

*Ettrick, Sept. 18, 1717.*

THANKSGIVING FOR MY CONTINUANCE IN ETRICK.

SERMON XXVII.

PROVERBS XXIX.

*Where there is no vision the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.*

WE are called this day to give thanks unto God, that the congregation is not left desolate, and wanting a settled ministry. The due consideration of the evils attending such a case is a proper mean to excite unto thankfulness, for averting such a stroke. And where thankfulness is to be found in its due latitude, it will extend to a suitable improvement of the means of grace. But of these we have in the text, where notice,

1. What makes a people very unhappy, with respect to the concerns of their souls. Where there is no vision the people perish. The want of vision puts a people in very unhappy circumstances. By vision is understood prophecy, 1 Sam. ix. 9. "Before time in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, thus he spake, Come and let us go to the seer; for he that is now called a prophet, was before time called a seer." And by prophecy is meant the preaching, expounding, and applying the word of God, 1 Cor. xiv. 1. "Desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophecy." This also is clear from the opposite clause, which mentions the law, as the rule by which people are to walk. They that are left without this mercy of the word, they perish, their spiritual case goes to wreck, they are made naked, stripped of their ornaments.

2. What makes a people or person happy. He that keepeth the law, happy is he. Negatively, you may observe, it is not the having of vision, the enjoying the ministry of the word that will do it. Though the want of it makes a people unhappy, however prosperous they may be otherwise; yet the mere having of it will not make them happy. Positively, it is the improving of vision among them, to the obeying of the truth, it is the keeping of the law which is preached unto them, the falling in with the great ends of the revelation of the mind of God made among them, by faith and a holy walk. This makes every one happy that doeth it.

*Doctrine.* Though the want of the ministry of the word makes a people very unhappy, yet it is not the having of it, but the right improving of it that makes them happy.

There are three things which the text presents to us, and which crave our serious consideration in our case.

I. Deplorable is the case of those that are deprived of the ministry of the word.

II. The mere having of the ministry of the word is not sufficient to make a people happy.

III. A right improvement of the ministry of the word will make a happy people.

We return to the consideration of the

I. Namely, deplorable is the case of those that are deprived of the ministry of the word. In speaking to this, I shall first show what makes that case so deplorable and heavy; and then confirm the truth of this point. Let us then,

1. Show what makes that case so deplorable and heavy. The text tells us the people perish. The original word here used has several significations, which different translations give it, and I see no reason why each of them that is suitable may not be thought to be intended by the Holy Spirit, and the whole make up the just explication of what makes that case so deplorable.

1. Where there is no ministry of the word, the people are made naked, they are left in a bare condition, they are uncovered. This is the primary condition of the word. Thus the sad condition of the people by their idolatry is expressed, Exod. xxii. 25. Moses saw that the people were naked, for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame amongst their enemies. And,

1. They are stript of their ornaments to their shame. Gospel ordinances kept up by a gospel ministry are the ornaments of a house, Isa. lxiv. 11. The ordinances are the beauties of holiness, Psal. cx. 3. Thus the saints have ever considered them, Psal. lxxxiv. 1. Where there is no ministry of the word, there the stars, which Christ holds in his right hand to give light to the people, are hid out of sight; the candles that shined in the candlestick are put out, and so such a people stript of their ornaments.

2. They are stripped of their armour, left naked in the midst of danger. The word of God is the sword of the Spirit. We cannot want it in an evil hour, if we mind to strive against the stream. It is true, the word read is the sword of the Spirit as well as preached. But the preaching of it is the special mean to draw it out of the scabbard, and put it into the hand of poor sinners against their enemies. Thus the Eunuch, after reading the word, replied to Philip's question, How can I understand it, except some man should guide me? And he desired that Philip do come up and sit with him for

that purpose. The well is deep, and there is need of some to draw for the people, that they may drink.

3. They are stript of the means of their defence. Sinners are in danger of attacks from enemies on all hands. They have need of watchmen to stand in the watch-tower, but where there is no ministry the watch-tower is empty, none to sound the trumpet to awaken those that are asleep, and to encourage those to fight that go out to the battle. The wall is then taken down, and what is within will appear like the garden of the sluggard.

