

SERMONS UPON HEBREWS VI. 18.

SERMON I.

That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.—HEB. vi. 18.

To give you the occasion of these words, we must look back into the context. The apostle proveth the firmness of the promises, and yet the great need of faith and patience ere they be accomplished. He proveth both by the instance of Abraham, who was long exercised in waiting, and had God's promise ratified with the most solemn assurance that can be conceived under heaven, with an oath, which is held sacred and inviolable among all nations. But here some might object, that if Abraham had such a special assurance from God, what is that to us? To this the apostle replies, that though God's oath were given to Abraham, yet it concerns all the heirs of promise, every believer hath the same ground of certainty that Abraham had; so it is asserted, ver. 17, 'Wherein God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath.' There is an emphasis in the phrase, 'more abundantly.' God's oath was not given out of necessity, but out of condescension. Not out of necessity, as if his word was not valid and authentic without an oath, but he would give his oath that, over and above and by all solemn ways of assurance, the Lord would provide for our certainty and assurance, that we might have strong consolation upon solid grounds, 'That by two immutable things,' &c.

In the words we have the purport and the aim of God's oath, which is to give believers more solemn assurance. Take notice of three things—

1. The ground of this assurance, 'That by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie.'
2. The fruit of this assurance, 'That we might have strong consolation.'
3. The persons to whom God hath given this assurance, we 'who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope that is set before us.'

Suitable to the three parts there are three main points—

[1.] God's word and oath are the immutable grounds of a believer's certainty and confidence.

[2.] That the fruit of this confidence and certainty is strong consolation.

[3.] That the persons to whom God hath deposited his oath, and by it administereth so strong a comfort and consolation, are those who fly for refuge to take hold of the hope that is set before them.

Doct. 1. That God's word and God's oath are the immutable grounds of a believer's confidence and certainty; for these are the two immutable things spoken of. I shall speak of each distinctly.

First, God's single word is an immutable ground; having this, you have enough. And so it will appear if you consider the power and the certainty of it.

1. The power of God's word. His word is nothing else but the declaration of his powerful will; the force of it was discovered in creating the world. God created all things by his word: Ps. xxxiii. 9, 'He spake and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.' This whole fabric of heaven and earth, which we now behold with wonder, was made with a word. And mark, God's creating word and word of promise do not differ, they are both the word of God; and there is as much force and power in this word 'I will take away the heart of stone,' as there was in this word, 'Let there be light.' There is as much power in this sentence, 'I will make your vile bodies to be like to Christ's glorious body,' as there was in that word, 'Let there be a firmament.' God's word was powerful enough to make a world when it was nothing before. All the works of God subsist by the force of his word: Heb. i. 3, 'Upholding all things by the word of his power.' It is but for God to say, Let it continue, let it be, and either are accordingly. One word is enough to undo the world, and one word is enough to uphold and preserve it. God's word is the declaration of his almighty and powerful will; whatever he did in the world, he did it by his word. Therefore if you have this immutable ground, if God hath deposited and plighted his word, you have enough to establish strong consolation, for it is powerful to all purposes and intents whatsoever.

2. Consider the certainty of it. When the word is gone out of God's mouth, it shall not be recalled. The Lord prizeth his faithfulness above all things. The scripture must be fulfilled whatever inconveniences come of it. Mark the whole course of providence, and you will find that God is very tender of his word; he valueth it above all his works: Luke xxi. 33, 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.' God is not so tender of heaven and earth but that he will break it all to pieces rather than not make good his word; though it be a curious frame and fabric, in which he hath displayed much of his glory, yet that shall be dissolved. Heaven and earth do only continue till all that is prophesied of in the word be fulfilled. We shall enjoy the comfort of his word in heaven, when all these things are melted away with a fervent heat. Nay, which is more, God valueth his word above the human life of Christ his own Son. If God passed his word for it, his Son, who was the delight of his soul, equal to him in glory, must come from heaven, take a body, and suffer a cruel death: 'Lo, I come, in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to

do thy will, O God,' Ps. xl. 7. God had passed his word to the church that it should be so; therefore, rather than he would go back from his word, he sent Christ to die for a sinful world. There was no promise of more difficulty for God to grant nor for us to believe, than this of the incarnation and death of Christ; yet rather than go back from his word Christ must come and die an accursed and shameful death.

Secondly, The main thing is, what ground of consolation we have in God's oath. And there I shall—(1.) Show the reasons why God gives us his oath over and above his word; (2.) The several advantages which we have by his oath in believing.

1. For the reasons why God should give this oath. An oath you know is given in matters doubtful. Philo saith, An oath is given for the manifestation of a matter which is secret and doubtful, and which cannot otherwise be determined. To swear in things apparent and matters clear is to take the name of God in vain. All matters which are clear are otherwise decided; matters of opinion, by argument; matters of fact, by testimony; matters of promise, by the single word of the party that promises, if he be a person of honour and credit; but always an oath supposes some doubt and controversy that cannot otherwise be determined. And so much the apostle intimates when he says, Heb. vi. 16, 'It is the end of all strife' or controversy. Well, then, God's promises being of such absolute certainty, why doth the Lord deposit his oath with the creature, since his single and bare word is enough.

I answer—The matter itself needs it not, but only in regard of us. We look upon the promises with doubtful thoughts; there is a controversy between God and us; we have hard thoughts of God, as if he would not be so good as his word; therefore his oath is given, not to show the doubtfulness of the thing that is sworn, but the greatness of our unbelief. Austin saith, *Est exprobatio quedam infidelitatis nostræ*—God hereby upbraids us with our unbelief, when he gives us an oath for the confirmation of any matter. Briefly, God's oath is given us for two reasons—to show us the certainty, and to show us the excellency of our privileges in Christ.

Reason 1. To show us the certainty of our privileges in Christ. The world makes it a controversy and doubtful matter whether Christ came to die for sinners, yea or nay? whether God will save those that take sanctuary at Christ? God saith, Ay, and we say, No; and how shall the matter be decided? Observe it, and you will find that there are two things which we are apt to suspect in God—his good affection in making the promise, and his truth in keeping the promise. We suspect his good affection, especially when we are in pangs and gripes of conscience; and we suspect his truth in straits and difficulties, whenever in the course of God's providence we are cast into such a condition that we think he hath forgotten his promise. Now the Lord might be highly offended with us for those wicked thoughts we entertain of his majesty, but in a gracious condescension he is pleased to put an end to the controversy by an oath. As if the Lord had said, Do you doubt of this? Will you put me to my oath? Here I am ready to take it; and that the matter may no longer remain in suspense, I swear by my life, by my holiness, by whatever you count sacred and

excellent in me, that whoever among you, whatever he be, that is touched with a sense of his sin and misery by nature, if he will run to Christ for refuge, take sanctuary in Christ, if he doth belong to my unchangeable purposes of grace, I will surely without miscarrying bring him to a sure and eternal possession of glory; and for the present I will be a father to him, and guide him and keep him as the apple of mine eye; I will be his present help, his guardian, his counsellor, during the whole time of his abode in the world, where he is only liable to dangers. This was the matter in controversy, and this is the substance of God's oath. And I shall show you how apt we are to distrust God in all this. We suspect, as I said, either his good affection in making the promise, or his truth in keeping the promise, so that we need this solemn way of assurance. Therefore—

First, I shall speak to this, that we distrust his good affection, and will not believe God upon his single word. What should be the reason that nature is so abhorrent from this certainty and assurance, which so much concerneth our own peace and comfort? Take six reasons—

1. Partly because guilt is full of suspicion. We hate those whom we have wronged. *Proprium est humani ingenii odisse quos laeserit.* First we hurt a person, then we hate him; so out of fear of revenge we suspect all that he doth, all acts of kindness, all tenders and offers of reconciliation which come from him. Let me exemplify it in men. Thus David speaks of his enemies: Ps. cxx. 7, 'I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war.' David was the wronged party, and Doeg and Saul's courtiers had slandered him, and done him wrong. David was willing to forget all this injury, and he comes with an offer of peace, but all treaties of peace are in vain. This you will find to be the fashion of the world, when they have wronged a person, never to trust him any more, lest they should give him opportunity of revenge. Thus do we deal with God; conscience knows we have wronged him, slighted his love, and put affronts upon his grace, and therefore, though he makes the first offer, we believe it not. Revengeful man cannot think God will be so gracious and merciful, therefore we cannot believe those ample purposes of reconciliation. It breaks the back of patience to think of forgiving seven times: 'Must I forgive seven times?' saith Peter. And therefore how can we believe the Lord will pardon so many thousand affronts we put upon him day by day? Thus we wrong God and sin away our faith, and therefore are not capable of so rich a comfort.

2. Partly because the way of salvation is so rare and wonderful, that a man can find no faith for it. The gospel is a mystery, so called by the apostle, 1 Tim. iii. 16, 'Great is the mystery of godliness.' Nature affords no help here. Theology is natural, but not christology. Nature believes there is a God, but not that there is a Christ. The sun and moon preach up a God, their sound is gone out into all lands, and proclaim everywhere that there is one infinite and eternal power; and conscience preacheth up a judge. But all these natural preachers are dumb and silent concerning Christ, not a word concerning a saviour and mediator. It could not enter into the thought of an angel to pitch upon such a remedy if God had not revealed it to them by the church: Eph. iii. 10, 'To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom

of God.' The angels did conceive of this great mystery by observing God's dispensations to the church. Well, then, the way of salvation being so rare and wonderful, we should never acquiesce and rest satisfied with bare declarations, but we need God's oath that the controversy may be determined. When an angel came to bring tidings of it to the Virgin Mary, though she were a holy woman, and had such an extraordinary way of assurance, yet you find her unbelief outstarts her obedience and submission to the will of God: 'How shall this be?' Luke i. 34. The incarnation of God, the conception of a virgin, the death of life itself, all these things are riddles and golden dreams to reason; and without a higher assurance than a bare word, we should not be easily satisfied.

3. Partly because the blessings and privileges we have in Christ are so great, and the persons which enjoy them so unworthy, as being nothing and deserving nothing, that they exceed all thought and belief: 1 Cor. ii. 9, 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared for them that love him.' Mark, all the ways by which we can gain any knowledge of a thing, they come short; sense, fancy, reason, eye, ear, heart, of man cannot conceive and cannot tell what to make of these excellent privileges we have in Christ; they cannot furnish him with fit notions and apprehensions of such excellent glory as is revealed to us in him. To illustrate it by the creatures: If a man had been by when God made the world, as the angels were, if he had seen God laying the foundations of all things, he would have wondered what God was about to do, for what rare creature the Lord was about to frame this stupendous and wonderful fabric, arched with heaven, floored with earth, interlaced with waters, decked with fruits and plants, stored with creatures, and glazed, if I may so speak, with stars; who would ever have thought that all this furniture and provision was for man, a handful of dust, a poor worm not six feet long, that he might be lord of all things, vice-king and deputy under God? Now, if a man would wonder at the honour and glory God put upon man at his creation, much more at the privileges of our redemption by Christ; they are matters to be wondered at indeed: 2 Thes. i. 10, 'Christ shall be glorified in his saints, and admired in all them that believe.' This place chiefly concerns the angels, when God puts such clarity and splendour upon the body that they shall wonder what Christ is about to do with such a contemptible creature as man, that newly came out of the grave of rottenness and dust. This text I am upon speaks of 'a hope set before us.' If this were but a little opened, as our ear hath received a little thereof, if we should tell you what preparation Christ hath made to bring the saints to glory, with what a glorious train of angels he will come from heaven, what mansions he hath prepared for us in his Father's house, and all this for those that have nothing and deserve nothing, unless it be extremity of misery; if a man should tell you Christ would come in such a state, and entertain the saints with such dearness of affection, and receive sinners into his bosom, that he would make them his fellow-judges, liken their bodies to his own glorious body for brightness and splendour, that such pieces of worms, and clods of earth shall be many times brighter than the sun, I tell you this would require a strong faith to believe it, and

we had need of all the averment and assurance that can be given us under heaven. If an angel admires at the saints, certainly inferior creatures will suspect it. Alas! what a valuable price can we bring and pay to God for all this glory! We that judge all things by the laws of reason and commutative justice, for we give nothing but upon valuable consideration, what valuable price can we bring to God? What consideration can we give him for so great a glory, and how shall we think ever to be partakers of an estate so disproportionable to our merit and condition? Therefore, because our privileges in Christ are so great and wonderful, we need not only God's word, but also his oath.

4. Partly because we ourselves are so false and fickle in all our contracts with one another, especially in our dealings with God, that we need to be bound with promise upon promise, and oath upon oath, and all little enough to restrain and hold us within the bounds of duty. Man is changeable, and breaks vows and covenants and promises, and snaps them asunder as a thread and tow is burnt asunder with fire, and will not be held with any obligation. It is a Greek proverb, Children play with nuts, and men with oaths. It is too often so. Perjury, though it be monstrous and barbarous, and dissolves the bonds of human societies and confederacies, yet it is no rare thing in the world, especially in the latter times. They are said among other sins to be infamous for covenant-breaking: 2 Tim. iii. 3, 'Truce-breakers,' &c. Thus we deal with one another. But if we should be more faithful to men for the safety of our interest, yet how often do we break with God, and compass him about with lies: 2 Sam. xxiii. 5, 'He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure.' We are false and fickle when God is sure. To-day we promise, to-morrow we fail. What vow did we ever make to God and kept it? Now we are apt to judge of God's promises by our own. It is usual with man to transform God into his own likeness, and to muse of him as we use ourselves. The heathens did it grossly, and by a sensible picture; the apostle chargeth it upon them: Rom. i. 23, 'They changed the glory of God into an image made like to corruptible man.' They shaped God into the picture of man, and still according to the particular genius and fancy of each nation. The Spartans, being a warlike people, painted their gods in armour, suiting most with their disposition; the Ethiopians painted their gods black and their devils white, because they were a black people. But now we do it all spiritually: Ps. l. 23, 'Thou thoughtest I was altogether such an one as thyself.' We judge of God by ourselves, and draw a monstrous misshapen picture of him in our minds, as if he were revengeful, fierce, fallacious, fickle, and changeable as we are. Therefore, to meet with this sin doth the Lord so often disclaim the dispositions of a man, that we should not fancy him according to the lineaments of a man: Hosea xi. 9, 'I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim; for I am God, and not man.' As if he had said, Do not measure me according to your model; I am not revengeful as you are, and changeable as you are; this is not my fashion. So Isa. lv. 8, 9, 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.'

You see the distance between earth and heaven is so wondrous great that the earth cannot reach it with its mountains, cedars, turrets, smoke, and vapours ; it is so great that a star of the heavens, as big as the earth, seems to be but a spangle : so infinitely more are the workings of my thoughts, and my heart different from your thoughts and your heart. More particularly and suitable to the present case : Num. xxiii. 19, ' God is not a man that he should lie, neither the son of man, that he should repent : hath he said, and shall he not do it ? or hath he spoken it, and shall he not make it good ? ' Man is as unstable as water ; his point varieth according to the different posture of the times and situation of his own interest and advantage ; but it is not so with me, saith the Lord. Men say and do not, but God's Yea is always yea, and his No is always no. This was the speech of Balaam, who was called a false prophet, not from the matter of his prophecy, but only from his aims. But if you will have it from a more authentic hand, you have it out of the mouth of Samuel : 1 Sam. xv. 29, ' The strength of Israel will not lie, nor repent ; for he is not a man that he should repent. ' Mark the reason, for he is not a man. To be a man and to be changeable is all one. Certainly the frequent inculcation of such passages in scripture showeth that we are apt to measure infiniteness by our own scantling and size. And therefore, this being man's natural thought, God in a condescension, and by way of check, is pleased to give the creature this assurance, we have his word and his oath ; so that if we would but afford him the favour we use to show to an honest man, we have no ground of diffidence and distrust.

