

SERMON IV.*

1 Peter 5. 10.

But the God of all grace, who hath called us into his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered awhile, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.

I SHALL spend none of your time at all in looking upon the context. And although there are many great truths, which lie within the compass of this verse, as any of you may easily apprehend at first sight; I shall only pitch upon that one which I intend to insist upon, and which it may be hoped will be equally suitable to the time and to our case, as it is to the text. You may without further preface take it thus;

That to a right and well-disposed judgment, spiritual improvements and advantages by sufferings, are more desirable, than a freedom from those sufferings themselves.

That the ground may be clear, I shall present you with a supposition or two, before I proceed to make out the truth itself. As

First: We will suppose these expressions, to wit, "make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you," do all of them hold

* Preached at Plaisterers' Hall, February 28, 1677.

forth to us spiritual improvement and gain. I apprehend that none of you will doubt, but the apostle by these expressions intended the better state of those, to whom he wrote, in spiritual respects. We may suppose not of each person considered absolutely, and singly; but all considered in common, that they might be brought into a better state with reference to their spiritual concerns and affairs; which indeed the word *καταρτισαι* doth more especially seem to hint to us. It signifies the setting in joint, what was unjointed before, and quite out of frame; and so rather imports a relation to a community, than to a single person alone. But take all together, and no doubt the expressions do intend spiritual improvement and advantage. And then again,

Secondly: We may lay down this further supposition, that the order of the sufferings here mentioned is not merely that of precedency in time, but of subserviency to some kind of cause that has an instrumental influence to their spiritual advantage. "After that ye have suffered awhile, or you having suffered a little" (as the words may be read, for the word "after" is not in the Greek text) "May the God of all grace make you perfect," &c. But it would be very unreasonable to suppose, that these sufferings should only precede, and no more; or have only an idle priority in respect of time; for that were to suppose, that God, as it were, was consenting to it, that they should suffer for nothing, or to no purpose. And therefore we must conclude that the apostle intended to insinuate, that this precedent state of suffering would conduce, and contribute much to their spiritual improvement; which he had principally in his eye, on their behalf. These things being supposed, I shall endeavour very briefly to evince to you.

I. That a well-informed judgment will reckon, and does reckon and account, as you have heard, namely, that spiritual improvements and advantages by sufferings are more desirable, than a freedom from those sufferings themselves. And,

II. Shew you what reason and ground it has so to judge. And this I shall do only from the text, and with all possible brevity, that I may hasten,

III. To the use, which I chiefly intend.

I. That a well-informed judgment doth reckon spiritual improvements by sufferings to be more desirable, than a freedom from those sufferings themselves. We need no further light than what the text affords us to make this point clear, if we will but admit this twofold consideration;

1. That this great apostle was undoubtedly furnished with

wisdom enough to understand what was really best for these scattered strangers, to whom he writes here. There can be no room for a doubt concerning this. And,

2. That he was prompted by that love, which would certainly engage him to pray for that which was best for them, according to his judgment. We can, I say, doubt of neither of these, if we will but consider that this prayer of his was indited by the Spirit of all wisdom, and love. We cannot therefore doubt but that he both understood that to be best for them, which really was so; and that he thereupon prayed for that, in great kindness of heart to this poor people, which he so understood to be best. No more need be said to evince that a well-informed judgment will determine thus, that spiritual improvement by sufferings is better, than a freedom from them, and more desirable. I proceed to shew

II. That there is a sufficient reason for such a judgment, which we may also see in the text; that is, that it is more desirable to have sufferings improved, than to have them presently removed from us. And this appears most suitable to that grace by which christians are called; and also to that glory unto which they are called.

