

COMMUNION SERMONS.

Askirk Communion, Monday, August, 1709.

THE HAPPINESS OF FEARING ALWAY.

SERMON I.

PROVERBS xxviii. 14.

Happy is the man that feareth alway.

If these words have any connection with the preceding verse, they must be taken as an evidence of the sincerity of him who confesseth and forsaketh his sins. Such an one will be afraid of sin for the future, having felt the smart of it. Or the text may be taken as a direction to such, how to avoid relapsing into a sinful course. They must fear alway.

You, in this place, have been confessing, preparing, and communicating. It is probable, that at this solemnity you have been brought to say, *How dreadful is this place!* But the fear of many quickly decays, and they become fearless, as if bread and wine could of themselves be armour proof against temptations; or did entitle them to a liberty of sinning safely. Nay, but if you would prove your sincerity, if you would not relapse into your old sins, then be not high minded but fear. Thus you shall be happy indeed. *For happy is the man that feareth alway.*

Here we have a duty proposed, *fear*, a necessary qualification of this duty stated, *alway*, and the advantage which arises from it. *Happy is the man that feareth alway.*

In prosecuting this subject, I shall,

I. Shew what that *fear* is which men ought to maintain alway.

II. I shall condescend on some things, with respect to which, we are in a special manner to entertain this holy fear.

III. Consider the necessary qualifications of this duty, *alway*.
And,

IV. The advantage attending it. *Happy is the man that feareth alway.* We are then,

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B

I. To shew what that fear is which men ought to maintain alway. The religious fear meant in the text comprehends two things,

1. A fear of God for himself. "Sanctify" says the Prophet, "the Lord of Hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread." This is the case when men beholding the greatness, majesty, and holiness of God, have a holy fear of him raised in their spirits.

2. A fear of other things for God, or in reference to him. Thus we are to be afraid of sin, and whatsoever puts us in hazard of offending God. For religious holy fear still terminates in God. Now according to what hath been said, must this fear be explained. We ought then to entertain,

1. A filial and reverential fear of God. "God is greatly to be feared among the assembly of the saints."—Slavish fear of God will never denominate, nor make a man happy. In reprobates it is the beginning of hell that *makes them tremble*; and even in the elect it is like a spark of hell to make them look after heaven. Slavish fear of God is a turbulent violent storm in the soul that takes away the heart, and often binds up the hands from duty. Thus Adam under its influence hid himself. But filial fear glides softly through the soul, watering it to bring forth the fruits of holiness. Slavish fear dreads nothing but hell and punishment. Filial fear dreads sin itself. The displeasing of God is a frightful object in itself to the saint. Slavish fear looks at eternal wrath with expectation of it. Filial fear also looks at wrath, but not with expectation, though with dread and terror. The one is mixed with hatred of God, the other with love to him—the one looks on him as a revenging judge, the other as a holy father, to whose holiness the heart is reconciled and the soul longs to be conformed.

2. We must entertain a fear of jealousy over ourselves. This Paul had over the Corinthians. "I am jealous, says he, over you with godly jealousy; for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicty that is in Christ." Now such a fear as this would suit communicants well. Such a fear seized the disciples—Me, Is it I? said each for himself. He ist he happy man who trusteth not his own heart, but keeps a jealous eye over it. "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely he shall be delivered." This holy self-jealousy, the apostle strongly presseth. "Be not high minded," says he, "but fear."

3. A fear of caution and circumspection. When a man is much

afraid of snares in his way he takes good heed where and how he walks. He proceeds with fear and trembling. This fear made David say, "I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue." This makes a man walk warily, *softly* as Hezekiah expresseth it. It sets the eyes of the mind to work to discern the hazard, and so to escape it.

II. I shall condescend on some things with respect to which we are in a special manner to entertain this holy fear, lest we offend in them.

1. Happy is he that feareth alway with respect to himself. Every man is his own nearest neighbour, and so his worst enemy is nearest to him. Happy is the man that keeps a jealous eye over himself. "Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things that thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life." And there are four things about yourselves which you have need to fear; to be jealous over them, and circumspect about them, lest you offend God in them and by them.

1. Your heads, your principles. God is a God of truth as well as holiness. There are soul ruining principles as well as practices. The spirit of delusion rageth. New doctrines please those who have not had the spiritual relish, nor felt the efficacy of the old upon their hearts. "The time will come," says Paul, "when they will not endure sound doctrine." These he calls perilous times, and in them men shall be *heady* and *high minded*. Now a perilous time is a time for fear. Why do these things prevail but because men are rash and fearless about them. There is a certain fondness of new notions, and hence, men are caught in the trap before they are aware.