5. Another cause of this unbelief is enmity to the gospel. There is a natural contrariety in our hearts both to the privileges and duties of the gospel, and because we hate it, we do not easily believe it. The pride of man's heart sets him against the privileges of the gospel, and carnal liberty against the obedience of it. Man is a proud creature, and would be self-sufficient ; he is loath to be beholden to God, as a proud man loves a russet coat of his own better than a silken garment that is borrowed of another. Thus the apostle complains of the Jews : Rom. x. 3, ' They being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish a righteousness of their own, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God. ' There needs some submission and bearing down of the pride of man, all is borrowed ; here Christ is all, and doth all, he hath merited for all, and suffered for all. Now this suits not with the pride of man's heart, who would be sufficient to himself, and establish a personal merit in himself. And then especially is this pride bewrayed when a man hath anything to trust to and rest in, as civil righteousness or a formal profession ; it is a hard matter then to bring men to submit to the righteousness of God, to come hungry and thirsty for Christ's righteousness. There is no pride so deadly and mischievous, and opposite to the gospel, as the pride of self-conceit and self-sufficiency ; yet this is natural to us ; therefore God doth not only say, but swear, that we shall never enter into his rest unless we take this course, and run to this hope that is before us. And as pride opposeth the privileges of the gospel, so carnal liberty opposeth the obedience of the gospel. Men are loath to stoop and submit to God's terms. Christ is to be Lord as well as Saviour. Now the world will not hear of laws and restraints. You know the nations

were all for casting away the bonds and cords : Ps. ii. 3, ' Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their cords from us.' In the latter ages of the world, it is foretold in the prophecies of scripture, that the church is in danger of turning to libertinism : we cast away yoke after yoke, till we have left Christ nothing but an empty title. How busy are men now to find out a north-east-passage, a nearer cut to heaven ; and therefore the Lord swears, and ratifies the whole tenor of the gospel by an oath, to meet with our enmity and natural contrariety, which makes us so apt to misbelieve.

6. Another cause why those that are touched with a sense of sin suspect God's good affection is a jealousy of assurance, or a secret fear of presuming. All the doubts and scruples of a troubled conscience come to this issue, and may all be referred to this head, a fear of presuming. Many will plead the number of their sins, and how many affronts they have put upon the grace of God. Some will plead the greatness and the aggravations of their sins, relapses into sin, sins against light, against the advantages of grace ; but they all end in this one thing, a fear of being too bold with the comforts of the gospel, and that comfort doth not belong to persons in their case. This is the cable-rope which keeps them from floating out amain upon the ocean of God's mercy, as if the Lord delighted in their grief rather than in their assurance and satisfaction. Usually thus it is with disturbed consciences. Trouble that is once swallowed is hardly got up again ; and men think sadness is more pleasing to God than comfort, and that doubts suit with a christian frame rather than confidence, and so they hug a distemper instead of a duty. Therefore the Lord is fain to swear that certain it is. Nay, it is not for nothing that this makes the heart of Christ so joyful, that we live upon the provision he hath made for us : John xv. 11, ' These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.' This is the very aim of God's oath ; he would show, as I shall further clear by and by, that our assurance is more pleasing to him than our doubting ; that he is better pleased with our comfort, nay, though it rise up to strong comfort, than with our sorrow. Thus you see that diffidence and incredulity is deeply rooted in our nature ; yea, believers themselves are liable to many doubts, out of the relics of atheism and unbelief that yet remain in them.

Secondly, I am to show that we are apt to suspect his truth in keeping his promise. When straits and difficulties come, and things go cross to our expectation, we had need of more than God's single word. There is not one of an hundred that lives by faith, and can bottom his comfort on a single promise, and can rejoice in the Lord his God when outward supports fail. We are led altogether by sense, and therefore in cross providences we look upon promises as words of course, and are apt to say, Where are his promises, and the soundings of his bowels ? and where is the ready help which God hath promised in the time of trouble ? And therefore, as a prop to the soul, he hath backed his promise with an oath. Mark it, christians, it is very usual, even with God's dearest children, to unravel their hopes, and to question all upon a cross providence ; as David : Ps. cxvi. 11, ' I said in my haste, All men are liars.' Why doth David retract that charge, and impute it to his haste ? The apostle saith, Rom. iii. 4, ' Let God be true, and every

man a liar.' We are changeable creatures, our beings are a lie; to-day we are, and to-morrow we are not; and so our promises are a lie; we say, and do not; and therefore why doth David impute it to his haste, as if he had spoken something that were untrue? Certainly, there was some blame in the expression, for he acknowledgeth it was spoken in haste. The speech hath respect to those messages and assurances which were brought to him from the mouth of God by Samuel, Nathan, and other prophets. They comforted him with God's promises, and now he was thunderstruck, blasted with some sore affliction, far enough from the case of a man that had many assurances from heaven; now 'all men are liars,' prophets and all. Once more, Ps. xxxi. 22, 'I said in my haste, I am cut off from before thine eyes; nevertheless thou heardest the voice of my supplications, when I cried unto thee.' God hath cast off all care of David; he doth not look after a poor banished man, which wandereth up and down in the wilderness, a poor flea that is chased and hunted to and fro. Such pets and passions of distrust, such irregular and unbelieving thoughts usually have we upon any cross providence, when sense contradicts the promise. Always we find sense and distrust making lies of God; therefore a single promise will not serve the turn, but we need an oath. Surely if God hath sworn, we may wait upon him. Doubts, now God hath passed his oath, do but accuse him of perjury. And therefore you shall see the oath of God hath always been the refuge of the saints even in the worst of times, when they seemed most of all to lour upon their hopes and expectations, Hab. iii. 9. The affairs of the church were at that time desperate; but saith the prophet, 'Thy bow was made quite naked, according to the oaths of the tribes, even thy word. Selah.' God for his covenant and oath's sake revived the affairs of the church when they were at a desperate pass. It is there expressed in the plural number, *oaths*, because they were often renewed with the church; and they are called 'the oaths of the tribes,' because this was the church's treasure, because of the oath God made with the tribes, for it is not meant of the oaths the church made with God. Look, as the covenant of Abraham is God's covenant made with Abraham, and the mercies of David were God's mercies bestowed upon David, so the oaths of the tribes are not taken actively for the oaths which the tribes deposited with God, but passively for the oath God deposited with the tribes, that is, the church. God took this bow out of the case, and bestows the arrows of his vengeance upon the adversaries of the church. That this exposition is true, it appeareth in what follows, 'Even thy word. Selah.' There is his word, and that confirmed by an oath, the two immutable things; these relieve the sinking state of the church. It goes ill with the church a long time, that we might have experience what God can do. Look what Florus said of the state of Rome, *Romani prelio saepe victi, bello nunquam*—The Romans were often overcome in battle, but never in war. So of the church; they go by the worst in some particular cases, and in some particular times, that we might try God, and God may try us: but we are safe; God will remember the oaths of the tribes; the oath of God will relieve the most desperate case. It is rude blasphemy to say God will not make good his oath. Thus you see why God would deposit his oath.

Reason 2. God sweareth, as for the confirmation of his grace in Christ, and to show the certainty of our privileges in Christ, so for the commendation and excellency of them. An oath is not lawful but in weighty matters; it must be taken in judgment, as well as in righteousness and truth, Jer. iv. 2. In judgment, that is, considerably, upon weighty occasions. It is a profaning the name of God, and of such a solemn ordinance and part of worship, to make an oath to lacquey upon trifles, and upon every small matter; it must be in matters of weighty concernment. There is a severe penalty and sanction annexed to the taking of God's name in vain, either rashly or falsely: 'The Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.' So whatever is established by God's oath must needs be great and excellent. Certainly God would not swear but in weighty matters; therefore one of his aims was that we might the more regard our privileges in Christ. The apostle proveth the excellency of Christ's priesthood by the oath wherewith it was ratified: Heb. vii. 20, 21, 'And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest; for those priests were made without an oath, but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord sware, and will not repent,' &c. He alludes to Ps. cx. 4, where God is brought in, saying to Christ, 'The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedeck.' Such administrations as are confirmed with an oath have upon them a seal and mark of special excellency. The Lord foresaw that as we were apt to disbelieve the gospel, so also to despise it; and therefore, to shame us for our neglect as well as our unbelief, to awaken our attention and quicken our speed and earnest pursuit, the Lord swears; his word should be regarded, much more his oath. When we are busy about the world; and neglect the great salvation, we put a scorn upon God, as if the things he hath confirmed by oath were not worth the looking after. When we prefer worldly comforts as more certain, oh! what an injury is this to the oath of God! We read of the sure mercies of David, but you are all for lying vanities. We are naturally for the comforts that are before us, and look upon it as a riddle to grow rich in promises and to live by faith. Are uncertain riches more to be trusted, and a better refuge and sanctuary for your souls than God's oath? It is a sign you slight his confirmation and commendation, and so count him false and foolish in all the things he proposeth to you. God forbid, say you, that we should be guilty of such a blasphemy. You do it not in word, but this is the necessary interpretation of your actions. If a man should offer you a good bargain upon very easy terms, that would bring you a thousand pounds profit, and should confirm it by oath, though you did not tell him that he did deceive you with words, yet if you go away never heeding it, but should run after smaller matters which you purchase with great hazard, would not this argue you counted him but false and foolish; or the thing not worth the taking and looking after? So when God hath pawned his oath, that his grace and immutable counsel for salvation belonged to you if you would but take sanctuary in Christ, do you not count him false and foolish in the proposal when you run after carnal satisfactions, which are purchased with the loss of your souls?

SERMON II.

That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, &c.—HEB. vi. 18.

II. THE advantages we have by God's oath. What greater assurance can we have ?

1. Consider the sacredness of an oath in general. You know among all nations an oath is accounted a sacred and most solemn way of engagement among the sons of men. The apostle saith it is *πέρας ἀντιλογίας* the end of strife: Heb. vi. 16, 'An oath for confirmation is to men an end of all strife.' When men solemnly call God to witness, though the matter were never so doubtful and controverted before, when they take an oath we have no more to say, but believe every honest man upon his oath. The heathens have spoken much of an oath. One saith, this is the final assurance; we are bound up, and contented when men swear. Another that it is the highest faith that men can expect. We owe so much to humanity. All nations by the light of nature have found out this remedy and way to end differences. So among the Jews; if there were a strife between Israelite and Israelite, Exod. xxii. 11, 'Then shall an oath of the Lord be between them both, and he shall accept thereof.' There was no more stir to be about the matter. Perjured persons are the scorn of men, and they have forfeited the privilege of humanity. Well, then, if the oath of man be so sacred and valuable, how much more is the oath of God! It is impossible for God to lie. He can do all things which argue power, but nothing which argueth impotency and weakness, for this were to deny himself.

2. This oath is so sacred, because the name of God is invoked in it. It is the name of God that giveth credit to all other oaths. When men swear, saith the apostle, 'They swear by a greater,' Heb. vi. 16, by a higher power. Men by sin have lost their credit, and therefore they pawn the credit of God. Every oath is an appeal to God as witness and judge. For want of other sufficient proof we appeal to God as a witness; so we acknowledge his omniscieny, that he is the searcher of the heart and reins. And indeed herein an oath differeth from a vow; in a vow we deal with God as a party, but in an oath we appeal to God as a witness. Nay, and in case of forswearing, we appeal to him as a judge, and challenge and imprecate his vengeance, wherein we acknowledge his justice and power to avenge the wrong that is done to his name. For mark, if a man violate his oath, and forswear himself, the wrong is directly done to God; his truth is falsified, his witness is abused, his name is blasphemed; therefore there is an implicit appeal to him for vengeance, if not expressed. Sometimes the execration and imprecation is expressed in an oath; as 1 Kings ii. 23, 'Then King Solomon sware by the Lord, saying, God do so to me, and more also, &c. So Ruth i. 17, 'The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.' Sometimes it is suppressed, as Ps. xcvi. 11, 'Unto whom I sware in my wrath, If they enter into my rest.' If! What then? Then count me not a God. The imprecation is sup-

pressed; because the expression is dreadful, it is not mentioned. Furious gallants belch out curses against themselves, whereas usually the imprecatory part in scripture is not expressed, but left to be conceived in silence. However, every oath ends in an imprecation and curse, and it is understood, if it be not mentioned and expressed in all oaths. And this is that which makes the oath to be the more binding, for in charity it is not to be supposed that a man will draw God's curse upon himself wittingly and willingly. Now it is the name of God which makes all other oaths to be valid and binding; we swear by a higher, because our own credit is lost. Now when the Lord swears by himself, shall not he be believed, when he could swear by no higher?

3. This advantage faith hath by God's oath, it is a pledge of his love and good-will, that he would condescend so far to give us his oath for our assurance and satisfaction. Man's oath is necessary in weighty matters, because we are vain and foolish, and deceive and are deceived, and our vanity makes our speech to be less believed; but God's oath is not necessary, but only to show his love and condescension; he would satisfy us in the highest manner that possibly he could. Man takes it ill if he be forced to his oath. Oh! how far then doth the great God stoop to give us this satisfaction! Over and above his word he hath deposited his oath. What could God say more? He is willing to do what he can, not only for our safety, but for our assurance. Take this observation, the Lord not only hath given us an assuring oath, but an inviting oath in Ezek. xxxiii. 11, 'As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.' And all showeth his readiness to do good to his creatures.

4. God's oath is an argument that he delighteth in our comfort and assurance. Some look upon doubting as a kind of humility, but it is quite contrary to the aim of God's oath. With what care doth he provide not only for our salvation but security! He would deliver us not only from hurt, but from fear. Certainly a fluctuating spirit always, like the waves of the sea, tossed to and fro, displeaseth the Lord exceedingly. His promise is confirmed by an oath, that the comfort might be more strong, and remain with us both in life and death, and that he might take away all doubt and scruple. Certainly it is not a thing acceptable with God always to be uncertain and in terms of suspense. Nothing can be more directly contrary to his purpose than a course of doubting; therefore it is not presumption to rise to assurance, as carnal men think, and godly men fear.

5. Consider the special nature of God's oath. In every oath God is invoked as a witness and as a judge. As God is called upon as a witness, so there is an appeal; and as he is called upon as a judge, so there is an execration. With reverence and wonder think of it. In God's oath there is, as it were, an appeal to our thoughts of him. God appeals to the reverence and confidence we put in his holiness, excellency, and power; nay, and there is somewhat that answers the imprecation and execration, and all his excellency is laid at pawn, and exposed, as it were, to forfeiture, if he doth not make good his word.

To clear it by instances. Sometimes the Lord swears 'by himself,' Jer. li. 14; sometimes 'by his holiness,' Amos iv. 2; and in other

places 'by his excellency,' Amos vi. 8; and by his life, 'As I live, saith the Lord.' Now in all these there is something answers the appeal; as if the Lord should say to the creature, What do you think of me? Can you think that I will deceive you? As you esteem of me a living, holy, excellent, glorious God, so surely will I perform all my promises. Then there is something answers to the execration or appeal to God as a judge, there is his honour laid at stake upon such an issue; never count me a living, glorious, excellent God more. God draws an imprecation (let me speak it with reverence) upon himself, if I do not accomplish this for you. All the glory of his godhead is laid at pawn and pledge with the creature.

Application.

Use 1. Information.

1. We see the greatness of the condescension of God. Herein God considereth rather what is fit for our infirmity than his own glorious excellences. Such is the sovereign majesty of God, that it is enough for him to declare his mind to his creatures, to command what he would have done, and to forbid what he dislikes; but he addeth a promise, and would indent with us in the solemn way of a covenant, as if we were altogether free before the contract. Now, as if his word were not enough (though it be enough; he can as well deny his nature as his truth; he can do all things, but he cannot lie) he addeth his oath. We take it ill to be forced to our oath. That God should engage himself at all is much, for he is debtor to no man. We account it a wrong to a friend to require a bond of him for the assuring of a free gift. God is willing to do anything, not only for our safety, but assurance, that the comfort might be more strong, and remain with us in life and death. It is not acceptable to God that we should always fluctuate, and be upon terms of uncertainty, therefore he was pleased to yield thus far.

2. What reason we have to bind ourselves to God. There was no need on God's part why God should bind himself to us, but great need on our part why we should bind ourselves to God. We start aside like a deceitful bow, and therefore we should solemnly bind ourselves to God: Ps. cxix. 106, 'I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep thy righteous judgments.' We need the strongest cords; we have sometimes motions to good, but they die presently, and come to nothing. Well, then, out of necessity, as well as out of gratitude, let our engagement in the covenant answer to the Lord's. Only take heed of resting in it, and take heed of breaking it. Take heed of resting in it; remember Peter's confident promise would not bear him out; a rash and presumptuous confidence is soon disappointed. What feathers are we, for all our vows and oaths, when the blast of a temptation is let loose upon us! Take heed of breaking it; remember Ananias, Acts v. God hath a double right; an oath bindeth us more than a bare promise. Better never have sworn than not perform our vows.

