

## A FAST SERMON.

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*Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts.  
But ye said, Wherein shall we return?—MAL. iii. 7.*

THOUGH the time of this prophecy be not exactly specified, yet the matter showeth that Malachi prophesied after the return from captivity. When the people were established again in their possessions, they soon forgot God and the mercy of their deliverance, and polluted themselves with divers sins and abominations. Therefore the prophet is sent to expostulate with them, which he doth in a warm and close way of arguing. The sins charged upon them are pollution of God's worship, and profaneness in the people; but in the priests, who should teach them better, ignorance and partiality in God's law. Besides, in the people again, carelessness in worship, a parsimonious detention of God's rights, marriages with infidels, polygamy, abuses of divorce, blasphemous and hard thoughts of God, contemptuous speeches of his providence. Observe how soon a people may forget the mercy of their deliverance. A man would have thought that persons newly come out of a long and tedious captivity should have been more awful and thankful. But man is man still; and no moral means will cure them, without God's special and powerful grace. They were tainted by long converse with the heathen, and smelt of Babylon when they came back to Zion, having brought home the sins of the country with them where they had been scattered. To such a people is Malachi sent; and his dealing with them is suitable; sometimes boldly expostulating, other whiles sharply threatening, again seriously exhorting the people.

The verse, of which the text is a branch, carrieth the face of a sweet exhortation to repentance: a duty very seasonable; for, saith he, 'from the days of your fathers ye have gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?'

In which words there is—

1. An accusation—*Ye have gone away.*
2. An exhortation—*Return unto me.*
3. The rejoinder or reply of the people.

1. In the accusation there is the nature of their sin; they had gone off from God's ordinances, and had not kept them. Sin is a going away from God's ordinances, or a breach of his law, 1 John iii. 4; and the law may be broken, either by omitting the good required, or doing the evils forbidden. This people are supposed to be charged with both in

the text. Ye are gone away from mine ordinances, by doing things contrary to the law ; there is transgression, or sins of commission. And ye observed not what the law required, ye have not kept them ; there sins of omission are implied. The next thing in the accusation is their long continuance in their sins, 'from the days of your fathers.' The longer we lie in sin, the more heinous and provoking it is, and the worse it is remedied, and it bringeth us nearer to the curse and actual judgment ; for God will not bear always. A chimney long foul and not swept, is fired at length.

2. The exhortation. There you may take notice of the duty, the motive and authority with which it is backed. (1.) The duty, 'Return to me.' They that are gone away from God's ordinances are gone away from God himself ; by breaking his laws they renounce their fealty to their rightful Lord, and turn the back upon him, and not the face. Therefore repentance towards God, Acts xx. 21, is necessary to set the creature right again, and put him in his proper place and posture, called therefore a turning or returning to God often in scripture, because the bent of the heart is altered, and set to love, please, serve, and glorify God. This is the duty we must mind, if we mean to be safe. And it must be done, not by a few, but all, or many, at least ; but especially every one must look to himself. Many are willing others should turn from their sins, but stay behind themselves. No ; let us come jointly and generally, every one of us bring our bucket to quench the common burning : Hosea vi. 1, 'Come let us return unto the Lord, for he hath torn, and he will heal us ; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up.' This turning is not an hanging our heads for a day like a bulrush ; but a putting away the evil of our doings, and a fixing and engaging our hearts to love God, and live to him ; this is the duty. (2.) The motive is, 'And I will turn unto you.' If we turn to God in a way of duty, he will turn to us in a way of mercy. We turn to him by his preventing grace, and God turneth to us by his rewarding grace, giving us blessing, comfort, peace. Our returning to God is our great duty ; his returning to us is our great happiness. (3.) The authority with which both are backed, in those words, 'saith the Lord of hosts ;' that is, which hath all things at his command, to arm them for us or against us, according as we make him a friend or an enemy. (1st.) This bindeth the duty. Remember with whom your business lieth, with the Lord of hosts. It is ill to be found in a course of disobedience to him. He that commandeth all things, shall he not command your hearts ? (2d.) It assureth the promise ; for what difficulties soever lie in the way of our happiness, the Lord of hosts can remove them.

