

THE CHURCH'S COMPLAINT AND CONFIDENCE.

THE CHURCH'S COMPLAINT AND CONFIDENCE.

NOTE.

'The Church's Complaint' forms a portion of 'The Beams of Divine Light' (4to, 1639). Its separate title-page will be found below.* For general title-page, see Vol. V. page 220. G.

* THE
CHVRCHES
Complaint and
Confidence.

In three Sermons,
By the late Reverend and Learned
Divine RICHARD SIBS,
Doctor in Divinity, Master of Katherine Hall in
Cambridge, and sometimes Preacher at
Graves-Inne.

L A M. 1. 20.

*Behold O Lord for I am in distresse, my bowells are troubled,
mine heart is turned within me, for I have grievously
rebelled, abroad the sword bereaveth, at home there is
as death.*

L O N D O N,

Printed by G. M. for Nicholas Bourne and Rapha Harford, 1639.

THE CHURCH'S COMPLAINT AND CONFIDENCE.

But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are as filthy rags ; and we all do fade as a leaf ; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee : for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. But now, O Lord, thou art our Father : we are the clay, and thou our potter ; and we are all the work of thine hands.—ISAIAH LXIV. 6-8.

THE words are part of a blessed form of prayer prescribed to the church long before they were in captivity. It begins at the 15th verse of the former chapter, 'Look down from heaven ; behold from the habitation of thy holiness,' &c. The blessed prophet Isaiah was carried with the wings of prophetic spirit over many years, and sees the time to come, the time of the captivity ; and God by his Spirit doth direct them a prayer, and this is part of the form. For God in mercy to his people, as he foresaw before what would become of them, so he vouchsafes them comfort beforehand, and likewise he prescribes a form of prayer beforehand. It is very useful to use forms. The 102d Psalm, it is a form of pouring out the soul to God when any man is in misery, as you see in the preface. But that by the way. These verses are a part of a form prescribed for the pouring forth an afflicted soul ; 'We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness,' &c. The words they are,

First, An humble confession of sin.

And first, of the sins of their nature, of their persons themselves, 'We are all as an unclean thing.'

And then, of the sins of actions : 'all our righteousness is as filthy rags.'

And then, in the third place, a confession of the sin of non-proficiency, of obduration, and senselessness, that notwithstanding the corrections of God, they were little the better : 'There is none that calleth upon thy name, or that stirs up himself to take hold of thee.'

In the second place, there is an humble complaint of the miserable estate they were in by their sins : 'We all fade as a leaf ; our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away : thou hast hid thy face from us, and consumed us, because of our iniquities.' The complaint is set forth in these four clauses.

And then an humble supplication and deprecation to God, in ver. 8, and so forward. 'Now, Lord, thou art our Father: we are the clay, thou art the potter; we are all the work of thy hands,' &c. These be the parcels of this portion of Scripture.

'But we are all as an unclean thing,' &c.

Here is, first, *an humble confession*. And first, observe in general what afflictions will do, especially afflictions sanctified. That which all the prophetic sermons could not do, that which all the threatenings could not do, affliction now doth. Now when they were in captivity and base estate, they fall a humbling themselves. So the prodigal, nothing could humble him but afflictions. 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,' Ps. cxxxvii. 1. All the denunciations of judgments before they came to the waters of Babylon could not make them weep. One affliction will do more than twenty sermons. When God teacheth and chastiseth too, when together with teaching there is correction, then it is effectual. And this is the reason of God's course; why, when nothing else will do, he humbles his people with afflictions, because he cannot otherwise teach them.

Affliction withdraws that which is the fuel of sin; for what doth our sinful disposition feed on? Upon pleasures, and vanities, upon the honours of this life, and riches, &c. Now when affliction either takes these things away, or embitters them if we have them, then that which sin carried us to, and that we fed our own base earthly lusts with, being gone, when a man is stripped of these, he begins to know himself what he is, he was drunk before. I deem a man in prosperity little better than drunk. He knows neither God, nor himself, nor the world. He knows it not to be as a vain world. He knows not himself to be vanity, to be an empty creature, except he consist* in God, and make his peace with him. He knows not God to be such a holy God, and such an angry God for sin. But when affliction comes, and withdraws and strips him of those things that made him fierce against God, then he begins to know God, and to tremble at the judgments of God when he begins to smart. He begins to know himself to be a madman, and a fool, and a sot. He did not know himself before in his jollity. And then he knows the world indeed as a vain world. Blessed be that affliction that makes us know a gracious and good God, and the creature to be a vain creature, and ourselves out of the favour of God to be nothing. You see what afflictions will do.

God doth use to break men, as men use to break horses. They ride them over hedge and ditch, and over ploughed lands, uneven grounds, and gall them with the spur and with the bit, and all to make them tractable; and then afterward they ride them gently and meekly, and rather so than otherwise. So God is fain to carry his children over ploughed lands; he is fain to break them in their wickedness, to bring their ways upon their heads; he is fain to gall them, and humble them every kind of way, that they may carry him, that he may bring their spirits under him, that he may lead them in the ways that lead to their own comfort.

Use. Let us never murmur, therefore, at God's hand, but willingly yield at the first. What doth a stubborn horse get, but the spur and stripes? And what doth a man get, that stands out when God comes to humble him by affliction, and intends his good? Nothing but more stripes. To come to the parts.

'We are all as an unclean thing,' &c.

* That is, = stand.—G.

Here, first, you see there is an humble confession. I will not enlarge myself in the point of humiliation, but speak a little, because this is the day of humiliation: the occasion is for humiliation. All this is to bring us low, to humble us, to make us know ourselves. Without humiliation, Christ will never be sweet unto us, and the benefit of health, &c., will never be precious to us. I mean by humiliation, when God humbles us, and we humble ourselves; when we join with God. When God's humbling of us and our humbling of ourselves go together, then mercy is sweet, and favour and protection is sweet, when God pours his judgments on others, and spares us.

Now humiliation, it is either real (or inward), or verbal.

Real humiliation indeed, that is, our humbling ourselves by fasting, especially when it is joined with reformation of our wicked ways, or else it is a mockery of God, as it is in Isa. lviii., 'to hang down the head for a while,' and in the mean time to have a hard heart, to shut up our bowels to our brethren; but that is a real kind of humiliation, when we think ourselves unworthy of the creatures, of meat or drink, of any refreshing, for this humiliation of fasting is a kind of profession, though we speak not so, that we are unworthy of these things. But all is nothing, without inward humiliation of the soul. Verbal humiliation is in words, as we shall see after in confession; and it must come from inward humiliation of spirit.

Use. Therefore, considering it is here the first disposition of God's people, let us labour to work upon ourselves those considerations that may make us humble. I will name a few.

1. First, *To bring ourselves to the glass of the law.* Examine ourselves how short we have been of every commandment.

2. But especially bring ourselves *to the gospel.* We hope to be saved by Christ; and have we mourned for our sins 'as one mourneth for his first-born'? Zech. xii. 10. Our sins have wounded Christ. Have we preferred Christ, in our thoughts, above all the things in the world? Have they all been dung to us? Have we had that blessed esteem of the gracious promises of the gospel, and the prerogatives therein set forth, that they have been so precious to us, that we have undervalued all to them, as St Paul did? A base esteem of the gospel is a great sin: 'How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?' Heb. ii. 3. Put case we be not enemies to the ministry and to holiness of life, expressed in the gospel, as many cursed creatures are; yet a base esteem and undervaluing in our thoughts is a thing punishable. 'How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?' Have we walked worthy of the dignity we are called to by the gospel? Have we carried ourselves so in spiritual things, as to rule our base lusts? Have we been careful of private prayer, to offer ourselves to God as priests? Are we not pressed in St Paul's epistles, 'to carry ourselves worthy of our profession?' Eph. iv. 1; and have we done so? Let us bring our carriage, and see how proportionable it is to God's advancing of us in these glorious times of the gospel, and this will bring us on our knees.