3. You see the great wrong you do to God in giving so little credit to his promises. You make God a liar: 1 John v. 10, 'He that believeth not God hath made him a liar.' But John iii. 33, 'He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.' It is a great dishonour to God not to receive God's testimony; you put the lie upon him, and so make him to be no God. You would not do

so to your equals. A lie is the greatest reproach; it rendereth a man unfit for society and commerce. It is a fearful thing to make the God of truth a father of lies. When God hath given his word, and oath, and seals, all this while shall he not be believed? God never gave us cause to distrust him, he never failed in one promise; all that have had to do with him have found him a faithful God. Nebuchadnezzar doth him this honour and right after he had tasted of the whip, and was again restored to the use of reason: Dan. iv. 37, 'Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth;' not only justice, but truth, not only as I deserved, but as he foretold. It is a shame that you have made no observations upon providence, that you may give it under hand and seal that God is true and faithful. God expecteth such a testimony from his people; all that have long had to do with him have found him a true God both in a way of justice and mercy, that he ever stood to his word. God cannot lie: Titus i. 2, 'In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began.' God can do all things that argue power and perfection of nature, but he cannot lie, for that argueth weakness and impotency: 2 Tim. ii. 13, 'If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful; he cannot deny himself;' he should then cease to be God. He is truth itself, the primitive and supreme truth, the original author of all truth. If he should not be true, who should be so?

But is any so impudent as to put the lie upon God? I answer—Yes: 1 John v. 10, 'He that believeth not God hath made him a liar, because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son.' We accuse him not only of a lie, but of perjury—

[1.] By our carelessness, and the little regard we have to those great and precious promises that he has given us. Great things are offered, and you look upon them as notions and fancies. It was otherwise with the patriarchs of old: Heb. xi. 13, 'All these died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them.' We cast off the tenders of grace, as matters of which we never made any great account. We grasp after the world, and let heaven go; when we mind it not, we believe it not. A man toileth hard all day for a small piece of silver; do we seek heaven with a like earnestness? How many adventures do merchants run, when the gain is uncertain! But we are not uncertain of our reward: 1 Cor. xv. 58, 'Forasmuch as ye know that your labour shall not be in vain in the Lord.' Did we more steadfastly believe this, we should not be so cold in duties, and so bold in sinning.

[2.] By our despondencies in all cross providences. We have a sure word, and why are we up and down, and so full of distractions and inquietness of soul? James i. 8, 'A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways,' unsettled in all his thoughts, uneven in all his ways, raised up and cast down with contrary hopes and fears, off and on, as worldly things ebb and flow. We shall never want discouragements if we live upon sense, but if we could live upon the promises, we should not be at such a loss. The fruit of faith in the promises is strong consolation, too strong to be overcome by sin, death, or hell. A believer is content with the promises, though all the world say, No: 2 Cor. i. 20,

'For all the promises of God in him are, Yea, and in him, Amen,' Yea to our hopes, Amen to our desires. Whatever changes happen, the promises are the same; upon desire of such a thing, Amen, saith the promise; upon hope of such a thing, Yea, saith the promise. In difficult cases you ask of the creatures, they say, No, but the promise saith, Yea.

[3.] When we will venture nothing on the promises. Christ told the young man of treasure in heaven, and he went away sad; he doth not like such a bargain: Luke xviii. 22, 23, 'Sell all that thou hast, and distribute to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come follow me. And when he had heard this, he was very sorrowful, for he was very rich.' Thus God dealeth with us: Prov. xix. 17, 'He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth to the Lord, and that which he hath given will he pay him again;' Eccles. xi. 1, 'Cast thy bread upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days.' But the words and engagements of men, that deceive and are deceived, are esteemed above them. We would trust a man of sufficiency upon his bond with hundreds and thousands, if we have his hand and seal to show for it, but we refuse God's assurance. Who is careful to provide bags that wax not old, and to draw over his estate into the other world? Luke xii. 33, 'Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags that wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth.' What adventures do you make upon God's bond or bill? Do you account no estate so sure as that which is adventured in Christ's hands? Can we believe the promises, and part with nothing for them, with neither our lusts nor our interests?

[4.] When temporal things work far more than eternal things, visible things than invisible. If we had such promises from men, we would be more cheerful. If a beggar did hear of a great inheritance fallen to him, he would often think of it, rejoice in it, long to go see it. We have a promise of eternal life, who thinks of it, or puts in for a share of it? We are contented with any slight assurance in matters of such weight. Men love great earnest and great assurance in temporal affairs, but any slight hope serves the turn in spiritual affairs. Why do we so little rejoice in it? If the reversion of an earthly estate be passed over to us, how are we contented with such a conveyance! but God hath made over pardon and grace, and we are not satisfied.

[5.] Our confidence bewrayeth it. The pretended strength of our faith about Christ and hopes of glory showeth the weakness of it, and that it is but a slight overly apprehension. Most men will pretend to be able to trust God for pardon of sin and heaven, and yet cannot trust God for daily bread; they find it difficult to believe in temporals, and yet very easy in spirituals and eternal. What should be the reason? Heaven and things to come are greater mercies, the way of bringing them about more difficult; if conscience were opened, and the heart serious, they are more hardly obtained; there are more natural prejudices against our coming to Christ, and coming to heaven. The whole earth is full of his goodness. God feedeth all his creatures, even the young ravens that cry; there is not a worm but he provides for it; but he pardoneth but a few, blesseth but a few with spiritual blessings,

saveth but a few. But here is the reason: bodily wants are more pressing, and faith is presently put in exercise. Men are careless of their souls, and content themselves with some loose hopes of ease and eternal welfare. Certainly he that dareth not venture his estate in Christ's hands, he dareth not venture his soul there. They say they find no difficulty in believing in Christ for pardon of sin and eternal life, and yet cannot trust God for such maintenance and support as he giveth the young ravens: John xi. 24, 'Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' As if it were an easier matter to raise him up after so many years than after four days. But the reason is, faith is not put to a present trial, and men are careless of things to come, and do not mind the danger and hazard of eternity. Certainly he that dareth not in the use of means trust God for this life, doth not trust him for everlasting life. Eternal things are counted a fancy, but worldly things are desired in good earnest.

Use 2. To press us to improve these two immutable grounds, that we may grow up into a greater certainty. His saying is as immutable as his swearing; God's word is valuable enough of itself, but only because we count an oath more sacred. God hath added it over and above. Men are slight in speech, but serious in an oath. Well, then, since you have a double holdfast on God, make use of it in prayer and in meditation; in prayer, when you speak to God; in meditation, when you discourse with yourselves.

1. In prayer, you may urge God with his promise and oath. We put ourselves in remembrance by pleading with God, therefore God alloweth the humble challenges of faith. 'Put me in remembrance,' saith God, Isa. xliii. 26; or rather, put yourselves in remembrance. By pleading with God we wrestle with him, that we may catch a heat ourselves. Tell the Lord what an holdfast you have upon him; show him his handwriting. As Austin said of his mother, she showed him his handwriting; or as Tamar brought out to Judah the bracelets and staff and ring, and said, Whose are these? So you may plead, Ah! Lord, are not these thine own promises, and is not this thy oath? The children of God have done both; they put him in mind of his word: Ps. cxix. 49, 'Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope.' As if he had said, Lord, thou hast invited my hope; I should never have had the boldness to have expected so great a mercy and privilege in Christ if thy promise was not passed. God forgetteth not, and yet he loveth that the saints should put him in remembrance; he would have you to revive these grounds of trust and confidence. Then they put him in mind of his oath: Ps. lxxxix. 49, 'Lord, where are thy former loving-kindnesses, which thou swearest unto David in thy truth? It is a great advantage in believing thus to put in a modest challenge to God.

2. Improve God's word and oath in meditation when you discourse with yourselves. And here I shall show—(1.) How we may improve God's oath in meditation; (2.) When, and in what seasons.

[1.] How? Thus: God, that cannot lie, hath passed his sword, he who is truth itself, the supreme truth, the original of all truth. Then say, Hath he given me his word and oath? and why am I still upon

terms of suspense? The word of an honest man is wont to be enough, and an oath is the end of strife if there be a controversy. God hath passed his oath, and why doth the controversy still remain between me and God? How is it with me? Is the controversy ended and taken up? Am I satisfied with God's oath? Do I live as one to whom God hath given such a highway of assurance? The world lives by guess and devout aims, and hath good meanings and conjectures. Ay! but christians should not rest in a may-be, or content themselves with a possible salvation, with lazy conjectures or loose hopes. Art thou still upon uncertainty, upon terms of hesitancy and suspense? See how St James describes them, chap. i. 8, 'A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways;' and it is our character, we are double-minded, divided between hopes and fears, full of anxious thoughts; and as chaff is driven in the air, or waves tossed in the sea to and fro with various and uncertain motion, so are we carried up and down. Dost thou live up to the assurance that God hath given thee, and to the preparation and provision he hath made for thy certainty and confidence?

Briefly, that you may know what a sin it is to be upon uncertainty, consider the dishonour you do to God, and the damage you do to yourselves.

(1.) The dishonour you do to God. Unbelief accuseth God not only of a lie, but of perjury; you accuse him of a lie with respect to his word, and of perjury with respect to his oath and solemn engagement: 1 John v. 10, 'He that believeth not God hath made him a liar.' But God forbid, will you say. Why then are you so doubtful, notwithstanding so many offers of grace and mercy? why so full of trouble and jealousy when difficulties do arise? Oh! base barbarous ingratitude! you take a stranger's oath, but you deny God the honour that you vouchsafe to any that bears the face of a man. If a man pass his oath, his brother shall accept of it, Exod. xxii. 11, and will you not do thus to the great God that cannot lie?

(2.) The damage you do to yourselves; you frustrate the oath of God, and weaken your own comfort. Wherefore did God give us his oath? What! that we might rest in a possible salvation, and walk with him, as dancers do upon ropes, every moment to be in fear of falling? Did God lay so great a foundation for so weak a building? Who would build a hovel on such a foundation as would serve to bear a palace? God's oath is a foundation for the highest confidence, and do you think God gave it only that you might rest in conjectural hopes and uncertainties? Nay, you run the hazard of a dreadful curse. God hath sworn in judgment as well as in mercy: Ps. xcvi. 11, 'Unto whom I swear in my wrath, that they should not enter into my rest.' Do you think this rest on! concerned Canaan? No, but it reacheth the unbelievers of all ages. Oh! it is terrible when God swears against us. The greater his condescension in the gospel, the greater is his wrath when it is refused and neglected. It is very sad when God is provoked to swear to the damnation of any creature. Who are the persons that may stand in dread of this oath? Why, they that believe not: Heb. iii. 18, 'To whom swear he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believe not.' It is the sin of unbelief after many tenders and offers of mercy, which provokes God to this indignation. Here is oath against

oath, the one to drive us, the other to draw us, and pull in the heart to God. If you continue in this course, you shall have neither part nor portion in Christ, nor in the land of promise. It is better to be satisfied with God's oath in mercy, than to run the hazard of his oath in judgment. Therefore speak to conscience, Do I come up to this certainty and confidence? Is the controversy ended between God and me? Are all suspicions laid aside?

Object. But you will say, I do not doubt of the truth of the gospel, but of my own interest. I doubt that I am not the person to whom God hath sworn. The truth of God is sure, but my interest is not clear.

Sol. In answer to this, consider—

(1st.) It doth but seem so that all doubts are about our own interest, but it is not so indeed. If once you were heartily persuaded of God's good affection in Christ, doubts and scruples about our own estate would soon vanish. Look, as the fire, when it is well kindled, bursts out of its own accord into a flame, so if faith were once well laid in the soul, if men could rest upon these two immutable things, consolation would not be so far from them; if there were a firm assent to the doctrine of the gospel, there would not be so many *but*s; if you did firmly believe his mercy in Christ, it would soon end in a steadfast confidence. This appeareth from the nature of the thing. All uncertainty ariseth either from a neglect of the great salvation, or else from trouble of conscience. Now carnal men neglect it, because they are not persuaded of the worth and excellency of it; and men under horrors of conscience distrust it; they are such sinners they dare not apply it, and are so full of doubts and scruples because they are not persuaded of the truth of the gospel. See how the apostle proposeth the gospel: 1 Tim. i. 15, 'This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.' If negligent and carnal men would but look upon it as 'worthy of all acceptation,' and troubled conscience look upon it as 'a faithful saying,' there would be more regular actings and effects found in their hearts and lives; the negligent would give more diligence, and the contrite would rise up into a greater hope and confidence. If men did believe the worth of salvation, they would not run after lying vanities. If they did believe the truth of salvation for sinners there would not be so many scruples and fears. It is notable that the scriptures very seldom do press assurance of the subject, but assurance of the object in very many places, to believe the doctrine itself, for there is the greatest difficulty; and in the word of God we have no precedent of any that were troubled about their own interest. If an earthly king should proclaim a general pardon, and an act of grace to all persons in rebellion, only on terms of submission and laying down their hostility and returning to their duty and allegiance, the doubt would not be of their own interest, but of the truth of his intention to show them such grace and mercy. So it is with God; he hath proclaimed terms of grace in the gospel, provided we will lay down the weapons of our defiance, and return to the duty of our allegiance. Now that which we suspect is the heart of God and the gospel in the general, whether there be mercy for such kind of sinners as we are.

(2d.) Because we cannot persuade men to a certainty against their

consciences, what should hinder but that now you should establish your interest, and that you now make your plea and claim according to God's word and oath, for joy must arise from a sense of it. Your complaining is not the way to ease your conscience, but obedience. It is an advantage to find ourselves in an ill condition, not a discouragement. As the woman in the gospel made an argument of that, that she was a dog: Mat. xv. 27, 'Truth, Lord; yet the dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' As when the man-slayer saw the avenger of blood at his heels, this made him mend his pace, and fly for refuge, so when we see we are under the wrath of God, this should make us more earnest to look after Christ, and salvation in and by him. The cities of refuge under the law stood open for every comer, and there was free admission till their cause was heard; so Christ is the sanctuary of a pursued soul, and whosoever comes shall be received: John vi. 37, 'Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.' God excludeth none but those that exclude themselves. No sin is excepted but the sin against the Holy Ghost. Therefore make your claim till your cause be heard. The great affront we put upon God's oath is not so much doubting of our condition, but not running to Christ for refuge. If we still stand complaining of our lost estate, and do not attempt the work of faith, we put an affront upon God's oath. If the Lord had bid thee do some great thing (I allude to the speech of Naaman's servants), wouldst thou not have done it to be freed from death and hell? How much rather when he saith unto thee, Only come; fly as for thy life, and see if I will cast thee out? Take up a resolution to try God, and see if he will not be as good as his word and oath. Say, Lord, thou hast given two immutable grounds of hope; here I come, I will wait to see what thou wilt do for me in Christ.

(3.) I answer—Do but see whether thy interest in Christ be not established or no? Here is the lowest qualification of an heir of promise, and yet the highest and most solemn way of assurance. Here are two immutable grounds, and yet what is the description? We who have fled for refuge, 'to lay hold upon the hope set before us.' Here is a driving work that belongs to the law, implied in these words, 'We fly for refuge;' then a drawing work, which belongs to the gospel, in these words, 'To lay hold on the hope set before us.' The law begins and works preparatively, as Moses brought the children of Israel to the borders, then Joshua led them into the land of Canaan. The law shows us our bondage, and makes us fly for refuge, but then the gospel pulls in the heart to God. There is a necessity of the preparing work of the law, that we might be driven out of ourselves; sin else would not be bitter, nor Christ sweet, our motions and addresses to mercy would not be serious; every one hath this, some in one degree, some in another; though all be not anxious, yet all are solicitous: Oh! what shall I do? Now, canst thou speak of this driving work of the law? Thou canst not say but thou art a poor lost sinner, one willing to fly and take sanctuary in Christ, and to wait upon him in obedience till thy great hopes be accomplished. This is the lowest trial; what canst thou deny in it? Art thou not a poor chased pursued soul, else what mean these fears and scruples? and what hath

the Lord required of thee, but to run to Christ for refuge? Many christians have not assurance, but though they dare not say, Christ is theirs, yet here they will wait, and not let go their holdfast for all the world. God hath promised to be gracious to every one that takes hold of his covenant, Isa. lvi. 6, when the soul will not let go the grace of God in Christ, though it hath many discouragements; but, in the face of all doubts and scruples, will anchor and hold fast, whatever comes of it. I am a lost and undone creature; it is Christ that must save me, and here I will stick and hold. This is the qualification, why should we be afraid to be comforted upon God's terms? If you are resolved to wait upon God in and through Christ, you are the heirs of promise, God hath plighted his oath to you, if there be such a disposition in you, being startled and awakened with the sense of your sinful condition, to take hold, and not let it go, then what mean those fears and scruples? Do not you desire to take sanctuary in Christ, and wait upon him with strong resolution not to be discouraged? When therefore God hath put it upon such low conditions, why should we stand off?

