

SERMON IV.¹

“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.”

Isaiah 1:18

THE Lord is here speaking unto a stubborn and rebellious people, who thought themselves far on in religion because of external things; and now the Lord, who loves the welfare of His people, resolves either to bring them home unto Himself or leave them inexcusable. In the former verses, the Lord, finding them to have made some kind of reformation in their lives by outward ceremonies, tells them it was nothing but lies; when they trusted unto their outward service, it could not pass in heaven, because it was not sound on both sides, and therefore He calls both their practices and their worship a lie. Having convinced them of this, He comes now to lay down the true and living way, that if they would take Christ for their Prophet, Priest, and King, and His righteousness and holiness, then although He and they were strangers to one another before, now He would admit them into near fellowship with Him. “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. And whatsoever ye can object against your well-being, I shall answer it if once ye will come and make use of the suit. Come, and I will take away your sins;” and He says in the sixteenth verse, “Wash ye, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes, cease to do evil.”

We have in the text so many reasons to press the point upon them.

Reason 1. “Come,” says He, “let us reason together. And

if ye will do so, I will admit you into near fellowship with Me.”

Reason 2. The second reason is, “If ye will come and make use of the fountain, or remedy, that I have laid out unto you, then come; I am content to debate, or reason the matter with you in a gospel way.”

Reason 3. The third reason is, If ye will come and make use of the fountain, be your condition what it will, it shall not be remembered: “If your sins were as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

1. The first is the word “Come.”
2. The second is, “Let us reason together.”
3. The third is, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as wool.”

And there is the authority on which they are given, viz., “Thus saith the Lord;” and the last reason is expressed twice over, to beat down all objections whatever.

Now we come to the explication of the words. And,

I. The first reason, as we have said, is “Come.” And to come is several ways taken in Scripture. And,

1. To “come,” sometimes signifies to appear. “God came from Teman, and the Holy One from mount Paran.” There, coming is taken for appearing.

2. Sometimes “coming” is taken for believing. “He that cometh unto me shall never hunger.” There it is meant of believing.

3. Sometimes, in Scripture, it is taken for going from one

place to another; and in this sense it means a piece of reformation in life; and so it may be taken in these words.

4. “Coming” may be also taken for a heavenly joining together. “And many nations shall come, and say, Let us go up unto the mountain of the Lord.” That is, Come let us join ourselves in a heavenly way together, in the Lord’s service.

Now we say all these significations may be contained here, in the word “Come.” Now,

1st, The first signification was, to appear. In the former words He has laid out a fountain unto them, and has bid them come, and make use of it; and it is well. “Come,” says He, “and let me see thy countenance; let me hear thy voice, for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.”

2ndly, This word “Come” may be taken for believing. “Ye are guilty of all these things,” says He. “Now if ye will come and take My advice, and submit unto Me, then I allow you faith to believe upon My Son, and you shall have life.”

3rdly, As it signifies to come from one place to another; and this expresses some piece of reformation, as I said before, says He, “If ye come and make application to this fountain, then I will command holiness for you.” “Now ye are clean, through the word that I have spoken unto you.” By what word? Even by that word that He had spoken unto them and that they had believed. So says He, “Come, ye shall be cleansed; I will command holiness for you.” But,

4thly, The word here is principally to be taken for a heavenly or close joining together. “You are guilty,” says He, “and ye cannot be cleansed, but by the fountain; and if ye will come, whereas ye were but strangers and outlaws before, and I took no gracious notice of you; now I will admit

you to be near unto Me, and I will notice and look into your case and condition.” But there is a coming two ways.

1. There is a coming, out of respect to a command, where the creature dare do nothing, but even because there is a command for it; and then a necessity pressing upon the back of it, and the creature must give obedience. And indeed many a time the creature thinks the command of God very unreasonable, as in this instance that the like of it should come and believe, and yet necessity and the command press unto it. And,

2. There is another sort of coming, and that is not so much out of obedience to the command, and of necessity, as it is out of love to God. This kind of coming is rather a reward for the creature, than a duty; for it may be the creature has stayed itself upon God, and yet comes to God but as a law-giver; and because of the command, it goes about duty. But when one comes out of love to a loving invitation, then it becomes rather a reward than a duty.