3. I come now to the people's answer and reply, or entertainment of this exhortation : 'But ye said, Wherein shall we return ?' (1.) It is not a serious question, but a cavil, not a desire of information, but a bold expostulation ; for it is mentioned here with a 'but ;' 'but ye said ;' and it suiteth with the stout and stubborn genius of this people, who would not yield to anything that might infer their guilt. See it all along : Mal. i. 2, 'I have loved you, saith the Lord ; but ye said, Wherein hast thou loved us ?' They remember the old desolations, and were not satisfied with the present mercies. So ver. 6, 'Hear, O

priests, that despise my name ; and ye say, Wherein do we despise thy name ?' They would not own any such thing. So ver. 7, 'Ye have offered polluted bread on mine altar ; and yet say, Wherein have we polluted thee ?' They thought everything good enough for God, and yet would not own that they had any lessening thoughts of his majesty. So chap. ii. 14, God rejected their offerings, and they say, 'Wherefore ?' they saw no cause. So chap. iii. 8, 'Ye hath robbed me, saith the Lord ;' as they detained the maintenance due for the support of his worship ; 'and yet ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee ?' So ver. 13, 'Your words have been stout against me ; yet ye say, Wherein have we been stout against thee ?' Thus did they outface all challenges. Therefore it is not a serious inquiry, like that, Acts ii. 37, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do ?' and Acts xvi. 30. These speak as owning their sin, and desiring to be directed into a better course. But in the text they did not ask as desiring to be satisfied in the duty, but as quarrelling at the application of it to themselves ; wherein had they sinned, that they should need to return ? It is an exception to the charge, that they had not departed from God. (2.) This question or reply was not in words. The scriptures are wont to attribute such sayings and speeches to wicked men as agree to their manners ; if their mouths do not say so, their practice and carriage saith so ; as Ps. xiv. 1, 'The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.' There are explicit thoughts expressly conceived in our minds, and implicit thoughts which lurk in our hearts, and are known from the interpretation of our actions, when these are run up to their proper principle. Men live as if they were influenced by such a thought ; what could he do worse if he should actually say, 'There is no God ?' So he shows us what and wherein we offend ; not that they speak it in plain terms, but they clearly showed such was their meaning : What have we done amiss ? or wherein do we depart, that thou biddest us return ? that is, the exhortation was lost upon them, as if they needed no repentance nor reformation.

*Doct.* That a people who are apparently gone off from the ways of God, are not easily brought to a sight and sense of the necessity of returning to him.

The point is true—(1.) Of mankind in general ; (2.) Of nations ; (3.) Of particular persons.

*First,* The point is true of mankind in general, who, being fallen from God, continue in their apostasy as long as they can with any tolerable shift and pretence of satisfaction. There is in all some false imaginary happiness, and some counterfeit righteousness, wherein they please themselves. The false happiness is as their God, and the superficial righteousness is as their Christ and mediator ; and so they are secure and senseless, till God open their eyes by a powerful conviction. They neither seek after another happiness, nor trouble themselves about the way whereby they may obtain it.

1. That men set up a false happiness in their carnal estate needeth not much proof ; for ever since man fell from God, he adhered to the creature : Jer. ii. 13, we left the fountain, and we betook ourselves to the cistern. And if we can make a shift to patch up a sorry happiness here in the world apart from God, we neither care for him, nor

will come at him : Jer. ii. 31, 'Wherefore say my people, We are lords; we will come no more unto thee?' They love to live of themselves. Our pleasure, profit, and honour, that is our God; and while we enjoy these without control, we look no further; and if we can sail with a full current in worldly felicity, we count ourselves well a-paid. Certainly we do not seek our happiness in an invisible God, nor can we wait to enjoy it in an invisible world. The flesh must be pleased; and the more it is pleased, we think ourselves the more happy.

(2.) That there is something in us which is instead of Christ to us, to keep the conscience quiet when our affections take up with present things. Our happiness is to satisfy our desires, our righteousness is to allay our fears. Now here we run to an external course of religion, as if it would make us perfect, as appertaining to the conscience. We seek to something external, which is diversified according to men's education. If pagans, to the *ἔργον νόμου*, Rom. ii. 15. If we do some external works, and avoid some gross sins, wherein shall we return? If Jews, to ritual observances of Moses, and there is our righteousness : Rom. x. 3, 'For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God.' Out of ignorance and pride in their legal observances, they rejected the obedience of the gospel. If they be christians, they rest in baptism and the name of christians, or the outward profession of the gospel, without coming under the power of it. The apostles obviated this, 1 Peter iii. 21, and 2 Tim. iii. 5. Among christians, who are divided in opinions, interests, and affections, some rest in this form, some in that; some that they are of a church which claimeth infallibility and damneth all others that are not of their own way; and if they be herded there, they think they are safe. They are catholics, others are heretics; and out of the church there is no salvation, but there they promise it themselves without scruple; though God knoweth, and we may easily see that of all christians they are in the most hazardous condition; and it is a very large charity that can allow them any probability of salvation. Others have their external forms, wherein they place all their religion, though accompanied with little life and power of godliness. And others take up a stricter form, and delude their souls with the fallacy and self-conceit of disproving other men's errors, when their hearts are not a jot the better constituted towards God, or disposed to the heavenly life; if they stand on the vantage ground, they are not the taller men. And so as long as men make any shift to live quietly in the carnal state, in vain do you press them to return to God. Thus it is with mankind in general.