Object. All the fear is, these terms are too easy and cheap to give a solid comfort, and many miscarry by sudden and delusive hopes, and this makes christians stand at a distance from their own comfort.

Ans. When a man hath God's warrant to show for his confidence, why should he doubt? If men were once serious in the business of salvation, there is no fear of delusion. You will find comfort cannot be counterfeited, as the life of a creature cannot be painted. Carnal men, that feed themselves with delusive hopes, who make an account they shall go to heaven, are not serious, and mind not what they do, as appears by their contradictions, for they blow hot and cold. They think that he is in a dangerous condition that doubts of his salvation, and yet they say it is presumption for a man to say he is assured of his salvation. The one saying suiteth with their carelessness, and the other with their own private feeling. They have no deliberate and advised confidence, only a rash presumption. And because of their miscarrying, we have no reason to weaken our own hopes; because a man that is in a dream thinketh that he is awaked when he is not, shall not a man that is really awake know himself to be so? Shall we suspect all our interest in Christ and the terms of the gospel as too free and easy? Let me tell you, by experience you will find, when you are serious and deliberate, it is not so easy a matter to have rest for your souls. Certainty and solid assurance is not so soon had. Guilty nature is subject to bondage, and presagious more of evil than of good, more prone to fear than hope, and to mourn than to rejoice; therefore go on with your business, wait upon God, and take his way without jealousy and doubting. Thus I have showed how you should meditate on these two immutable things.

[2.] When must you meditate on God's word and oath? *Ans.* Very often. The less you apply God's promise and oath, the weaker will your consolation be in Christ; and the oftener, the stronger; for by these two immutable things we have strong consolation. Christians lose much of their peace and comfort, because they do not exercise themselves in thinking of the condescension and satisfaction which

God hath given them in this kind, that he should lay all his holiness, his life, his excellency at pledge with poor creatures. I am confident if you did but think of these unchangeable grounds and advantages of faith mentioned before, your comfort would not be upon such loose terms. But there are some solemn times when it must be done.

(1.) Whenever you are conversant about the seals of the covenant, and go to the Lord's table. Why should I doubt, when I have God's promise and oath? The sacraments are *visibilia juramenta*, visible oaths; here God reneweth his oath to us, and we to God. It is an oath of allegiance to Christ, to walk in all his ways; and it is God's oath of assurance to us, that he will perform the promises of the covenant. As under the law, the blood of the covenant was to be sprinkled half upon the altar and half upon the people, Exod. xxiv. 6-8, God takes an engagement upon himself, and reneweth his oath to be good and gracious to us in Christ; and we take an obligation upon ourselves to walk before him in all obedience. There is a mutual stipulation, therefore there is a special time to meditate of the sureness on God's part; God that cannot lie, hath said and sworn it.

(2.) In times of outward trouble, when you are in danger of fainting and making revolt from God, meditate of the unchangeableness of his word and oath: 'Unless thy law had been my delight, I should then have perished in mine affliction,' Ps cxix. 92. God's word and oath were given on purpose to revive a fainting soul. This is the design of the text; the apostle is dissuading from apostasy, and pressing to keep our hopes to the end: ver. 11, 'We desire that every one of you do show the same diligence, to the full assurance of hope unto the end.' Why? We are not upon conjectures and probabilities; and though outward encouragements fail, yet God's promise and oath is a sure ground of comfort in the midst of all difficulties and hardships. This reviveth the soul; we have a glorious inheritance in reversion, and we have God's word and oath to show for it, as much as the patriarchs had to show for Christ. It is notable that when the patriarchs were exercised with any new trouble, then God renewed his oath, implying this is a sure holdfast we have upon God. When outward encouragements in the service of God are like to fail, then think of the two immutable grounds of comfort.

(3.) In pangs of conscience, when guilt lies heavy and burdensome upon the soul, God's word and oath is a proper meditation. The Lord hath sworn that if I will, out of a sense of this misery that is upon me, take sanctuary in Christ, I shall have strong consolation. And we have not only an assuring, but an inviting oath, to help us in such a case: Ezek. xxxiii. 11, 'As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.' Count me not a living God if I delight in your scruples and in your death.

(4.) In fears of death. We must die by faith, as well as live by faith; and then comfort ourselves with the promise and oath of God, called here two unchangeable things. We need all the props of faith that can be used. When all things are about to change, then think, God changeth not, though I am changing apace. As one comforted himself with that passage: Isa. liv. 10, 'For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee.'

neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.' Sight is almost gone, and speech doth even fail, but God's loving-kindness will never be gone. You are changing, but you may look upon death itself as an act of faithfulness, and sent in mercy to break the shell, that you may have the kernel; to dissolve the union between body and soul, that the soul may flit away to God.

SERMON III.

We may have strong consolation, &c.—HEB. vi. 18.

DOCT. 2. That the fruit of this certainty and assurance which we have by God's word and oath is strong consolation.

To make way for the discussion of this point, and to open the words which the apostle here useth, I shall—

1. Inquire what is meant by strong consolation.

2. How this strong consolation ariseth from the certainty and assurance we have by God's word and oath.

3. How it is dispensed on God's part, and how far it is required on ours.

I. What is meant by strong consolation, *ἰσχυρὰν παράκλησιν*. There are two terms, *consolation*, and *strong consolation*.

First, Consolation. There are three words by which the fruits and effects of certainty and assurance is expressed, which imply so many degrees of it. There is peace, comfort, and joy. Peace, in the scripture dialect, notes rest from accusations of conscience. Comfort notes a temperate and habitual confidence. Then joy notes an actual feeling, or an high tide of comfort, or a lively elevation of the saints.

1. Peace. 'That we have as a fruit of justification: Rom. v. 1, 'Being justified by faith, we have peace with God.' There are no actual doubts, though we cannot say we have absolute assurance. This is the lowest degree of assurance, and it is a fruit of the Holy Ghost; as many of the children of God have encouragement to wait upon God, though they cannot for all the world say they have an absolute interest in Christ.

2. Then there is consolation and comfort. which notes an habitual persuasion of God's love; there is an habitual confidence, a serenity and cheerfulness of mind. Though there be not high tides of comfort, there is support, though not ravishment. It is called 'everlasting consolation,' 2 Thes. ii. 16, 17, 'Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God even our Father, who hath loved us, and given us everlasting consolation, and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and establish you in every good word and work.' There is a settled comfort, and he prayeth for the continuance and increase of it. When the heart is lightened or eased in duties or troubles, it is bewrayed by a constant cheerfulness and alacrity in God's service, and support in troubles.

3. Then there is joy, or an high and sensible comfort: Rom. xv. 13,

‘Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost.’ This abides not always; it is a festival dispensation, wherewith God entertains the soul in the day of his royalty and magnificence, he useth it but now and then. We have this high joy, either after the pangs of the new birth, when deep sorrows were occasioned by the spirit of bondage. When David’s bones were broken, then ‘make me to hear joy and gladness,’ Ps. li. 8. Then we have the highest comfort: John xvi. 21, ‘A woman when she is in travail, hath sorrow, because her hour is come; but as soon as she is delivered of a child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world.’ Then our apprehensions of Christ are most fresh. Comfort, being a strange thing, is most welcome. Trouble makes way for more comfort; for as our trouble is most vehement, so is our comfort enlarged. Or upon the solemn exercise of grace, when we are carried on in high assistance, in meditation, prayer, receiving the supper, and the word is revived upon the conscience; or else in times of suffering and self-denial, for God will always be even with a believer: 2 Cor. i. 5, ‘For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.’ A man is no loser by Christ, but according to the ebb of outward comforts so is the tide and overflow of inward comforts; and when we have experience of Christ’s sufferings, we also have experience of Christ’s comforts, that at the same time God may have an experience of our faithfulness, and we of his. So that comfort is a middle degree of assurance between peace and joy; a temperate confidence and support, though we do not feel ravishment and actual sweetness; as a child doubteth not of his father’s affection, though he doth not actually smile upon him.

Secondly, The next term is ‘strong consolation.’ Why is it so called?

1. It is called so either in opposition to worldly comforts, which are weak, vanishing, and washy. The consolations of the world seem to be strong till they come to be tried. Carnal joy makes a great noise, but is soon gone: ‘As the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool,’ Eccles. vii. 6. None seem to lead such merry lives as carnal men; but when it comes to the trial, when their joy is put to it by sickness, trouble, pangs of conscience, or death, it is soon spent. Take away the creature and it is gone; it dependeth upon somewhat without them. Or if the creature continueth, it availeth not; before it cometh to trial, wicked men tremble at the very thoughts of eternity. Outward things cannot ease the conscience; if they could satisfy the heart, they cannot buy a pardon: Jer. xvii. 11, ‘As the partridge sitteth on eggs and hatcheth them not, so he that getteth riches, and not by right, shall leave them in the midst of his days, and at his end shall be a fool;’ Prov. xi. 4, ‘Riches profit not in the day of wrath.’ Carnal mirth is a merry madness, as a bird in the fowler’s snare: Prov. ix. 17, 18, ‘Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant; but he knoweth not that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depths of hell;’ a stolen fit of mirth when conscience is asleep. Carnal mirth entangleth us; the more dreggy delights oppress reason, wound conscience, and so make way for sorrow.

2. Or else it is called 'strong consolation' in comparison with itself, with respect to less or more imperfect degrees of comfort. There is a latitude in comfort, some have more, and some less; some have only weak glimmerings and drops, others have strong consolation, 'joy unspeakable, and full of glory,' 1 Peter i. 8. Now a christian should aim at the highest degree; the stronger your consolation, the better is Christ pleased with it: John xv. 11, 'These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy might be full.' This makes the heart of Christ glad, when our comforts are more able to swallow up our sorrow, and revive the soul in the midst of trouble. In some this confidence is accompanied with more sensible doubts, staggerings, and weaknesses, though comfort gets the upper hand; in others it is more strong, clear, and lively, and they act in the ways of God with greater encouragement.

3. It may likewise be called strong in regard of its effects.

[1.] It marreth carnal joy, it puts the soul quite out of taste with other things. Men used acorns till they found out the use of bread. We content ourselves with husks till we taste of the fatted calf in our father's house. The soul must have some oblectation, love cannot lie idle; we are taken with garlic and onions till we taste manna. When once we have tasted of the love of God, other things will not be so sweet: Cant. i. 4, 'We will be glad, and rejoice in thee; we will remember thy love more than wine.'

[2.] It is stronger than the evil which it opposeth; it swalloweth up all our sorrows, whatever they be. Look, as we say of wine, or of any spirits, it is very strong, when a few drops can change a great deal of water into its own nature, so, because it overcometh the greatest evils, terrors of conscience, worldly miseries, and the greatest anguish and distress which may befall us, therefore it is called strong comfort. A mighty joy, a sense of God's love in Christ, swalloweth up all our sorrow whatever. The wrath of God is a dreadful thing; we can hardly think of it without amazement. The fear of hell, death, and judgment to come, these are wont to raise a great storm in the conscience, but spiritual joy can only allay it. As a wounded conscience can say, There is no sorrow like unto my sorrow; so a peaceable conscience can say, There is no joy like unto my joy: Phil. iv. 7, 'The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds, through Jesus Christ.' The strength of this joy is seen by experience rather than expression. In outward troubles, they can 'take pleasure in infirmities,' 2 Cor. xii. 10; 'Glory in tribulation,' Rom. v. 3. The more the devil seeks to trouble the saints, they have the more joy, and are 'more than conquerors,' Rom. viii. 37, and all by the power of this joy; as the more we seek to wrest a staff out of a man's hands, he holds it the faster. Tribulations, anguish, distress, fears, torments, difficulties, they are all overpowered by this joy.

II. How this strong consolation ariseth from assurance and certainty.

To establish joy and comfort, two things are necessary—excellency and propriety. The thing in which I rejoice, it must be good, and it must be mine. Suitably here in the text, there is an assurance of excellent privileges; and then there is a qualification annexed, that we may understand our own interest. God by his oath assures us of excellent privileges in Christ, and that is a ground of strong consolation.

Then he requireth a duty of us, that we fly for refuge to take hold of the hope set before us.

1. For the excellency of our privileges. You know, that which will minister solid comfort to the soul, it had need be excellent. A small matter, though never so sure, will not occasion a strong consolation; the joy is according to the object. Now, whether a christian look backward or forward, there is matter of rejoicing to the heirs of promise. Backward, there is the immutability of his counsel; forward, there is a hope set before us. From one eternity to another may a believer walk, and still find cause of rejoicing in God. If he looks backward, there God reveals to him the unchangeable purposes of grace before the world was; if he looks forward, there is an eternal possession of glory, when the world shall be no more. It is sweet to know what is past and what is to come; there is naturally a curiosity in us which would be satisfied. We know what God was doing before the world was, and what he will do when the world shall be no more. We may know, for our comfort, God was treating and dealing with Christ about our salvation, putting it into an unchangeable course; and he hath for ever provided for the comfort and welfare of our souls, that we may enjoy him, love him, and delight in him for evermore. Man, out of a natural curiosity, hath a great delight both in history and prophecy, to read what is past, and to foreknow what is to come, especially what concerns his own destiny. Now God in condescension tells us, under the assurance of an oath, what he has done for us, what thoughts of love he had towards us from eternity, what he will do, and how happy our estate shall be for ever. God doth not only satisfy the curiosity of our nature, that desireth knowledge, but the bent of it, that poiseth us to our own happiness. It is sweet to read our names written in the book of God's everlasting decree: Luke x. 20, 'Rejoice because your names are written in heaven;' that God hath set us down as heirs of all that grace and mercy he hath dispensed in his covenant. It is sweet and pleasant to reflect upon his ancient purposes of grace; and by the eye of faith to read our names written and recorded in the rolls of heaven; when you hear any offer in the gospel, to say, This was God's purpose and eternal counsel to bestow this upon me before all worlds; he thought of me then. And then there is an hope set before us; thy lot is fallen to thee in a fair ground. Oh! what joy is this to believers, that their souls are fully provided for for ever and ever, and they shall have what infinite mercy can bestow, and what infinite merit hath purchased!

2. Another cause of strong comfort is interest and propriety. Besides the excellency of the privilege, there must be the clearness of our interest. The object of joy is not only good in common, but our good, *τὰ αὐτῶν πᾶσι ἡδέα*. That which is a man's own is sweet to him. It doth not enrich a man to hear there are pearls and diamonds in the world, and mines of gold in the Indies, unless he had them in his own possession; so it doth not fill us with comfort and joy to hear there are unchangeable purposes of grace, and that there was an eternal treaty between God and Christ about the salvation of sinners, and that there is a possible salvation, but when we understand this is made over to us. When God led Abraham through the land of promise to view the

breadth and the length of it, and see the goodness of it, he saith, 'All this will I give thee,' Gen. xiii. 15. So here we speak of rich comforts, but happy is the man that can apply them. We speak of abundance of comfort, but it is to those that have an interest in it, not to those that live in their sins. Here is a description of the parties, which must be regarded if we would establish this comfort. When once we take sanctuary in Christ, and run to him as our city of refuge, then God saith, All this will I give thee; this hope is thy own, and you are those to whom belong these unchangeable purposes of grace; otherwise it is but a joy in fancy and conceit. It is said of David, 1 Sam. xxx. 6, 'But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.' He comforted himself not only in God, but in the Lord his God. That God is ours, this is a ground of comfort. As the father said, *Tolle meum, tolle Deum*—Take away mine, and take away God; so the church, Hab. iii. 17, 18, 'Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat, the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stall; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.'

III. How it is dispensed on God's part, and how far it is required on ours; because every heir of promise cannot speak of these lively comforts, those sweet and strong consolations of the Spirit.

First, On God's part. There is a great deal of difference between christians in respect of God's dispensations.