II. I come now to the second reason that is given to press this point on these people: “Let us reason together. Let us humbly and mildly debate the matter as to whatever concerns your well-being. I am now upon speaking terms with you, which I was not before.” Now there are sundry sorts of reasoning between God and the soul. And,

1. There is a law-reasoning between them. Sometimes when the Lord, as a just and holy God, sets all the sinner’s iniquities before him, and then He appears as a lawgiver unto him. Now, in this law-reasoning, all the acts of parliament are from the covenant of works; and this is one act, “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all the words of this law to do them.” And when He comes to this creature, this clause is in its bosom, “Depart from me ye workers of iniquity.” Now, in these acts there is nothing given

unto the creatures to work upon but their own strength. Neither do they admit of repentance, but persons are cursed for the least sin as a breach of that law.

2. A second kind of reasoning is a gospel-reasoning. The form of it is this: God enters into debate with the creature, only for the removal of its doubts. And He reasons with the soul only according to the acts or terms of the New Covenant, and this points out a pleasant way wherein the creature may be fully satisfied.

3. There is a reasoning which, in some sense, may be called a law-gospel reasoning, beginning in the spirit of bondage and fear, but terminating in the gospel. In this the Lord calls a rebel to an account, and at length he finds all he has forfeited, he is made sensible that there is not so much as a dish or a spoon that he possesses but he, as it were, steals it from God, as having no proper right in law to it. Now, after all this, the criminal hears an ancient act, which was made in the reign of King Jesus, and it is found there that if any man, either in the person of himself or in the person of another, can fully satisfy, he shall be free. Whereupon a submission is drawn up, and the criminal submits unto it, he will have Christ to come in and bring him into friendship again with God. On this Christ, as Mediator, steps in and takes up the plea. He convinces the creature, and says, "You have wronged God greatly, but it shall be done away." And then out of God's own treasure He takes as much as satisfies God fully, upon which this promise comes out, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." "And let him that is athirst come, and whosoever will let him take of the water of life freely." Now this we may call a law-gospel reasoning.

4. There is a fourth way of reasoning, wherein the Lord reasons or speaks to His people by strokes. In this kind of

reasoning He is said to contend, as ye will find it frequently expressed in Scripture. And this reasoning has its rise from the former. This arises from the gospel, in this sense, that it is a clause of the covenant to correct His people. "If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments, then will I visit their transgressions with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless, my loving kindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail." If they stand in need, they must not want strokes. This is a clause of the New Covenant. But shut out faith and consolation from the creature, and debate only for sin in the creature, then it becomes a law-reasoning. Therefore He has said, if He sees it needful, He wilt strike them. But judicially, or aiming at satisfaction, He could debate with Christ only, so that He does not strike His people to get satisfaction from them; no, but for their good. "All things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are the called, according to his purpose." Though it may not seem good for the present, yet it shall be for their good at the long-run, as the Scripture says, "No affliction for the present seemeth joyous, but grievous." Besides, the apostle says that He "afflicts us that we may be partakers of his holiness."

Now, there are also other sorts of reasoning between God and the creature, as when the creature reasons from arguments taken from the Lord Himself, such as Moses or Jeremiah used. The latter says, "Why shouldst thou be as a mighty man who cannot save."

Again, sometimes the creature reasons from his own holiness or uprightness. "Preserve my soul, for I am holy; save thy servant that trusteth in thee." "O that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know the words which he would answer me, and understand what he would say unto me." There

the righteous might dispute with Him, "So should I be delivered for ever from my judge." Now the servants of God may argue from the argument taken from what they have already got from Him. But my reasoning here in the text is gospel reasoning, "Come," says He, "and I will debate with you in a gospel way; I will answer all your doubts, and let the Mediator be Judge of all."