We are ashamed of a little unkindness to men. But when we consider how unkind we have been to God, that thought not his dear Son, and heaven and happiness, too much for us; besides other favours, that he protects, and clothes, and feeds us every day, and yet we have not been answerable: these considerations would humble us, proportionable to our carriage to men. Can we be ashamed to offer an unkindness to men, and are we not ashamed, cannot we be abashed with this, that we have carried

ourselves so towards God ? It comes from atheism and infidelity of heart, that either we believe not these things to be good, or else that we have not our part and portion in them. Could we ever be so dead and dull-hearted else ?

3. Again, That we may be humbled, *let us call to mind*, now in this day of humiliation, *our special sins*. We may soon know them. Our consciences and our enemies will upbraid us for them, and we are loath to hear of them above all, either by the ministry or by our friends. We wish, above all, that the preacher would not speak of them, and fret if he do ; and our hearts run upon them above all. So let us search our false hearts, which way they run ; and now, in the day of our abasement, let us think what would lie heaviest on our conscience, if God should take us now with sickness or sudden death. Let us think with ourselves, What is the sin that would afflict me most ? that would stagger me most ? that would shake my faith most ? whether it be filthiness, or profaneness, or swearing, or injustice ; and whether have I made satisfaction or no ? Let me examine, if God should strike me with his arrow now, what sin would rob me of my comfort, and make me afraid to yield my soul to God ? Now think of it. This is the way to be humbled. You may now bring yourselves to consider of that that at other times you will not give yourselves leisure to do. What are days of fasting for, but to give ourselves leisure, that we may not think of meat, and drink, and business ? These days should be days of rest, that we may think of that which concerns our souls. Take the advantage when thou retest from thinking of other business. Think with thine own soul, what will lie heaviest upon thy soul. This is required to humiliation. This real humiliation that is outward, it is a protestation of the inward ; and verbal humiliation is but an expression of what we do inwardly.

There are two things wondrous necessary, before the soul can be in the right frame it should be in.

First, The soul *must apprehend deeply what distance it hath from God, what alienates it from God, before it can be wise* ; and it must be estranged from that before ever it can come to couple and join with God. When the soul apprehends what separates it from God, and conceives as it should do of that, then it will be the readier to apprehend God ; and then all duties will come off easily. Therefore let us first of all work upon our own souls to be humbled, and by all the helps that can be.

4. And to help it, consider now at this time *how uncertain our life is*. We know not who may be stricken next. And consider what the dangerous issue is, if we humble not ourselves here before God humble us in our graves. Let us help humiliation by all that may be ; for where this is, all will follow easily. A man will go out of himself to God when he is abased in himself, and sees no comfort in heaven or earth but in God ; that there is nothing to be stuck to in the world, but all is vanity, and he may be stripped of life and of all these comforts ere long. When a man is abased, faith and obedience will come off easily. What is the reason that Christ is not relished more, and that many fall off ? They were never deeply humbled. According to the depth of humiliation is the growth of holiness of life and the height of faith. All graces rise higher as the soul is more deeply humbled. The more we descend deeply in digging and rending up our hearts, the more the word of God sinks into the 'good ground' that suffers the plough to rend it up and to cut off the weeds. The more deeply we are humbled, the more the fruits of God's word appear in our hearts and lives, the more fruitful is our conversation. All

comes indeed upon the truth of our humiliation; and when that is not deep and true, all the rest is shallow and counterfeit. There[fore] we should work it upon our own hearts.

5. And labour *to be humble and low in all the powers of our souls*; to have humble judgments, to think of ourselves as God thinks of us. God thinks of us as sinners; God and Christ think of us that we are such as must deny all in us before we be fit for heaven. Let us judge of ourselves as he that must be our judge doth and will judge of us ere long. Labour to have low judgments of ourselves; what we are in ourselves, empty of all good, defiled with all ill.

And this will breed poverty of spirit in our judgments. Then let us labour for humility in our affections; to bring ourselves more to God; to stoop to him in fear and reverence; and humility in our obedience and conversation to God and to men every way. Let humility spread itself over all the parts and powers of the soul and body, and over our whole lives. I cannot stand further upon that.

Now, here is verbal humiliation, that is, by confession, expressing our humiliation by our words; as the people of God do here by confession, laying open our sins that God may cover them. What we hide God will never cure; therefore we should take heed that now we are to deal with God, we lay open the bottom of our souls to him; let not the iron be in the wound. You know a chirurgeon can heal nothing if the iron or poisoned arrow stick there. If there be corruption in the stomach, it must up. If it be ill-gotten goods, it will not digest, up it must all to God. For men, except there be scruples that a man cannot free his conscience, there is no necessity, though great conveniency; but between God and thy soul open all by confession, and give not over till thou hast brought pardon to thy heart of that sin thou hast confessed. Every slight confession is not enough, but it must be a resolved, downright confession, without guile of spirit, as it is in Ps. xxxii. 4. This is the course that David takes there. Until he dealt roundly with his soul, without guile, 'his moisture was as the drought of summer.' He was in some dangerous disease that could not be cured. And do we look to be preserved from falling into sickness? or if we be sick, to be cured? We must begin the cure in our souls; lay open the wound to God: 'I said, I will confess my sin, and thou forgavest me.' He begins with confession. So all persons that either fear or are under any judgment, let them begin with laying open their souls to God. When the soul is healed, he will heal the body presently after, for he lays sickness upon the body for the soul; and when the wound is healed, the plaster will fall off of itself. Therefore let us lay open our sins by confession, and shame our souls all that we can.

This is the way to give glory to God. Let us join both together, our own ease and glory to God. When we have laid open our souls to God, and laid as much against ourselves as the devil could do that way—for let us think what the devil would lay to our charge at the hour of death and the day of judgment, he would lay hard to our charge this and that—let us accuse ourselves as he would, and as he will ere long. The more we accuse and judge ourselves, and set up a tribunal in our hearts, certainly there will follow an incredible ease. Jonah was cast into the sea, and there was ease in the ship; Achan was stoned, and the plague was stayed. Out with Jonah, out with Achan, and there will follow ease and quiet in the soul presently; conscience will receive wonderful ease. It must needs be so, for when God is honoured conscience is purified. God is honoured

by confession of sin every way. It honours his omniscience; that he is all-seeing, that he sees our sins and searcheth the hearts. Our secrets are not hid from him. It honours his power. What makes us confess our sins, but that we are afraid of his power, lest he should execute it? And what makes us confess our sins, but that we know there is 'mercy with him that he may be feared,' Ps. cxxx. 4, and that there is pardon for sin? We would not confess our sins else. With men it is confess and have execution, but with God confess and have mercy. It is his own protestation. We should never lay open our sins but for mercy. So it honours God; and when he is honoured, he honours the soul with inward peace and tranquillity. We can never have peace in our souls till we have dealt roundly with our sins, and favour them not a whit; till we have ripened our confession to be a thorough confession. What is the difference between a Christian and another man? Another person slubbers over his sins; God is merciful, &c.; and he thinks if he come to the congregation, and follow the minister, it will serve the turn. But a Christian knows that religion is another manner of matter, another kind of work than so. He must deal thoroughly and seriously, and lay open his sin as the chief enemy in the world, and labour to raise all the hatred he can against it, and make it the object of his bitter displeasure, as being that that hath done him more hurt than all the world besides; and so he confesseth it with all the aggravations of hatred and envy that he can.

But to come more particularly to the confession here spoken of: 'We all are as an unclean thing,' &c.

'We all.'