Hence they are exposed in a special manner to the subtilty and violence of their spiritual enemies, without the ordinary means of help. They that let their case go as it will, it is much alike to them, whether they have the ministry of the word or not. But such as are concerned about their souls, will find they need all the help they can get from public ordinances: so that they will look upon themselves without them, to be exposed as sheep without a shepherd.

2. Where there is no vision, the people go backward. They leave their first love, their first ways in religion, they fall into a spiritual decay and apostacy. God hath appointed the ministry of the word to set people forward in the way of duty, and in that they must strive against the stream. No wonder then that as the boat must go down the stream, when the rowers are no more; so where there is no vision the people go backward. And this is one reason why Satan strives to rob the church of her ministers. What is said to the seven churches, is said to the angels of them, for a lively minister, is most likely to make a lively people; a dead minister, a dead people; and no ministry at all, would soon issue in no religion at all.

3. Where there is no vision, the people are drawn away. They are drawn away from their God, from their duty, from the right way. They are never wanting who will be agents for Satan, to draw people aside into the ways of sin and wickedness. We have many such drawers, the devil, the world, and the flesh. Now to draw against and oppose all these, a gospel ministry is set up in the church. All hath enough to do, to draw people forward; but how much more easily then would people be drawn away, were there none such to hold. Thus are they drawn away and scattered as sheep not having a shepherd.

4. Where there is no vision, the people are idle, they give over their work. They are like children who go to their play when they have none to call them to their books. They stand idle in the market place, while they have none to invite them to go into the

vineyard; to tell them what to work and how to work. There is a principle of sloth in the sons of men; they need monitors to stir them up to their business, to deal with their consciences, to put them on.

Lastly, Where there is no vision, the people perish, they die for lack of instruction, are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Good motions once raised in them are weakened and extinguished, and the case of their souls goes to wreck. Let us now,

II. Confirm the truth of this point.

I. The depriving of a people of the ministry of the word is a stroke of the Lord's anger. It is threatened as such, when he says, "I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent." It is inflicted as such. "But go ye now, says he, unto my place which is in Shiloh, where I set my name at the first, and see what I did to it, for the wickedness of my people Israel." It is a spiritual stroke and therefore the more heavy. It concerns men's souls, and therefore makes the case deplorable. It is a stroke laid on for a grievous quarrel, namely, the misimproving of the gospel.

2. The right notion of the excellency of the ministry of the word will evince their case to be sad that want it. Ministers are the light of the world, and they are dark places of the earth that want the gospel. The ministry of the word is the ordinary means of convincing and converting sinners; and when the gospel goes from a place, it is a sad sign that that work there is near an end. It is appointed for the edifying of the body of Christ, therefore to be continued till the temple be finished. The word is the bread of our souls the water to quench their thirst, rain to make them fruitful; and it is our counsellor in doubts and fears.

*Use 1.* Let us pity the case of those that are altogether without the light of the gospel, as many places in the world are. What though they have many precious things which we want, yet our gospel is better than their gold. Whatever they have in this world, where is the solid grounds of hope with them of a better? For our text looks sternly on the opinion of the salvation of heathens, telling us that where no vision is, there the people perish.

2. Let us pity the case of persecuted Christians and churches. Where there is no open vision, where silent Sabbaths are forced upon professors by the rage of enemies. As also the case of desolate congregations amongst ourselves, where many are perishing for want of vision, being brought up in ignorance of the precepts of religion, and have not the means of instruction, direction and comfort, when they most need them. Did men consider the sad case

into which the want of vision brings a people, they durst not raise obstacles in the way of planting congregations. Though in the mean time we have reason to bless God, that our land is a land of light, and if the ministry of the word be wanting in one corner, it may be had in another.

3. How injurious are they to their own souls, that wilfully slight the ministry of the word, whom a very little thing will keep back from ordinances. How do they wrong themselves that quite turn their backs on the ministry, and make it religion to them, not to be present at the ordinances dispensed in the congregation. The experience of such whose souls are helped thereby in their Christian course, will witness their sin, and the injury done to themselves, as well as to the ordinances.