1. Consider, Christ, though he loved all his disciples, yet he did not use them all alike familiarly; some were more intimate with him, and were more in his bosom. In his transfiguration he takes with him Peter, James, and John, Mat. xvii. 1; and when his agonies came upon him in the garden, he took the same disciples with him, Mat. xxvi. 37. Though they were all dear to Christ, yet these were chosen out above others to be witnesses of his agonies and transfiguration. So though all the elect are dear to Christ, yet there are *ἐκλεκτων εκλεκτοτεροι*, the elect of the elect, some chosen out above others, with whom God will be more intimate and familiar. All the saints, with respect to the substance of the covenant, are alike beloved. Those poor christians who were scattered throughout Pontus, Asia, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Bithynia had *ισοτιμον πιστιν*, 'like precious faith' with Peter the apostle, 2 Peter i. 1. A jewel in the hand of a man and of a child is of the same value, though a man holds it more firm and faster; so faith being conversant about the same object, the righteousness of Christ, as to acceptance with God, is alike precious; though because some have a greater faith, and hold the jewel faster, God may more manifest himself to them, and be more intimate and familiar with them. We are all saved by the same mercy, redeemed by the same merit, and called to the same grace and glory for the substance of it; yet in degrees of grace and dispensations of comfort there is a vast difference. Some are feasted with loves, while others are exercised with sorrows, trained up in a way of duty without comfort, their apprehensions being more sad and doubtful, and their comforts more dark and litigious; for comfort is not absolutely necessary to salvation, though we should all aim at it. The highest degree of comfort pleaseth Christ best; when our joy is full,

then Christ's heart is most delighted: John xv. 11, 'These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full;' though we may go to heaven without it. Look, as many carnal men go to hell, and die away without any actual sense of wrath to come, so I am persuaded it is possible that some christians may neither in life nor death have any feeling of comfort and joy. Certainly we find some have it not all their lives till sickness and the hour of death, and they are even in the borders and suburbs of heaven; their pulses of desire and love beat vehemently after Christ; when they are in the end and close of their lives, then their hearts are filled most with peace and joy, as natural motion is swiftest the nearer the thing moved draws to its centre. Again, others have comfort, and may lose it again; these spiritual suavities are liable to change, and such dispensations may be removed. The 5th of Canticles begins with a feast, and ends with a story of desertion. There are many ups and downs in a christian's comfort; and after great enlargements, when a soul hath been feasted with the loves of Christ, there may be a sad suspension, and our gourd, which seemed to cast a comfortable shadow upon the soul, may be devoured and eaten up by the worm of conscience. If our joy were always full, we should look for no other heaven. Thus there is a great deal of difference in regard of God's dispensation, without any breach of faithfulness; he doth not break his oath in not ministering to us this strong consolation, for God hath not absolutely promised degrees of comfort.

2. Though God deals here with great difference, yet it is usual with the Lord to give most comfort to three sorts of persons—

[1.] To the poor in spirit. Look, as parents use their weak children with most indulgence and fondness, so poor weak christians, that are sensible of their weakness, wants, and sins, have that comfort which is denied to persons it may be of greater spiritual ability. Comfort is promised to mourners, and blessedness to the poor in spirit: Mat. v. 3, 4, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.' Their interest many times is most sensibly cleared up, and they feel the greatest elevation of joy and comfort. It is God's wonted method to revive the spirit of contrite ones, and to bind up broken bones: Isa. lvii. 15, 'For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.' God loves to comfort poor, humble, afflicted believers, whereas others, that are full of themselves and of their own abilities, are carried on in a more dark and low way. A broken vessel is fitter to hold the oil of gladness than a full one, I mean such who are empty and broken, and possessed with a sense of their own wants. Thus our Lord saith, Mat. xi. 5, 'The poor have the gospel preached to them.' We translate it too feebly; in the original it is *εὐαγγελίζονται*, the poor are evangelised; it is such a form of speech as notes a deep reception, they are all to be gospelled. The poor, not in purse or estate, but poor broken-hearted sinners, they are drenched in gospel-comfort, and most filled with the good news and glad tidings of salvation, and a sense of God's love in Christ.

[2.] Though God is at liberty, yet usually he fills those which are exercised with hard and long conflicts with their corruptions. Comfort is Christ's entertainment for those that return from victory over their lusts: Rev. ii. 17, 'To him that overcometh,' that is, the enemies of his salvation; he that hath been long wrestling with the powers of darkness, and the inconveniences of the world, and corruptions of his own heart, and can persevere notwithstanding assaults and temptations, 'to him I will give to eat of the hidden manna;' that is, feast him with inward and spiritual refreshments, figured by manna; 'and I will give him a white stone,' which some say was a token of election; a white stone they gave in their suffrages for choice of a magistrate, to manifest they had chosen him; or else white stones were given to wrestlers as a token of victory; or, as among the Romans, a black stone with a hole in it was a sign of condemnation, a white stone of absolution; or in lots, a white stone was a token of good luck and happiness, a black stone of misfortune. Take it either way, Christ will give it to him that overcometh; they shall have the comfort of pardon, and free justification with God, and till then a man is not fit for comfort.

[3.] Those that are called forth to great employments and trials are seldom without comfort, and this strong consolation, that they may behave themselves worthy of their trial. Look, as men victual a castle when it is in danger to be besieged, so God layeth in comfort beforehand when we are like to be assaulted. This we have in the example of our Lord himself. Just before Christ was tempted, he had a solemn testimony from heaven: Mat. iv. 1, 'Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil.' Every circumstance of scripture is notable, and when the Spirit of God notes the time, it is to be regarded: *Then*; it looks back to the words before, chap. iii. 17, 'Lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' And after this solemn assurance, 'Then was Jesus led up by the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted by the devil.' Certainly somewhat there is in that, that the same apostles must see the beaming out of the divine glory of Christ, and afterwards see his agony, as Peter, James, and John, first his glory in the transfiguration, and then his agony in the garden; to show that when once we have had experience of the glory of Christ, when he hath given us any signification of his love, any foresight of heaven, and of our interest in the comforts of the covenant, then most commonly we are called out to suffer agonies and bitter conflicts. God's conduct is gentle and faithful, he drives on as the little ones are able to bear; he doth not lead into great temptation until he hath given the advantage of great comforts; first he stores the hearts, and lays in sweet consolation, then calls out to trial.

Secondly, On our part. It is not absolutely required that we should enjoy it, but only to seek after it; and if we want it, to submit to God's pleasure. Comfort is seldom withheld when it is long sought and highly prized. I cannot say he is no child of God that hath not a feeling of this strong consolation, but he is none that doth not seek after it, and that hath low and cheap thoughts of the consolations of God: Job xv. 11, 'Are the consolations of God small with thee?' We are absolutely bound to communion with God in point of holiness, and to seek

after communion with God in point of happiness ; but rewards differ from duties, and they must be left to God's pleasure. There is a difference between comfort and grace ; comfort is a mere dispensation, and is to be referred to the pleasure of God ; but we cannot be without grace, without sin ; the one belongeth to communion with God in point of holiness, and the other to communion with God in point of happiness ; and God hath the dispensing of our happiness : the one concerneth our being, the other our well-being ; grace makes us living, comfort makes us lively christians. On God's part, if he doth not give us sensible consolation, he is only bound to give us sustentation and support ; and there is no breach of duty on our part to want comfort, provided it be not despised, and we do not neglect to seek after it. To want grace or any degree of it, though it be God's gift, is a sin, because the creature is under a moral obligation ; but to want comfort is no sin, because that is a thing given, not required. Grace is given and required. Comfort is required that we should seek after it, but for its attainment we must leave that to God's pleasure, and tarry till the master of the feast bids us sit up higher, and till then we must be content with our measure and degree. And this is God's course, he gives less comfort, that we may look after more grace ; and in the decay of comfort a christian many times doth receive a greater increase of grace ; as you know a summer's sun that is clouded yields a great deal more refreshment and comfort than a winter's sun that shineth. It is an advantage to be kept humble, and therefore we must submit to God's will, and be contented with ' unutterable groans,' though we have not the ' unspeakable joys' of the Spirit, 1 Peter i. 8, Rom. viii. 26, we must be satisfied with a lower dispensation.

Use 1. Information in these branches.

1. That comfort is allowed to the saints. I observe it, because we are nothing and deserve nothing unless it be misery, torment, bondage, and so out of guilt we entertain comfort with jealousies and fears. Dolorous impressions are most natural to a guilty conscience ; we suspect comfort, and in deep distresses we refuse it : Jer. xxxi. 15, ' A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping ; Rachel weeping for her children, refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not ;' and Ps. lxxvii. 2, ' My soul refused to be comforted.' This was his infirmity. God hath made you a good allowance, take heed of refusing comfort upon God's terms. God alloweth it ; it is made a part of our work : Phil. iv. 4, ' Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice.' We serve a good master. Christ hath purchased it, and the Spirit worketh it, for he is the comforter : Rom. xiv. 17, ' The kingdom of heaven is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.' Nay, it is not only God's allowance, but his great aim ; the solemn assurance that is given by his covenant is that you may grow up in believing to a strong consolation, and be able to laugh at fears and sorrows.

[1.] You may pray for it when you want it : Ps. xc. 14, ' O satisfy us early with thy mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.'

[2.] Nay, when you have lost it by your default, it is not boldness to ask grace and comfort again when you have wasted conscience and weakened your hopes ; as David, Ps. li. 12, ' Restore unto me the joy

of thy salvation.' When your candle is put out, you may get it lighted again.

[3.] You may wait for comfort, and still continue your attendance upon God: Ps. lxxxv. 8, 'I will hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people and to his saints.'

[4.] You may entertain it when it comes. Comfort is a fruit of the Spirit as well as grace; he which is the God of grace is also the God of consolation; and the same Spirit which works grace witnesseth for our comfort; and it is as great a crime to smother his witness as to resist his work. Whatever we think, God would have us not only to be holy, but to be cheerful. Would you make the heart of Christ glad? See John xv. 11, 'These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.' Christ rejoiceth most in his heritage, when they live up to the provision and preparation he hath made for them in the gospel. The devil envieth our comfort, he knows how useful it is in the christian life, to make us thankful for mercies, cheerful in his service, to wean us from carnal delights, and make us willing to do and suffer for God; he seeks to weaken our confidence, as knowing the joy of the Lord is our strength; he would either keep us from grace, or from a sense of it; and make us either wicked or sad, and keep us from a comfortable feeling and apprehension of grace.

2. If strong consolation be a fruit of certainty upon God's oath, then it informs us that it is a false comfort and peace, which is not the fruit of certainty and confidence in Christ, which ariseth either from a neglect of duty or carnal pleasure; and all that wicked men have comes from one of these grounds. It is good to look to the fountain and spring of our joy and comfort, that we may be able to say with the psalmist, 'Thy comforts delight my soul,' Ps. xciv. 19. We should look to the ground and reason of our peace and security. Why am I thus quiet? Is it because God is reconciled to me in Christ; because of assurance from him, under his oath, upon my taking sanctuary in Christ? The devil lulls men asleep by other means. Carnal men's comfort ariseth from carelessness and negligence in the spiritual life; they do not trouble the devil, nor he them: 'When a strong man armed keeps his palace, his goods are in peace,' Luke xi. 21. The devil lets us alone when we let him alone, when we do not exasperate lusts, nor trouble his kingdom in our heart. Look, as the sea is very calm when wind and tide go together, so when our corruptions and Satan's temptations ruu the same way, all is calm and quiet. As a man feels not the sickness that grows upon him till the humours are stirred by exercise, so when there is a spirit of slumber and security, and men are neglectful and careless in the spiritual life, and let Satan alone to possess the heart, they sleep, but their damnation slumbers not. Then for carnal pleasure, this will not give them leave to think of their condition; their whole life is nothing but a knitting of pleasure to pleasure, and a diversion from one contentment to another; so they put far off from themselves the thoughts of their own eternal condition. The outward man is gratified, and the inward man hath no time; they fill the soul with work, that it may not fall upon itself, as a mill grinds not itself as long as it hath something to work upon; as the prophet observes of those that drink wine in bowls, 'and put far away the evil day,' Amos vi. 3. They

melt away their days in pleasure, and charm and lull their souls into a deep sleep with the potion of outward delights, lest conscience should awake and talk with them. Therefore look to the ground of your comfort and security, whence it cometh: Ps. xciv. 19, 'Thy comforts delight my soul.' Every now and then we should be making experiments, and try the strength of it. Can you venture your everlasting estate upon the present confidence? Would I be thus found of God? 1 John ii. 28, 'Little children, abide in him, that when he shall appear we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming.' In afflictions and sickness men are wont to be serious. Is your faith found to praise and honour?

3. It informs us that the state of a believer is far better than the state of those that flow in worldly delights. A man of a great estate, and that abounds in all the comforts of this life, may seem to live a merry life. Oh! but a believer hath strong consolation, such as, when it is put to the trial, will bear him out in life and death. Wicked men may rejoice, as a bird sings in the fowler's snare; they may take comfort in their portion for a while, but in their latter end they will be fools. Alas! your comforts cannot ease you of the colic or headache, nor give you a good night's sleep. Small comfort, that can neither satisfy the heart in any distress, nor ease the conscience. Solomon saith, Prov. xi. 4, 'Riches profit not in a day of wrath.' Take it for man's or God's wrath. In man's wrath, riches many times prove our burden; and none lie so obnoxious to public displeasure as rich men; the comfort is soon lost, it lieth without us. An estate cannot be carried about you; though it be in jewels, it is liable to hazard. The rich Jews were carried captive when the poor were left to till the land. So in the day of man's wrath, it falls most upon worldly great men, they have poor comforts which will not bear them out; but we read of those which 'took joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing in themselves that they have in heaven a better and an enduring substance,' Heb. x. 34. Though with Joseph they lose their coat, yet they keep a good conscience, and this makes amends for all their outward losses. But I take the place rather for God's wrath; there is the trial in trouble of conscience, and in the pangs of death. Christians, as sure as the Lord liveth, there will a time come when the strength of your comforts will be tried. Here you sit a brooding upon wealth, as a partridge upon rotten eggs; and what then? 'At his latter end he shall be a fool,' Jer. xvii. 11. Why at his latter end? Then he shall be so in the conviction of his own conscience, his own heart will call him fool. O fool! O madman that I was, in lavishing out my time, strength and care upon that which will yield me no comfort! Mr Fox tells us of a rich cardinal, who, when about to die, cried out, And must I die that am so rich? will not death be bribed? will money do nothing now? This will be your case and condition when you come to die, if you get not an interest in this strong consolation. As that pagan emperor warbled out to his soul, *O animula blandula vagula, quo nunc abibis?* &c.—Oh! where is this soul of mine going? You that now shine in bravery, that eat of the fattest, and drink of the sweetest, when your day is gone what will become of you? You must die and go from all this. Nothing then but peace of conscience and spiritual

comfort will serve the turn. Oh ! for one drachm of this comfort then when death is nigh and God is angry. Men keep a great deal of bustle now to get honour, and break through all restraints of honesty and conscience to work themselves into worldly greatness. Oh ! but when they come to die, how will this be upon their heart ? What would they give then for peace of conscience, and this strong consolation which God vouchsafeth to the heirs of promise ? But then no price will be given to God. That look as a husband when he surpriseth his wife in her adulterous embraces, 'He will not spare in the day of vengeance ; he will not regard any ransom ; neither will he rest content, though thou givest many gifts,' Prov. vi. 34, 35. So when God hath surprised you in the midst of your whoredoms, when you have diverted your respects from, and been disloyal to him, it is the day of his vengeance, and he will take no ransom. What will a man give in exchange for his soul ? There will be such a dying hour, which thou must expect, it is hard by. Christians, have you comforts strong enough to encounter the terrors and horrors of death ? Within a little while you will be put to trial.

4. It informs us that christians put a disparagement upon their comforts when they are dejected with every fear and trouble. This is much beneath God's oath, the merit of Christ, and the joy of the Holy Ghost, and all the provision the three persons have made. As for instance—

[1.] When your comforts are so weak that you faint in every affliction : Prov. xxiv. 10, 'If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small.' Thou hast small comfort if it will not bear thee out in outward trouble. God and Christ and the Spirit, they are as it were trying their skill (I would speak it with reverence) to raise up a confidence in believers that shall be affliction-proof ; now if you are presently gone when put to trial, you disparage this strong consolation, and frustrate all the provision they make for you. Many a heathen would do better upon moral principles, and behave themselves with a greater generosity and bravery of spirit. You know that question, Job xv. 11, 'Are the consolations of God small with thee ?' The meaning is, is all the provision of comfort and grace and joy in the Spirit too slender to bear you up in this affliction ? What do you expect, christians ? Would you have better provision than God hath made ? Dost thou expect greater promises, surer mercies, and a more able Christ to bear up thy heart ? Are not all the consolations of God able to raise you up ? Thus when you are overcome in every trial.