We see here holy men themselves confess their sins, and rank themselves among sinners in their confessions. So we learn hence this,

That we in our confessions (in our fastings especially) ought to rank ourselves among the rest of sinners, and not to exempt ourselves from other sinners. Perhaps we are not guilty of some sins that they have been guilty of. God hath been merciful to us and kept us in obedience in some things. But, alas! there is none of us all but we have had a hand in the sins of the times. The best of all conditions are guilty of them. Therefore we have cause to rank ourselves among others, as he saith here, 'We are all as an unclean thing;' and as Daniel, he makes a confession of the sins of all, 'we are all of us guilty.'

How are we all guilty?

(1.) We are all guilty in this respect, *we receive some taint and soil from the times we live in.* Either our zeal is weakened; we do not grieve so much for the sins of the times; and who is not guilty in this respect? We do not grieve and lament as we should; as St Paul tells the Corinthians, they should have been sorry and humbled, 1 Cor. v. 6. They were guilty of the sin of the incestuous person, because they were not humbled for it. We are thus far guilty at least, the best of us, that we do not sorrow for the common sins. Alas! how many sins are there that everybody may see in the times in all ranks! In pastors, what unfaithfulness, and in governors and in places of justice; what crying of the poor and men oppressed; and in all ranks of people we see a general security; we see filthiness and hear oaths, 'for which the land mourns,' as Jeremiah saith, Jer. xxiii. 10. These and such like sins provoke God and solicit the vengeance of God; and will have no nay till they have pulled down vengeance. Who hath been so much humbled for these sins as he ought? Perhaps ourselves are not personally guilty of them. But are they not our sins, so

far as we are not abased for them, and oppose them, and repress them as we should in our places and standings, whether we be ministers or magistrates? Thus far we are guilty all. Therefore the prophet might well say, '*We all are as an unclean thing,*' &c.

(2.) Then again, *there is great sympathy in the hearts of good men.* They are full of pity and compassion; and therefore they join themselves with others, partly knowing that they are guilty in some degree with others, and partly because they are members of the same body politic and ecclesiastical. They live in the same church and commonwealth. Therefore all join their confession together. '*We all are as an unclean thing,*' &c.

Use. Let us make this use of it, *every one of us to be humbled.* Do not every one of us bring sticks to the common fire? Do we not add something to the common judgment? If there be two malefactors that have committed a trespass, one of them is taken and used in his kind; he is executed. Will it not grieve the other? He will think, was it not my case? I was a wretched sinner as well as he. If there be divers traitors, and the king is merciful to one, and the other he executes, will it not grieve him that is spared, if he have any bowels of good nature, besides goodness in other kinds? Will he not think, it was my own case? There was no difference between me and them, only the mercy of the king? So the best of us may think, have I not a corrupt nature, and for the sins of the times, am not I soiled with them? Others have been stricken; might not the same arrow have stricken me? Certainly this consideration, that we bring something to the public sins, it will make us humbled for the public, as the church here confesseth, '*We are all as an unclean thing,*' &c.

To come to the particulars of the confession.

'*We are all as an unclean thing.*'

Here is a confession of their persons. Their persons were tainted. We are all a tainted seed and generation in nature. What the wickedest is wholly, the best are in part. Therefore it is no error that we should say so and so of ourselves in our confessions; as Saint Paul saith of himself, '*I am sold under sin,*' Rom. vii. 14. One would wonder that he should confess so. Alas! blessed man, he felt that in part that others in the state of nature are wholly. So we are all filthy. The best, as far as they are not renewed, are as other men are.

'Unclean.'

It is a comparison taken from the leprosy, or some other contagious disease. Those that were tainted of them were separated from the congregation seven days, or some set time. So it is with sin, especially the sins of this people. They had sinned grievously, and were severed from their land; not seven days, but seventy years, the leprosy and filthiness of their sins and lives was such.

Indeed, sin, especially the sin of nature, it is a leprosy, contagious, pestilential; and as a leprosy it spreads over all the parts and powers of body and soul. Take a man that is not changed; he hath a leprous eye, full of adultery; he hath a leprous, uncircumcised ear. Ask him how he judgeth of discourses and sermons. He relisheth nothing but that which is frothy and vain. Plain, substantial, solid discourses, either in hearing or reading, will not down with him. He hath a leprous judgment. His eyes, and ears, and tongue are defiled and corrupt. He is vile and abominable in his speeches. He is uncircumcised in all. All are unclean. All his powers are defiled by nature.

All the washings in the law did signify this, the corruption and defile-

ment of our natures, which needs another washing which they typified, a washing by the blood and Spirit of Christ. 'Christ came by water and blood,' 1 John v. 6, both in justification and sanctification. 'There is a fountain opened for Judah and Jerusalem to wash in,' Zech. xiii. 1. All those washings shewed a defilement spiritually, that needed a spiritual washing. This sin is a leprous, contagious sin; therefore by nature we may all cry as the leper, 'Unclean, unclean.' The best of us may take up that complaint as far as we are not renewed. A leprous man defiled the things that he touched. So it is with sin, till it be forgiven; we defile everything. A proud man, especially when he is set out in his bravery, he thinks himself a jolly man, a brave creature. Alas! he is a filthy creature; not only in himself, but in everything he puts his hand unto. He taints and defiles everything, even civil actions. He sins in eating and drinking; not that they in the substance of them are sins, but he stains everything; for he forgets God in them; he forgets himself exceedingly; and he returns not thanks to God. So in moral, civil actions, much more in religious. He defiles himself in everything. He is defiled to all things, and all things are defiled to him. This is our state by nature, 'We are all as an unclean thing.'

Use. This should enforce a necessity of cleansing ourselves in the blood of Christ; that is, in the death of Christ, who hath satisfied the justice of God. Our natures are so foul in regard of the guilt and stain, that the blood of God-man, that is, the satisfactory* death of God-man, was necessary to breed reconciliation and atonement between God and us. 'And the blood of Christ, which by the eternal Spirit offered himself, must purge our consciences,' &c., Heb. ix. 14. Our consciences will not otherwise be pacified and cleansed in regard of guilt, but will clamour and cry still, much less will God be appeased. Neither God nor conscience will be pacified, but by the blood of him who by the eternal Spirit offered up himself; and then it will in regard of the guilt and stain, then God and conscience will both be appeased. Therefore in Zech. xiii. 1, 'There is a fountain opened for Judah and Jerusalem to wash in.' And 'The blood of Christ cleanseth us from all sin,' 1 John i. 7. Blood is of a defiling nature; but the blood of Christ cleanseth because it is a satisfactory blood. He died, and was a sacrifice as a public person for us all.

Then again, considering that we are all defiled, besides this cleansing from the guilt of sin, let us get our natures cleansed by the Spirit of Christ more and more. We are all defiled.

Use. And take heed of those that are defiled; take heed of sinners. Who would willingly lie with a leprous person? Yet notwithstanding, for matter of marriage and intimate society there is a little† conscience made; men converse with leprous company, they join in the most intimate society with those that are leprous in their judgments. The life of nature we know, and are careful to avoid what may impair it; but it is a sign we have not the life of grace begun in us, because we do not value it. If we had, we would be more careful to preserve it, and to take heed of contagious company. Who would go to the pest-house, or to one that hath 'Lord, have mercy upon us' on the door? (a) None but a madman. He might do so. And surely those that join with swearers and drunkards and filthy persons, and go to filthy places and houses (as many do, the more shame for them), they think they have no souls nor no account to make, they go to these places and infect themselves. It is a sign they have no life of grace; all

* That is, = satisfaction-giving.—G.

† Qu. 'little'?—Ed.

companies are alike to them. Is this strength of grace? No. They have no life of grace, they have nothing to lose; for if they had the life of grace, they would preserve it better.