Observe the connexion of the request, which the apostle makes on the behalf of these scattered Jews; (as we have most reason to suppose them Jews converted to Christianity) do but observe, I say, the connexion of the request, with the preface to it: "The God of all grace, who hath called you to his eternal glory by Jesus Christ, make you perfect," &c. It is to be supposed, that the preface in this prayer (as it is usually intended in all such prayers) should carry somewhat or other in it, agreeable to the matter afterwards prayed for. And so it really is here. For the apostle does not pray, that these christians might not suffer; but that upon, or by the means of their sufferings, they might receive that great and spiritual advantage, of being brought into a more perfect and better state, than they were in before; and gain more strength, more stability, more fixedness than ever. And to pray thus, I say, is,

1. Most suitable to that grace by which they had been called; or most suitable to God, as he is the God of all grace.

But it may be said, "Is that suitable to the gracious nature of God, to let his own peculiar people be abused by a vile, wicked world? to expose that sort of persons (who of all others do alone love him, and are true to him among men) unto violent and injurious usage from the rest of mankind?" Yes cer-

tainly; if we consider the matter well, it is most suitable. God is, it is true, a Father to that select people; but consider where the relation falls, and where it terminates. He is said in contradistinction to the fathers of our flesh, to be the Father of our spirits. Heb. 12. 9. It is certainly most suitable to the love of God to let his own people suffer, if you will allow his love to be correspondent to the relation. He is indeed related to them as a Father, but to what of them? To their spirits principally, and especially to that spiritual product, or new nature, of which he is the immediate Author. There the relation terminates, to that he is chiefly related as a Father, and there his care and love goes with the relation, "Let it be well with their spirits, and it matters not much how it goes with them any where else. I am the Father of their spirits; I am to take care it may go well with them upon spiritual accounts. Therefore if their flesh feel pain, if it suffer want, if it be pinched and straitened, if it languish and complain, it agrees very well with my relation to their spirits, as a Father to them. Let it then be so, let sufferings come upon them, if all this shall prove to the greater advantage of their spirits; if they shall thereby come to have so much more thriving and prosperous souls; if by this means they grow more refined; more freed from terrene dross; be more fitted for my fellowship; rendered more capable of doing me duty in their respective places; and of tasting, and relishing the pleasure thereof; if this be the case, I think I deal with them but as a Father, whose relation is to their spirits."

The apostle speaks of this with a great deal of complacency, and as one that is highly well pleased. "Though (says he) our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen, are temporal; but the things which are not seen, are eternal." 2 Cor. 4. 16, 17, 18. He does not speak this with any kind of regret that he found the outward man so struck as to be continually liable to perish.

"No," saith he, "let it perish daily; I matter it not. Though it does perish, that signifies nothing to me, so that the inward man be but renewed day by day." And,

2. It is more suitable to that state of glory, whereunto we are called; as well as to that grace, by which we are called. It is very necessary, to our being introduced into that glorious, blessed state, that we be prepared, and made some way fit for

it, before we reach it. And the great concernment and necessity of this makes the apostle Paul bless God, with a great deal of triumph, on the behalf of those Christian Colossians to whom he wrote; and he puts them upon blessing of God, that though they were suffering to that degree as that they stood in need of all patience, yet that all this while he was making them meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light. Col. 1. 11, 12. He speaks of it as the proper matter of thanksgiving, that though they suffered so much as to require their being strengthened with all might, according to the glorious power of God; yet it was all well enough: they were so far from having cause to complain, that they had a great deal of reason rather to give thanks to God. As if he had said, "It is a pure, a bright, and lightsome region that you are going to, and you need a great deal of refining before you come there, that you may be fit to be received. You need to have your spirits clarified, and freed from all impure dross, even while you are suffering so as that all patience is requisite unto it. You have therefore reason to give thanks, if God by this means is making you meet to partake of the inheritance of the saints, in their state of life, purity and perfection."