Lastly, Let us be thankful to God, for the late favourable event in keeping this congregation from the desolation that was intended. There are few places that could have worse borne a desolation; there being in our case several things not common to render a desolation heavy. The Lord hath heard prayer, let us render to him the calves of our lips. We proceed now to show,

II. That the mere having of the ministry of the word is not sufficient to make a people happy. This is evident if we consider,

1. That people may have it, and yet get no saving benefit by it. It may be to them like a sounding brass, that reaches no farther than the ear. We find people going on in horrible profanity, notwithstanding they enjoyed the means of grace, Jer. vii. 8, 9. Some again sink into formality. Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof. Outward privileges make no man a happy man. What avails the light if men will not open their eyes to see: our food will not nourish us, unless we eat and digest it; nor clothes warm us, unless we put them on; so the word preached did not profit, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

2. The mere having of the word is so far from saving men, that it will aggravate the condemnation of those that have it, and walk not answerably to it. It will be more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah than for Capernaum; for them that never heard the gospel, than for unbelieving ungodly men. The brighter the light shines among a people, their works of darkness are the more heinous: and their outward privileges will be to them at length like a bag of gold on a drowning man.

*Use.* You my brethren have shown on the late occasion a great concern to have the ministry continued among you, and I hope you are convinced that the design pursued was very unacceptable to me. Now providence has turned this matter according to the desire of us

both. But let us not sit down upon it, as if that were enough to make all well with us in the relation of pastor and people. We need the Lord's hand to it, to put efficacy in the mercy for the good of us both. Many have got their desire; but it has turned to an empty husk in their hand, because they did not look to the Lord, and depend upon him for the good of it. "Ye looked for much, and lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it: Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man to his own house." If the Lord be not with us to bless us, we may come to be a weary burden to one another, for no creature can be more to us than God makes it to be. We need the blessing to make the ordinances effectual among us; for Paul may plant and Apollos water, but God giveth the increase. O! pray, pray for the blessing on this continuance.—Protest before the Lord that you will not be satisfied without it. We need the blessing to make the mercy lasting, for an unblessed mercy will either be very comfortless, or else it will not continue long.

It remains for us to shew,

III. That a right improvement of the mercy of the word will make a happy people. This improvement consists in two things, which come both here, under the notion of keeping the law.

1. Faith in Jesus Christ. It was to him the ceremonial law pointed the sinner, under the Old Testament; and without faith there is no keeping of the moral law. For in the eleventh chapter of the Hebrews, the apostle shows us, that it was by faith that the Old Testament saints did perform duties and bear trials and crosses.—This is the great call of the gospel; to close with Christ there offered. We are sent to espouse you to our Master's Son, and do not come speed, but by gaining your consent.

2. Holiness of life. The doctrines of the gospel believed with the heart, teach us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present world. As Christ is the end of the law, so I may say, the law is the end of the gospel; for it is the great design of the gospel revelation, to bring back sinners, to that righteousness and holiness which the law requires. The gospel never gains its end among a people, till a strain of piety and holiness run through their whole lives.

Now to confirm this point. Consider,

1. This improvement will make happy souls here, and hereafter. Here in peace with God, pardon of sin, yea, all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus; and hereafter in eternal salvation. For he that believeth shall be saved.

2. It bids fair for prosperity in earthly things, and as far as it will serve for God's glory and your good, will secure it to you. "For godliness is profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life that now is, and that which is to come."

3. It will give happiness under your crosses and trials with which you meet in the world. Troubles in the world will make the saints more attentive to the word; and they will find the word lighten, yea, sweeten their burdens.

Lastly, It will put a happiness into the relations in which we stand, for religion is the grand cement of society, and makes it most comfortable. The corruptions of men make them hurtful to one another, and this would cure them; under the enlightening and purifying influence of the gospel, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid: and the calf and the young lion, and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

*Directions* For improving the ministry of the word.

1. Pray much for a real benefit from ordinances; brethren, pray for us.

2. Diligently attend upon ordinances.

3. Meditate upon what you hear, and converse with one another about it.

4. Set yourselves humbly to obey the truths delivered from the Lord's word, embracing them by faith.

5. Put your hand to the Lord's work in your several stations in your families, and among those with whom you converse to prosecute the great ends of the gospel.

Lastly, Let us live in love and unity; and as ever you would see the gospel do good in the place, beware of division, for unhappy is that minister and people between whom it creeps in, and little success or comfort can there be where it prevails. "Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work, to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."