*Secondly*, As to nations, which is the case here; for a national return to God preventeth national judgments. Now how hard is it to convince them of a necessity of returning to God, though they are apparently gone off from his ways!

1. Because the commonness and continuance of sin taketh away the odiousness of it. By custom and tract of time, corruptions get esteem and veneration, that they are accounted a great part of religion; and God is outlawed as it were, and Christ's prescriptions and institutions are looked upon as innovations, against which the zeal of the country

is engaged. And though, in pressing men to return to God, we do not, as Moses, open a new fountain in the wilderness, but, with Isaac, dig the wells which his father had opened before, because the Philistines had stopped them and filled them up with earth, Gen. xxv. 18; yet the world cannot bear it; but say unto us, as they did to him, Go from us. It was Nazianzen's plea, in reviving the doctrine of the trinity, after the church had been long oppressed by the Arians: Though we endeavour to take away the earth with which the old fountains have been obstructed and filled up, it will not do. That which hath been received by tradition from their fathers, though vain, they will not part with, 1 Peter i. 18; and John iv. 20, 'Our fathers worshipped in this mountain.' Inveterate superstitions are not easily removed. In the text, 'From the days of your fathers ye are gone away from my ordinances;' and no wonder that they said, 'Wherein shall we return?'

2. Because of some show of worship and religion left among a people. If they be not wholly gone from God, they will not own that they are in part gone from his ordinances; and so reformation becometh desperate, lest they should seem to lose the whole, while they yield that they have erred in part. Antichrist had not gotten such a great advantage over christian people if he did not sit in the temple of God, 2 Thes. ii. 4. And the Jews did not so often cry out, The temple of the Lord! the temple of the Lord! as they cry out, The church! the church! and all corruptions and usurpations must be borne out by the name of the church and the authority of the church, and we must not so much as peep and mutter against the church. And thus Christ's ordinances are turned against himself, and the beast pusheth with the horns of the lamb, Rev. xiii. 11. Church constitution is used to oppress Christ's interest, and the most serious people that he hath in the world. Press them to return from whence they are fallen, and still they have this buckler to ward off all invitations of reformation: The church hath decreed otherwise, and the church cannot err; and with this *mormo* or bugbear they fright and drive off all motions of returning to God.

3. Because they are in part reformed already, and purged from some of their defilements, and will you have them returning still? These people had been in Babylon, but now they had built the temple, and the sacrifices and worship were restored, and therefore think they might well say, 'Wherein shall we return?' Had they not done enough already? Must reformations be reformed, and no end of them? Alas! Christ gets up by degrees, for the world disputeth it with him inch by inch. And if his messengers would be contented with half Christ, they might live in pomp and ease as others do—*Si dimidio Christi*, &c. The ark and mercy-seat removes, till it was seated in its proper place, from Shiloh to Kirjath-jearim, then to the house of Obed-edom, then to the city of David, till at length placed in the temple. We accept with thankfulness as much as God alloweth us and the world will bear, and are ready to support the common christianity with our utmost endeavours, provided we be not bound to consent to encroachments, and to approve imperfections and defects, as if these spots of the church were the beauty of it. We observe—All cannot be done at one time, and we must wait God's leisure. The best kings

of Judah could not bring the people to return as far as God would have them, and they themselves would have them: 2 Chron. xx. 33, 'Howbeit the high places were not taken away; for as yet the people had not prepared their hearts to the God of their fathers;' 2 Chron. xxxiii. 17, 'Nevertheless the people did sacrifice in the high places, yet to the Lord their God only.' We bless God for the abolishing of idolatry, for the zeal of the first reformers, the consent and allowance of our princes, that Christ is so far onward in his way; and we abhor those that go upon that principle, the worse the better, as being wholly bent to separation, division, and destruction; but yet we patiently and humbly wait for a more thorough returning to the Lord.