Sin is a filthy thing, more filthy than the leprosy, nay, than the plague itself; for the plague or leprosy makes but the body loathsome, but the sin that we cherish and are loath to hear of makes the soul loathsome. The one makes unfit for the company of men; but the other, sin and corruption and lusts, unfit us for the kingdom of God, for heaven, for life or death. Therefore it is worse. The leprosy of the body makes a man not a whit odious to God; but the leprosy of the soul makes us hateful to him. We may have more intimate communion with God in the plague than out of the plague, because God supplies the want of outward comforts; but in sin we can have no comfortable communion and society with God. Therefore this plague of the soul is many ways worse than the pestilence. But we want faith. God hath not opened our eyes to see that that we shall see and know ere long, and it is happy if we consider it in time.

To conclude this point concerning the corruption of nature. Take David's course, Ps. li. 1, *seq.* When sinful actions come from us, or unsavoury words, or beastly thoughts, or unchaste and noisome desires that grieve the Spirit of God, let us go to the fountain. Alas! my nature is leprous as far as it is not purged. 'I was conceived in sin, my mother brought me forth in iniquity.' The more we take occasion every day to see and observe the corruption of our nature, the less it is, and we cannot better take occasion than upon every actual sin to run to the fountain, the filthy puddle from whence all comes, and be more humble for that than for particular sins. It is a mistake in men; they are ashamed of an action of injustice, &c., but they should go to their nature and think I have a false, unclean nature, whereby I am ready to commit a thousand such if God should let me alone. I have the spawn of all sin as far as the Spirit hath not subdued it. It is a defect of judgment to be more humbled for particular sins. Nature is more tainted than any action. That sowing, breeding sin, as the apostle saith, it is worse than the action, it breeds the rest. So much for that. They confess here, 'We are all as an unclean thing' in ourselves.

But what comes from us?

That that aggravates to the utmost a sinful state.

'All our righteousness is as filthy rags.'

He doth not say we have filthy actions, but our best actions are stained; and not one, but all. Mark how strong the place is, 'we all,' the people of God. He includes all, as Daniel saith, 'I confess my sins, and the sins of my people.' And there is no man in the church but he might have this confession in his mouth, 'we,' the people of God, and 'all we;' in all our actions, 'all our righteousness,' &c. So all the actions of all the righteous, the best actions of the best men, and all the best actions of the best men are defiled and stained. It is as great an aggravation as may be.

Some would have it to intend the legal righteousness, yet notwithstanding it is true of all. And when we now humble ourselves, it is good to think of all. So we may say, 'All our righteousness.' Whatsoever comes from us it is stained and defiled. As for their legal performances, there is no question of them; for, alas! they trusted too much to them. In Isaiah i. and Isaiah last, they thought God was beholding to them for them: 'Away with them, away with your new moons,' &c. They were abominable to God

as 'the cutting off a dog's neck,' as it is Isaiah the last, Isa lxi. 3. So all their righteousness, their ceremonial performances, were abominable.

But I say we may raise it higher. It is not only true of them, but in greater matters, in our best moral performances, they are all as tainted rags.

Obj. How can this be? It is strange it should be so. The papists cry out here that we discourage men from good works. If all our righteousness be as filthy rags, why should we perform good works?

Ans. Put case a man be sick, all the meat he eats it strengthens his sickness, shall he therefore not eat at all? Yes. He must eat somewhat. There is nature in him to strengthen as well as his disease. Thy best performances are stained; wilt thou do none therefore? Yes. Though they be stained, yet there is some goodness in them. Thou mayest honour God, and do good to others. Besides the ill there is good. There is gold in the ore. There is some good in every good action. Nay, there is so much good as that God pardons the ill, and accepts the good. So though our good actions be ill, yet for their kind, and matter, and stuff, they are good, they are commanded of God. For their original and spring they are wrought by the Spirit of God; for the person, the workman, it is one in the state of grace; and for acceptance God rewards them. But it is another thing when we come before God to humble ourselves. Then we must see what stains and sins are in them. There is no good action so good, but there are wants and weaknesses, and stains and blemishes in it as it comes from us. The Spirit of God indeed is effectual to stir us up to good actions; but we hinder the work of the Holy Ghost, and do not do them so thoroughly as we should. Therefore, besides our wants and weaknesses, there is a tainture of them. Either we have false aims, they are not so direct, or our resolutions are not so strong. False aims creep in for a while, though we do not allow them; and then there are some coolers of our devotion. Our love is cold, our hatred of sin is not so strong, our prayers are not so fervent, our actions are not so carried without interruption, but are hindered with many by-thoughts. Who cannot complain of these things? Who is not brought upon his knees for the weakness of his best actions? Nay, I say more, a Christian is more humbled for the imperfections and stains of his best actions, than a civil* carnal person is for his outward enormities; for he turns over all his outward delinquencies, and makes the matter but a trick of youth; when a poor Christian is abased for his dulness, and deadness, and coldness, for false aims that creep into his actions, for interruptions in his duties, that his thoughts will not suffer him to serve God with that intention† that he would, but puts him off with motions and suggestions and temptations in his best performances; this abaseth him more than outward gross sins doth a carnal person. When we deal with God, 'our righteousness it is as menstruous cloths,' Isa. xxx. 22.

Know this for a ground, that there is a double principle in a Christian in all things that he doth. There is flesh and spirit; and these two issue out in whatsoever comes from him. In his good words, there is flesh as well as spirit; in his thoughts and desires; in his prayer, his prayer itself stands in contraries. So everything that comes from him it is tainted with that that is contrary. The flesh opposeth and hinders the work of the Spirit, and so it stains our good works. Therefore contraries are true of a Christian, which seem strange to another man. A Christian at the same time is deformed and well-favoured. 'He is black and comely.' 'I am

* That is, 'merely moral.'—G.

† That is, 'intentness.'—ED.

black but yet well-favoured,' saith the spouse, Cant. i. 5; black in regard of sin, but well-favoured in regard of the Spirit of God and the acceptation of Christ. He is a saint and a sinner: a sinner in respect that sin hath spread over all parts, and a saint in respect of Christ's acceptance. 'My love and my dove.' Christ makes love to his church as if she had no defilement; but he looks on her better part; he looks on her as she is in his love, and as he means to bring her after. But the church looking upon herself as she is in herself, she is much abased. The ground of it is the imperfection of sanctification in this world. The best of our works are 'as menstruous cloths.' When we think of the corruption of the best things as they come from us, when we come to humble ourselves before God, we must down with proud styles and pharisaical thoughts, although there be somewhat that is good. Yet let us think of all the ill that may abase us.

There is a season for every thing, when we are tempted to be overcome by Satan. Then think of the good, as Job when he was tempted. 'I have done this and this; you cannot take away mine innocency,' Job xxxiii. 9. In false temptations from the world and Satan, then stand upon our innocency. But when we humble ourselves before God—'Alas! I am dust and ashes,' 'I abhor myself,' as Job and Abraham said, Gen. xviii. 27, Job xlii. 6—lay all proud apprehensions of ourselves aside; and all good works, especially in one kind, in matter of justification, 'all is dung in comparison of Christ,' Philip. iii. 8. All must be sold for the pearl, the righteousness of Christ. There is no reckoning must be had of good works by way of merit in justification and our title to heaven. What gives us title to heaven and frees us from hell? The death of Christ, the obedience and satisfaction of Christ. God by it hath redeemed us perfectly without anything in ourselves, and accepts us to life everlasting only by the righteousness of Christ. Therefore it is called God's righteousness, because it was done by Christ, it was wrought by God. Our righteousness is as 'a menstruous cloth.' It is spotted and stained and defiled. It will not do the deed. It will not satisfy conscience, much less the exact piercing judgment of God. That is the righteousness that must stay our souls in life and death, and we must oppose it to all temptations, as a satisfying thing that will set down conscience to be quiet. It must be righteousness of God-man; nothing else will do it. 'All our righteousness is as filthy rags.' That is the confession of their sinful actions.

