

SERMON XXXIX.*

GOD THE SAINTS' ROCK.

*From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed:
lead me to the rock that is higher than I.—Psal. lxi. 2.*

THERE are two things in the words. First, The state wherein the psalmist was. Secondly, The course that he steered in that state.

His estate is doubly expressed: 1. From the place where he was; 'from the end of the earth.' And, 2. From the condition he was in; his 'heart was overwhelmed.'

And in the course he steered there are two things also. 1. The manner of it: he 'cried unto the Lord. 2. The matter of that cry: 'Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.'

First, There is the state wherein he was. And,

1. The first description of it (for both parts are metaphorical) is from the place where he was: 'The end of the earth.' Now this may be taken two ways: either naturally, and then it is an allusion to men that are far distant and remote from help, relief, and comfort; or, as I may say, ecclesiastically, with reference to the temple of God, which was 'in medio terræ,' 'in the midst and heart of the land,' where God manifested and gave tokens of his gracious presence and favour: as if he had said; I am at the end of the earth, far from any tokens, pledges, or manifestations of the love and favour of God; as well as from outward help and assistance.

2. The second description of his state is, that his heart was overwhelmed. Wherein we have two things.

(1.) A confluence of calamities and distresses. (2.) The effect they had upon him; his heart was overwhelmed, and fainted under them. As long as the heart will hold up they may be borne: 'The spirit of a man will bear his infirmity;' but when 'the spirit is wounded,' and the heart faints, a confluence of calamities greatly oppresses.

What is meant by overwhelmed, himself declares in

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another place, Psal. cii. The title of the psalm is, 'A prayer of the afflicted when he is overwhelmed.' And he describes that condition in the psalm itself, ver. 3, 4, &c. 'My days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burnt as an hearth. My heart is smitten and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread. By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin. I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert. I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the housetop. Mine enemies reproach me all the day; and they that are mad against me are sworn against me. For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping, because of thine indignation and thy wrath: for thou hast lifted me up, and cast me down.' To be overwhelmed is to be under a confluence of all manner of distressing calamities. Psal. cxlii. 3, 4. he describes again what it is to be overwhelmed: 'When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, I looked on the right hand and beheld, but there was no man that would know me, refuge failed me: no man cared for my soul.' So that to have a confluence of manifold distresses, with an eye to the indignation of God, as the spring of those distresses, until the spirit sink and faint under it, is to have the heart overwhelmed. This is his state and condition.

Secondly, The course he takes in this state, as we have already observed, is also doubly expressed.

1. In the manner of it: 'I cried,' saith he, 'unto thee.' The word is frequently used in this case in Scripture; and it is naturally expressive of the principal actings of faith in a distressed condition.

There are four things that faith will do in a condition of distress in believers; and they are all of them comprised in this expression: 'I cried.'

(1.) It will make the heart sensible of the affliction. God abhors the proud and the stubborn, that think by their own spirits to bear up under their pressures. Isa. xlvi. 12. 'Hearken, ye stout-hearted, who are far from righteousness.' Persons that think to bear themselves up, when God dealeth with them, by their stout heart, are such, whom of all others God most despises and abhors: they are 'far from righteousness.' Now crying doth include a sense of evils and pressures the soul is exercised withal, and that we do

not despise God when we are chastened, as well as that we do not utterly faint, but cry unto the Lord.

(2.) The next act of faith is a holy complaint unto God in such a state and condition. So the psalmist tells us, Psal. cii. 'A prayer of the afflicted when he is overwhelmed, and poureth out his complaint before the Lord.' He often mentions 'his complaint, coming with his complaint unto the Lord.' And God takes nothing more kindly, than when we come to him with our complaints, not repining at them, but spreading them before the Lord, as from whom alone we expect relief: for it declares we believe God concerns himself in our state and condition. There is no man so foolish, whatsoever he suffers, as to go unto them with his complaints whom he supposes are not concerned in him, nor have any compassion for him. It is a professing unto God, that we believe he is concerned in our condition, when we cry unto him, and pour out before him our complaints.

(3.) There is in it an endeavour to approach unto God. As you do when you cry after one whom you see at a distance, and are afraid he will go farther from you. It is the great work of faith to cry out after God at a distance, when you are afraid lest at the next turn he should be quite out of sight. Crying to the Lord, supposes him to be withdrawing or departing.

(4.) There is earnestness in it. It is expressive of the greatest earnestness of spirit we can use, when we cry out in any case.

Thus he behaves himself during the condition described. He had a sense of his distress; he makes his complaint unto the Lord; he cries out after him for fear he should withdraw himself; and that with earnestness, that God might come in to his help.

2. The matter of it is, That God would 'lead him to the rock,' that is, that God would give him an access unto himself by Jesus Christ, in whom God is our rock and our refuge in all our distresses: that he would but open a way through all his dark and overwhelming entanglements, that he might come unto himself, there to issue the troubles and perplexities that he was exercised withal.

That which I would speak to you from the words thus opened, is this:

Observation. In the most overwhelming, calamitous distresses that may befall a believing soul, faith still eyes a reserve in God, and delights to break through all to come unto him; though at the same time, it looks upon God as the author of those calamities.