4. Another reason why a people are not easily brought to a sight and sense of the necessity of a national repentance is because they many times return feignedly, as in Josiah's time: Jer. iii. 10, 'This people hath not returned to me with their whole hearts, but feignedly, saith the Lord.' There seemed to be a thorough reformation then, for that godly prince searched into all nasty corners that he might cleanse them; but many discontinued their practice that yet hankered after them in their hearts, and secretly kept up their abominations. And Zephaniah was sent in his days: Zeph. i. 4, 'I will utterly consume all things, saith the Lord.' Why! will the Lord never be pleased? Yes; God is a good God, but the people dealt deceitfully with him; they seemed to turn to the Lord when they did not. There may be a face of strictness when there is little of the power of godliness, and men contradict not only the principles of their religion, but their own professions.

*Thirdly,* Come we now to particular persons. When they are apparently gone off from God, it is hard to bring them to acknowledge their sin, and to see a necessity of returning to him. I will enforce this by two considerations—

1. That a people professing repentance in the general, yet, when it cometh to particulars, wince and start, and will not be convinced of apparent sins, and then reply, 'Wherein shall we return?'

2. That is but a notion of repentance, not a real exercise of it, when we profess to return to God, and know not wherein we should return.

1. For the first, I will prove it by two things—(1.) The several shifts men use to divert a particular acknowledgment of sin; (2.) The causes of it.

[1.] The several shifts men use.

(1.) Men rest in generals, and say, We are all sinners, and raise a great outcry against sin. But alas! that is but a notion, and too much in the air to work upon the heart and conscience. Confession should be particular; you must fetch out your sins by head and shoulders till you find out the Achan, the most particular and most affective. Blunt iron, that toucheth many points, maketh but a bruise; a needle, that toucheth but one point, entereth to the quick. As Nebuchadnezzar dreamed a dream, but could not tell what it was, Dan. ii. 5; or as Ahimaaz brought David tidings of a tumult, but could specify no particularity, 2 Sam. xii. 27; so many confess to

God sins, but do not name the sins by which they have provoked him. Sin in the general is the common pack-horse upon which men lay all their burdens; it is long of sin; but what sin I pray you? If it be sin, amend then, avoid sin. There they start aside. Zanchy observeth the apostle saith not, 1 John i. 9. *Si confiteamur nos peccatores esse; sed si confiteamur peccata nostra*—He doth not say, If we confess that we are sinners, but, If we confess our sins. We should particularise those that most wound the conscience. Malefactors in men's courts are not indicted in general terms, but fact and circumstances are related. But to God we confess by wholesale and in the lump, say we are sinners in the general, but will scarce be known of any particular sin we have committed. God saith, Hosea v. 15, 'I will return to my place till they acknowledge their offence.' And again, 1 Kings viii. 38, 'When he shall acknowledge his own plague, and the sore of his own heart.' In deep distress, inward or outward, there is some concealed sin which we must find out, without which much show of prayer and humble confession of a sinful people will be little worth.

(2.) They confess particular faults, but not the sin God aims at. There are some creditable sins and loved errors, like diseases, that are incident to the best complexions and constitutions. It may be human frailty, when it is gross enormity; distractions in duties, when tippling should be mentioned rather; some defects of love to Christ, when it is gross inclinations to the world and sensual delights, &c. As Moses pleaded he had a stammering tongue, he was not eloquent, &c.; but God gently toucheth his privy sore: Exod. iv. 19, 'And the Lord said unto Moses in Midian, Go, return into Egypt: for all the men are dead which sought thy life.' Moses pleaded not that, but God knew what was the great impediment and let in the case. So it is with us, we plead this and that, confess sins that we are guilty of indeed, but overlook the main sin.

(3.) Transferring or putting it upon others; they care not upon whose back the burden is cast to ease their own shoulders. Adam puts off the sin upon his wife, and obliquely upon God himself: Gen. iii. 12, 'The woman which thou gavest me,' &c. Aaron puts it off upon the solicitations of the people: Exod. xxxii. 22, 'Thou knowest this people, that they are set on mischief,' &c. Pilate washed his hands, but yet he could not wash off his guilt, though he said, 'Look you to it,' Mat. xxvii. 24. So among others, sometimes the people shift off their burden on their rulers and governors, whereas the princes smart often for the people's sins, Prov. xxviii. 2; on the other hand, the prince on the people, Zech. xi. 3; as head and stomach mutually vitiate and disorder one another. Again, people on their ministers, ministers on the people; but both are punished: Luke vi. 39, 'The blind lead the blind, and both fall into the ditch;' Ezek. iii. 20, 'The wicked shall surely die; but if thou givest not warning, his blood will I require at thy hands.' Oh! what cause have all of us to acknowledge our offences and humble ourselves before the Lord, and to return to a more serious discharging of our duty! So among us; one party chargeth the calamities of the nation upon another, as if they said, 'Wherein shall we return?' The stricter party charges it on the