The next thing he confesseth is senselessness. 'There is none that calls upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee.' There be other words between concerning the complaint of their miserable estate; but I will handle them that concern their sins first.

'There is none that calls upon thy name.'

In a word, he means that none worshipped him; because prayer is put for the whole worship of God, as indeed it may well be put for the whole, for it exerciseth all the graces of the Spirit. What one grace is not set on work in prayer? It is put for all the inward worship of God. If it be faith, prayer is the flame of faith. When there is faith in the heart there will be prayer in the mouth. The knowledge of God: prayer is grounded upon a promise. So it comes from that part of spiritual worship. Hope: hope makes a man pray. No man would pour out his supplications but to him that he hath hope in. And for love: God's love and mercy draws us into his presence; and joy and delight in the presence of God draws us to pray. We give God the honour of all his attributes in prayer; of his truth,

of his goodness, of his merey, of his presence everywhere, &c. So it sets all graces on work, and gives God the honour of all. It is the worship of God every way; for though it be an outward verbal worship of itself, yet it expreseth the worship of God inward. It gives God the honour of all.

Therefore, those that pray not, what kind of persons are they? Wretched persons. The sickness is now among us. If a man should ask now, What family is likeliest to have the vengeance of God on it?—though I speak not to censure those that have it, but I speak in God's ordinary course—surely those that do not exercise the duty of prayer. 'Pour out thy wrath upon those that call not upon thy name,' Ps. lxxix. 6. Those families that call not upon God humbly morning and evening, or that person that doth not morning and evening reverently call upon God, they are fit objects for the vengeance of God, for the plague or the like. 'Pour out thy wrath upon the families and persons that call not upon thy name,' insinuating that the Lord will spare us if we do call upon his name and humble ourselves. If thou wilt needs pour out thy vengeance, let it be on them that have not grace humbly to call upon thy name. Let us make conscience of this duty, except we will prove atheists, and lie open to all the vengeance of God.

'There is none that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee.'

He represents God to us as a great person, that would bestow some benefits, and is ready to turn away himself; yet none lays hold of him or desires him to stay. So, saith he, there is none that lays hold on God, to keep him that he should not go away. Therefore, when he saith, 'None calls upon thy name, or stirs up himself to take hold of thee,' he means there are none that pray earnestly. Incense was to be burnt, or else it cast no sweet smell. Our prayers must have fire and zeal in them. Our prayers must be cries that must pierce heaven. 'Out of the deep have I cried unto thee, Lord,' Ps. cxxx. 1. We must stir up ourselves; we must waken ourselves to waken God. Indeed, before we can waken God we must waken ourselves.

'There is none stirreth up himself to take hold of thee.'

Insinuating that if we would lay hold of God he will be stayed. To speak a little more particularly of this. God is so gracious that he will be stayed even by prayer. The way to stay God in his judgments, and to lay hold of him and keep him among us, it is prayer. Let us take notice now of the hand of God upon us; what is the means to stop his hand, that he come not among us with his public judgments? It is prayer. The way to stop God, and the angel that hath his sword now drawn over our heads, it is prayer. God so condescends that he will be stopped by prayer; as we see in Exod. xxxii. 10. He saith to Moses, 'Let me alone.' Moses prayed, and alleged arguments to God that he should not confound his people. 'Let me alone,' saith he, insinuating that prayer binds God's hands. So powerful is prayer, that it binds the Almighty. It makes the Omnipotent in some sort impotent. He cannot do that he would, he cannot execute his wrath; prayer binds him. When a company of Christians lay hold on him by prayer, he cannot do that he threateneth. The only way to lay hold of God is by prayer. In Ezek. xiii. 5, there is a complaint that 'none stood in the gap,' insinuating that if any had stood in the gap when the vengeance of God was coming abroad, they might have prevented the wrath. The way to stand in the gap and to keep God is to pray, and to pray heartily.

Now that God may be held by our prayers, they must be strong prayers. Every prayer will not hold God. They must be strong prayers that must bind such a Sampson that hath his strength. Therefore there must be a stirring up of ourselves. He saith here, 'There is none that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee.' So it is the duty of Christians to stir up themselves in these times.

Quest. How shall we stir up ourselves?

Ans. 1. First, *By considering the danger we are in.* Danger felt or feared, it will make a man lay hold. When a child feels the smart of the rod, he lays hold upon his father or his mother's hand. Strike no more! When the children of God feel the smart of his judgments, then they cry, 'Oh no more!' The cry of the child prevails with the mother, though it cannot speak oftentimes. So when in the sense of sin and misery we cry to God, we move his bowels with crying. There is no question but the serious apprehension of danger felt doth awaken the soul and stir it up. It is so also in danger feared. A danger feared, with belief, will work as if it were present; for a man that hath a spirit of faith to see that unless God be appeased with good courses, he will punish, as surely as if the judgment were upon him. Faith makes things present, both good and ill; and it makes a man sensible of things that are not yet upon him. This is the difference between a Christian and another man. Another man 'puts the evil day far off from him;' but a believing Christian, by a spirit of faith, sees God, except he be turned away by hearty and humble repentance, ready to seize upon him; and so he walks humbly in all his courses. So that danger felt or feared by a spirit of faith awakens and stirs up the soul to lay hold on God.

Therefore in spiritual dangers we should especially waken our souls to see in what need we stand of Christ and the pardoning mercy of God in Christ, that we may waken him and give him no rest till we find peace in our consciences.

2. Then again, that that we may stir up ourselves withal, is *meditation of the necessity and excellency of grace, and of the good things we beg.* The serious consideration of that will make us stir up ourselves to lay hold on God, and give him no rest till we have it. When a man thinks the 'loving-kindness of God is better than life,' Ps. lxxiii. 3, and if I have not that, my life is nothing to me. It is not only better than corn and wine and oil, but than life itself. Pardon of sin, and a heart to do good, is better than life itself, than anything in the world. If one should offer such a man this, a heart patiently to bear ill, and large to do good, and strength against temptations, he would rather have this gracious disposition than anything in the world; he had rather have the pardon of sin with the sense of God's favour than anything in the world. This will stir up a man, as we see in David, Ps. li. 1, *seq.*, 'Mercy, mercy;' it binds God and lays hold on him, together with pardoning mercy, to have a heart enlarged with spiritual joy. There is nothing spiritual, but it is so excellent, that if we had the eyes of our spirits awakened to see them, we would bind God and lay hold of him. He should not go further till he had shined on us.

3. Therefore *let us offer violence to God this way; never give him rest till we obtain.* You see when the two disciples were going to Emmaus, Christ made as though he would have gone further, but they 'compelled' him, Luke xxiv. 29. Now there is a semblance as if God threatened war, and would take away the gospel. There are dangers toward. When God makes such a semblance, let us lay hold on him; let him go no further.

Lord, night approacheth and affliction approacheth. Lord, stay ; thou shalt go no further. Let us stop God with importunity. The consideration of danger, and the necessity and excellency of the things we beg, will make us lay hold on God.

There is an hypocrisy among men, among a company of formalists, that are the bane of the times, that God will spue out. They are as ill as a profane person in his nostrils. They think that all devotion is in prostrating themselves, which is good, and more than profane men will do, and yield a dead sacrifice to God. They will come and hear, and yield the outward act in outward humiliation. Is this to rouse thyself? Outward things are never current but when they express outwardly the inward truth. Therefore take another course, man ; God cares not for the dead, empty carcase thou bringest him. Work upon thine own heart by meditation of the danger thou art in, and of the excellency of the things thou art to beg, and meditate of the majesty of God whom thou appearest before, of his goodness and truth, &c. Affect thy heart deeply with these apprehensions ; let these serious thoughts draw outward expressions of humiliation. And then it is excellent when the outward expression follows the inward impression ; when there is somewhat inward that shews itself outward ; when we stir up ourselves, and not to think that all devotion consists in a comely, outward carriage—which is commendable of itself—but because men usually rest in it, it is prejudicial to their soul's good. We must offer a reasonable sacrifice to God ; we must love him in our hearts ; we must work upon our hearts and carry ourselves so in our inward man, as that we may stir up our whole man and awaken our souls : ' Praise the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, praise his holy name,' Ps. ciii. 1. We should stir up ourselves by speaking to our own souls, that we may waken and take hold of God.