I have told you before in the opening of the words, what I intend by these overwhelming distresses. They are of two sorts, inward and outward.

First, Inward, in perplexities upon the soul and conscience about sin. When the soul is in darkness, and hath no apprehension of any ground upon which it may have acceptance with God; when it is pressed with the guilt of sin, and abides in darkness upon that account, and hath no light.

Secondly, Outward; and these are of two sorts.

1. Private, in afflictions, losses, sickness, pains, poverty, either as to ourselves, or those who are near unto us, and wherein we are concerned. These may sometimes have such an edge put upon them, as to prove overwhelming.

2. Public, in reference unto the church of God; when that is in great distress, when there is no prospect of relief, no beam of light; when the summer is past, and the harvest ended, expectations come to an issue, and no relief ensues: this is an overwhelming distress to them, whose hearts are in the ways of God, and have a concern in his glory. When Zion is in the dust, and the bones of the children of Zion lie scattered like wood upon the face of the earth.

These are the heads of overwhelming distresses. And I say, faith looks upon them as proceeding from God. Is the soul in distress upon the account of sin? They are God's rebukes, God's arrows, it is God that hath caused this darkness. Is it troubled or pressed upon the account of afflictions or dangers? 'Affliction,' saith faith, 'doth not spring out of the earth,' or troubles from the ground: these things are from God. Is it with respect unto the church of God, 'Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers?' Is it not the Lord, he against whom we have sinned? It is therefore his wrath and indignation in all these things. Yet notwithstanding this, faith will look through all, and make a reserve in God himself.

I shall,

I. Give some instances of this.

II. Shew the grounds of it.

III. Come to that which I chiefly intend, namely, to discover what it is in God that in such an overwhelming condition faith can see and fix upon, to give it support and relief.

IV. Shew how this differs from that general reserve which the nature of man is apt to take in his thoughts of God in distress.

I. I am to give some instances. And we have a very remarkable instance of this in Jonah, who tells us, chap. ii. 2. that he was in 'the belly of hell.' Hell in Scripture, when it is applied to the things of this world, doth intend the depth of temporal evils; as in Psal. xviii. 4. 'The sorrows of hell compassed me,' saith David, speaking of the time of his affliction and persecution under Saul. And 'the belly of hell' must needs be the darkness and confusion of all those calamitous distresses. Where did Jonah (viewing himself in this condition), look for the cause from whence it did proceed? He tells us, ver. 3. 'for thou hast cast me into the deep.' He knew the occasion of it was his own sinful frowardness; the instrumental cause, the mariners upon his own persuasion; but he refers it all to the principal cause, God himself: 'Thou hast cast me into the deep.' And how did this affect him? ver. 7. 'My soul fainted within me.' What relief then had he? ver. 5, 6. 'The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottom of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever.' No manner of relief, support, or succour to be expected. What did he do in this case? He tells presently, 'My prayer came in unto thee,' saith he, looking upon God as he who had cast him into this condition; his eye was to him. David gives us several instances of it in himself. Once I acknowledge he was mistaken in his course. He tells us so, Psal. lv. 3—5. he had described the overwhelming condition wherein he was. And what course doth he take? ver. 6. 'O that I had wings like a dove, for then would I fly away and be at rest; I would wander afar off, and be in the wilderness.' O that I was gone from the midst of all these perplexities,

that I was rid of those that are ready to overwhelm me. But this was not a right course. I might give innumerable instances of the contrary: Psal. xxxi. 8—10, &c. is a description of as sad a condition as any man can fall into, and which is accompanied with a great sense of God's displeasure, and of his own sin; ver. 10. 'My strength faileth because of mine iniquity, and my bones are consumed.' What course doth he then take? ver. 14. 'But I trusted in thee, O Lord; I said, Thou art my God.' When my strength failed because of mine iniquities, and my bones were consumed; when there was nothing but distress round about me, and that from God; yet then 'I trusted in thee, and said, Thou art my God.' And this is what God himself invites us unto, Isa. xl. 27. There is a complaint made by Jacob; 'My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God.' We have but two things wherein we are concerned in this world, as we are professors of the gospel; and they are, our way, and our judgment. Our way, that is, the course of obedience and profession, which according to the truth we are engaged in; as believing in Christ is called 'a way.' My way of faith, my way of worship, my way of obedience is hid from the Lord; God takes no notice of it; which is as much as to say, my all in the things of God is at a loss, God takes no notice of my way. Should that be our condition, really we should be of all men most miserable. But there is also our judgment, that is, the judgment that is to be passed upon our cause, and way, which David doth so often pray about, when he begs that God would 'judge him in his righteousness.' Now saith the church here, God takes no notice of it, but hath put off the cause to the world; my judgment is passed over, determined for me no more, but he lets me suffer under the judgment of the world. And truly when our way and judgment is passed over, profession and obedience as it were hid from God, God takes no notice of them. And when he puts off the judgment and determination of our cause, what have we more in the world? What doth God now propose to them for their relief? What promises, what encouragements will he remind them of? Nothing but himself, ver. 28. 'Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the

Creator of the ends of the earth fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding.' God calls them to consider him in his own nature and being, with those glorious acts suited thereunto. He calls our faith to look for rest in himself alone. It is impossible thy way and thy judgment should thus pass over from him, because he is 'the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator.'