This is also intimated in that place before mentioned. "I do not care," as if he had said, "though the outward man perisheth, while the inward is renewed day by day." And how is it renewed? Why thus, the "light affliction, which is but for a moment, works out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." But how do afflictions work out a state of glory for us? In answer to this, we are to consider what notion we ought to have of the glory, whereof the saints are to be partakers hereafter; and by which they are to be made happy and blessed. Now it is not merely an objective glory that can make me happy, and be the satisfaction of my soul; that is, to have only some glorious sights to behold and look upon, and no more. For I can be happy by nothing, which is not united to me; and it is impossible any one should be blessed by a distant good, severed from themselves. And therefore we are told how we are to conceive of this glory, by St. Paul, who tells us it is a glory that is to be revealed in us. Rom. 8. 18. It is a glory most intimate to the subjects, and by which they are made glorious; not merely to be seen, but what they themselves are to bear: and therefore the apostle says it is *εις ημας*, to be revealed in, or into us. It is that impress of the divine glory, which is imparted and communicated from God to the soul, upon the vision of his blessed face; by which it is transformed perfectly now into the same likeness, as much as a creature can be like to him.

Here is the glory, by which souls are made happy and blessed at last ; and into the stated participation of which they are now actually called by Jesus Christ.

Now consider this glory so, as here explained, and it is very apprehensible how the light afflictions, that are but for a moment, do work it out for us. For they gradually refine the soul after the image of the divine nature, make it more and more conformed to God ; and according to the degree of the progress to which this refining work is carried on by such means while we are in this world, is our participation of the divine glory hereafter. According to the capacity of the vessel, which God hath designed to be a vessel of glory and honour, is the measure of that glory which is to be put into it in the other state. But certainly by this refinement, to which afflictions are so subservient and useful in this world, the soul is made more and more capable and receptive ; it is refined, and enlarged at once. And thus it is more suitable to that state of glory to which we are called, which was to be proved, in order to shew that it is more desirable to have sufferings improved, than to be freed from those sufferings themselves.

III. Therefore now to apply this, as the time will allow ; and,

1. For Instruction.

(1.) We may learn hence, that we have another interest to concern ourselves about, besides that of our flesh or outward man. For otherwise it could never be understood how that, which is really an offence and prejudice to the outward man, should be an advantage to us in any other respect. As chastising afflictions by a paternal rod are natural evils, but yet inflicted on us for spiritual good. It is plain then, I say, we have another interest about which we ought to be concerned.

(2.) We may further collect ; that these two interests, as they are very distinct, so they are ordinarily too, very opposite to one another. That may make for the advantage of the spirit or inward man, which is greatly to the hurt and prejudice of of the outward ; and that which contributes to the gratification and pleasure of the outward man, may be very prejudicial to the inward. These are opposite interests, and we should consider them as such ; and it would be of very great advantage to us, through our whole course, to carry this as a fixed thought with us, "That the interests of my flesh, and of my spirit, are often stated in such an actual opposition to one another, that what makes for the advantage of the one, is frequently hurtful and prejudicial to the other." For if we would but allow

ourselves to consider this, and admit it as a fixed thought, then it would not, upon every occasion that occurs to us, be our first concern and care ; namely, "What shall I do to save my flesh and outward man ? how shall I order matters that all may go well with that ?" especially as there is another interest in myself, which may be provided for by the methods of providence, that cast a severe and threatening aspect upon the other. And,

(3.) We may hence further learn, that the interest of the inward man is much more considerable than that of the flesh ; which is the subject of the supposed sufferings, of which the apostle speaks, who puts up a very solemn request for spiritual advantage by such sufferings. He that loved them so well does not pray, that they might not suffer at all ; but only that after they had suffered a little, they might be perfected and established. Certainly our spiritual interest is more considerable, than our outward interest ; and we should be willing that the interest and advantage of the flesh, should be sacrificed to the interest of the soul : and that which I am willing to part with for another, must certainly be less considerable than the other. But,

(4.) We may also learn, that sufferings are not novelties among the people of God in this world ; neither are they to be looked upon as novel, even the sharpest and severest of them. The apostle directs those, to whom he writes, in the same chapter, that they should look with another kind of eye upon an afflicted state, than to suppose it a new thing, or as if nothing like it was known before. In the verse before my text, he intimates that they only suffered such afflictions as were common to others in the world, and such as many good men had endured, who were gone before them. And in another place of this epistle he admonishes them not to think strange even of the fiery trial ("which," says he, "is to try you") as if some strange thing had happened to them ; assuring them that after they had suffered awhile, the Spirit of glory and of God should rest upon them. That they should suffer was reckoned upon, taken for granted ; and therefore it speaks a very strange spirit among us, if the thoughts of any sufferings should presently startle us. What ! are we grown so soft and delicate, that we must meet with no afflictions in the world ? as if it were a more wonderful thing that we should suffer, than others who have gone before us in former days. Wherein are we better than they ?