[2.] When you are full of doubts, bondage, and servile fears, you disparage God's consolation. As for instance, when you cannot think of the judgment without horror : Acts xxiv. 25, 'As he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled ;' or of death without bondage : Heb. ii. 15, 'Through fear of death they were all their lifetime subject to bondage.' Christians, now and then we should be making experiments, and trying the strength of our comforts, and say thus, Can I venture my everlasting estate upon this confidence ? Would I be thus found if Christ were coming to judgment ? 1 John iv. 17, 'Herein is love made perfect, that we may have

boldness in the day of judgment.' Take it for God's apprehensions of his love to us, or our apprehensions of our love to God; we should still be providing for that day, and citing ourselves before Christ's tribunal, that we might see of what strength our consolation is.

SERMON IV.

We might have a strong consolation, &c.—HEB. vi. 18.

USE 2. To press you to look after this strong consolation. Oh! be not contented until you have the fruit of God's oath, that you may be able to live up to the provision and preparation he hath made for your comfort in the covenant. It is a condescension that God will give us his oath, and this is the fruit of it, that we might have strong consolation, to see our names in God's book, and our heaven in Christ's possession.

I shall press you with arguments both of duty and profit.

First, For arguments of duty.

1. It is for God's honour that his people should walk comfortably. Two things there are which God glories most in—the holiness and the comfort of his people: in their holiness, as he is a God of grace; in their comfort, as he is a God of consolation. It is said in scripture, 'There is none holy as the Lord.' God would have the world know that there is none can sanctify but he alone. Moral principles may change the life, but he only can change the heart. And then it is said there is none like him in pardon: Micah vii. 18, 'Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity?' God would have the world know that there is no comfort so strong and sweet as that which he conveyeth. In your lives God will be glorified in holiness; in your deaths God will be glorified in your comfort: Jer. vi. 16, 'Where is the good way, and walk therein, and you shall find rest for your souls.' Is there any such comfort to be had as my people have, as they have found in the way they have beaten, the beaten path of faith, repentance, and godliness?

2. As it is for God's glory, so for our profit. We look upon comfort with jealousy, knowing we have deserved none: we are guilty creatures, therefore are loath to entertain it even upon God's terms. Joy is the strength of the soul: Neh. viii. 10, 'The joy of the Lord is your strength,' and that in all duties. Satan knoweth that while the conscience is kept raw, the soul is unfit for action. A christian never acts so strongly, so regularly, as when he is filled with God's love. Again, there are some special duties which cannot be performed without comfort, as rejoicing in God: Phil. iv. 4, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice. You cannot have comfortable thoughts of God, your meditation of God will not be sweet, until you have apprehensions of his grace. And you cannot long for the presence of Christ. It is 'the Spirit in the bride, that saith, Come,' Rev. xxii. 17. God will not be sweet, nor the day of judgment looked upon with hope and

longing. And so for thankfulness for mercies; thanksgiving is the vent of comfort and joy.

3. Though it costs you pains, it will make amends at length. All excellent things are encompassed with difficulty. Comforts would not be rightly prized, nor rightly managed, if they did not cost us pains and diligence. The heir that comes to his estate without labour spends it riotously many times, whereas those that know the getting of an estate are careful in spending it; so when we come lightly by comfort, we are apt to abuse it. It must cost pains, for it is the nature of man to slight things that are easily obtained.

4. Consider, comforts were to be suspected if they cost you nothing. Foolish presumption is like a night dream, soon gone, like a mushroom that grows up in a night, or like Jonah's gourd: 'Behold, thou hast not laboured, neither madest it to grow,' saith God, Jonah iv. 10. So an idle conceit without labour, that you receive you know not how, comes to nothing. False comfort casts a false shadow upon the soul for a while, to shelter it from the wrath of God, but the worm of conscience will soon devour it. But a settled solid comfort, though it costs much pains, yet it will stick by you, and satisfy you for all the expense of labour and travail of soul to which it puts you.

Secondly, Take notice of the benefit that this comfort will bring you, how it will sweeten all things, sweeten God, Christ, providence, ordinances, mercies, afflictions, nay, death itself.

1. It will make God sweet to you. Ps. civ. 34, David saith, 'My meditations of him shall be sweet.' Oh! how sweet is this, when we can think of God without horror and trembling, his mercy will be sweeter to you, because it is yours; this is your portion. His justice will not be your terror, but support; your comforts are bottomed upon God's justice as well as his mercy, 1 John i. 9. The apostle doth not say, he is faithful and gracious, but 'faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' You have a holdfast upon God by the merit of Christ, and so you may expect a crown from a righteous judge. Nay, his very wrath will increase your comfort. Why? Because this you have escaped. Look, as a sense of danger heighteneth the deliverance, so for reflections upon God's wrath, if it be opened to you in a sermon, or to your own thoughts, how may you rejoice that you are delivered from it. No man can look upon the sea with more comfort than he that hath escaped a danger of shipwreck; so will you with comfort look upon all the bitterness, and dregs, and sourness of God's wrath, this you have escaped; as the Israelites, when they saw the Egyptians dead on the shore, sang a song of praise. Nay, this will make the magnificence of his creating power sweet; when you walk in the fields, and view the structure of the heavens, you will say, Heaven is my Father's palace, and mine in Christ: 'All things are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's,' 1 Cor. iii. 22, 23.

2. This will make Christ sweet, whenever he is represented in the word, and crucified before your eyes, and you can say as Thomas, 'My Lord, and my God,' John xx. 28. A possible salvation is nothing so sweet as that which assurance gives. Conjecture gives but a taste, as those hypocrites had but a 'taste of the good word of God, and the

powers of the world to come,' Heb. vi. 5 ; but this is nothing to an actual interest. When you can say, ' My God,' how doth it fill the soul with ravishment and sweetness !

3. This will make all his providences sweet, the dreadful acts of his justice, and terrible things of righteousness which God discovereth to the sons of men. Look, as a son is much delighted in a history wherein are recorded his own father's valiant acts, so will you take pleasure in meditating upon the providences of God ; they are the mighty acts of your God and Father.

4. This will make ordinances sweet ; as prayer, it brings the soul sweetly into God's presence. It is a far greater advantage to cry, ' Our Father,' than to cry, ' Lord, Lord.' Observe it when you will, duties are a burden, either when we have a false peace or none. When we have a false peace, for then we are loath to disturb our carnal quiet ; it breeds a quarrel between vile affections and natural conscience. Oh ! when we have no peace, fears are revived and come upon us anew ; as guilt ariseth at the presence of the judge or an offended party. Oh ! but when we can say, God is our reconciled God, what a comfort is this ! It is sweet to draw nigh in the assurance of faith : Heb. x. 22, ' Let us draw nigh in full assurance of faith.' This will make the word sweet ; the word relishes not unless we have some interest in the comforts of it. Things which do not concern us affect us not. Though a man come with never so much comfortable promises, they taste not sweet until we have a propriety in them. A taste presupposeth hope. Oh ! but how sweet will it be when we shall come to the word as to the reading of our own charter, as the indenture which is drawn between God and us, by which all privileges are made over to us, and can apply the promises, and say, This was God's unchangeable purpose given me in Christ. And this makes the supper of the Lord sweet, for then you can come as one of God's friends and invited guests : ' Eat, O friends, drink ; yea, drink abundantly, O beloved,' Cant. v. 1. Others hope well, but you are sure of welcome and entertainment.

5. This makes all particular providences of God to yourselves sweet, when they are dipped in love, for ' all things shall work together for good to you,' Rom. viii. 28. Though a single dispensation may seem to go cross to your desires and hopes, yet there is no curse in it ; as a crooked stick in a faggot makes the whole more compacted : Cant. iv. 16, ' Awake, O north wind, and come, thou south.' Mark, north and south wind, two contrary blasts from different corners ; however it be, it doeth good to the church. Whencesoever the blast comes, be it a gentle breath that comes this way, or a cold nipping wind that comes another way, it makes the spices to flow out. Oh ! how sweet are mercies, when they are wrapped up in the bowels of Christ, and sent to us as a token from heaven, and we can see love in all our enjoyments ! If God gives you deliverance, you may say, as Hezekiah, Isa. xxxviii. 17, ' Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption.' You are loved into mercy. Whatsoever you enjoy, it is not as a creature, but as an heir. What a comfort then will a christian take in a morsel of bread, when he can see God's special love in it, more than worldly men can take in their greatest possessions ! Look, as a mean remembrance from a friend is better than a royal gift from

an enemy, so this makes thy meat and bread sweet, when sent from thy Father in heaven, when thou hast it as an heir of promise.

6. This will make afflictions sweet; their very property is altered; they are not now vindictive dispensations, but such as belong to the covenant of grace, and so they will not do us harm: 'In faithfulness thou hast afflicted me,' Ps. cxix. 75. When you can make this reflection, The Lord seeth I want this, else I should not be exercised with such providences. At least there is a supply of inward comfort, and then a heavy burden is nothing to a sound back. If God strikes, sin is pardoned, and the sting of affliction is taken away.

7. It will sweeten death itself; thou knowest whither thou art going. Death is a sad stroke to wicked men, which sends the body to the grave, and the soul to hell; it must needs be a king of terrors to them. But death to those that have this strong consolation is as Haman was to Mordecai; from a mischief, it is made a means to do us honour. Christ hath delivered us both from the hurt and fear of death: Heb. ii. 14, 15, 'That through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.' So that we may entertain it with delight, as Jacob looked upon the chariots that were sent for him with rejoicing. This is a messenger to carry me to Christ; and who would refuse to be happy? Phil. i. 23, 'I desire to depart, and to be with Christ.' They know death is but a losing from the body, that they may be joined to Christ, and they had rather lose a thousand bodies than fellowship with Christ; their souls are sent away in peace to the place of bliss.

8. This makes the day of judgment sweet. Look, as the betrothed virgin longs for the day of espousals and when the bridegroom will come, or as a woman longs for the return of her husband that is gone a long voyage, so the soul that is betrothed to Christ longs for the return of the bridegroom, that he may carry it into his Father's house.

9. It will make the thoughts of heaven sweet. When a christian walks abroad, and points up to heaven, he may say, There is the place of my bliss and everlasting abode. One would think this were enough to ravish the heart of any man, and make him do anything, even run to the ends of the earth, to gain this strong consolation.

But we are backward and slow; therefore here is the great question, What shall we do to get and keep this great comfort?

I shall give you a few directions. Many rest in notions; when they see the way, they are discouraged, and go no farther. But will you engage, before the Lord, to observe these things, if you find them according to scripture?

First then, how to get these strong consolations.

1. Lay a good foundation by meditating upon the mercy and truth of God in the gospel. Our first comfort ariseth from meditation, or the serious act of faith on the mercy and truth of God; as settled assurance ariseth from a sight of evidence. God usually gives us at first conversion a taste of his goodness and sweetness, which differeth from assurance: 1 Peter ii. 2, 3, 'As new-born babes desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious.' Usually at first, when the soul is taken up

with deep thoughts of God's love and mercy in Christ, God lets in some comfort and sweetness into the soul, which, though it be not assurance, and a solemn testimony of our interest in Christ, yet it is a refreshment which the soul receiveth, while it admires the riches and the bounty and the certainty of God's grace. However this is a taste, a beginning, that maketh us look after a more assured sense of God's grace. Briefly, there must be believing thoughts of God's mercy and truth. I call this meditation, because all the direct acts of faith are performed and carried on by the help of the thoughts. Faith engageth us in solemn musing, and deep thoughts fasten things upon the spirit. As eggs are hatched by a constant incubation, so when the soul museth, comfort ariseth. The two things you should often propound are mercy and truth, because they are the Jachin and Boaz, the two pillars which support the covenant of grace; for it was made in mercy, and kept in truth. Therefore it is said, Micah vii. 20, 'Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob, and mercy to Abraham.' The covenant was made first with Abraham, therefore it was mercy to him; but it was made good to Jacob, therefore it was truth to him. In the 89th Psalm, they are seven times coupled; the one is the fountain, the other the pipe and conveyance; it springs from mercy, and is conveyed and dispensed in truth. Therefore the psalmist saith, Ps. xxv. 10, 'All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth to them that keep his covenant and his testimonies.' It is free that it may be sure, and sure that it may be free. These are the two attributes God doth glorify in the covenant of grace, and in all his dispensations of grace.

[1.] Meditate of the mercy and love of God. In the covenant of works, God would glorify his justice, but his great aim in the covenant of grace is to glorify his mercy: Eph. i. 6, 'To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath accepted us in the Beloved.' God would make grace glorious. Justice seeks a fit object, mercy only a fit occasion. The question of justice is to whom is it due? but the question of mercy is who wants it, who needs it? Well, then, though Satan and our own hearts may make many objections, there is enough indeed to overwhelm us, to damn us when we look to ourselves. But what will God glorify? Grace, grace. This is the banner he hath spread over the church, in defiance of all the powers of darkness: 'He hath brought me to the banqueting-house, and his banner over me was love,' Cant. ii. 4. You must refresh your souls with a sense of God's mercy; every day get a sprinkling of Christ's blood upon your heart. Now in the establishing assurance, this is necessary; for the Spirit sealeth as a Spirit of promise, upon terms of mercy and grace: Eph. i. 13, 'Ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.' The Spirit stirreth up faith in the promise, and then giveth in the sense and comfort of it. And therefore if you first look for evidence, and see what grace is wrought in you, you pervert the order of the gospel; the right method is to begin with direct acts, and then to go on to reflex acts; first refresh the soul with God's free grace and mercy.

[2.] Then for God's truth, look upon what sure terms grace is conveyed to you. In the text you have God's word and oath. God would over and above satisfy you. If you will not trust him upon his word, yet give him the credit you would give to an ordinary man's oath.

You have promises of grace written in the scriptures; put him in remembrance, spread your matter before the Lord, and show him his tokens: Lord, whose are these? Then you have covenant and seals, which are as indentures between God and you. A covenant is a solemn transaction between man and man; now God hath made a covenant, and sealed it in the sacrament. Then you have not only outward seals, but inward assurances, earnest, and first-fruits; as if the Lord could never be bound fast enough to the creature, that is so loose and uncertain. God hath given us his word, oath, covenant, seals, and earnest, which you should meditate upon if you would increase delight.

2. Get assurance and holiness, which is an evidence of your title and interest. As Ahab was angry with the prophet Micaiah: 1 Kings xxii. 8, 'I hate him, because he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil;' so sinners hate us because we speak not peace, and do not assure them of comfort. But alas! in vain do we press men to comfort, for till there be holiness there can be no peace or positive certainty: 1 John ii. 3, 'Hereby do we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.' This is the evidence we must avouch in the court of conscience. Though comfort be founded upon Christ's merit, yet it will be found only in Christ's way. Mark the distinctness of phrase, Mat. xi. 28, 29, 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.' Certainly it is Christ must give us rest; but when will he give it? ver. 29, 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest for your souls;' when we abide in the discipline of his Spirit. God first poureth in the oil of grace, and then the oil of gladness. There is an inseparable connection between comfort and grace, as between fire and heat; if no fire, no heat; and if no grace, it is in vain to expect comfort. The dispensation of the Spirit of Christ cannot be severed from the application of his merit. Christ is first king of righteousness, then king of peace, Heb. vii. 2. First he disposeth and puts the soul into a holy righteous frame, and then settleth peace and quiet in the conscience. Alas! for others, God will not trust them with it, and they cannot receive it. God will not trust them with peace and comfort. God trieth carnal men with the comforts of the world, which they abuse to the neglect of God, and therefore he will not bestow upon them the comforts of his Spirit: 'If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?' Luke xvi. 11. When a leaky vessel is tried with water, and will not hold it, you will not put any precious liquor into it; so if you are carnal, and abuse worldly comforts, corn, wine, and oil, to riot and excess, do you think God will trust you with the strong consolations and ravishments of his Spirit? Then you cannot receive it. A man may as well think to apply a needle to his finger and not be pricked, as to commit sin and not find trouble in his conscience. Comfort cannot be felt there where sin reigns; and besides, a carnal heart can have no spiritual discerning. Therefore the foundation must be laid in grace and holiness, that is the evidence.