II. I come now to the grounds of it, whence it is that faith doth this. And that is upon a twofold account.

1. Because it knows how to distinguish between the nature of the covenant, and the external administration of it.

2. Because it is natural to faith so to do; and that upon a double account, as we shall see presently.

1. Faith doth this, because it is able to distinguish between the covenant itself, which is firm, stable, invariable; and the administration of the covenant, which is various and changeable; I mean the outward administration of it. And this God teaches us, Psal. lxxxix. 30—34. 'If his children' [the children of Jesus Christ] 'forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; if they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgression 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. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips.' The covenant of God shall stand firm and unalterable then, when the rod and the stripes of men are upon our backs. In the midst of all God's visiting for iniquity, whether by internal rebukes, or outward chastisements, yet faith sees the covenant stable, and so makes unto God upon that account. David, when he comes to die, gives it as the sum of all his observation, that the covenant was immutable, but the outward administration various; 2 Sam. xxiii. 5. 'Although my house be not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure.' However God doth deal with my house, whatever misery is brought upon us, yet the covenant itself is everlasting, ordered in all things and sure. Whatever misery and distress may fall upon a believing soul, and I pray God help me to believe it, as well as to say it, whatever darkness or temptation he may be ex-

exercised withal upon the account of sin, whatever pressure in afflictions, persecutions, dangers, may befall him; they all belong unto God's covenant dispensation in dealing with him. For God being his God in covenant, he acts according to the covenant in all things. Hence saith Hezekiah, Isa. xxxviii. 16. 'O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit.' What are these things? Why, saith he, 'I reckoned till morning, that as a lion so will he break all my bones; from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me. What shall I say? he hath both spoken unto me, and himself hath done it; I shall go softly all my years in the bitterness of my soul.' One would think the next words would be, By these things men die. No: but 'by these things believers live, and in all these things is the life of my soul;' because they are all administered from the invariable covenant for the good of the souls of them who are exercised with them. Now as God is pleased to declare himself, so is the soul to think of God in these dispensations of the covenant. Doth God hide his face, and leave the soul to darkness? In darkness it must be. Job xxxiv. 29. 'When he giveth quietness, who then can make trouble? And when he hideth his face, who then can behold him?' Whether it be done against a nation, or against a man only; be it against one person, or the whole church of God; if he hides his face, and causeth darkness, none can behold him. When God chastens us, we cannot but look upon him as angry; when he gives us up into the hands of men, hard masters, we cannot but look upon it as a token of his displeasure. When God doth thus in his outward dispensation of the covenant, so that all things are dark, and shew nothing but displeasure, and we are to look upon him as a God that hideth himself, and is displeased with us, and exercising anger towards us; in such a day, what shall the soul then do? Why under all these outward tokens of God's displeasure, faith will, though but weak and faint, work through unto God himself, as invariable in his covenant, and there have a reserve in him beyond them all. Psal. xcvi. 2. 'Clouds and darkness are round about him; but righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne.' I confess I have clouds and darkness round about me, but if I could but break through these clouds and darkness, that are the consequents

of God's hiding his face, and come to his throne, there is righteousness and judgment, that righteousness and judgment wherein he hath betrothed me unto himself in covenant; Hos. ii. 19. Could I get through this darkness of mind, this pressure upon my spirit, this sense of guilt, and come unto his throne; there I should find him faithful and stable in his promises, and unalterable in his love. Now suppose a person to have all these things upon him at once; that God hath left him to a great sense of sin (for our troubles about sin are not according to the greatness of our sin, but to the sense God will let in upon us; and they are not to be reckoned the greatest sinners, who are most troubled for their sin), and his troubles are very great; and at the same time the Lord in his providential dispensation is pleased to exercise him in sharp afflictions; and if at the same time his interest and concernment in the people of God is likewise in darkness and distress, that there is no relief in that neither; to such a one there are clouds and darkness round about God. What then will faith do in such a case? Why true faith will secretly work through all to the throne of God, where there is righteousness, and judgment, and acceptance with him. So it is said, Isa. viii. 17. 'I will wait upon the Lord, that hideth his face from the house of Jacob, and I will look for him.' The face of God is his love in Christ, and the shining of his countenance in the promises of the covenant; for the way whereby God communicates his love unto our hearts, is by his promises. Now when the soul is sensible of no communication of love, nor promise of it, then God is said to hide his face. What will faith do in such a case? betake itself unto any thing else for relief? No, saith he, 'I will wait upon God that hideth his face.' As a traveller, when the sky is filled with clouds and darkness, tempests and storms, that are ready to break upon him everywhere; yet remembers that these are but interpositions, and the sun is where it was, and if he can but shelter himself till the storm be over, the sun will shine out again, and its beams refresh him: so is it with the soul in this case, it remembers God is still where he was; though there are clouds within, and distresses without, sorrow, and anguish, and fears round about us, and the enemy enters into the very soul; yet the sun is where it was still, God will hide us where we may abide till

this indignation be overpast, and the light of his countenance will yet shine upon me again. Faith considers God in the midst of all his various administrations, and so finds a way for relief.