2. I pass on to another use, which may be for conviction to us, who seem to be so much of another judgment from the

apostle, in this important case. And there are two or three things which I would here premise. As

(1.) That there is no present question depending whether we should simply desire to be freed from affliction, yea or no; or whether, considering the matter simply in itself, we may not judge it desirable to be free from affliction. This is not the thing concerned in the present discourse, nor any part of it. It will be easily acknowledged, that the sufferings we speak of are natural evils; and evil as such, or in itself, cannot be eligible to a reasonable nature. But the thing we speak of is, that when these two matters are compared; to wit, freedom from afflictions, and spiritual advantage by them, we should not prefer the former: not but that a freedom from suffering, simply in itself and alone, is a desirable thing; but compared with the spiritual advantages arising from thence, is not to be preferred or desired by us. And,

(2.) I again premise, that by judgment here I do not intend a mere notional, but a practical judgment. For I make no question but we are all of the apostle's mind without any more ado; and agree with him that it is better to have spiritual advantage by affliction, than to be free from it. But when we speak of a practical judgment, here it is that our error lies, and wherein we are to be rectified. The practical judgment is that, to which the temper of a man's soul doth correspond: that which is of such power and prevalency with a man, as to impress its own likeness, or somewhat correspondent to itself upon his own heart, upon his will, his choice, and affections; and so consequently influence the course of his walking, and conversation. The thing therefore I complain of, in this case, is, that the temper of our spirits is so unsuitable; so unlike the apostle's judgment in this case, that spiritual improvement by suffering is more desirable than freedom from it. These things being premised, I shall evince, that there is a failure among us in these things, particularly that we are not like-minded with the apostle in this matter, and then, shew you the great evil of it, that is, of our error in this regard.

[1.] I am to evince that there is a great failure or mistake in our judgment, if we are not of the same mind with the apostle as to this point. And this I would do by putting a few queries to you, by which you may be able to convict yourselves where in the matter does require, and will admit. As

First. Whether are we more sensible of the external calamities which befall us, than of inward spiritual distempers? Suppose a person by some surprising providence lose all he had in the world, is reduced to the utmost distress and necessity, whe-

ther is not this more grievous, or more sensibly felt than inward spiritual evils? "Do I so cry and bemoan myself because of the body of sin and death, as I do when I have lost my friend, my husband, my wife, my child, my house, my estate, my pleasant delectable things in this world?" In such cases we cry out as undone persons; we mourn and refuse to be comforted. "But I have an earthly, vain heart; a heart that will not be brought to live in love, and communion with God; unapt to prayer, to meditation, to spiritual commerce with heaven." Do we so sensibly complain upon these accounts, I say, as men are apt to do under the sharp and acute sense of external evils? This shews which way the poize of our spirits inclines, and we may plainly discern it by urging ourselves with this question.

Secondly. Whether do we more dread and fear the continuance, and increase of inward distempers, or external sufferings? which, I say, is more the matter of our dread? I have a near evil that hath pressed me, and is like to do so still; a carnal, stupid, terrene, and corrupt heart; whether do I dread the continuance of this, or the increase of it; more than I do the continuance, or increase of any external sufferings that are upon me, or may threaten me? If you should be told, that there is danger of being devoured in all your external concerns by a formidable enemy; or that you are in danger of fire, of great losses, of coming into a decayed state in respect of your trade and traffic; which things would you think of with the most dread? Should not we dread more the thoughts of being turned out of all, driven from house and home, of going to seek our bread in desolate places, of wandering in wildernesses and deserts, lurking in dens and holes of the earth? Should we not, I say, think of these things with more dread, than we ordinarily do of that close, latent enemy, that lies lurking at our very hearts and sculs? namely, infidelity within, and disaffection to God? a proneness to depart from him, and a heart bent to backslide? Which sort of evils are we most apt to dread?