III. The third thing was, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be like crimson, they shall be as wool." Their objection was, "Why should we reason; we can look for nothing but death." "No," says He, "though your sins be as scarlet, though they be of a double dye, yet they shall be blotted out." But how is it that He says "they shall be made white?" Why, He makes them as if they had never committed them. "For if once ye will yield," says He, "and come to the fountain, ye shall be freed from the pollution of sin." Moreover, if ye will yield to Jesus Christ He shall make you holy, and ye shall be reformed more and more, and made thoroughly holy.

And the authority for this is, "Thus saith the Lord." "Submit, I will reason calmly with you, and answer all your doubts." And for your warrant, ye shall have the word of Jehovah, who is absolutely in and of Himself; for "by my name, Jehovah, shall I be known." Before He was saying that He could not away with their offerings, and then in the sixteenth verse He says, "Wash you and make you clean." But here He gives them His word and His own great name as the security of their cleansing.

Now, if ye look on the command, and the necessity, you will see that the doctrinal point here is,

DOCT. I. That provided any abominable sinner will submit his way and himself to God, he may come boldly, and have access unto Him. "Let us draw

near with a true heart in full assurance of faith,
having our heart sprinkled from an evil conscience,
and our bodies washed with pure water.”

“In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of Him.” “In whom you are also builded together for an habitation of God, through the Spirit.”

So that if any sinner, however so great, yield once to Him, he may come with boldness and have access unto God. And the

Reason is: If once the soul come and yield itself to God, it has got a full right and title to the heavenly inheritance. “But ye are come to Mount Sion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.” And they get the new name and white stone. Moreover, the partition-wall that was betwixt God and them is now broken down. When the creature confesses his faults, and submits unto them, then he may come boldly. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Further, the soul is a bride for the King’s Son, and therefore is it not becoming that His daughter-in-law should come familiarly unto Him? The real enjoyment of this access to God manifests itself by gospel-holiness. “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son, cleanseth us from all sin.” Again, we have access unto Him because we are entered by the door. “I am the door; by me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.”

USE. This doctrine is of use to comfort all those that are

content to take Christ as their Prophet, Priest, and King; and yet dare not be bold with Him. But if you be content to submit to Him, ye may come boldly unto Illin. But whosoever they be that will not yield to God, and lay down their arms of rebellion, they are proud rebels, and God knoweth the proud afar off. And they get all that God gives them as one would cast a bone unto a dog. If ye ask me, “What points of familiarity those who have submitted unto Christ may use?”

1st, You may go and tell God what is wrong with you, either with respect to sin or judgment. Ye may come and tell Him the greatest sin that ever ye committed; think it before Him when ye dare not speak it. Many a time the sin is so heinous that the creature dares not speak it. And yet ye may tell the thing to Him that ye dare not tell to a living creature, for He is the best secretary that ever one had.

2ndly, Whatever you have need of, you may get, and take, in and through Christ, even whatsoever can do your souls any good.

3rdly, Ye may use familiarity with God to know His will, or purposes, in so far as such knowledge may make you forthcoming to His praise. You may say, “Wilt thou let me know, Lord, what Thou wouldst have me to do in this case, and what is Thy mind in it.” God allows you to be familiar with Him, so far as it may make you forthcoming in your duty to His praise.

“Come let us reason together.” Thus God allows them in a peaceable way to come and reason the matter with Him; and, says He, “You shall be satisfied concerning all your doubts.”

DOCT. II If once poor sinners be content to yield to Christ, then He is willing to come into terms of speaking with them in a peaceable way; as ye will

find in sundry places of Scripture.

Now, for the reason of this point, we find in Scripture that the Lord uses to reason with His people.