2. Faith will naturally thus act, as it is the principle of the new nature in us that came from God, and will tend unto him, whatever difficulties lie in the way.

Evangelical faith will have a secret double tendency to God.

(1.) Upon that necessary respect which it indispensably and uncontrollably hath to Jesus Christ; for it being the purchase of Christ, and wrought in us by his Spirit, and being the product and travail of the soul of Christ, it hath a natural tendency unto him: 1 Pet. i. 21. 'Who by him do believe in God;' by Christ as mediator, as our surety, undertaking for us. That let what will overwhelm the soul, where there is but the least faith, it will have relief in this, that Christ was substituted in its room against all real indignation and wrath from God. The father of the faithful was once reduced to great distress, when he had lifted up his knife to the throat of his only son; but when destruction lies so near at the door, a voice called to him from heaven, and stopped him, and he looked behind him and saw a ram caught for a sacrifice to God. When many a poor soul hath the knife at the throat of all his consolations, ready to die away, he hears a voice behind him, that makes him look and see Christ provided for him, as a substituted sacrifice in his room.

(2.) The new creature is the child of God, whereof faith is the principle. It is begotten of God, of his own will; and so against all interpositions and difficulties whatsoever is tending to him.

III. I now proceed to shew, what it is, that in such an overwhelming condition as I have described, faith regards in God, to give it a support and relief, that it be not utterly swallowed up and overwhelmed. And,

1. The first thing faith considers in such a condition, is, the nature of God himself, and his excellencies. This is that which God in the first place proposes for our relief: Hos. xi. 9. 'I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger; I will not return to destroy Ephraim.' What reason

doth he give to assure us that he will not ! 'For,' saith he, 'I am God, and not man; the holy One in the midst of thee.' He proposes his own nature to our faith to confirm us, that whatever our expectations be, he will not execute the fierceness of his wrath; and he reproaches them who put their trust in any thing that is not God by nature. So Deut. xxxii. 21. 'They have provoked me with that which is not God.' And he curseth him 'that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm;' Jer. xvii. 5. But he proposes himself for our trust, one of infinite goodness, grace, bounty, and patience.

Now there are two ways whereby God proposes his nature, and the consideration of it, for the relief of faith in overwhelming distresses.

(1.) By his name. The name of God, is God himself, Psal. ix. 10. 'They that know thy name will put their trust in thee;' that is, they that know thee. Whatsoever the word itself signifies, yet it is the nature of God that is declared by his name. And you know how he doth invite and encourage us to trust in the name of God: 'The name of God is a strong tower; the righteous fly thereto and are safe;' Prov. xviii. 10. Isa. l. 10. 'Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.' The name of the Lord is what he declares himself to be: 'The Lord God, gracious and merciful, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin;' Exod. xxxiv. 6, 7. Here he reveals and declares his name. God proposes his name, and the declaration of it, against the working of unbelief, which apprehends that he is severe, wrathful, that he watcheth for our halting, treasures up every failing and sin to be avenged of it, and that he will do it in fury. No, saith God, 'fury is not in me;' Isa. xxvii. 4. The Lord is good and gracious, as appears by his name, especially as revealed in Christ; so that faith will find secret encouragement in it in all distresses.

By the way, hence you may observe, that God in former days, whilst revelation was under a progress, and he revealed himself by little and little, did still give out his name according as the state and condition of his church and people required, because he called them to trust in his name. How did he reveal himself unto Abraham? He tells you, Exod. vi. 3. 'I revealed myself unto Abraham by the name of God

Almighty.' So Gen. xvii. 1. he says to him, 'I am the Almighty God.' And he gives an explication of that name, Gen. xv. 1. 'I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.' Abraham was in a state and condition wherein he wanted protection in the world; for he was a stranger, and wandered up and down among strange nations that were stronger than he, and such as he might fear destruction from every day. Fear not, saith God, for 'I am God Almighty; I am thy shield.' And in the faith of this did Abraham travel among the nations. And at that time he had no child. What end then should he have of all his labour and travel? Why, saith God, 'I am thy reward.' And Gen. xiv. where there is a discourse about the nations of the world, who began to fall into idolatry, Melchisedek is called 'a priest of the most high God.' God revealed himself to be a 'high God,' to cast contempt upon their dunghill gods. And when Abraham came to speak with the king of Sodom, he says, 'I have sworn by the high God.' So when God came to bring the people out of the land of Egypt, he revealed himself unto them by his name Jehovah. I did not reveal myself so before, saith God, but now I reveal myself so, because I am come to give subsistence unto my promise. Thus God dealt with them when he came to maintain his church by gradual revelations. But now God reveals himself by his whole name, and we may take what suits our distress, especially that which is comprehensive of all the rest, 'The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

(2.) God doth this by comparing himself to such creatures as act out of natural kindness: 'Can a woman forget her sucking child? Yet I will not forget.'