Thirdly. Which should we consider with more complacency, an external state of things just agreeable to such an idea as we could form to ourselves in our own minds; or an inward frame of holiness, agreeable to the idea which the blessed God hath set before us in the word of truth? which, I say, should we think of with more delight? Suppose we should have the prospect set before us of such a state of things in outward respects as we could wish; garners yielding all kind of store, nothing but prosperity, pleasure and peace in our dwellings; all the liberty our hearts could desire, to do and walk according to our

own inclinations : and frame again the prospect of an enlightened, lively mind and spirit ; full of God, full of heaven, full of divine love, full of spiritual strength, vigour, activity and fervour in all holy exercises whatsoever ; and which, I pray, of these seemeth the more grateful prospect to us ? Or which is the more taking thing with our hearts, upon the view of the one and the other ? to have in outward respects, all the opulence and prosperity our hearts could wish on the one hand ; and on the other, to have hearts disentangled and freed from sin, so as that we may go to God upon all occasions with freedom, or without restraint, and always converse with him with delight ?

Such questions as these closely urged may convince some, as the case may require, how much they differ from this apostle ; and are of a different sense and estimate from him, in reference to what we are speaking of. And if there be such a disagreeing judgment in this case, then we are to consider,

[2.] The great evil of it. And this I might represent to you very largely ; but, at present, take some account of it only in these few particulars.

First. It speaks great injudiciousness in the matter of discerning between things that differ, and which doth more excel. It is one great part of the work and business of judgment to distinguish between things, that are of different value from one another ; and he is a very injudicious man, who is not able to prefer those things that are more excellent, which when compared and judged of do vastly differ : as it would argue very great injudiciousness indeed if I could not tell which of the two to prefer ; a gay feather, or a rich diamond. The odds is so vastly great here, that it must needs argue a great want of discerning the just value of things : and so it must in like manner if we cannot tell which is to be rather chosen ; a little freedom from pain and affliction, or that which is a great advantage and gain to the inward man.

Secondly. It argues very great unbelief of the truth of God's word in reference to this very case. It is expressly said, All things shall work together for good, to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. Rom. 8. 28. But we do not believe this ; for it is plain that if we did believe it, it were then altogether impossible we should reject or less value that, which at the same time we believe to be the greater good. For it is spiritual good that is there meant, which is to be wrought out by external natural evils. And can we tolerate in ourselves an habitual indisposition to take God's word ? Sure, methinks, we should look upon this as a most intolerable thing.

Thirdly. It argues a very low and mean temper of spirit, when we do not know how to value and favour most our best and most excellent good. It shews that we have a very vile esteem of our own souls, when we are more concerned about a clod of clay, a lump of flesh, than we are about them, or their benefit and advantage. And

Fourthly. It argues most unworthy thoughts of the wisdom and goodness of the providence of God, with respect to those sufferings and afflictions we speak of. It looks as if we did not really believe, that they are brought upon us for some greater good, than any we can lose, or be indamaged in, by them; or that we thought that neither wisdom, or goodness, conducted the course of affairs towards us. What account can we give, or what reasons produce, why the course of divine providence should run so and so (as it many times has done in the world) as to cast smiling fair aspects on the worst sort of men, and frowning severe aspects on the better sort? Hence men have been apt to make very sinister interpretations, and applications. Thus the prophet Malachi charges some in his time: "Ye have wearied the Lord with your words: yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? when ye say, every one that doeth evil, is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them; or, where is the God of judgment?" Mal. 2. 17. And truly, though we have explicit formed thoughts otherwise, yet the sense of our hearts will seem to be agreeable to such thoughts as these, if we tolerate in ourselves the error which I am detecting, and representing the evil of; that is, of supposing that it were better to be freed from afflictions, than to have them improved to our gain and advantage. Either we must think, that afflictions come upon the people of God by chance, and so that God has no design at all by such an ordering of things; or else, that he afflicts his people out of hatred and perfect ill-will: both which are monstrous, and horrid thoughts. It were altogether an unaccountable thing, upon the whole matter, why the course of the dispensations of God's providence should be as it ordinarily is, that the saints should be exposed to sufferings and afflictions, while the wicked live in ease, prosperity and pleasure; I say, this were unaccountable, if it could not be said that there is some greater good to be wrought out by these sufferings which shall abundantly compensate and countervail them. But if we persist in the error I speak of, we lose the only way of solving this difficulty of providence.