2. Your hearts. "Keep thy heart with all diligence for out of it are the issues of life." The heart is the principle of action as the eye is the light of the body. Great need then is there for the heart to be pure. O! what need to entertain this holy fear with respect to the heart; *for it is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked*. If you would have the streams pure you must look well to the fountain. To keep this jealous eye over the conversation and not over the heart, is to shut the door while the thief is in the house. And therefore entertain a holy fear with respect to the thoughts of your hearts. They may offend God as well as your outward actions. "O Jerusalem," says Jeremiah, "wash thine heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved; how long shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee." Thoughts are the offspring of our hearts. We had need then to take heed to them, that we may suppress those evil

thoughts in the birth which otherwise may swarm outward and defile the whole man. For "that which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man." One wandering thought has sometimes been a wide door through which the soul's life and vigour, in duties, have gone out; the thought being like a dart suddenly struck through the liver of a bird while it has been singing on a branch.

Guard also the affections of your hearts. Good affections are tender buds of heaven easily checked and made to wither; and bad ones like ill weeds grow apace. How ready are our affections to go astray. At one time they set on unlawful objects, and at another they fix immoderately on those that are lawful, and when once let loose, they run like fire in a train. The wandering of the desire is a vanity and vexation of spirit. As we would be afraid to let an untamed colt slip the bridle, so ought we, with the greatest care, to keep rule over our own spirits.

3. Your tongues. "The tongue is a little member but boasteth great things. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." It is dangerous to ride on an unbridled horse, and equally dangerous to have an unbridled tongue. "I will keep my mouth," says David, "with a bridle while the wicked is before me." Again says he, "Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth, keep the door of my lips." He was afraid something might break out to the dishonour of God. Words are of the greatest consequence. "For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned."

4. Your senses. These are the gates of the soul, and when the town is besieged, there must be strict watch kept at the gates. Satan lays his trains at these gates, and if we do not take good heed, the whole soul may be set on fire. By the eyes and the ears, did the devil blow up all mankind in Adam and Eve. The eyes ruined Achan, and grievously wounded David. Job was so afraid of them, that he was glad to make a covenant with them. Happy then is he that feareth them.

2dly. We should entertain this holy fear with respect to our lusts and corruptions. He fears God. He is happy who can say he fears nothing so much as sin. You must fear the sin of your nature, the old man, that woful bent of the soul to evil. O! how much was the apostle afraid of it; when he said, O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? It reigns as king in the unregenerated, dwells as a troublesome guest in the regenerated, and endeavours to recover the command. "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body that you should obey it in the lusts thereof." They cannot be safe without fear who lodge such a guest. Due fear of this would set us on our guard against it, and send us to the Lord for his grace to mortify it.

You must be on your guard also against the sins by which you have been formerly led away; "not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance." These forsaken lovers will again make suit to you, and will get in upon you, if you grow secure. They will not want agents for them, though the devil should stir up the wife of your bosom for that end.—Whether they are crucified or not, you are in hazard and must be on your guard against them. You must also be afraid of the sins to which you find yourselves most inclined. Every man has *his sin that doth most easily beset him*; and where the wall is weakest it should be best guarded. Like David, we must keep ourselves from our iniquity.

Little sins must be dreaded. There is no sin little with respect to the infinite Majesty offended, or the reward of it due by justice. A man may be drowned in a small stream as well as in the ocean. The little thief makes least noise, but opens the door to the rest. A look to Bathsheba in the end broke David's vows. Satan ruins many this way, bringing them on by little and little, who would be alarmed at gross sins, in which he appears with his cloven foot. It is evident also that gross sins should be dreaded. O! how many professors fall scandalously. And why? because they are secure as to these, and so are caught in their security. Here what a watchword Christ gave his disciples, "Take heed to yourselves," said he, "lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares." Let no person then, whatever his attainments are, be sure in this point. For the seeds of the grossest sins are originally in every man's heart. The best of men have been overtaken by them, even after the strongest obligations to duty, and there is a principle of sloth in the best. Hence it follows that all occasions of sin should be feared. It is very dangerous for a man with bags of powder about him to walk amidst sparks of fire. Peter, in the high priest's hall, was soon ensnared. Sin having a lodging within wants only an occasion to come out, therefore restrain your lusts by fearing the occasions of sin, and particularly ill company. "Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not into the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away." Temptations are dangerous things, "therefore watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." You live amidst many snares, be then always upon your guard, and keep yourself out of the way of temptation.

3dly. We should entertain this holy fear with respect to our graces. Grace is that holy fire sent from heaven into our hearts, which must not be neglected. It is a *gift* to be stirred up. It is in

hazard of decay, though not of death. Though the root will remain, yet it may be overgrown and hid. The way to keep the treasure is to fear.

4thly. We should entertain this holy fear with respect to our duties. The whole worship and service of God is called fear; so necessary is our fear in approaching to him. "In thy fear," says David, "will I worship toward thy holy temple." In this there is cause of fear. For "when we do good evil is present with us." Satan also is busy to cast some dead fly to spoil the whole, making it unacceptable to God and unprofitable to us.