Now there are three reasons why it is necessary that faith in an overwhelming condition should have regard to the nature of God, and the essential properties of his nature for its relief. [1.] Because of the circumstances of our distresses; [2.] Because of the nature of them; and, [3.] Because of the nature of faith.

[1.] Because of the circumstances of our distress. There are three or four circumstances that may befall us in our distress, that faith itself can get no relief against them, but from the essential properties of the nature of God.

1st. The first is, place. Believers may be brought into

distress in all places of the world: in a lion's den with Daniel; in a dungeon with Jeremiah; they may be banished to the ends of the earth, as John to Patmos; or they may be driven into the wilderness, as the woman by the fury of the dragon. The whole church may be cast into places where no eye can see them, no hand relieve them; where none knows whether they are among the living or the dead. Now what can give relief against this circumstance of distress which may befall the people of God? Nothing but what Jeremiah tells us, chap. xxiii. 23. 'Am I a God at hand only, and not afar off, to the ends of the earth?' Psal. cxxxix. 7. 'Whither shall I fly from thy presence? to the utmost ends of the earth?' It is all in vain: the essential omnipresence of God can alone relieve the souls of believers against this great circumstance of various places, whither they may be driven to suffer distress, and be overwhelmed with them. If the world could cast us out, where God is not, and hath nothing to do, how would it triumph? It was a part of their bondage and great difficulty of old, that the solemn worship of God was confined to one certain country and place; so that when the enemies of the church could cast them out from thence, they did as it were say unto them, Go, serve other gods. God hath taken off that bondage; all the world cannot throw us out of a place where we cannot worship God. Wherever there is a holy people, there is a holy land, and we can be driven to no place but God is there: and if we should be compelled to leave our land, we have no ground to fear we shall leave our God behind us. God's essential omnipresence is a great relief against this circumstance of distress, especially to souls that are cast out where no eye can pity them. Should they be cast into dungeons, as Jeremiah was, yet they can say, 'God is here.'

2dly. It is so likewise with respect to time. The sufferings of the church of God are not tied up to one age or generation. We can see some little comfort and relief that may befall us in our own days; but what shall become of our posterity, of future ages? Why God's immutability is the same throughout all generations; his 'loving-kindness fails not,' as the psalmist saith; which is the only relief against this distress. Alas, if a man should take a prospect of the interest of Christ at this day in the world, and con-

sider the coming on of wickedness like a flood in all parts of the earth, he would be ready to think, What will God do for his great name? What will become of the gospel of Christ in another age? But God is the same through all times and ages.

3dly. There is relief to be found in God, and only in himself, in the loss of all, when nothing remains. Should a man lose his lands, if his house remains, he hath something to relieve him, he knows where to repose his head under his cares. But when all is gone, what can relieve him? Nothing but God and his all-sufficiency. This was Habbakkuk's comfort if all should fail him; yet, saith he, 'I will rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of my salvation.'

4thly. The last circumstance of distress, is death, with the way and manner whereby it may approach us: and how soon this will be, we know not. When all this state and frame of things shall vanish, and we prove to have an utter unconcernment in things below; when the curtain shall be turned aside, and we shall look into another world; the soul's relief lies in God's immutability, that we shall find him the same to us in death as he was in life, and much more.

SERMON XL.*

IN my former discourse upon this text, I told you, that there were three reasons why faith betakes itself to the nature of God for relief in overwhelming distresses. The first was taken from the circumstances of those distresses; the second from the nature of them; and the third from the nature of faith itself.

I mentioned four circumstances in such distresses that nothing can relieve the souls of men against, but the consideration of God's essential properties, which I shall not here repeat, but proceed to the second reason.

[2.] There are some distresses that in their own nature refuse all relief that you can tender them, but only what is derived from the fountain itself, the nature of God. Zion's distress did so; Isa. xlix. 14. 'Zion said, The Lord hath forsaken me.' And, chap. xl. 27. 'My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God.' She was in that distress that nothing but the nature of God could give her relief. God therefore proposeth that unto her: 'Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth fainteth not?' ver. 28. A man would think sometimes it was no difficult thing to answer those objections which believing souls charge against themselves, even such as we are well and comfortably persuaded are believers. But it frequently falls out quite otherwise, and nothing will bring them to an issue, but the consideration of the infinite grace and goodness that is in God.

Nay, there may be temporal distresses that in their own nature will admit of no other relief. As when the whole church of God is in extreme calamity in the world, which nothing can remove but infinite power, goodness, and wisdom. You know how Moses was put to it when God told him he would deliver Israel out of Egypt. He looked upon it as impossible, and raised objections till it came to that, Exod. iii. 13. If it must be so, tell me thy name. And God revealed his name: 'I am that I am.' Till God con-

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firmed him with his name, that is, with his nature, Moses could see no way possible how the church should be delivered. And so it falls out with us, as with Moses. When God did not appear, Moses thought he could have delivered them himself, and goes and kills the Egyptian; but when God appeared, he could not believe that God himself could do it, till he gave him his name.

