

SERMON XIII.*

THE USE OF FAITH IN A TIME OF GENERAL DECLENSION IN RELIGION.

The just shall live by his faith.—HAB. ii. 4.

I AM now come to the last thing that was proposed to be spoken to, and with which I shall shut up the subject, viz.

3. How we may live by faith, under an apprehension of great and woful decays in churches, in church members, in professors of all sorts; and in the gradual withdrawing of the glory of God from us all on that account.

I would speak unto three things:

(1.) That this is such a time of decay among us, among churches, among church members, and professors of all sorts and ways throughout this nation; yea, and other nations too, where there are any that fear God.

(2.) That this is, and ought to be, a cause of great trouble and trial unto all that are true believers. And then,

(3.) I shall shew you, how we may live by faith, in such a season. What it is faith will do to support the soul at such a time.

(1.) That it is now such a time of decay; there are too many evidences of it. I will name a few things.

[1.] A sense of it is impressed upon the minds of all the most judicious and diligent Christians, that do abound most in self-examination, or do take most notice of the ways of God. Multitudes have I heard testifying of it; complaints are received from many in this nation, and the neighbouring nations, that there is a great decay, as to the power of grace and life of faith, among all sorts of professors. And some of them will go farther in their evidence, and tell us, that they find the effects of it in themselves; that they find it a matter of great difficulty, requiring great watchfulness, and great diligence in any measure to keep up themselves

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unto their former frames; and when they have done all, they do not attain their desire. And to increase this evidence, we are all convinced of it, or else we are notorious hypocrites; for I know not how often I have heard it prayed over in this very place. So that there is sent forth from God a conviction upon the hearts and minds of spiritual, self-examining believers, that churches, church members, professors, and themselves, are under spiritual decays. This is the first evidence: and therefore, in such a season, it was the best part of the church that made that sad complaint; Isa. lxiii. 17. 'O Lord, why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our hearts from thy fear?' They were sensible, that there was a judgment of the hand of God upon them.

[2.] The open want of love that is among churches, among church members, among professors, is another evidence of decay. I will not speak of the want of love among churches, one to another. But as to love among church members, we have scarce the shadow of it remaining among us. Where men have relations, where they have acquaintance, where they have been old friends, where they agree in a humour, and converse, there is an appearance of love; and where they agree in a party and faction, there is an appearance of love; but upon the pure spiritual account of Christianity and church membership, we have, I say, scarce the shadow of it left among us. I remember how it was with us, when it was a joy of heart to behold the face of one another, wherein there was love without dissimulation, in sincerity, love attended with pity, compassion, condescension, yea, love attended with delight. But it is dead in churches, dead among professors.

[3.] Another evidence of this decay, is want of delight and diligence in the ordinances of gospel worship. These ordinances were wont to be a joy of heart unto all that feared God; but now there is so much deadness, coldness, and indifferency, so much undervaluing of the word, selffulness, pride, and so much an apprehension that we know every thing, so little endeavour to tremble at every truth, by what means soever it be brought unto us, as gives a manifest evidence of woful decays that are fallen upon us. Dead preachers! dead hearers! all things now go down

among the churches of God, and professors in these nations. And this is attended with two desperate evils; one of which I heard of but lately, but upon inquiry, I find it to be a far greater evil than I took it to be, viz. Men under an apprehension, that as they do not see others enlivened, nor quickened as they were wont to be, by the ordinances of divine worship, and finding no such thing in their own hearts neither, in all probability finding themselves to grow dead and useless, are fallen into an opinion, that there is an end of them, and that they ought to attend unto them no more. And this doth befall some that have long walked soberly, and with great diligence in the use of ordinances: some in this city, and in other places, are led by foolish delusions to it, because they do not find the spirit, and life, and power of the word and ordinances in themselves, and as they think in others. A godly and learned minister, that shewed me a discourse written upon this subject, in defence of ordinances, did acquaint me with so great a number falling into this abomination, that I did not think it had been possible. This is one of the evils.