1st, We find the Lord's servant sometimes reasoning with Him about the matters of His divine procedure. And,

2ndly, We find, in Scripture, the Lord reasoning with them, that He may have their approbation of that which He is doing. Now,

1. For the first reasoning about the Lord's procedure. "Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I plead with thee; yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments. Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are they all happy that deal very treacherously?" "I will give Thee credit before I begin, that Thou art righteous," says he; "yet there is somewhat in my heart concerning thy dealings, and I would be glad to be satisfied as to that: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper?" Here the servant of the Lord reasons with Him as to His proceedings; and yet at the same time acknowledges that all He did was righteous. When the Lord was about to destroy Sodom, He tells it to Abraham, who had some reluctance in his heart; "Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" "Shall not the Judge of the earth do right?" But, says the Lord, "I will satisfy you;" and then He falls a reasoning with him about His way of proceeding with Sodom.

Sometimes they reason about the work of God in themselves. Now, the creature's mind is not clear, but in doubts; and therefore he must reason thus: "Lord, if it be not so, that I have the work of God within me, whence is all this striving? If Thou hadst designed to have killed me, wouldst Thou have taken a meat-offering at my hand?"

Again, There is a reasoning concerning the creature's duty.

The creature is at a stand in duty, and cannot go any further, till it knows the Lord's mind. "Lord, let me know what Thou wouldst have me to do in this, and in that cross, that is fallen in my way." Somewhat of this is expressed, "O Lord, why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our heart from thy fear?" Lord, we would know why Thou hast let this and that come upon us. But the natural man doth not say so; for it were blasphemy for him to speak to God after this way and manner. And,

2. We say, "It is granted to the creature to debate with God;" and why?

(1.) Because it is one of the privileges of the creature to be of one mind with God; for God will seek the creature's approbation as to what He is about to do. And,

(2.) Because it concerns His glory, and their duty. For where they know not His mind, it is lawful for them to reason and plead with Him, in order to know it, that they may know their own duty concerning such and such a thing.

USE. You that have fled to Christ, plead for satisfaction in anything concerning God's glory, and your own duty. When ye are likely to succumb, and see not the Lord's mind in anything, ye may go and plead for the manifestation of it. But ye that have never fled unto Christ, ye shall never be satisfied concerning the Lord's way. It is well known that the natural man many times is ready to curse God in his heart, because he cannot be content with His way. But iniquity shall stop the mouth of the wicked. But unto you that flee to that fountain He shall make known His covenant; that is, He shall make you read His covenant in that which does not resemble it.

The next thing in the text is the justification of the sinner,

by taking away his iniquity. “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be as crimson, they shall be as wool.” Hence,

DOCT. III. *The most vile sinner that ever comes to Christ is welcome, and shall be set free from the debt of sin* “Him that cometh unto me,” says Christ, “I will in no wise cast out.”

The reason for this doctrine is, because the soul having once fully yielded itself to Christ, owes God nothing, so to speak; it is not a debtor any more, it is completely justified. God has nothing to say unto it when once the righteousness of Christ is imputed to it as, to everyone who savingly knows Him, he is fully justified “through His blood, which cleanseth from all sin.”

USE. This reproveth all those who have God’s testimony in them, that they are content to submit unto Him, and yet they have thoughts arising in their hearts as to what shall become of them for such and such sins; for the text says, “Though they be of a double dye, they shall be done away, and be made white as snow.” Sins that are done against light, sins that are done against challenges of conscience, are sins of a double dye, and yet they shall be done away. Sins done against love, even against much of the good-will of God, are sins of a scarlet dye. Sins done against vows, making former vows lie like so many broken chains about your necks, are sins of a scarlet colour—such sins committed after sacramental occasions; sins relapsed into after you have been oft-times convinced of them; sins after fasting, when you have been duly warned by those who would not be found guilty of your blood. Sins against covenant engagements, sins against a profession, all these are sins of a scarlet colour and crimson dye. But I say, “Suppose your sins have been after communions, after fasts, after swearing or covenanting, if once ye stoop and be content that Christ reign in you, the Lord will cleanse you, and make you white

as snow or as wool.