But some may object; When faith comes to approach unto God to find relief as God proposes himself in his name, it will find other things in God besides his goodness, grace, and mercy: there is severity, justice, righteousness in God, which will give as much discouragement on the one hand, as the other properties will give encouragement on the other: to come to God and see him glorious in holiness, and infinite in severity and righteousness, here will be discouragement.

I shall answer this briefly, and so pass on.

1st. It is most true that God is so: he is no less infinitely holy, than infinitely patient and condescending; no less infinitely righteous, than infinitely merciful and gracious: but these properties of God's nature shall not be immediately glorified upon their persons who go unto him, and make their addresses in faith, though he will be so to others. There is nothing but faith can take a proper view of God. Wicked men's thoughts of God are referred unto these two heads: First, They think wickedly, 'that God is altogether such an one as themselves;' Psal. l. 21. While under the power of their corruptions and temptations, while in pursuit of their lusts, they have no thoughts of God, but such as these. The meaning of which is, that he is not much displeased with them in what they do; but hath the same care of them in the way of their sins, as of the holiest in the world. Secondly, Their other thoughts are commonly when it is too late, and God lets his terrors into their souls, what the prophet saith in Isaiah; 'Who of us shall dwell with eternal fire?'

2dly. God hath given believers assurance that he will not deal with them according to the strictness of his holiness, and severity of his justice. So speaks Job, chap. xxiii. 3, 4. 'Oh that I knew where I might find him; that I might come

to his seat! I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.' But doth he know of whom he speaks? and what this great and holy One will speak when he appears? Yes, ver. 6. 'Will he plead against me with his great power? No, but he will put strength in me.' God will not plead with me by his dread, and terror, and great severity; but he will put strength in me. Therefore, Isa. xxvii. 5. he bids them 'lay hold on his arm.' Who dare lay hold on God's arm? 'Let them lay hold upon my arm that they may have peace, and they shall have peace.' Poor creatures are afraid to go to God because of his power; but 'fury is not in me,' saith God.

3dly. It is impossible for faith ever to consider the nature of God, but it hath a secret respect unto Jesus Christ, as the days-man, or umpire between God and the soul, and as he by whom, as to all that concerns these properties of his nature, his severity and justice, are already manifested and glorified.

[3.] There is one reason more why the soul will thus in overwhelming distresses betake itself unto the nature of God, as manifested by his name; and that is taken from the nature of faith itself. The formal reason of faith is the veracity of God's word. What we believe with divine faith, we believe upon this account, that God hath revealed and spoken it. And the ultimate object of faith is God's all-sufficiency. And whatsoever you act faith immediately upon, it will not rest, and be satisfied, till it comes, as it were, to be immersed in the all-sufficiency of God; like the stream of a river that runs with great swiftness, and presses on till it comes to the ocean, where it is swallowed up. It is said, 1 Pet. i. 21. that through Christ we 'believe in God.' Christ is the immediate object of faith, but God in his all-sufficiency is the ultimate object of faith.

Again, faith acts thus, because it is the great principle of that divine nature which God hath inlaid in our souls, created in us, and whereof he is the Father; for 'of his own will he hath begotten us by the word of truth.' Faith therefore, as it is the child of God, the new nature that God hath ingrafted in us, has a natural tendency towards God; so that it is working in and through all to God himself who is

its Father. This is the first thing that the soul considers in God, that faith makes its application unto for relief.

2. In an overwhelming condition faith finds relief in sovereign grace; that is, grace as it is absolutely free. What I mean by it, is that which is mentioned, *Exod. xxxiii. 19.* 'I will be gracious unto whom I will be gracious, and I will shew mercy upon whom I will shew mercy.' The things we stand in need of, are grace and mercy: the principle from whence they flow, and are bestowed, is the sovereign will and pleasure of God. God refers the dispensation of all grace and mercy merely unto his own sovereign will and pleasure. Now when the soul can find nothing in the promise, nothing in any evidence of the love of God, or in the experience that it hath formerly had, it betakes itself unto the sovereignty of grace. And in sovereign grace there are two things:

(1.) That God is able to give relief in the state and condition wherein we are; whatever we stand in need of, mercy, life, salvation, God is able to give it; whatsoever he will do, he can do. And this in the Scripture is made a great encouragement of rest upon God. Thus *Dan. iii. 17.* when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in that great and overwhelming distress, what did they relieve themselves withal? 'If it be so,' say they, 'our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thy hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.' If God 'will not;' it is not, 'if God cannot;' for he can do what he will. If he had not been able, they would not have worshipped him. There is nothing for these sixteen hundred years that hath seemed harder to be effected, than the call of the Jews; but the apostle gives us this ground yet to fix our hopes upon, in the expectation of it: they may be grafted in, 'for God is able to graft them in again;' *Rom. xi. 23.* The very power of God, that he is able to do whatever he pleases, is a foundation for faith to act upon, and relieve itself by. And therefore God pleads it emphatically, *Isa. l. 2, 3.* where he tells them, that his hand is not shortened that it cannot save; but he is still able to do it. 'Is my hand shortened at all,' saith he, 'that it cannot redeem?

or have I no power to deliver? Behold, at my rebuke I dry up the sea: I make the rivers a wilderness: I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering.'