Fifthly. To represent the evil of this error yet more, I would observe, that it argues much impatience and weakness of spirit: for patience is passive power, fortitude, or ability to

suffer. It argues very great weakness when we had a great deal rather not be good, than suffer affliction. Sure it is a sign that we can suffer nothing. And if there be such a disposition to faint in the day of adversity, our strength is small; as saith the wise man:—and this is not only our great infelicity but our sin. Prov. 24. 10.

Sixthly. It is a tacit choosing of sin, rather than affliction; and certainly that is a very bad thing. It is manifestly so, if we consider and look upon the case as it is. “Let me be impure still, drossy and terrene still, unlike to God still; so my flesh may but escape, my sense be gratified and indulged, and incur no prejudice.”

Seventhly. It argues a great deal of pride; and also insensibleness both of what we deserve, and what we need. If any can by no means bring their spirits to think of suffering, there commonly lies at the bottom an insensibility of what they are; what wretched hearts, and untoward natures they have. It is little apprehended what we deserve, and what we need, when we look upon such an aspect of providence as unsuitable; which threatens us with suffering, and is like to prove afflictive. This should be the sense of our hearts: “Alas! whatever I suffer, it is much less than my iniquity deserves! Yea, if I suffer never so severely, it is but what the exigency of my case requires. My heart is very sleepy and dead, and needeth rousing; it is very drossy and needs a hot furnace.” And we should think so if we thought of ourselves aright, and if too good an opinion of ourselves did not blind our eyes. I might mention several things more, but the time permits not. I shall only design hereupon in the close, to recommend two things;

i. That we should fix this judgment of the apostle in ourselves, as the standard and measure of our own. I judge thus, as the apostle Paul says; “I reckon that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us.” Rom. 8. 18. As if he had said, “This is my logic, I compute so upon the whole matter; and this is the result I come to, having considered it thoroughly, and viewed it on every side.” Let us settle our judgment of this in like manner, and record it: “This was my mind at such a time, and I came then to be convinced of the truth of it. I will never alter it, till I see better reason (which I suppose I never shall) for laying it down, than I had to take it up.” And,

ii. Agreeably hereunto let us direct the scope, current, and end of our prayers, on such days as these, as the apostle here doth his. It is necessary our hearts should be brought to an agreement with our judgments. What is the good I should

most desire, and wish, and seek for my soul this day? If this be a right judgment which we have now heard of, it will be very good for us, at such times as these, and even at all times in our prayers to say: "I pray not that I may be freed from suffering; that is not the great thing I request. As to that I refer myself to the divine pleasure, and acquiesce in the determination of providence. But, O Lord! I have another request to make unto thee, that whatsoever shall befall me, I may have more of thine image; more life and strength; vigour and heavenliness; fitted for holiness in this world, and blessedness in the other. And then let my sufferings be what they will, so they be but subservient to this great design, of procuring my spiritual advantage."

And we pray upon pretty sure grounds when we pray thus. We do not need to doubt whether this be agreeable to the divine will or no. We are upon a certainty. If I should insist peremptorily in prayer upon this, and that temporal good for myself, or the community I belong unto, it may be said; "Where is the promise? and thereupon, where is the faith of being heard in such a prayer?" But I am sure I pray agreeably to his own will, when I pray, that I may be brought into spiritual prosperity. I am sure therein to suit with what he himself doth command. This will be acceptable, and well-pleasing to God; and turn to my ineffable good and advantage, both here and hereafter.