3. Labour after a sense of grace. Grace and a sense of grace differ, for the spiritual acts of the soul are not so liable to feeling as the acts of the body. When I awake, I know I am so; but internal sense differeth

from outward. A man may be in a state of grace, yet not always know it; as John xiv. 4, 5, 'Whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest, and how can we know the way?' A direct contradiction. *Sciebant isti, sed se scire nesciebant*, saith Austin—The apostles knew the way, but did not know they knew it. We need an interpreter to show us our righteousness. Grace is so weak, and there is such a mixture of sin, and men so seldom come to an audit, that conscience is extremely puzzled to know whether there be grace or no. Our uncertainty in this kind may be reduced to these two heads—want of observance, and want of judgment, inadvertency and injudiciousness. We do not take notice of the acts of grace through non-observance, and because of the mixture of weakness, conscience cannot judge of the regulation of our actions. We neglect observation, and therefore are to seek of consolation. You know there are two questions go upon this debate—whether I have done such a thing or no? then whether I have done it as I ought to do it? It concerns first the being of the action, and then the regularity of it, congruousness of it with the rule. Therefore, if we would get a sense of grace, we must be watchful to observe what is done, and judicious to see whether it carry proportion with the rule. Now, 'by use our senses will be exercised to discern both good and evil,' Heb. v. 14. To get a sense of grace, the soul must be heedful and cautious. By long and much acquaintance with God and the work of holiness we may be able to make a judgment upon our own actions.

How shall we keep the soul in a constant observation, that we may be more at home, and constantly take notice of the state of the heart? Here these rules will be of use.

1. As doubts arise get them satisfied. These are hints from God, that you should study your hearts more. Smothering of doubts is dangerous; it breeds atheism and hypocrisy; therefore, when they arise, never dismiss them without an answer and clear satisfaction; do not suspend it out of self-love and carnal fear. As when we see the smoke a-coming, we keep blowing to get it into a flame, so when the Spirit begins to set the heart on fire, keep blowing. Doubts arise, but bring them to a head. God offereth many a fair occasion to men to study their own heart, how it is with them; if they neglect it, all runs to confusion and uncertainty. Well, having your hearts at an advantage, get the case cleared one way or other.

2. As sins are committed get them pardoned: 1 John ii. 1, 'If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.' Run to your advocate; never leave until you have gotten a copy of your discharge, and God gives you assurance of your pardon by his Spirit in the court of your consciences. This will put you upon often recourse to Christ, which is the sure way to get comfort; but negligence in the spiritual life, and swallowing sins without remorse, breeds security. Look, as a fountain, when it is muddied, never leaves till it work itself clear again, so when you have fallen foul, and conscience smites, never leave until God hath given you the pardon of that sin: Jer. viii. 4, 'Shall they fall, and not arise?' Take heed of lying still or of negligence. If you be a constant observer of corruptions, and cease not until by Christ's death you get a pardon, all things will not be so dark, doubtful, and litigious.

3. Revise acts of faith as soon as they are exerted and put forth. When faith is renewed by the word, in prayer, or in meditation, examine it. Lusts and graces are best discovered whilst they are stirring. A man surprised in an act of sin is most sensible of it: 'A thief is ashamed when he is found,' Jer. ii. 26. So to surprise the soul in an act of grace, as when sweet thoughts and hopes of God's grace and mercy are stirred up, say, Is not this faith? Carnal principles, that otherwise lie hid, are best discovered in their operation; as when a man is praying or preaching out of vainglory, if his heart return upon him, and take him tardy, his shame is more increased.

4. Get experiences confirmed as soon as they are exhibited. A christian that walks in darkness and is uncertain of his state had need be watchful, and wait upon God in the word and in prayer, and observe providences for some glimpses of his love. Look, as Benhadad's servants, 1 Kings xx. 33, watched for the word *brother*, so should you watch what tokens of love and favour will pass out, and what experiences and quickenings you have. In the word: Ps. cxix. 93, 'I will never forget thy precepts, for with them thou hast quickened me.' When you find fresh excitations of grace come in upon the soul, oh! I shall never forget such a duty; there God met me and quickened me. Oh! improve it. So in the supper: Cant. i. 3, 'Because of the savour of thy good ointment, thy name is an ointment poured forth, therefore the virgins love thee.' When at any time you have been conversing with God, and the Lord hath stirred up holy joy, oh! remember it. So for comfort in affliction: Rom. v. 3, 4, 'We glory in tribulation also, knowing that tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope.' When you have had any experience of God in trouble, improve it to a settled hope. Should I not believe in him, and wait upon him for comfort, that hath been so gracious to me? When experiences and feelings pass away without any observation, we lose a great deal of comfort.

5. Give not over strong desires of grace until they be answered and satisfied. Many times there is something which awakens the heart to grow earnest in prayer. Observe what answers God gives: Ps. xxvii. 4, 'One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after.' When holy and strong desires are stirred up in the heart, we must not suffer them to go away, but they must be pursued resolutely, and recommended to God until he give an answer.

6. When at any time you are convinced of the power of sin, leave not until you get it mortified. There are some sins which have most power over us, as suiting with our complexions and course of life, and they most of all urge the soul with frequent temptations. Now a christian is to observe the weakness and decay of this sin; as David, Ps. xviii. 23, 'I was also upright before him, and I kept myself from mine iniquity.' Whatever the sin be, be it pride, sensuality, or worldliness, any carnal practice, or fleshly gratification, which you are convinced of by many smittings of conscience. A man cannot be such a stranger to his heart but he must needs find what this sin is. Now, you will never have peace till this be mortified. Spiritual peace is disturbed, God provoked by it, and a guilty conscience is clamorous, and full of objections; you must narrowly observe the decay of this sin.

7. Observe how daily temptations are checked. There is no day but

the devil will be casting in some bait or other, either to please appetite, provoke anger, stir up pride, or worldly desires of greatness and reputation, and rising in the world, or fears of men. Now unless a man be a constant observer of his temptations and conflicts, all will be out of order, and in confusion with him; a man will be a great stranger at home, and not observe what his heart is. This much for the first question, how to get it.

Secondly, How to keep it. As it is gotten with much diligence, so it must be kept with much care.

1. There must be constant watchfulness against sin, and avoiding it; suppose it be passion, wrath, evil-speaking, envious and vain thoughts, all these grieve and disturb the Spirit in his sealing work: Eph. iv. 30, 'Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.' Men usually sin away their comfort and peace, and the grieved Spirit will refuse to give witness. Evidences are not kept clear, but are blotted and blurred, that you cannot read them. Especially watch against such sins as most waste the conscience and disturb all in the soul.

2. There must likewise be a constant increase, and an exercise of grace. I press both.

[1.] A constant increase of grace. Small things are hardly discerned. Many stars in the firmament are so small that they cannot be seen; so a great many graces in the soul, when small, conscience can take no notice of them. They need have good eyes that read a very small print. Every grace by degrees is set forth in a fairer letter and a new edition; as the waters of the sanctuary grew deeper and deeper, Ezek. xlvii. 3-5; 2 Peter i. 5-10. Give diligence to add to and increase every grace. He musters up several graces, and then infers the exhortation, ver. 10, 'Wherefore the rather give diligence to make your calling and election sure.' So that by increasing of grace still we increase our assurance. Christians rest in complaints, but do not increase and grow in grace. It is impossible for a man to have fire in his bosom and not feel it; so it is impossible, if men did grow and thrive every day, but they would be sensible of it.

[2.] Exercise grace more. By a constant exercise of grace it is drawn forth into the view of conscience. Grace is never so apparent as when it is in action. As the sap is hidden though the fruits are seen, so habits of grace lie out of sight, but operations discover what is in the soul, the fruits appear. Therefore if Christians be lazy and without fruit, they will be without comfort. St James saith, chap. ii. 23, 'Faith is made perfect by works.' Understand not in a popish sense, as if works did contribute a worth and value to faith. No; but as the strength of God's power is discovered with more advantage by the weakness of man: 2 Cor. xii. 10, 'When I am weak then am I strong.' So faith by works is sensibly discovered with more advantage to the soul. So that if a man would come to the knowledge of grace, he must be constant in the operations of grace.

SERMON V.

Who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.—
HEB. vi. 18.

THE third thing I would take notice of in this text is the description of those who may take comfort in God's word and oath, 'Who have fled for refuge, to lay hold upon the hope set before us.' The point is this—

Doct. 3. The true heirs of promise, with whom God hath pawned his word and oath to do them good eternally, are such as have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before them.

In the description there are two parts, 'flying for refuge,' and 'taking hold of the hope set before them.' The one relates to their justification, or their first acceptance with God in Christ, 'Flying for refuge;' the other relates to their carriage after justification, 'To take hold of the hope set before them.' To open both these—

I. For the first branch, 'Flying for refuge.' It is an allusion to the cities of refuge spoken of under the law. God provided six cities of refuge for them to fly to that were guilty of casual homicide, that, killing a man by chance, they might avoid the fury of the avenger of blood. These cities of refuge were a type of Christ. In the opening of which, I shall show two things—(1.) That Christ is a believer's city of refuge; (2.) That believers must run into him.

1. That Christ is a believer's city of refuge, or the alone sanctuary for distressed souls. These cities are spoken of Num. xxxv. 11-14, Josh. xx., and Deut. xix. Now the comparison or resemblance between Christ and these cities is very obvious. Look, as God appointed cities of refuge to fly to, so Christ is of God's appointing to be a sanctuary for distressed souls. These cities were built upon hills and mountains, that they which fled to them might ever keep them in sight; so Jesus Christ is set forth: Rom. iii. 25, 'Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation for our sins.' And the apostles which did hold forth Christ are compared to 'a city upon a hill,' Mat. v. 14. Christ is lifted up in the preaching of the gospel, to be seen of all. There was a cause-way, with stones set up to guide them, a direct path, that the man-slayer might fly thither: Deut. xix. 3, 'Thou shalt prepare thee a way, and divide the coasts of thy land into three parts, that the slayer may flee thither.' The cities were so established that they might have a short and direct way to them, and that their escape might be more easy; so the way to Christ is clear and open, that we may not miss of him who is alone the support of our souls; and God hath appointed some that were as stones to signify to us that this is the way: Zech. ix. 12, 'Turn ye to the strongholds, ye prisoners of hope;' by the ministry of man he hallooeth, as it were, after us: Isa. xxx. 21, 'Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.' Again, they were ordered so that in half a day one might recover one or other of them from any part of the land or corner of the land; so God is made near to us in Jesus Christ: Rom. x. 6-8, 'Say not in

thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above), or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead); but what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart; that is, the word of faith which we preach.' Our refuge doth not stand at a distance; the gospel hath brought him near to us. In the gospel God doth so plainly and fully show the way of salvation, that we need not seek further; Christ is at hand to do us good. Once more, these cities of refuge were all cities belonging to the Levites, partly that the tribe of Levi might be the more esteemed and loved of all Israel, but chiefly that they might not be lurking holes of wicked and flagitious persons, but a school as well as a sanctuary, where persons that lived there in exile might be instructed in the law of God; so whoever comes to Christ for refuge must come also for instruction, to be taught and instructed in all the ways of God: Micah iv. 2, 'Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob, and he will teach us of his ways.'

Other things are spoken of these cities of refuge, but I now come to the persons that had slain a man by chance, and were not guilty of malice prepense; they fled thither as for life, for fear of the avenger of blood; so do we even 'fly from wrath to come,' Mat. iii. 7, as if the wrath of God were at our heels. And whoever ran to the city of refuge was to be received; the gates were always open, for Jew or foreigner; the sojourner was capable of the privilege as well as the natives: Num. xxxv. 15, 'These six cities shall be a refuge both for the children of Israel, and for the stranger, and for the sojourner among them, that every one that killeth any person unawares may flee thither.' So John vi. 37, 'He that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.' The arms of the Lord's mercy stand open to receive us. And when they were once received, they were safe, and might enjoy their privilege without molestation, unless they went out of the limits and bounds of the city, then it was death: Num. xxxv. 26, 27, 'But if the slayer shall at any time come without the border of the city of his refuge, whither he was fled; and the revenger of blood find him without the borders of the city of his refuge, and the revenger of blood kill the slayer, he shall not be guilty of blood.' So when wrath makes inquisition for sinners, they are never safe but so long as they are 'found in Christ,' Phil. iii. 9. Christ must not be made use of only at first, but for ever. And here they were to remain until the death of the high priest, Josh. xx. 6, who was herein a type of our great high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by his precious death wrought out a perfect reconciliation between God and us, and procured the full pardon of all our sins, and a perfect liberty from the pursuit of God's wrath: John viii. 36, 'If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.' I mention these things because it is very comfortable to compare the law and the gospel. Look, as though you know a man well, yet you delight to view his picture, so though Christ be more clearly represented in the New Testament as a sanctuary for souls, yet it is good to look upon his picture, and the shadows of Christ under the law.

2. It is the propensity of believers to fly to Christ for refuge. This flying may be explained with analogy to the two terms of every motiou, which

are *terminus a quo* and *ad quem*, from what we fly, and to what ; and so we have the perfect method and course which the Spirit observeth in bringing home souls to God. In this flying to Christ as a city of refuge there is a driving and a drawing work ; the first belongs to the law, the second to the gospel. The law driveth us out of ourselves, and the gospel draweth us, and bringeth us home to God ; first there is a preparative work of the law, which causeth flight and fear, and is as the avenger of blood at our heels to make us run as for life : but the gospel hath the greatest stroke in the conversion of a sinner ; it is the gospel that pulls in the heart of a man to God. In coming to Christ we are moved not only with fear but hope ; a flight argueth fear, and there is an hope set before us ; there is a fear of deserved wrath, and a hope of undeserved mercy. First the law worketh fear in us, as a good preparation to make way for the gospel, but then the hope set before us in the offers of the gospel perfecteth the work ; as Moses brought them to the borders, but Joshua led them into the land of Canaan. Let us speak a little distinctly of these points.

[1.] Let us speak of the *terminus a quo*, the term from which we come, or the driving work ; it is comprised in these two things—a sense of sin, and a sense of the wrath of God pursuing for sin.

(1.) There must be a sense of sin. A man is satisfied with his condition until he seeth his own vileness in the glass of the law : Rom. vii. 9, ‘I was alive without the law once ; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.’ He had as great hopes as most men have. Persons have a strong conceit of themselves, and a large opinion of their own righteousness, until the law of God comes upon their hearts in full evidence and power, and shakes their confidence ; then what wretched creatures do we appear to ourselves upon such conviction ! I thought that I was thus and thus towards God, but I see that I am wholly carnal, and the law is spiritual ; I had thought that I had a better heart towards God, but alas ! I was wholly overgrown with lusts. This is like the awaking out of a dream ; a poor hungry man dreams that he is satisfied, but awaking, his soul hath nothing ; so a sinner says, I thought my estate was good ; but now I am convinced of the unsoundness of my heart, oh ! how poor and miserable and wretched am I in all spiritual respects ? First or last we are thus humble : Rev. iii. 17, ‘Thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing ; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.’ Sottish wretches think they had ever a good heart towards God : Mat. xix. 20, ‘All these things have I kept from my youth up ;’ and they go on with a pleasing dream, and so are not so much as prepared for Christ. The children of God are kept constantly humble, they think none can have a worse heart than they : 1 Tim. i. 15, ‘Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.’

(2.) There must be a sense of the wrath of God pursuing us for sin ; both are necessary. Some are sensible of sin, but not of wrath ; as the carnal and dissolute, who cannot but know themselves wicked wretched creatures, but do not consider of wrath to come : Amos vi. 3, ‘Ye put far away the evil day.’ Hell is at a distance, and judgment is to come : they put off trouble when they cannot put it away ; they sleep, but their

damnation sleepeth not ; they adjourn their work, and leave their souls at a desperate pass. Things afar off, though they be marvellous great, seem little ; a star that is bigger than all the earth is as a spark or spangle. Their consciences are not sensible of wrath, though their hearts be full of sin. Wrath is not upon them, nor the avenger of blood at their heels ; they delay and dream of a devout old age. But now God maketh them sensible of wrath to whom he meaneth grace, though I confess in a different degree. They are solicitous, if not anxious ; one time or other they are brought to this. What shall I do ? Some more violently, others more gently ; some are wounded at the very heart, others are pricked and a little stung at the heart : Acts ii. 37, ' Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart,' as with an empoisoned dagger. No certain rules can be given ; sometimes they that have good education have least terrors, as being restrained from grosser sins. Trees long unpruned have the more cuts when they come to be lopped. Some have more terrors, because they have withstood more means. Some that are called to greater services have most terrors ; he that hath received much wrong by a bad neighbour can speak worse of him than he that hath received less injuries. Those that are not called to such eminent services, God spareth them. Work serveth instead of sorrows. Some have drunk most deeply of the dregs of sin, they serve only for monuments of the power of God's anger. Sometimes men or women of the most excellent and acute understanding are most troubled, as having the clearest apprehension of the heinousness of sin and terribleness of wrath. At other times it cometh from ignorance, as fears are in the dark, and weak spirits are apt to be terrified. There can be no certain rules, only this in general, all feel some smart. Sin would not be bitter, and Christ would not be sweet, did not we taste it sometimes. The hart would not pant for the water-brooks if it were not chased, Ps. xlii. 1. Every one cometh to Christ with their load. A man that was never lost in himself will never be found in Christ.