4. This again will help it, *A man should never come to pray, but he should have an answer before he hath done, either at that time or another.* Never give over till thou hast an answer. This will make us stir up ourselves indeed. How do you know a prayer from a formal lip-labour? A man that prays conscionably* marks what he doth, and expects a return, as a man that soweth his seed. He that doth a thing with hope of issue will do it thoroughly. Therefore never pray to perform an empty duty to God ; but mark what you pray for, if it be forgiveness of sins, or for grace, or protection, &c., and do it with that earnestness that you may hope for an issue answerable ; and this going about it will make us do it to purpose. Do we think to serve God with the deed done? God hath appointed prayer for our good, and to convey blessings to us. Let us pray so as we may expect a blessing by it. Now that prayer that expects a blessing to be conveyed, it will be a prayer to purpose. It will make a man stir up himself.

' There is none that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee.'

The complaint of this holy man of God may be taken up at this time of many of us now. How few are those that rouse and stir up themselves, but put off God with an empty compliment ! Nay, in these times of danger, have ye not a company of idle persons that will not vouchsafe to hear the word, nor to come and humble themselves, but walk and talk offensively, as if they would dare God ; or if they come here, they come not with a resolution to hear the issue of their prayers, to rouse up themselves ' to lay hold on God.' Because, as there is a great deal of atheism in regard of God, so there is much dead flesh in regard of men. Who is so pitiful of

* That is, 'conscientiously.'—G.

our brethren round about as he ought? We had need to stir up ourselves. The danger is present. We are beset round about, yet who is stirred up to earnest prayer? We want bowels of compassion. Those that have hearts compassionate, it is a sign that God intends good to them. But of the most we may take up this complaint, we are dead-hearted in regard of our sins against God, and in regard of the contagion among us. A man may see it by men's discourses. There is inquiry how the sickness spreads? how many dies? But men do not labour with God to make their accounts even with him; nor we are not compassionate to men: for that would be a means to stir and to rouse us up 'to lay hold of God,' to stay his hand out of love and pity and compassion to our brethren which are our flesh, though it should never seize on us. I say, I fear this complaint is too justly on many of us. I beseech you, let us labour to amend it as we tender* our own salvation—perhaps that we do not regard so much, we shall ere long, but then—as we tender the health of our bodies, which we prefer before our souls, let us humble ourselves more than ordinary now.

Some devils are not driven out but by prayer and fasting, Mat. xvii. 21. So some judgments, they will not away without prayer and fasting; not only public, but private fasting and prayer. Sometimes there must be more than ordinary humiliation for some sins; for some kind of temptations there must be prayer and fasting; for some maladies prayer and fasting, and more than ordinary stirring and rousing up of ourselves to lay hold upon God. God will not be held with ordinary humiliation. That will not do it; but there must be a resolution against, and a hatred of all sin, and to please God in all things. We must do it with extraordinary humiliation now, because the judgment is extraordinary. There is ordinary humiliation and extraordinary: as there are ordinary feasts and extraordinary, so there is ordinary humiliation for daily trespasses; but in extraordinary judgments, extraordinary fasting and humiliation. As there is ordinary washing daily, but there is washing and scouring at good times. God calls for extraordinary humiliation now; not only prayers, but stirring and rousing up of ourselves. We should apprehend the danger as seizing on ourselves. This night it may seize upon us, for aught we know. It should affect us and make us stir up ourselves. This is the way to hold God by prayer; and if we hold him, he will hold the destroying angel. He hath all creatures at his command. Thus you see how we should confess the sins of our persons, the sins of our good actions, our want of calling upon God. 'There is none that calls upon thy name, that stirs up himself to take hold of thee.' Thus far proceed the branches of their sinful disposition in those times.

Now he complains likewise of the judgments of God.

'We all fade as a leaf; our iniquities, as the wind, have taken us away. Thou hast hid thy face, and we are consumed because of our iniquities.'

The complaint hath these four branches; a little of each.

'We all fade as a leaf.'

Wicked men are 'as leaves;' and worse, they are 'as chaff.' Godly men, because they have a consistence, and are rooted in Christ, and set in a good soil, they are 'trees of righteousness.' But godly men in the state of their nature, and in regard of this life, they are as leaves. Wicked men are as leaves every way, and as 'chaff which the wind bloweth away,' as we shall see afterwards.

* That is, = 'care for.'—G.

‘We all fade as a leaf.’

1. He means, first, in regard of *ceremonial performances that were without vigour and spirit of true devotion*. There was no spirit in their legal performances. They were dead empty things. Therefore when judgment comes, they were as leaves. So an idle careless hearer, when judgment comes, all is as leaves. When conscience nips him, as his atheistical heart will do ere long, then he is as a leaf, all fades away. The Jews, when they were in trouble, all their legal performances faded, they were all as a leaf.

2. So it is true in regard of *mortality*, the vanity of health and strength. We all as a leaf fade away when God's judgments come to nip us. Men are as leaves; as the leaves now in autumn fall, and there is a new generation in the spring; and then they fall away, and a new generation comes again; so it is with men: some are blown off, and some come on again. ‘We all fade as a leaf.’ Not to be large in the point, at this time we are all as leaves. In this city now, there is a kind of wind that nips a world of men, many hundreds in the head.* It is an autumn wind that nips the leaves. Our autumn wind with us is before the time—a kind of autumn wind in the spring, in summer, that nips the leaves and takes away the vigour of health.

3. And so, as I said, for all idle performances, that have not a foundation in *substantial piety*, they are all as leaves. When trouble of conscience comes, they are as Adam's fig-leaves. When God comes to search and examine, they all fall off, both in respect of our performances and in respect of our lives. We are all as leaves when God comes in judgment. This is one part of the complaint. ‘We are all as leaves.’ The like we have of Moses, the man of God, Ps. xc. 6. When God blows upon us with the wind of his displeasure, we fall off as leaves.

Then another expression is,

‘Our iniquities, as the wind, have taken us away.’

As chaff, or things that have no solidity in them, are blown away with a puff of wind, so it is with a man if he be not a Christian, set into and gathered unto Christ. By the fall we all fell from God, and were scattered from him. Sin blew the angels out of heaven. It blew Adam out of paradise; and now Christ, the ‘second Adam,’ gathers us to him again by his word and Spirit, and so we have a solid and eternal being in him. But out of Christ, our iniquities, as a wind, and God's judgments, blow us all away first or last. Wicked men settle on their dregs a great while, but when God's judgment comes, it blows them in this world to this part and that part oftentimes, when it pleaseth him to exercise his outward judgments. But if he do not blow them away here, he will give them a blast that shall send them to hell, their centre. Out of Christ there is no solidity, no consistence or being for any man. Therefore, when God's judgment comes, it blows them away in this world, and at the hour of death sends them to hell. This is the state of all. ‘Our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.’ He means here, they were blown out of Jewry to Babylon. It was a strong blast that blew them out of their own country.

May not we say, ‘Our iniquities have blown us away?’ What hath blown us from our callings and employments? Is it not the pestilence? And what brings that? Is it not our iniquities? So that we may all complain of this, ‘Our iniquities have blown us away.’

We see here he lays the blame upon their iniquities. Did not the Babylonians carry them away? Alas! they were but God's instruments.