The other evil that attends it is this, That this deadness and indifferency unto ordinances, and want of bringing our necks to the yoke of Christ therein, against all disputings and arguings of flesh and blood, hath taken such place among us, and proceeded so far, that all ways of reformation are useless. Men may make divisions, and do I know not what, but this I know, there is no way of obtaining any reformation, but for men to engage their hearts to return unto God, in more delight in his service than there hath been. Some utterly forsake the assemblies, some come with great indifferency, using their liberty, off and on, at their pleasure. Are not these things evidences of great decays among us? To me they are. I speak not as to this congregation in particular, but as to the state of all churches that I know or can hear of in these nations.

[4.] The last evidence I shall mention of these decays among us, is our worldly-mindedness, conformity to the world, and security. These things have been so often spoken to you, and no reformation hath ensued, that now they are looked upon as words of course; and I am discouraged from speaking of them any more. But assure yourselves,

this conformity to the world, and this security that is yet found among us, is a great evidence, that the glory of God is departing from us. Ministers preach against worldly-mindedness, security, &c. but it makes no impression upon the minds of men; for we can scarce give an instance of any the least reformation. These things plainly demonstrate, that we are all under great decays.

(2.) A sense of this general decay among churches, church members and professors, ought to be an exercise and concern unto our minds. If we think all is well with us, and are satisfied, while we are free from outward troubles, and not concern ourselves about our decays, I will not say we are hypocrites, but truly we are poor, low, dead, carnal, unspiritual Christians. I thought to have spoken to these three heads; to shew you,

[1.] How God is dishonoured by this general decay.

[2.] How the world is offended and scandalized at it.

[3.] How the ruin of churches is hastened by it, which will befall them assuredly, unless God recover us out of this bad state. But I shall waive these things, and proceed.

(3.) Suppose it be thus, and we do complain of it to one another, not knowing what the issue will be, nor what it may come unto, How shall we live by faith under this consideration? What is the work of faith in this state? If things are so (and I wish any one could evidence they are not; but suppose for once that they are so), and our souls are burdened with an apprehension that they are so; then what will faith do to enable us to pass through this exercise, and to live to God?

I shall tell you something of what I find. And if God help you not to better things, make use of these, and improve them, that you may give glory to God, by believing under this condition also.

[1.] Faith will mind the soul, that notwithstanding this also, yet Christ hath built his church upon that rock, that it shall not be utterly prevailed against. The promise, saith faith, extends itself as well to the inbred adversaries of our own souls, unbelief, deadness, and all these things, as to our outward enemies; Matt. xvi. 18. 'I will build my church upon this rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' Though we were all dead, helpless, lifeless,

poor creatures; though we had retained almost nothing but outward order, and had lost the very vigour and essence of faith and obedience, yet Christ's church shall abide, and stand, and those that belong to him shall be preserved. Such and such are turned apostates, saith the apostle, 2 Tim. ii. 19. 'Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.' Here is my ground of hope notwithstanding all this, though one falls after another, though one decays after another, 'nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure,' and it hath a seal upon it, 'God knoweth who are his.' Every one whom he hath effectually called, and built upon the rock Jesus Christ, shall be preserved, whatever befalls the residue of the world. To see such a confluence of all manner of dangerous evils from without, as are coming this day upon the church of God, and to see, in the mean time, so many evidences of a decaying spiritual state in believers themselves, it will put faith to exercise itself upon this promise of Christ, 'I have built my church upon the rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' If you find your spirits at any time pressed with these things, if nothing better occurs at hand, exercise faith upon this promise of Christ, and upon the firm standing of the foundation of God, that he knoweth who are his, and will carry them through all these difficulties, and land them safe in eternity.

[2.] Faith will also mind the soul, that God hath yet the fulness and residue of the Spirit, and can pour it out when he pleases, to recover us from this woful state and condition, and to renew us to holy obedience unto himself. There are more promises of God's giving supplies of his Spirit to deliver us from inward decays, than there are for the putting forth the acts of his power to deliver us from our outward enemies. And God is as able to do the inward work, to revive and renew a spirit of faith, love, and holiness, of meekness, humility, self-denial, and readiness for the cross: he is able, with one word and act of his grace, to renew it, as he is able, by one act of his power, to destroy all his enemies, and make them the footstool of Christ when he pleases. Live in the faith of this.