[2.] Let us come to the *terminus ad quem*, from what we come to what ; they run to Christ as their city of refuge.

(1.) It implies earnestness, as in a case of life and death. A dilatory trifling spirit shows we are not touched at heart. A man scorched with the wrath of God will not linger but fly ; delays are a sign of unwillingness. To say, *Non vacat*, I am not at leisure, rightly interpreted, is *non placet*, it doth not please me. When men are not at leisure for the things of their peace, it is a sign they have no mind to go to Christ, and are not earnest in this matter. Excuses are but a real denial, as they that have no mind to pay their debts, they put off their creditors and troublesome suitors until another time, only to be rid of them. When men have a true sense of their case, they can trifle no longer. In a matter of life and death delays are dangerous. God is for present obedience : Heb. iii. 7, ' To-day if ye will hear his voice.' And so a soul that is affected with its condition cannot dally with God any longer : Gal. i. 16, ' Immediately I consulted not with flesh and blood.' When Christ called Andrew and Peter, they ' straightway left their nets, and followed him,' Mat. iv. 20 ; and Zaccheus ' made haste and came down, and received him joyfully,' Luke xix. 6. When men have but a slight conviction, they think of a more convenient season,

when such a business or such a temptation is over ; but alas ! *modo et modo non habet modum*, a sinner's morrow will never come.

(2.) Running to the city of refuge implieth avoiding all byways. A soul that is rightly affected cannot be satisfied with any other thing ; another place would not secure the man, nothing but the city of refuge. Worldly things to a wounded conscience are as unsavoury as the white of an egg. Surely the wound is not deep enough when it can be healed with other plasters, and that thirst is not urgent which we can quench at the next ditch ; I mean, when the comforts of the creature can satisfy the soul, our thirst was not very deep. Many have a trouble upon them, but they quench it in mirth and carnal company, and by little and little wear out all feelings of conscience. A man that ran to a city of refuge would not turn aside, but went a straight way thither ; another town could not secure him ; so all things else are but dung and dross in comparison of being found in Christ, Phil. iii. 8, 9. There are two things which are apt to keep us from Christ when we begin to be touched with any sight of sin or God's wrath pursuing us—either the delights of the world, or some formal duties. When a man begins to be in want with the prodigal, he first feeds upon husks with the swine, takes up with worldly delights, which serve to benumb and stupify the conscience. Or, if that will not do, then some outward formal duty. That trouble never went very deep that can be cured with anything on this side Christ.

(3.) This running implies an unwearied diligence. The man was running still till he was gotten into the city of refuge, for it was for his life ; so we are unwearied until we meet with Christ, Cant. iii. 2. The spouse sought her beloved throughout the whole city, from one ordinance to another, Where is Christ ? They run here and there to the word and to prayer, to see if God will let in any glimpse of love. They do not presently give out, though they find not what they look for, but are borne up by encouragements of the word. Many that have trouble upon them are anxious, and make a kind of essay whether God will give them Christ or no, and, if not presently answered, throw up all ; but they which run to Christ in good earnest wrestle with many a discouragement and delay ; it is for the lost sheep of the house of Israel ; it is children's bread, and not to be given to dogs, but they are resolved to hold fast and take no denial.

(4.) When they are got into their city of refuge, they stay there ; having once taken hold of Christ, they will not quit their holdfast for all the world. Many times the children of God have that which divines call a negative adherence, that is, they do not stick to other things ; though they dare not apply Christ to their souls, though they have but a twilight, and make but a blind adventure, they dare not say Christ is theirs, yet they will not let go that kind of loose hope for all the world. Much more when it comes to some positive adherence, though not a full assurance, that is, when they are resolved to cast their souls on Christ, to see what God will do with them ; as Joab when he took hold of the horns of the altar, he said, If I die, I'll die here, 1 Kings ii. 30. So, whatever discouragements they meet with, their hearts hold Christ fast, and will not let him go.

II. For the second branch, 'To lay hold upon the hope that is set

before us,' and you must repeat the word *flying* or *running* again. Here is another metaphor implied. The apostle having spoken of flying, alludeth not only to the city of refuge, but to that speed and haste men make in a race to take hold of the prize; for he speaks of laying hold of a hope set before them (the word *κρατῆσαι* signifies to seize upon it), and ver. 20, of a 'forerunner' that is entered before us.

1. What is this hope? Hope is put for the thing hoped for, heaven with all the glory thereof; for it is a hope 'that lies within the veil,' ver. 19, or a hope 'laid up for us in heaven,' Col. i. 5. Mark the double end of him that cometh unto Christ, refuge and salvation; for in Christ there is not only deliverance from pursuing wrath, but eternal life to be found; first we fly from deserved wrath, then we take hold of undeserved glory. This is more easy of the two: Rom. v. 10, 11, 'For if when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son; much more being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.' The greatest brunt is at first, because of the great fear upon us to fly from wrath; then we encourage ourselves to take hold of eternal life. In the temporal refuges they had security, but not possessions, there was no heritage there; but here we are not only secured against the avenger of blood, but we are called to great and glorious hopes. Our privileges in Christ are not only privative, but positive: Cant. ii. 3, 'I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.' Christ is not only a shady tree, to afford a cool and wholesome shade to shelter us from the scorings of the sun, but a fruitful tree; we are not only sheltered from wrath, but called to eat of the apples of paradise. In the covenant of grace God doth not only enter into a league with us, that he will not hurt us, but he openeth all his treasure to us. So Ps. lxxxiv. 11, 'The Lord God is a sun and a shield.' We are not only pardoned, but restored to favours and friendship. It is much to us to be delivered from the terrors of hell, but more to be made heirs of eternal life. The prodigal only looked for a pardon, Luke xv. 19, 'Make me as one of thy hired servants,' and the father bringeth forth the robe, the ring, and the fatted calf. Oh! that we, that have deserved to be in the bottom of hell, should find a place in the heart and bosom of God! Let us enlarge our expectations according to the extent of Christ's mercy. Here is pardon and glory; heaven is more credible than pardon: Rom. v. 10, 'Much more being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.' It is harder to get a guilty sinner pardoned than a pardoned sinner glorified. And let us answer the divine mercy, to be not only negative, but positive in our obedience. Many please themselves in an abstinence from gross sins, but do not care to maintain communion with God: Ps. i. 1, 2, 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law doth he meditate day and night.' They are not scorers, wicked enemies and drunkards, but there is no savour of religion upon their hearts. Do they delight in the law of the Lord? Do they meditate on it, and make it their study? To leave sin is but the first degree, there must be something more.

2. Why is this hope said to be set before us?

I answer—

[1.] To note the divine institution of this reward ; it is not devised by ourselves, but appointed by God. The hypocrite's hope is compared to the spider's web, Job viii. 14, which is a poor slender thing, woven out of her own bowels, and it is gone by the first turn of a besom ; so is the hypocrite's hope a fancy, a slender imagination, or a rash and unadvised confidence, which comes to nothing.

[2.] It is proposed and set before us for our encouragement. As it is said of Christ, Heb. xii. 2, ' For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, and despised the shame ; ' that is, for the joy that was propounded to him. Well, then, it is a real hope, and a hope offered to us, and laid before us.

[3.] What is it to run to take hold of the hope set before us ? Sometimes it implieth a challenging it as ours ; as 1 Tim. vi. 19, ' That they may lay hold on eternal life. ' Here it signifies holding fast, never to let this hope go. It implieth diligence of pursuit, perseverance to the end, and all this upon christian encouragement.

(1.) Diligence in pursuit of eternal life in the heirs of promise. It is expressed by working out our salvation, making it our business : Phil. ii. 12, ' Work out your salvation with fear and trembling. ' Most men make a jest of it, or a thing of course ; but it must be made the main work, the great pursuit and thing in chase, as the obtaining the prize in a race, and not only a business, but that which is first and chief : Mat. vi. 33, ' Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and the righteousness thereof. ' And a business that must be earnestly prosecuted and well followed, and that notwithstanding discouragements : Mat. xi. 12, ' The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force ; ' when men press through, and will not be kept out. There must be earnestness in the matter, and this not only for a fit, and for a little while until they have made some progress, but there must be a getting ground daily : ' I press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, ' Phil. iii. 14, getting nearer, and nearer, making for heaven apace, to be established in the hopes of eternal life. When we will not be put off with anything else, but have heaven or nothing, this is to seek heaven in good earnest.

(2.) This flying to take hold of the hope set before us importeth perseverance in well-doing, notwithstanding the difficulties in the way to heaven. The Israelites' way to Canaan lay through a howling wilderness ; so we have many inconveniences and discouragements in our way to heaven, but we are borne up with this hope, that the promise will make amends for all, and so we go on in our course till we come to our journey's end. And the apostle, speaking how Christ, as judge of the world, will distribute eternal rewards, describeth those that shall inherit eternal life : Rom. ii. 7, ' Those that by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory, and honour, and immortality. ' It is not a description of our first address to Christ and taking comfort in his merit ; no, that consists in a broken-hearted acknowledgment of our sins, and a desire to be found in Christ, depending upon his merits and righteousness to free us from the wrath of God. But the apostle is not describing our coming to Christ, but our coming to

heaven, and the manner how justified persons look for their eternal reward; by patient continuance in well-doing they seek for glory, honour, and immortality. Though we are justified, and have the right of sons, yet we shall not have the possession of the inheritance until we are exercised in well-doing; therefore we must wait God's leisure, and persevere in obedience. And—

(3.) All this upon christian encouragements, for the hope that is before them. A man may know much of his spirit by what bears him up, and what is the comfort and solace of his soul: Titus ii. 13, 'Looking for the blessed hope;' when a man is borne up by invisible comforts, and upon the hopes of an invisible inheritance kept for him in heaven. A wicked man's hope lies within the compass of the world, therefore it may perish and die before he dies: Prov. xi. 7, 'When the wicked man dies, his expectation shall perish, and the hope of unjust men perisheth;' or at least it ends at death: Prov. xiv. 32, 'The wicked is driven away in his wickedness.' He would fain stay longer in the world, but he is arrested by death, in the name of the great God of heaven, and driven into the other world, there to be responsible to God; 'but the righteous hath hope in his death;' then his hope beginneth.

Application.

Use 1. Comfort to those that can apply it, even to those who are thus qualified, that are driven and drawn to Christ, and then go on cheerfully with the work of obedience, waiting for their inheritance in heaven. Now, that you may take in this comfort, examine yourselves.

1. Have you ever felt any law work? Were you ever driven to Christ? Were you ever startled and roused out of your sins, and made sensible of the displeasure of God, and forced to sit alone and complain over a naughty heart? Have you Paul's experience: Rom. vii. 24, 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' Have you been awakened? Eph. v. 14, 'Wherefore he says, Awake, thou that sleepest.'

2. Have you been drawn to Christ by the cords of the gospel? Have you been brought to him as a sanctuary for your distressed souls, as the man shut up himself in the city of refuge? 2 Tim. i. 12, 'I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him against that day.' Here is my anchor and safety.

3. Are you begotten to a lively hope? Do you often look within the veil, and groan and long for your everlasting hopes? Do you send spies beforehand into the land of promise, a few thoughts thither? What hearty groans are there, and sighs for that happy state! Rom. viii. 23, 'And not only they, but ourselves also, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.' Doth it quicken you and make you mend your pace, whatever difficulties you meet with? Rom. v. 2, 'We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.'

Use 2. Conviction. It showeth the hardness of their hearts who have neither felt the law work nor the gospel work, but remain like the smith's anvil, softened neither with hammer nor with oil; neither driven by the threatenings of the law, nor drawn with the glad tidings

of salvation; neither John nor Jesus worketh on them. Of such Christ speaketh, Mat. xi. 17, 'We have piped unto you, and you have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and you have not lamented.' A rude and stupid people, not affected with any kind of music. In times of rejoicing the Jews had their lighter notes fitted for mirth, in times of lamentation, they had their minstrels and mourning women, that had *venales lachrymas*, beating their breasts, and crying, Alas, my brother! and, Ah, Lord! and, Ah, his glory! Jer. ix. 17, 'Consider ye, and call for the mourning women.' Notable movers of passions they were. It was a thing so common among them, that the boys would imitate them in the streets. To these Christ likeneth a stupid people, that are moved with no kind of doctrine, neither with judgment nor sweet offers of grace. Alas! they are far from the strong comfort here spoken of.

Use 3. To persuade you to this temper. Three sorts of people usually we speak to—(1.) The carnal secure; (2.) Those that are affected with their condition; (3.) Those that esteem Christ, and embrace him, that own him as ready and willing to save sinners.

1. For the carnally secure, that never made their peace with God, never fled for refuge, nor took sanctuary at the grace of Christ. Our work is to make them sensible of the avenger of blood that is at their heels. O poor wretches! will you sleep when your damnation sleeps not? Within a little while what will become of you? In the ordinary course of nature, you have but a few years to pass over in this world, but for aught you know, the wrath of God, which makes inquisition for sinners, may seize upon you a great deal sooner; you may not live out half your days, that is, so long as in an ordinary providence you might expect: Ps. lxxviii. 21, 'God shall wound the head of his enemies and the hairy scalp of such a one as goeth on still in his trespasses.' God may take you by the hairy scalp while you are in your youthful freshness, before baldness and old age cometh on, and infirmities seize upon you. That which is measured by time will soon come about. Every day you are a step nearer to eternity. Oh! what will become of you? When you are at odds with God, death waylayeth you in every place; it may take you sleeping, eating, drinking. Ah, poor man! what refuge hast thou? what buckler to catch the blow of God's angry indignation, and ward off the strokes of his vengeance? Oh! fly, sinners, for refuge; the Lord knows how soon destruction may seize upon you, while you are yet in health and strength; there is no other means but Christ. Surely this driving work would prosper more if men were not wanting to themselves to improve the conviction of the word. When God shows you your natural face, and begins to startle and awaken you, oh! let not conviction die! No iron so hard as that which hath been often quenched and often heated; so no heart so hard as when it hath worn out many convictions. Make use of remorse of conscience and your own trembling fears, lest you are given up to a spirit of slumber.

2. To those that are affected with their condition, to seek for salvation in Christ alone. You which are troubled about your eternal state, own Christ as a city of refuge, his arms are always open to receive poor trembling sinners, that fly thither from the wrath of God. You do but go about while you seek elsewhere: Jer. xxxi. 22, 'How long

wilt thou go about, O thou backsliding daughter? for the Lord hath created a new thing in the earth. A woman shall compass a man; that is, when God hath sent forth Christ born of a woman, why will you weary yourselves to go about? This city of refuge stands open for all comers; own Christ as the only remedy. One who was long exercised with troubles of conscience, and at length came to some establishment, gave this advice: I will never look for that in the law which is only to be found in the gospel; and I will never look for that in myself which is only to be found in Christ; and I will never look for that on earth which is only to be found in heaven. These three things are the causes why men are kept in trouble. You will get nothing but weariness and discomfort by running about, and looking to duties and legal qualifications; and therefore, while you are affected with your condition, own Christ.

3. To those which are fled to Christ, and own him as the only sanctuary for poor souls. Press onward to take hold of eternal life. Now you have fled from deserved wrath, run to take hold of undeserved glory. You are past the worst, the rest is more easy. The apostle, Rom. v. 11, 12, puts a 'much more' upon this; 'Much more being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life;' as if that were a more easy thing. Now the worst brunt is over; 'And not only so, but we also joy in God through the Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.' When you are reconciled to God, you may look to be entertained as friends; being adopted in Christ, you may look for a child's portion. If God would pardon your sins, and take you with all your faults, quicken yourselves to be more diligent in the pursuit of eternal life, and put to your best strength. You will have many ups and downs in the world, but bear it with patience; heaven will pay for all.

But here is a doubt—May we look to the rewards? I answer—Yes, else there were no room for hope, for hope is nothing else but a longing expectation of blessedness to come. Sure those think themselves wiser than God that deny us the use of the Spirit's motives; why else doth God set these things before us? It requireth some faith to aim at things not seen. The world is drowned in sense and present satisfaction; it is a great help to us to look upward. Christ made use of it: Heb. xii. 2, 'For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross and despised the shame.' As man, he was supported with human encouragements. Our flesh is weak, and our task is difficult, and therefore we need all helps. But yet we are not so to covet the reward as to sever it from duty and neglect our work.