profane, the profane on the stricter party; but we all see cause to charge it on ourselves: 2 Chron. xxviii. 10, 'But are there not with you, even with you, sins against the Lord our God?' He would have them seriously to consider their own ways, and dive into their own hearts; though God had made them the scourge to punish the children of Judah, had not they their sins also? One party may have the advantage of another in point of power and interest; but they all stand upon the same level before God. All have miscarried, and neither the one nor the other can say, 'Wherein shall we return?'

(4.) They outface all challenges; and when they have done apparent injury to God, others, and their own souls, they will not see it, but reject all convictions: Jer. xvi. 10, 'It shall come to pass, when thou shalt show this people all these words, and they shall say, Wherefore hath the Lord pronounced all this great evil against us? or what is our iniquity? or what is our sin that we have committed against the Lord our God?' &c. Wicked men are pertinacious or presumptuous, either to deny or excuse their sins, though never so notorious and conspicuous; choosing rather to charge God with iniquity, as if he had punished them without cause or above measure, than to acknowledge their perfidious carriage towards him. So Jer. ii. 23, 'How canst thou say, I am not polluted, I have not gone after Baalim? See thy way in the valley, know what thou hast done,' &c.

(5.) By censuring faithful reprovers: Jer. vi. 10, 'The word of the Lord is to them a reproach.' It is a sad crisis and temper of a people to count matter of reproof matter of reproach; and let a man deal never so faithfully, they say he doth but rail. Though truths be delivered never so wisely, strongly, and with clear deduction from scripture, and with never so much caution and circumspection, yet guilt is touchy, and cannot brook it. And this is the fault of the religious party, the fooleries adopted into their religion.

[2.] The causes of it.

(1.) The blindness of self-love, whereby we are conceited of ourselves, and of our own gifts, and of our own good estate, and will not have the fallacy and cheat that we put upon ourselves discovered, Prov. xvi. 2. Especially in such practices as are in vogue and esteem, Luke xvi. 15. There are certain sins that are authorised by the ignorant false zeal of some good men, and cried up as a piece of religion. Now the discovery of this is irksome; conceits of our own goodness will not permit a debate about them: John ix. 40, 'Are we blind also?' It is a sign of a naughty heart when men cannot endure to hear of their sins and errors.

(2.) Loathness to acknowledge our shame. Certainly a man is loath to take shame to himself, and, though conscious of an offence, will not seriously confess it even to God. Adam hid himself, Gen. iii.; David kept silence, Ps. xxxii.; and is forced to urge his backward heart by a practical decree, ver 5. And Job maketh it the common nature of man: Job xxxi. 33, 'If I have covered my transgressions, as Adam, by hiding my sins in my bosom.' Some take the name *Adam* properly for the first man, whose fall and covering his transgression were remarkable; others take it appellatively, as Junius, *more humano*, after the manner of all mankind, who use to palliate and cloak their sins.



(3.) Indulgence to our lusts. Serious acknowledgment is a means to mortify them, and forsake them; for men cannot easily continue in sins for which they solemnly judge themselves before the Lord. Now all the godly, none excepted, have some tender parts in their soul, which they are loath should be touched, some evils which are as their Delilahs wherein they delight most; as David had his iniquity, from which he kept himself, Ps. xviii. 23. And every man, besides their general inclination to all sins, hath a peculiar and particular inclination to some bosom sins, which their constitution and education does prompt them unto, or course of life does minister occasion of. And these are the evils in which men should prove their sincerity, as in not sparing them, so in not covering or hiding of them, but confessing them with all bitterness of spirit before the Lord. Surely you should return from every known sin. For he that reserveth and alloweth any one darling sin, is no forsaker of sin, but doth only make choice of that sin which he would live in. As what profit is it to guard one part of the city walls, when the other are left open to every assault? But yet here is an indulgence which maketh us touchy and tender of having this sin meddled with; as it is seen in Herod, Mark vi. 19, 20. And not in him only; but some good men are impatient of reproof when their Delilah is touched; therefore it is hard to convince them, to bring them to see wherein they should return.