* Qu. ‘day’?—Ed.

God was displeased by their sins; his wrath blew them away. So you may see here the child of God in all judgments looks to his sins. He justifies God. He murmurs not, and says this and that. No. But, it was my sins: 'We have sinned against the Lord,' Lam. v. 16; Micah vii. 9, 'I will bear the wrath of the Lord, because I have sinned against him;' and Lam. iii. 39, 'Man suffers for his sins;' and every one of us may say, 'It is our iniquities have taken us away.' A gracious heart justifies God and condemns itself. The children of God may complain sometimes of God's hand, but they will never censure God's hand. They justify God alway, though they may complain of the bitterness of his hand. Here they complain of the bitterness of the judgment. They were blown into another country, into captivity. They do not complain of God. God will have us complain; but as he will have us complain, so we must justify him and condemn ourselves; just are thy judgments.

An hypocrite thinks God is beholding to him for his outward performances, and when judgments befall him, he frets and censures God. Either he thinks there is no God, or he frets and fumes against God: he is discontented. But a Christian justifies God, and condemns himself. 'Our iniquities have blown us away.' Our sins keep good things from us.

Use. Therefore, let us now lay the blame where it is. Search out our sins, personal and particular, and complain of them. They have a hand in this plague. God is no tyrant. He delights not to confound his creatures; but sin makes him out of love with his creatures, the workmanship of his own hands. It is our sins. Therefore, let us lament the sins of the times. So far we may without hypocrisy, and ought to take to heart, and mourn for the sins of the times that we hear by others and see ourselves, and mourn for our own hearts that we cannot mourn. We must mourn for the sins of the times, as Daniel and Nehemiah, and all the blessed men of God have done. It is not the plague that hurts us. That is but God's messenger. Sin doth us more harm than all the devils in hell and all the plagues in the world. It is not outward evils we need to fear. Let us fear sin, and lay hold on God. He is the Lord of hosts. He hath all the creatures at his command. Let us get sin away, that doth all the mischief. It is that that makes bate between God and us, and then God makes a controversy between us and the creatures. It is our sins.

And that is the reason of the necessity of humiliation for our sins, because sin breeds a separation between God and us, and between the creatures and us. When God is offended, the creatures are infected. Let us see our sins; by them we infect the air: by our vain speeches, and oaths, and our filthiness. Our sins infect the air, and that breeds infection in our bodies. Our sins cry. They have a voice to cry to God, if our prayers do not outcrie them. Therefore, let us cry to God to hear the cry of our prayers, and not of our sins. How many voices have crying sins! There is the voice of the people oppressed, the voice of filthiness, &c. Sins clamour in God's ears. They clamour for wages due, 'and the wages of sin is death,' Rom. vi. 23. Sin cries, though it says nothing in words. It cries in God's ears, and it will not rest till he hath poured out his vengeance. The filthiness and oaths, and atheism and profaneness, the suffering of the dishonour of his name: these sins of the times are those that pull miseries upon us. 'Our iniquities have taken us away as the wind.' So much for that.

'For thou hast hid thy face from us, and we are consumed because of our iniquities.'

Sin makes God hide his face from us, and then 'we are consumed, because of our iniquities.' 'We melt away in the hands of our iniquities,' as the word is (*b*). Indeed, sin is a cruel tyrant. When God leaves us in the hand of our sins, he leaves us in a cruel hand. Christ came to redeem us from our sins. Our sins are they that torment us. It is very significant in the original.

'We are melted.' We melt away as wax before the fire, as snow before the sun, 'because of our iniquities,' when God gives up men to be handled as their own sins will handle them. Nations melt before the hands of sin, and kings, and kingdoms, and all. Let God give up men to delight in sin, kingdoms or persons, they melt and moulder away in the hand of their sins.

But to speak a little more of the next words.

'Thou hast hid thy face from us.'

That is, thou hast hid thy comfort from us. God hath a double face : a face that shines on our souls in peace, and joy, and comfort, when he saith to the soul, 'I am thy salvation,' Ps. xxxv. 3 ; and his face that shines on the outward estate, that keeps misery, and sickness, and danger from us, and bestows good things on us. And God takes away his face from us in regard of the inward man, when he gives us no peace, but leaves us to spiritual desertion. In regard of the outward man, God hides his face when he gives us up to pestilence, and war, and sickness, and miseries in this life ; when he gives us up to outward desertion.

Sometimes God shines on wicked men in outward things, but he hides his face for peace of conscience ; and sometimes God's children have his face shining on their conscience, but he hides his face in respect of outward things. Sometimes he shines in neither of both : as at this time he neither shined on these blessed men in outward favours, for they were in captivity, nor in the sense of his love and favour, for they were in desolation, and eclipsed every way.

The face of God, it is as the sun to the creatures. When the sun hides his face, what is there but darkness and night ? What makes the night, but the absence of the sun ? What makes winter, but the absence of the sun, when he grows low, and cannot heat the earth ? So what makes winter in the soul, deadness, and darkness, and dulness in God's service ? The absence of the face of God ; God shines not on the soul. What makes night in the soul, when the soul is benighted with ignorance, that it cannot see itself, nor see the judgments of God ? God shines not. 'The Sun of righteousness' shines not on that soul.

God is the Sun of the creature. He gives life to the creature. What will become of the creature, when God neither shines outwardly nor inwardly on it ? As at the day of judgment, he shall take away outward comforts ;—there shall be no outward shining ;—and all inward comforts, they shall have no hope : he shall altogether hide his face. When God, the Fountain of all good, shall hide his face altogether from the creature, that is hell. The place where God shines not outwardly with comforts, nor inwardly, nor there shall be no hope of neither, but a place of horror and despair, that is hell, as the hell of this life is when God shines not on our souls.

Now, these holy men they complain, yet they pray : 'Thou hast hid thy face,' Ps. lxxxix. 46. Here is the conflict of faith, that sees God hide his face, and yet will follow God. It sees God ready to turn away himself, and yet it will lay hold of him, and have a glance of him. It will wrestle with him, and not let him go without a blessing. So there be degrees of God's hiding of his face. Though God seem to hide his face, and to with-

draw outward comforts, and perhaps in some to withdraw his favour from their hearts inwardly. What shall they do? Droop? No. Wrestle with God as Jacob. See through the cloud that is between God and thy soul. Break thorough by faith; and with Job say, 'Though he kill me, yet will I trust in him,' Job. xiii. 15. Let us stir up ourselves 'to lay hold on God' when he seems to turn away his face; and imitate good Jacob, never give over seeking the face of God.

How shall we seek the face of God?

1. *By prayer*; for that brings us to the face of God, though he seem to hide his face, as Jeremiah complains, Jer. xiv. 8, 'Why art thou as a stranger?' And yet he prays. Seek him by prayer.

2. Seek him *in his ordinances*. Hear the word of God. 'Thy face, Lord, will I seek,' Ps. xxvii. 8. God invites you to seek his face now by fasting and humiliation. Seek his face in this ordinance. Here is the blessed Trinity, 'Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.' Though outwardly God hide his face in some regards, yet when he offers outward liberties refuse them not. He offers his face to us now in Christ. Seek, by prayer and other means, holy communion with him still; and never leave seeking till you have got a glance of him; and stir up yourselves to lay hold on him, that he would shew his loving countenance upon you.