Now there are four things that are included in this very apprehension of faith, that God is able to do this whatever our condition be.

[1.] There is nothing contrary to his own nature in it. There are things that are contrary to the nature of God, and these things God cannot do. 'God cannot lie;' Tit. i. 2. Heb. vi. 18. It is one part of God's infinite perfection, that he can do nothing contrary unto his own nature. So that whatever I believe is of God's sovereign grace which he is able to do, I believe there is nothing in it contrary unto the nature of God. Whatever apprehensions we have of pardon of sin, it includes an atonement; for without an atonement God is not able to pardon our sins; God cannot do it without satisfaction unto his justice. So that every soul that hath an apprehension that there is sovereign grace in God, whereby he is able to relieve and help him, he includes in that apprehension, the belief of an atonement, without which God cannot do it. He cannot deny himself. It is the judgment of God, that 'they that commit sin are worthy of death.'

[2.] If God be able, there is nothing in it contrary to any decree of God. There are many things that may be contrary to God's decree, that in themselves were not contrary unto his nature; for the decree of God is a free act of his will, which might have been, or not have been. But when the decree of God is engaged, if any thing be contrary unto it, God cannot do it, for he is not changeable.

Now the decree of God may be taken two ways.

1st. For his eternal purpose concerning this or that person or thing. But this I intend not.

2dly. The decree of God signifies '*sententia lata*,' 'a determinate sentence,' that God hath pronounced against any person or thing, contrary to which God will not proceed. So Zeph. ii. 2. we are invited to 'seek the Lord, before the decree bring forth;' that is, before God hath passed an absolute and determinate sentence in that matter and case. When Daniel would assure Nebuchadnezzar of his doom, he tells him it was 'the decree of the Most High,'

chap. iv. 24. So in the case of Saul, 'God hath rejected thee,' saith Samuel, 1 Sam. xv. 26. But will he not call it back? No: 'The strength of Israel will not lie,' ver. 29. The sentence is gone forth, and it shall stand. God rejected the house of Eli from the priesthood, 1 Sam. ii. but will he not return again? No: 'The iniquity of the house of Eli shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever;' chap. iii. 14. So it was with them of whom God 'sware in his wrath, they should never enter into his rest.' Now while there is faith in God's sovereignty, if there be no decree in the case, there is hope. But if God had decreed, and put forth his oath, he would not have raised my faith to look after sovereign grace, which declares an ability in God, that he can do it.

[3.] It includes this, That there is nothing in it contrary unto the glory of God; for this is the measure of all that God doth in all his dealings with us; he aims in all things at the manifestation of his glory. And we are not to desire any thing that is contrary to the glory of God. We are not to desire that God would not be holy and righteous because of us, that we might be saved in our sins, and while we are obstinate in them. This is to desire, that God would not be God, that we might live. But now to save an humble, broken, contrite sinner, a poor guilty creature, that lies at his feet for mercy, to deliver poor distressed believers from ruin and oppression, is not inconsistent with the glory of God. God can do this for the advancement of his glory. I have known it go well with some poor souls, when they could come to believe this, that to save and pardon them, was not contrary to God's nature, decree, and glory.

[4.] There is this in it also, That if there be need of power, God can put it forth; that power which carried Abraham through all difficulties; Gen. xviii. 14. 'Is any thing too hard for the Lord?' What is your difficulty? It may be an overwhelming guilt of sin: 'Is any thing too hard for God?' What is your distress? A wicked, prevailing corruption. 'Is any thing too hard for God?' In outward distresses that lie upon the church of God, there is this relief in sovereign grace: 'Is any thing too hard for God?' Every thing is too hard for us, but nothing is too hard for God. This is the first thing in sovereign grace; that God is able.

(2.) If it be so, then all that we have to do is resolved into the will of God. So that all I have to do in this world, is but to go to God, as the leper did unto Christ: 'Lord, if thou wilt thou canst make me clean.' If God will, he can pardon, sanctify, save me. And if God will, he can deliver his church and people. Here lies the whole question; it is all resolved into his will.

Now two things ensue after once a poor soul hath resolved all his concerns into the will of God.

[1.] There will be an end put unto all other entangling disputes and dark thoughts, which overwhelm the mind: for now, saith the soul, it is come to this, that my whole condition depends upon God's sovereign pleasure. David somewhere makes his complaint, that he was in the mire. A poor creature is bemired, and the more he plungeth, the faster he sticks. When a soul is in this condition, saith God, 'Be still, and know that I am God;' Psal. xli. 10. And now all is rolled up upon the will of God.

[2.] When once we can resolve our conditions absolutely without farther dispute into the will of God, innumerable arguments will arise to persuade the soul that God will be willing. I will name some of them.