2. Now I come to my second consideration, that it is but a notion of repentance, not a real exercise of it, when we profess to return to God, and know not wherein we should return. What do you call returning to God? Long harangues against sin in prayer? This may be done by hypocrites, who raise up a puppet of sin in their own fancies, and cudgel it with barren invectives, but yet regard iniquity as a darling in their hearts. Surely real repentance is when anything that was amiss before is mended. It is either the reformation of some particular disorder by which God was provoked, or a general fixing of the heart to God, that we may love him more and serve him better, that it may sensibly appear that we have gotten good by every serious act of humiliation before God. But to bring it to some head, no repentance is serious and real but what is honourable to God and profitable to us. Now the more particular it is, the more these ends are accomplished.

[1.] Solemn repentance honoureth God; and therefore it is often said to be a giving God glory, Mal. ii. 2; Rev. xvi. 9, 'They repented not to give him glory;' Josh. xvii. 19, 'My son, I pray thee, give glory to the God of Israel.' True confession and humiliation for sin under judgments doth especially give God a double glory—the glory of his truth, and the glory of his justice: the one relates to his laws, the other to his providence. (1.) The glory of his truth: Hosea vii. 12, 'I will chastise them, as their congregation hath heard.' God herein showeth that his word shall take effect, that his threatenings are not a vain scarecrow, that men shall feel the danger which they would not believe. When he suits the judgment to the sin, according to the rule of the word, we are convinced of this, and so give God the glory of his truth. (2.) His righteousness. God loveth to be clear when he judgeth, Ps. li. 4, or to have the reason of his dispensation seen, that

he may have the glory, and we may have the shame: Jer. ii. 17, 'Hast thou not procured this unto thyself?' and is not this thy 'way in the valley?' as we say to children, Is not this your eating green fruit? This silenceth us, and honoureth God.

[2.] It is profitable to us to know what sin God aimeth at; that God never afflicts but for a cause, is necessary to be known, for the honour of God; and for what cause, that is necessary to be known, for our profit, that by the bitterness of the effects it may be made more odious to us; for our knowledge is more by the effect than the cause, Jer. ii. 19. By the evils we suffer God showeth us the evil which we commit, and that we may know what to redress: 1 Cor. xi. 30, 'For this cause many are weak and sickly among you.' Particular repentance respects particular sins.

*Use 1.* It informs us how difficult the work of conversion is, when the first work, and that which is but a common work, and may be lost, namely conviction, is so hard. Such is our blindness and partiality in our cause, our stupidity and hardness of heart in interpreting the word and providence, that when we are called upon to return to God, we know not wherein to return. Oh! what ado is there to bring a man to a kindly conviction of sin! The knowledge of the disease is but the first step to the cure; but when, under deadly spiritual distempers, we are heart-whole, and will not see our folly and filthiness, that we may turn to the Lord, and carry it so carelessly as if we needed no repentance—*Ex pede Herculem*—by this piece of the work judge of the rest—

*Use 2.* To exhort us to two things—

1. Take heed of the shifts whereby men beguile themselves, and if they do anything towards turning to God, it is but personated, a part acted for a day; but God is not more glorified, nor are they ever the better.

[1.] Take heed of outfacing open crimes. We are so shameless, as to clear ourselves when our wickedness is evident: Jer. v. 19, 'And it shall come to pass, when ye say, Wherefore doth the Lord our God all these things unto us? Like as ye have forsaken me, and served strange gods in your land, so shall ye serve strangers in a land that is not yours.' So Jer. xiii. 22, 'If thou say in thine heart, Wherefore are all these things come upon me? For the greatness of thine iniquity are thy skirts discovered, and thy heels made bare.' In our afflictions many thoughts boil up in our minds, and among the rest, about the cause of our troubles, Why doth God deal so severely with us? And we are at a loss in apparent causes; so wretched and sottish is our self-conceit, as if we were to be taught and told that which all the world can see. The foul blotches of our wickedness do appear, and yet we are loath to take notice of it, and bear it out as if we had done nought amiss; like the whore in the Proverbs, Prov. xxx. 20, 'She wipeth her mouth, and saith, I have done no wickedness.' An allusion to one that has eaten fat meat; when the mouth is wiped all is clean. This is outfacing.