Finally, This fear must be exercised about your attainments. They are in hazard of being lost. "Let us look then to ourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward." Those of you that have got any thing from the Lord on this occasion, Satan will set himself to rob you of it. Feed then with fear, on what has been given you. If it be only a conviction it is worth the keeping. Satan will think it worth his pains to take it away. O! let not the fire get out by neglecting it. "Despise not the day of small things." The cloud like a man's hand may cover the face of the heavens if cherished. Observe the diligence of the spouse. "I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please." Hear also Hezekiah, "What shall I say? he hath both spoken unto me, and himself hath done it: I will go softly all my years in the bitterness of my soul." We are now,

III. To consider the necessary qualification of this duty, *always*. Happy is the man that feareth *always*.—This fear must be our habitual and constant work. It must go through the whole of our lives, till we be in the place where there is no hazard of sinning. This fear should season all we do, and be with us in all times, cases, conditions, places, and companies.

Reason 1. Because we have always the enemy within our walls: "A heart deceitful above all things and desperately wicked." Now can men sleep securely when assassins are within their house? Constant danger requires constant fear and watchfulness. While a body of sin remains with us, temptations will always be presenting themselves.

2. Because there are snares for us in all places and in all circumstances. Satan is busy and has filled the world with traps; therefore "see that ye walk circumspectly not as fools, but as wise." In the wilderness Christ was tempted. Peter in company; and Eve when alone. There are snares in our lawful enjoyments.—Snares at home, in the field, waking, in our bed, or at our table we are beset

with them. Many ditches are in our way, and many of these are so concealed that we may fall completely into them before we are aware.—At all times we are beset. Men may have great privileges, but none have freedom from temptation.—Many have fallen so soon after a communion, that it would seem the devil had gone down with the sop.—We proceed,

IV. To consider the advantage attending this duty, *Happy is the man that feareth alway.* He is *happy*, for,

1. This prevents much sin, and advanceth holiness of heart and life. “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” He that fears to offend God is most likely to keep his way; and he that fears snares in his way is most ready to escape them.

2. It prevents strokes from the Lord’s hand. Where sin dines, judgment will sup. He that feareth the bait, will escape the hook. Both these may be gained from the antithesis in the text. Pride goes before a fall. “Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.” Now holy fear prevents these falls. It is an excellent ballast to a light, vain, and frothy heart. It is dangerous sailing in a ship without ballast; and that heart that is without this fear will soon discover itself. “The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes.” This fear is a restraint upon the mind of man, without which no man can rule his own spirit. This fear breaks many snares. The fear of man *bringeth a snare*. How many are led aside by the fear of man? They are unwilling to offend men, they desire to please the company. But holy fear takes away this. It teaches us to fear God, and not man. It makes the soul exert all its care to please God whoever be offended.

3. This fear carries the soul out of itself to the Lord Jesus Christ, the fountain of light, life, and strength. It empties a man of self confidence, and so makes way for the influences of grace. It leads the soul to the rock higher than itself. Thus when the man is weak, then is he strong.

For the improvement of what has been said, I exhort all of you to fear *alway*.

1. You who are in a joyful frame, join trembling with your mirth. You are in a paradise, but though you are, the serpent will conceal himself there till he turn you out of it, if you entertain not this holy fear.

2. You that are in a mournful frame *fear alway*. Satan can lay a snare for you in the house of mourning, and set his traps in the midst of your tears.

3. You that have not met with Christ, and therefore cannot rejoice, nor miss him and therefore mourn, but are going away as you came, stupid, senseless, and unconcerned; what shall I say to you? Shall I bid you fear to offend in your walk, after you have had the audacity solemnly to mock God at his table? Nay, but fear lest the devil has gone down with the sop, and that he has got a faster hold of you than ever he had before; your affections are more deadened and your consciences more seared. "Thus your last state will be worse than your first." Fear lest there be some black hour abiding you in which God will take the mask from your face by letting you fall into the mire. For he hath said, "Because thou art luke warm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." Then cast forth as a branch you will wither, losing both fruit and leaf.

Fear lest the Lord make a breach in you for profaning the secret symbols of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ. God made a breach upon his ancient people when they sought him not after the due order. 1 Chron. xv. 13. And for your very sin, many among the Corinthians were visited with heavy judgments. 1 Cor. xi. 29, 30. Wherefore look to yourselves, and when you go home, review what you have been doing. Repent, and yet give yourselves away honestly to Christ. His blood is able to save them that have shed it. From him you may receive the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Lastly, To all of you, I say fear alway. Carry this fear home with you. Perhaps you may meet with a temptation before you get home, or as soon as you enter your own house. Something may appear wrong that will be a fire to blow up your corruptions. Perhaps you may meet with a temptation from the quarter you least expect it. *Happy is the man that feareth alway.* The Lord will carry him through, till he bring him to the place where all fear of evil shall be banished for ever. Amen.