1st. One is taken from that goodness and graciousness of his nature, which we have been before considering and proposing unto you; and doth now properly in this place occur unto us. Suppose any of us had a business with a man, whom we believe to be a good man, a man that hath something of the image of God upon him, and the matter is to us of great importance, it may be as much as our lives are worth, and he can easily do it without any prejudice or disadvantage unto himself, with one word; can we cast a greater reflection upon this man than to think he will not be willing to do it? that merely to do us a mischief and spite, he will change his own nature, and act contrary to his own principles? Shall we then question the good will of God? Shall we question, when all is resolved into his will, that he will not give us out grace and mercy in time of need? Our Saviour presses this argument, Luke xi. 11—13. and in other places, where he brings the issue as near as possible, telling us, it is not to be expected that a child, who finds nothing but his father's will to hinder, will mistrust his

giving him bread. 'And if ye being evil,' saith he, 'know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?' And when we can bring the concerns of God's church and people merely to his will, his own nature will supply us with arguments enough to confirm our expectation that he will do it.

2dly. There is another great argument, when all is brought to the sovereignty of the will of God, which is mentioned, Rom. viii. 32. 'He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up unto death for us all; how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?' Shall I question whether God will do this thing or no, considering this great instance of his will? It was his will to send Jesus Christ to die for poor sinners. He did not send him to die in vain, and that his death should be lost. If God were not willing to give out grace and mercy to sinners, wherefore did he send Jesus Christ? Why did he give his own Son out of his bosom? Why did he not spare him, and cause our iniquities to meet upon ourselves? Can God give a greater sign of his readiness to spare sinners, than his dealing with Jesus Christ? That is the second thing which faith considers when it comes unto God for relief in an overwhelming condition; sovereign grace, that God is able, all things are resolved into his will.

3dly. Faith in this matter takes into consideration that one particular property of the grace of God in Christ, which is mentioned, Ephes. iii. 8. 'The unsearchable riches of Christ.' Saith faith, there is more grace and more mercy too in God (for these are God's riches that are here intended) than possibly I can see and look into. Will the mercy that hath been declared unto my faith, the promises that have been discovered and revealed unto me, give me satisfaction? No, they will not. I cannot be satisfied with what I have received; with what discoveries have been made unto me of the grace of God. But, saith the soul, there lie behind unsearchable riches of grace, which I can by no means conceive, which all the world, or all the angels in heaven cannot find out. This is a great relief in an overwhelming condition.

4thly. Once more, faith in such a condition learns to

resolve former experiences, not into its own present condition, but into the unchangeableness of God. And this one thing being wisely managed, is enough to relieve our souls under many overwhelming distresses that do befall us. The psalmist doth so, Psal. lxxvii. He had experience of God; ver. 6. 'I call to remembrance my song in the night.' Compare it with that in Job xxxv. 10. 'Where is God my Maker, who giveth songs in the night?' David intends some such intimation of the love and good will of God as made him rejoice in the night season. But what is his state now? He tells you, ver. 2. that it is the 'day of his trouble,' that 'his sores run in the night and cease not, his soul refuses to be comforted.' And, ver. 7, 8, &c. 'Will the Lord cast off for ever? Will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? Doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?' In this grand and overwhelming distress, where doth he find relief? He resolves his experience into the unchangeableness of God, ver. 10. 'This is my infirmity; but I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High.' He that gave me that former song in the night season, though now I am nothing but darkness, and ready to fear his mercy is quite gone for ever; yet, he is the same, and he will give in the like experience again: though I am changed, he is not.

3. I should go farther to shew what respect faith in such a condition hath unto the covenant of God; but I cannot now insist upon it.

IV. I thought to have shewn you also in the last place, the difference between the faith of the godly, and that of unbelievers; that which the worst of men will have in God in the time of their distresses; and that relief which true evangelical faith finds in an overwhelming condition. But I see it would take up too much time.

One word of use, and I have done.

Use. This is an overwhelming time; a time wherein many are at the ends of the earth literally, and many metaphorically; a time and season wherein most that fear the Lord are obnoxious to some overwhelming distress or other. Suppose that God hath not let forth upon many at this day an overwhelming sense of guilt, that there are not many

tempted, wounded, and troubled (though some there are which we meet with every day), yet I have great reason to fear, that if we were all rightly awakened, an overwhelming distress would come upon the minds of men from the want of humility, holiness, fruitfulness, faith, and love, which ourselves have sometimes enjoyed, and is proposed unto us, and which the examples of them who are gone before us, lead us to inquire after. Are none overwhelmed with the hardness of their hearts, instability of their spirits, overgrown with careless, empty, light, worldly frames? Truly, more or less, we have all reason to be overwhelmed, and we have shewed you a little where our relief lies in this state and condition.

Are we ready to be overwhelmed with the calamitous condition of the people of God all over the world? and as to ourselves, our goods, and personal concerns, any thing that is near and dear unto us? I pray God make our hearts jealous over it, especially those that are at ease, in their health and prosperity. When God throws others of his people into the furnace, such have great reason to be jealous, lest he deal more severely with them, than the poorest saint that wants a morsel of bread. Well, you see the way of relief in this case also. It is God alone unto whom we must make our application. He is willing to receive us, because of the goodness of his nature; and he is able to save us, because of the abundance of his grace and power.