[2.] Take heed of transferring. Man is mightily given to it; sometimes charging it on the wickedness of former generations, that we may remove it far enough from ourselves. This is in the nature of

man. Ask the Jews the reason of all their present calamities; and they will tell you their fathers worshipping the calf in the wilderness; but this will not fit us, for we have overpassed the deeds of the wicked of former generations, Acts v. 28. They have far outgone them in sin. Many declaim against the evil of the times, like the crafty lapwing that goeth screeking abroad to draw the fowler from her own nest. Have you no sins of your own to bemoan? Are not the times the worse for you? Is there nothing wherein you may exercise your personal repentance in reference to God? The sins of the land, you should be affected with them as if they were your own, because of your concern for God's glory, and because you be members of that society that hath so greatly sinned against God. So did Moses: Exod. xxxiv. 9, 'Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thine inheritance:' so Daniel, chap. ix. 5, 6, 'We have sinned and committed iniquity,' &c.; and ver. 13, the holy man joineth himself with the common body of which he was a member. Some transfer it upon the opposite faction, maliciously misinterpreting and misapplying providence to the disgrace and disparagement of those from whom they differ; as Shimei imputed all David's calamities to his severity to the house of Saul: 2 Sam. xvi. 8, 'And the Lord hath returned upon thee all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose stead thou hast reigned.' Thus men take the boldness to sit as a coroner's inquest on the souls of others, by their bold glosses and comments on the providence of God, and make it speak their own language. When they themselves live in apparent defiance of God, they will censure his people for doubtful matters, or lesser failings. God doth not use to contend with a nation for lesser faults or ordinary infirmities; nor do his judgments come for doubtful things, but the apparent breaches of unquestionable duties: Hosea iv. 2, 'By swearing, lying, killing, stealing, committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood.' Now for men guilty of such like crimes to lay all on the people of God, it is as if a man overgrown with leprosy should upbraid another with a pimple in his face, or that hath in his drunkenness plunged himself into the sea, should revile another for slipping into a ditch. But then, on the other side, the people of God ought not to put off this wholly from themselves, as if they were to bewail the sins of others when they appear in these duties. For—

(1.) They have their sins; a spirit of division and unsubmission to all that may be called lawful power, freely speaking evil of dignities; a censorious spirit, and a spirit of detraction, which men professing godliness make little conscience of; a spirit of murmuring against God and man; a libertine spirit, that runneth out more to pride than duties; impaling, enclosing religion within a party, and care not what hard things they think, speak, and do against others, thus appropriating Christ, as if the word of God came to them only, making private and doubtful opinions the characteristic of a godly man; hazarding the main of religion for the interest of a party, and fighting apart from the body of Christ's army, anathematising a christian nation, considering how far they differ, not how far they agree; railing against and obstructing the office of the most useful ministry Christ hath upon earth that I know of or ever read of.

Besides their many personal miscarriages, whereby they have offended God.

(2.) The sins of professors, yea, the regenerate amongst them, are most provoking, Amos iii. 2. They sin against a nearer relation, which is more than if a stranger did these things, 1 Peter i. 14; against a principle of life within, 1 John iii. 9. There is more unkindness in their sins, John vi. 67; more knowledge of their duty, James iv. 17. They have felt more of the sting of sin, Josh. xxii. 17, tasted the bitter waters. They are in covenant with God, Lev. xxvi. 25. They make profession of a strict obedience, Neh. v. 9. They harden and justify the wicked, Ezek. xvi. 51.

2. Inquire wherein you should return. Find out the provoking sin. To do so—(1.) There needeth much searching and self-communing, Lam. iii. 40. If you know wherein you have departed from God, you may know wherein to return to him. (2.) There needeth much prayer. Beg of God, Job xxxiv. 32: 'That which I see not, teach thou me;' seek for a further information from God, if anything divideth between you and him. Your hearts are deceitful; he must give you light. (3.) There needeth much observation of your own ways: Prov. iv. 26, 'Ponder the path of thy feet;' then you will soon see how God is dishonoured and provoked by you. But if all this will not do—

[1.] Let me tell you, for apparent wicked men to inquire wherein to return, what special sin God aimeth at, it is but a deceit they put on themselves, to leave the matter of repentance on an uncertain debate. And it is all one, as if a man should break through a thorn-hedge, and curiously desire to know which thorn hath pricked him. For those that are overgrown with sin, it is enough to know that the author of all afflictions is God, the cause is sin, and the end is repentance; that they must be new creatures, or they are undone for ever. To be more particular with them is to defeat the purpose of the dispensation, and to put them upon the leaving of one sin, when God calleth for a change of state, or a passing from death to life; and this is but like mending a hole in an house that is ready to drop down.