Those that turn their backs on God's ordinances, and in rebellion to his commandments, live in sins against conscience—can they wonder that he hides his face from them, when they turn their backs on him? Rebellious persons, that will not yield meekly to God's ordinances, and submit to his commandments, do they wonder that God takes good things from them? When we sin we turn our backs upon God and our face to the devil, and the world, and pleasures. When men turn their faces to sin, to pleasures and vanity, and their backs on God, do they wonder that he suffers them to melt and pine away? Let us do as the flowers do, the marigold, &c. They turn themselves to the sun. Let our souls do so. Let us turn ourselves to God in meditation and prayers, striving and wrestling with him. Look to him, eye him in his ordinances and promises; and have communion with him all the ways we can. Let our souls open and shut with him. When he hides his face, let us droop, as the flowers do till the sun come again. When the waters fall, the flowers droop and hold down their heads. When the sun riseth the next morning, up they go again, as if there had been never a shower. So when we have not daily comfort of spirit in peace of conscience, let us never rest seeking God's face in his ordinances and by prayer, and that will cheer a drooping soul, as the sunbeams do the flagging flowers. Then you may know that God's face shines upon you in some measure, when he gives you means and gives you hearts to use those means, and comfort in your consciences, that whether you live or die you are God's. This is a beam of that sunshine on the soul when God vouchsafes joy and comfort. A little of this will banish all fears. If you have one glimpse of his countenance, you shall not need to fear the plague, or war, or death. If he shine on you, one glance will take away all fear. Paul, when he was in the stocks, one beam of God's countenance made him sing at midnight, Acts xvi. 25. 'Let thy countenance shine on us, and we shall be safe,' Ps. lxxx. 3, let what will become of us outwardly. If God shine not on us for outward favours, if he shine on our souls and release them from fears and guilt, and speak peace to them, and say unto them, 'he is their salvation,' Ps. xxxv. 3, and as he saith in the gospel, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee,' all will be well whatsoever shall become of us.

'Let us seek the Lord while he may be found,' Isa. lv. 6. Hold him before he go; let him not depart. Attend upon the means; never miss good means of seeking his face till we have got a sweet answer from heaven that he is our God.

Now follows the supplication.

'But now, O Lord, thou art our Father,' &c.

Here is a prayer which is a kind of holding God by the relation of a Father. This is one way of stirring up our souls, to consider the relation of a father. It stirs up bowels when a child is beaten by his father, 'O stay, father, spare.' It works upon the bowels. There is a world of rhetoric in this one word 'Father.' Why, Lord, thou art my Father. Shall I be destroyed? Let us lay hold on God by this relation that he puts upon himself; and he will not lay it aside, though we be unworthy to be sons. He doth not say, Thou art our Father, and we are thy sons; because he thought they were unworthy, as the prodigal saith, 'I am unworthy to be called thy son,' Luke xv. 19; but instead of saying we are thy sons, he saith, 'We are the clay, thou art the potter.' Yet he is a Father continually; and though in Christ you cannot call him Father, yet you may by creation and initiation, being brought up in the church. Go to him with the encouragements you have, and cast yourselves upon him. There is a bond for you by creation; and there is his command. He bids you call him Father. He is a Father by creation. Look not upon this or that sin, but go to him and call him Father, as you may call him. Say, Thou art my Father, thou hast given me a being in the church. Wrestle with him as you may, though as sound Christians you cannot call him Father. Be weary of your courses. Are you willing to come under God's hands, to be sons? You are sons by creation already. Offer thyself to be of his family for the time to come, and God will give a sweet report to thy soul. Stand not out at the stave's end. 'Thou art our Father, Lord.' If you have a purpose to live in sin, the devil is your father, and not God. 'You are of your father the devil,' John viii. 44; but if we be willing to submit, we may say, 'Doubtless thou art our Father,' Isa. lxiii. 16.

'We are the clay, thou art the potter.'

Here is a resignation of themselves to God in this term, 'thou art the potter, we are the clay.' Indeed, we are but earthen vessels, the best of us, in regard of the bodily life we have; and we are at the liberty of God to dispose of as he pleaseth. So, before he comes to put forth this prayer to God, he useth this resignation of themselves into the hand of God: we are as clay in thy hands, Lord, 'dispose of us as thou wilt.' Let us remember this when we come to pray to God. Use all means of abasement that can be. Lay aside all terms other than abasing terms. 'We are the clay,' Isa. lxiv. 8; and as Job saith, 'I abhor myself in dust and ashes,' Job xlii. 6. So the saints have done in all times. 'I am not worthy to be called thy son,' Luke xv. 19; and 'I am less than the least of thy mercies,' Gen. xxxii. 10. Let us lay aside proud and lofty terms, and 'cast down our crowns' at the foot of Christ, as the saints in Rev. iv. 10, cast down all our excellencies. Let us have no thought of outward excellencies—of beauty, or strength, or riches, or high dignity. When we come to God, we must come with low thoughts to the high God. Can the creature be too low in his presence?

And then come with resignation. 'We are the clay, thou art the potter.' Do with us as thou wilt. If thou dash us in pieces as a potter's vessel, thou mayest do it. That is the way to escape. That is well committed,

that is committed into God's hand. Some men shift by their wits, and will not trust God with their health and strength. They 'be double-minded,' as St James saith, i. 8. They will have two strings to their bow; if lawful means will not serve, unlawful shall. No. But we 'must commit ourselves to God as to a faithful creator,' 1 Pet. iv. 19; and then see what he will do. Then it stands with his honour. 'He will look to the lowly.' 'I am the clay, thou art the potter.' Here I am; do as thou wilt. As David saith, it is a blessed estate thus to resign ourselves into God's hands. If the devil and reprobates could be brought to this, they should never come there where they are in terrors of conscience. Let us labour to practise this duty: Lord, I commit to thy hands my body and soul. I cast myself into thy bosom; do with me as thou wilt. Some that have stood out at the stave's end with temptations many years, have gotten comfort by this resignation. 'We are the clay, thou art the potter.' Thou mayest mould and break us as thou wilt. The way now to escape the plague is not altogether to use tricks of wit and policy (though lawful means must be used), but labour to get into Christ, and resign ourselves into God's hands absolutely, and say thus, 'We are the clay,' &c. Lord, thou mayest dash us if thou wilt, as thou doest many hundreds weekly. Thou mayest dash us in that fashion if thou wilt. Only we may have a desire that God would make our lives and health precious to him, that we may serve him as if we were now in heaven, and that we may have grace to make good use of all. But if God have determined and decreed to take us away, let us resign ourselves into his hands. It is no matter though the body be 'sown in dishonour, they shall be raised in honour,' 1 Cor. xv. 43. 'We are the clay, he is the potter,' let him do what he will with our carcases and bodies, so he be merciful to our souls. These vessels of clay, when they are turned to earth, they shall be renewed of better stuff, like the glorious body of Christ. Then our souls and bodies shall be glorious by him that took a piece of flesh and clay for us. Oh the humility of Christ! We wonder that the soul should animate a piece of clay, so excellent a thing as the soul is; much more may we wonder that the Son of God should take a piece of flesh and clay upon him; to take our nature of base earth, to make us eternally glorious as himself. Let it comfort us, though God dash our clay as a potter. Yet Christ, that took our clay to the unity of his person, our nature being engrafted into him, he will make our bodies eternal and everlasting as his own glorious body. Let us resign ourselves into God's hands, as the church here, 'Thou art the potter, and we are the clay,' and then we shall never miscarry.

NOTES.

(a) P. 190.—'Who would go to the pest-house, or to one that hath "Lord, have mercy upon us," on the door?' The allusion is to the marks placed upon the 'pest-houses,' and the dwellings of those sick during the plague in London—a visitation very often and very solemnly referred to by Sibbes, who twice witnessed its devastation—viz., in 1603-4, and the subsequent one of 1624-5. Having died in 1635, he did not pass through the 'Pestilence' of 1636.

(b) P. 200.—'We melt away,' . . . as the word is.' Dr Joseph Addison Alexander renders the phrase, 'For thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast melted us, because of (or by means of) our iniquities.' It will generally be found that Sibbes's critical remarks harmonise with the results of the highest modern scholarship. Cf. Note c, Vol. i. page 31. G.