The psalmist saith, in Psal. cxlvii. 16, 17. 'He sends forth his hoary frost,' and the issue is, the earth is frozen;

he brings a death upon it. But, saith he, in Psal. civ. 30. 'Thou sendest forth thy Spirit, and renewest the face of the earth.' In like manner there is deadness upon all churches and professors in some measure at this time; but God, who hath the fulness of the Spirit, can send him forth, and renew the face of the soul; can give professors and profession another face, not to trim and trick, as now so often is done, not so high and haughty, not so earthly and worldly, as is now so much seen, but humble, meek, holy, broken-hearted, and self-denying. God can send forth his Spirit when he pleases, and give all our churches and professors a new face, in the verdure and flourishing of his grace in them. When God will do this I know not; but I believe God can do this; he is able to do it, able to renew all his churches, by sending out supplies of the Spirit, whose fulness is with him, to recover them in the due and appointed time; and more I believe truly, that when God hath accomplished some ends upon us, and hath stained the glory of all flesh, he will renew the power and glory of religion among us again, even in this nation. I believe it truly, but not as I believe the other things I have mentioned unto you, for those I believe absolutely; namely, that Christ hath built his church upon a rock, and that nothing shall ever finally prevail against it; and that God hath the fulness and the residue of the Spirit to renew us again, to all the glory of profession and holy obedience. These I propose as truths that are infallible, that will not fail you, and upon which you may venture your souls to eternity. And if your faith in these things will not give you support and comfort, I know not what else will.

[3.] When your souls are perplexed within you about these things, your faith will say unto you, 'O my soul, why art thou cast down?' Are not all these things foretold thee? 1 Tim. iv. 1. 'That in the latter times some shall depart from the faith.' 2 Tim. iii. 1—5. 'That perilous days shall come, because men should have a form of godliness, but deny the power.' Hath it not been foretold that churches shall decay, and lose their first faith and love, in examples that have been set before you? Why are you surprised? saith our Saviour, John xvi. 4. 'I have told you these things, that when the time shall come, you may remember that I told you of them.' I was never nearer a surprisal than by this one thing, how it

could possibly be, that after so many instructions, after so many mercies, trials, fears, after so many years carrying our lives in our hands, and so many glorious deliverances, that there should yet be decays found amongst us, and such going backward: it is a great surprisal to one that considers it aright. But seeing it is foretold that so it shall be, let us live by faith; God hath some great end to accomplish out of it, and then all will be well. 'When I have accomplished my whole work upon mount Zion,' saith God, 'then,' &c. Isa. x. 12.

[4.] And lastly, Faith, if it be in exercise, will put every soul in whom it is upon an especial attendance unto those duties God calls him unto in such a season. This accomplishes and completes our living by faith under such a trial as this is. If faith be in us, and in exercise, it will put us upon all these duties that God requires of us in such a season.

1st. It will put us upon self-examination, how far we ourselves are engaged in these decays, and have contracted the guilt of them.

2dly. It will put us upon great mourning, by reason of God's withdrawing himself from us.

3dly. It will put us upon watchfulness over ourselves, and over one another, that we be not overtaken by the means and causes of these decays. It will put us,

4thly. Upon zeal for God and the honour of the gospel, that it may not suffer by reason of our miscarriages.

In one word, faith will do something; but for our parts, we do little or nothing. Faith will do something, I say, wherever it is, when it is stirred up to exercise. But as to these special duties, in reference to these decays that all professors are fallen under; O how little is it we do in any kind whatever. Would we might advise with one another what to do under these decays, to further one another in recovering ourselves from them. This then is what we are called to, and is required of us, viz. faith in the faithfulness of Christ, who hath built his church upon the rock, that, be things never so bad, it shall not be prevailed against. Faith in the fulness of the Spirit, and his promise to send him to renew the face of the church. Faith in apprehending the truth of God, who hath foretold these things. And faith putting us upon those especial duties, that God requires at our hands in such a season.