[2.] For a serious penitent, God will instruct him: Ps. xciv. 12, 'Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord, and instructest out of thy law.' Partly by the word; common and avowed truths, well considered and improved, will state much of our guilt, Rom. i. 18. Heb. ii. 2. Partly by checks of conscience. What saith conscience, awakened by misery? Gen. xlii. 21, 'And they said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us;' so Isa. lix. 12, 'Our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and as for our iniquities, we know them.' Partly by the complexion and face of providence; we may know what is the procuring sin. God is fain to teach us, as Gideon taught the men of Succoth, by briars and thorns. By the evil we suffer he showeth us the evil which we have committed, and so helpeth our faith by our sense.

[3.] It informs us how we may keep a true fast to God. We have had many superficial mock fasts. If we were once brought to a

sight and sense of returning to God, or a serious exercise of repentance upon those days, they would turn to a better account. What is there wanting?

(1.) A thorough acquaintance with ourselves. Religion in general lieth much in a true and unfeigned knowledge of ourselves. I am sure the life of this duty dependeth upon it. Alas! till a man thoroughly understand himself, his own heart, dispositions, inclinations, ways and actions, how can he humble himself before God? But most of us are great strangers at home; and while our eyes run to the ends of the earth, we do too little examine our own case, that we may be acquainted with the temper and frame of our own hearts, that we may have a just view of our own image and likeness, as it is represented to us in the word of God, James i. 23, 24. We are often discovered to ourselves in our own proper shape; but we forget it, pass it over, and do not consider whether anything be amiss in us, yea or nay. If we see it, it is but transiently; do not consider it so as to reform or amend anything. And then we are apt with those in the text to say, 'Wherein shall we return?' Alas! a few serious thoughts would present us to ourselves with a surprising monstrous appearance, and beget much self-abhorrence in us. How unpleasant soever such a sight be, yet it would be very profitable to us whenever we come to humble ourselves before God. What advantage this would be to us in prayer and praises. Remember thou art a sinner!

(2.) There is wanting contrition and sorrow of heart, or a sensible feeling of the loathsomeness and heinousness of sin. We want a broken and contrite heart when we would reconcile ourselves to God, Ps. li. 17. Otherwise men complain of a burden they feel not. They confess sin, or such actions as are commonly called sins and censured among men as sins; but while they confess them without sense and feeling, it is a sign they do not confess sin as sin, as a violation of the laws of God, and a provocation of his holiness, with that brokenness of heart which the nature and desert of it requireth. It is possible we may use passionate forms of speech, and talk by rote after others; but I observe in the rites of Moses, that if any man touched the water of purification wherewith another man had cleansed himself, he was not purified, but defiled thereby. To speak in the strain of humble penitents, and not to have the heart affected, is to make use of their forms without their spirit. Surely we should confess sin, as we commit sin. Will ye sin with the whole man, and confess it only with the mouth? act it with delight, and not confess it with a sorrow that affects the heart, or without any sense and feeling? This showeth we are not as real in confessing as we are in sinning.

(3.) There is a defect in the very confession, which seems to be all in all in our humiliations. We have other notions of words and things in dealing with God and dealing with men. Certainly confession is much; it hath promises annexed, 1 John i. 9. But what is confession? Suppose an injury done to a man by his equal or inferior. Let us instance in the latter, some wrong done to you by your tenant or servant; you have a mind to pardon, but he must acknowledge it. If he confess the injury only in general or ambiguous terms, if it be cursory, and without any sense and sorrow for it, or if he did excuse

or extenuate his fault, or upon the next occasion offered to do the like wrong again, would it not rather provoke than pacify you? Thus we put a real and deep signification upon confession in our own matters, but take it in the slightest and emptiest meaning, in things relating to God. Our confessions to him are either general, ignorant, senseless, or without any particular view or lively feeling of the horror of the sins we confess. And so many confess they are sinners, but do not at all confess their sins, their own real actual guiltiness, that which indeed they have committed, or are inclined to do, 1 Kings viii. 38. When it comes to particulars, there is a multitude of extenuations and pretences to hide and cover it; there is not such a confession of the heinousness of our sins as may abase and humble the soul in God's presence, as may induce the hatred of sin, or put an engagement upon the heart to renounce it.

(4.) There is not that earnest desire to forsake sin. We are told, Prov. xxviii. 13, it is the mortifying confession which is acceptable to God; such a confession of sin as may put us upon requests to God, not only that sin may be pardoned, but also that sin may be subdued. To confess sin as loathsome, and act it over again with fresh delight and vigour, is to mock God; though they bewail it, and never cease the more from sinning, it is but an hypocritical pang. To-day they confess it, and to-morrow they act it again with as much delight as before; so all their humiliation is but a false appearance, or a shadow of repentance. Still here is no returning to God.

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