“But what is the matter,” say ye, “although I be clean to-day, I shall be as unclean to-morrow.” But the text says that He will put holiness in you. Hence,

DOCT. IV. *The most unclean sinner that yields to Christ, and comes to the fountain opened, shall be made a pure saint.* “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? No idolaters, adulterers, extortioners, drunkards, and such were some of you; but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

Come then to Him, and He will sanctify you, and make you holy. The reasons are,

(1.) If you yield to Christ He is engaged to make you holy. “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly.” “Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.”

(2.) The soul now coming home unto God is under correction for misbelieving Him so long, and therefore is afraid to fall into sin again, and provoke God to be again angry.

(3.) A third reason is, that he has been far from God, and in the devil’s service. He knows the subtle devices of that enemy, and therefore does all he can to evite them. But we do not wish that any would take occasion from this to go far from God, that they may better know the subtle wiles of the devil. And therefore yield yourselves to God, and ye shall be purified, sanctified, and made holy.

But, say ye, “I would gladly yield if I knew my warrant, or ground whereon I would be better.” I say, there is a command, and there is a word that says, “This is the command, that ye believe on the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, whom

he hath sent.” Here is a command and ye shall receive damnation if ye obey it not. “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life, and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.” There is nothing within you that should be allowed to jostle out a commanded duty. “But,” say ye, “I would yield unto Him if I knew that He would but accept of me, or the like of me.” Oh, high blasphemy! To say that thou wouldst, He would not; to say that thy insignificant love would go beyond His infinite love; for He chose us before we chose Him; He loved us before we loved Him. His love has helped many, and drowned their iniquity—many who were loath to come to heaven. Hell, devils, and men have tried His love, but they have never yet found a crack or flaw in it.

Now, to put you out of all doubt, He doubles the expression, “For the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.” To satisfy them He uses two different expressions of one meaning, whereby we see that the Lord is pleased to answer the daughters of Zion with sundry expressions for one doubt. And He does so for this reason, that the creature is simple, and the devil is subtle; the devil who takes so many different methods to make the creature believe that these are new doubts again, which, indeed, are nothing but the same. He will say, “How prove ye that ye are within the new covenant?” “Because,” say ye, “I do not hate instruction, but I love it, and them that give it to me. I consent not to sinners when they go on in sin; and therefore I am within the covenant.” And then in a little he will come back again and say, “How know ye that ye are called?” “Because,” say ye, “I have got mine ear opened to hear the word, and I love it better than I did before and it does me more good many times.” “And how know ye,” says he, “that God is your Father!” “Because,” say ye, “I get my meat, drink, and all I have from Him.” And then he will say, “How know ye that ye have true grace within you?” and so on, still one

doubt after another, as long as he can make the poor jealous of God; and yet all these doubts are one and the same in substance; and therefore the Lord uses sundry expressions, though one and the same in substance, to answer all His people's doubts and fears.

USE. Think much on the devil's subtlety, and God's goodness towards you, who takes such pains in answering your condition. Ruminare upon your own folly. Though God has forgiven you; never forgive yourselves. And for your security you have, "Thus saith the Lord," the greatest security Zion's daughters can have in the world; and the only security that can satisfy the soul. For if ye would speak never so much to the soul, if ye do not prove it by "Thus saith the Lord," the soul will not believe it. And moreover this security, or way of security, keeps God in much respect among His people; because all their salvation and the grounds of it depend on Him! and it makes much for our duty also.

Finally, If we had only a man's word for our security in any matter, would we not be more loath to offend that man? How much more careful should we be not to offend the Lord, whose word we have for our security? This security makes believers continually seek to have God honoured. "Come, then, saith the Lord, and let us reason together, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

Footnotes:

1. It is supposed that this sermon was preached at Irvine on a sacramental occasion.