else to which he pays a greater respect than to Jehovah, he is not a godly man ; God is not his God ; he doth not worship him for his God, nor doth he belong to God, as one of his people.

Inquire, therefore, how it is with you, whether you prefer God before all other things. It may sometimes be some difficulty for persons to determine this to their satisfaction ; the ungodly may be deluded with false affections ; the godly in dull frames may be at a loss about it. Therefore you may try yourselves as to this matter these several ways ; if you cannot speak fully to one thing, yet you may perhaps to others.

(1.) What is it which chiefly makes you desire to go to heaven when you die ? Indeed some have no great desire to go to heaven. They do not care to go to hell ; but if they could but be safe from that, they would not much concern themselves about heaven. If it be not so with you, but you find that you have a desire to go to heaven, then inquire what it is for. Is the main reason, that you may be with God, have communion with him, and be conformed to him ? That you may see God, and enjoy him there ? Is the consideration that these things are to be had in heaven, that which keeps your heart, and your desires, and your expectations towards heaven ?

(2.) If you could avoid death, and might have your free choice, would you choose to live always in this world without God, rather than in God's time to leave the world, in order to be with God in the full enjoyment of him ? If you might live

here in earthly prosperity to all eternity, but destitute of the presence of God and communion with him, having no spiritual divine intercourse between God and your souls, God and you being strangers to each other for ever; would you choose this rather than to leave the world, in order to go and dwell in God's house in heaven, as the children of God, there to enjoy the glorious privileges of children, in an acquaintance with God, in an holy and perfect love to God, and enjoyment of him to all eternity?

(3.) Do you prefer Christ to all others as the way to heaven? He who chooses God, and prefers him, as hath been spoken of, he prefers him in each person of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; the Father, as his Father; the Son, as his Saviour; the Holy Ghost, as his Sanctifier. Inquire, therefore, not only whether you choose the enjoyment of God in heaven as your highest portion and happiness, but also whether you choose Jesus Christ before all others, as your way to heaven; and that in a sense of the excellency of Christ, and of the way of salvation by him, as being that which is to the glory of Christ, and to the glory of sovereign grace. Is the way of free grace, by the blood and righteousness of the blessed and glorious Redeemer, the most excellent way to life in your esteem? Doth it add a value to the heavenly inheritance, that it is conferred in this way? Is this far better to you than to be saved by your own righteousness, by any of your own performances, or by any other mediator?

(4.) If you might go to heaven in what course you please, would you prefer to all others the way of a strict walk with God? They that prefer God as hath been represented, choose God, as you have heard, not only hereafter, but here; they choose and prefer him, not only in the end, but in the way. They had rather be with God than with any other, when they come to the end of their journey; and not only so, but they had rather have God with them than any other, while they are in the way thither. Their chosen way of going to heaven is a way of strict walking with God. They would neither fail of coming to God in the end, nor would they depart from God by

the way. They choose the way of walking with God, though it be a way of labor, and care, and selfdenial, rather than a way of sin, though it be a way of sloth, and of gratifying their lusts.

(5.) If it were so, that you were to spend your eternity here in this world, would you choose rather to live in mean and low circumstances with the gracious presence of God, than to live for ever in earthly prosperity without God in the world? If you were to spend your eternity in this world, would you rather spend it in a way of holy living, in serving and walking with God, and in the enjoyment of the privileges of the children of God, having God often manifesting himself to you as your Father, discovering to you his glory, and manifesting his love, lifting the light of his countenance upon you, as God often doth to his saints in this world; would you rather choose these things, though you should live in poverty, and with but little of the good things of this world, than to abound in a fulness of worldly things, and to live in ease and prosperity, at the same time being an alien from the commonwealth of Israel, standing in no childlike relation to God, enjoying no gracious intercourse with him, having no right in God, either to have him for your God, or to be acknowledged by him as his children? Or would such a life as this, though in ever so great earthly prosperity, be esteemed by you a miserable life?

If, after all this, there remain with you doubts, and a difficulty to determine concerning yourselves whether you do truly and sincerely prefer God to all other things, I would mention two things which are the surest ways to be determined in this matter, and which seem to be the best grounds of satisfaction in it.

1. The feeling of some particular, strong, and lively exercises of such a spirit. A person may have such a spirit as is spoken of in the doctrine, and may have the exercise of it in a low degree, and yet remain in doubt whether he have it or not, and be unable, by all his selfexamination, to come to a satisfying determination. But God is pleased at some times to give

to some of his people, such lively and strong exercises of such a spirit, and they see it so clearly, and feel it so plainly, that it puts it, at least for the present, out of doubt. They obtain such discoveries of the glory of God, and of the excellency of Christ, as do so draw forth the heart, that they know beyond all doubt or question, that they feel such a spirit as Paul spake of, when he said, "He counted all things but loss, for the excellency of Christ Jesus his Lord;" and they can boldly say, as in the text, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee." At such times the people of God do not need any help of ministers to satisfy them whether they have the true love of God; they plainly see and feel it; and the Spirit of God then witnesseth with their spirits, that they are the children of God.

Therefore, if you would be satisfied upon this point, earnestly seek such attainments; seek that you may have such clear and lively exercises of this spirit. To this end, you must press forward, and labor to grow in grace. If you have had such experiences in times past, and they satisfied you then, yet you may again doubt. You should therefore seek that you may have them more frequently; and the way to that is, earnestly to press forward, that you may have more acquaintance with God, and have the principles of grace strengthened. This is the way to have the exercises of grace stronger, more lively, and more frequent, and so to be satisfied that you have a spirit of supreme love to God.

2. The other way is, To inquire whether you prefer God to all other things in practice, i. e. whether, when you have occasion in the course of your life to manifest by your practice which you prefer, when you must either cleave to one or the other, and must either forsake other things, or forsake God; whether then it be your manner practically to prefer God to all other things whatever, even to your dearest earthly enjoyments, to those earthly things to which your hearts are most wedded. Do you lead such lives as this? Are your lives, lives of adherence to God, and of serving God in this manner?

He that doth sincerely prefer God to all other things in his heart, he will do it in his practice. For when God and all other things come to stand in competition, that is the proper trial what a man chooses; and the manner of acting in such cases must certainly determine what the choice is in all free agents or those who act on choice. Therefore there is no sign of sincerity so much insisted on in the Bible as this, that we deny ourselves, sell all, forsake the world, take up the cross, and follow Christ whithersoever he goeth.

Therefore, so run, not as uncertainly; so fight, not as those that beat the air; but keep under your bodies, and bring them into subjection. Act not as though you counted yourselves to have apprehended; but this one thing do, "forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." 2 Pet. i. 5. &c. "And besides this, giving diligence, add to your faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."