

The background of the cover is a photograph of a desert landscape. On the left, a steep, rocky hillside rises, composed of reddish-brown, layered rock formations. The sky is a clear, bright blue with a few wispy white clouds. On the right side, the branches of a tree with green leaves are visible against the sky. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day in an arid environment.

The Prayer of Moses

*An Exposition of
Psalm 90*

JAMES A. HALDANE (1768-1851)

The Prayer of Moses

An Exposition of Psalm 90

Contents

1. Introduction and Historical Background3
2. Exposition of the Passage6
3. Practical Application 14

Cover photo: copyright under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>.

File source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Acacia_in_Ein_Khadra_Desert_Oasis_00_(87).jpg)

[Acacia_in_Ein_Khadra_Desert_Oasis_00_\(87\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Acacia_in_Ein_Khadra_Desert_Oasis_00_(87).jpg)

© Copyright 1999 Chapel Library: annotations. Original text is in the public domain. Printed in the USA. All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version. Chapel Library does not necessarily agree with all the doctrinal positions of the authors it publishes. Permission is expressly granted to reproduce this material by any means, provided

- 1) you do not charge beyond a nominal sum for cost of duplication, and
- 2) this copyright notice and all the text on this page are included.

Chapel Library sends Christ-centered materials from prior centuries worldwide without charge, relying entirely upon God's faithfulness. We therefore do not solicit donations, but we gratefully receive support from those who desire to give.

Worldwide, please download material from our website, or contact the international distributor listed for your country.

In **North America**, for additional copies of this booklet or other Christ-centered materials, please contact

CHAPEL LIBRARY
2603 West Wright Street
Pensacola, Florida 32505 USA

Phone: (850) 438-6666 • Fax: (850) 438-0227
chapel@mountzion.org • www.ChapelLibrary.org

Please see also Free Grace Broadcaster 198, *The Gospel*. The *FGB* is a quarterly digest of articles from prior centuries, developing one theme for each issue. Request a subscription

– worldwide, free eBook sent via email:

www.chapellibrary.org/subscriptions/

– in North America, free copy sent via mail: write Chapel

Library

– in a country with an international distributor, printed copy sent via mail: write to them directly

www.ChapelLibrary.org/about/distributors/

The Prayer of Moses

An Exposition of Psalm 90

“O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.”

Psalm 90:14-15

1. Introduction and Historical Background

This psalm is entitled, “A prayer of Moses the man of God,” and according to the ancient Jewish commentators, was written at the period when God swore in His wrath that the generation which had rebelled should perish in the wilderness and not enter into His rest (Num 14; Psa 95:8-11). The psalm contains much internal evidence in favor of this tradition; for although it must ever be applicable to the people of God in this world, it is peculiarly appropriate to the situation of Moses, and of all who feared God in Israel on that awful occasion.

Abraham, in obedience to the divine commandment, left his father's house, and dwelt in the land of Canaan, which he was assured should be given to his posterity. After the lapse of four hundred years, this promise was about to be fulfilled. The children of Israel had arrived at the borders of the land, and were commanded immediately to occupy it; but, discouraged by the report of the spies respecting the warlike appearance of the inhabitants, they bewailed their hard fate, *affirming* that they would rather have died in the wilderness, and resolved to elect a captain and return to Egypt.

Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua, in vain forbade the madness of the people. These distinguished characters would inevitably have fallen a sacrifice to their fury, had not the sudden appearance of the divine glory overawed the enraged multitude. The intercession of Moses prevented the congregation from being immediately consumed; but He Who “is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent” (Num 23:19), declared that their impious wish should be gratified, and that their carcasses should fall in the desert.

Job, in reference to those judgments in which the righteous and wicked are indiscriminately involved, observes, “If the scourge slay suddenly, he will laugh at the trial of the innocent” (Job 9:23). This was exemplified on the present occasion. Not only were the children of the rebels doomed to bear their iniquities during forty years in the wilderness; but Moses, and those who had withstood them, were included in the same punishment.

This must have been very mortifying to him, who in the strength of his God and on behalf of his nation had braved all the fury of the Egyptian monarch, and finally led Israel forth in triumph—to him who had gone before them through the midst of the sea—who had delivered to them those laws, which God Himself had been pleased to dictate for their government—and had now conducted them to the borders of the land promised to their fathers. Moses was at this time eighty years of age, and had the certain prospect—if he should live so long—of remaining, during the next forty years, in “that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water” (Deu 8:15). Here then was every earthly prospect completely blasted; and if in this life only he

had hope in God, he was “of all men most miserable” (1Co 15:19). But “he had respect unto the recompence of the reward” (Heb 11:26). Many years before, he had “refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt” (Heb 11:24-26). Such had been his deliberate resolution in the fervor of youth, when surrounded by every temptation; and he was not of those “who drawback unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul” (Heb 10:39).

We know, however, with what intense desire Moses looked forward to the enjoyment of the “good land” (Exo 3:8), which God had promised to Israel; but being disappointed in this, he cried to the Lord—like David, on another occasion—“Thou are my refuge and my portion in the land of the living” (Psa 142:5). He was “perplexed, but not in despair...cast down, but not destroyed” (2Co 4:8-9). When excluded from the habitation which God had promised to Israel, he exclaims, “Lord, thou hast been our *dwelling place* in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God” (Psa 90:1-2).

In the time of prosperity, the people of God are in danger of losing sight of the transient nature of earthly happiness. While Providence smiles upon them; while the Lord seems to set a hedge about them, and about their house, and about all that they have on every side (Job 1:10); although they do not forget Him, they are apt to forget that they are strangers and pilgrims here, and that they hold every worldly comfort by a very precarious tenure. “In my prosperity I said, I shall never

be moved. LORD, by thy favour thou hast made my mountain to stand strong” (Psa 30:6-7). But God, Who does not intend to give His people their portion in this life, often deprives them of what they chiefly value, and, by drying up the springs of earthly joy, compels them to seek their happiness more simply in Himself. He chastens them in order that they may be “partakers of his holiness” (Heb 12:10).

2. Exposition of the Passage

While, by this disappointment, the mind of Moses was directed immediately to God for relief, he exults in the contemplation of the divine eternity and unchangeableness. “*In all generations*” the Lord had been the dwelling-place of His people: from “*everlasting to everlasting*” He is God. Before the land of Canaan had been promised to the seed of Abraham, He had been the refuge of His people. He had preserved Noah and his family amidst the universal desolation occasioned by the flood. Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, to whom Canaan had been given as an inheritance, had cheerfully dwelt in it as strangers and pilgrims, although they obtained no other possession than a burying place; thus proving, that they viewed it only as an emblem of the heavenly country, where they desired to dwell with God (Heb 11:9-16). And now that Moses and those who feared God in Israel were excluded from the earthly Canaan, they could view Him as their strong habitation, whereunto they could continually resort (see Psa 71:3), and look for happiness beyond death and the grave.

It was true that God had pronounced sentence of death upon man, but He had also secured the recovery of His people. “Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a

watch in the night” (Psa 90:3-4). Turning man to destruction evidently refers to the sentence pronounced in consequence of Adam’s transgression (Gen 3:19); but God was not, on this account, less the object of the confidence of His fallen creatures; for while He turned man to destruction, with the same breath, as it were, He said, “Return, ye children of men.” Immediately after the Fall, He promised a Savior, Who should vanquish the great adversary of mankind, and thus, while He shut up every prospect of happiness in this world—declaring that in sorrow man should eat his bread all the days of his life—He opened to the human race the view of eternal happiness beyond the grave. This promise was illustrated, both by the preaching of Enoch, the seventh from Adam, and by his translation without seeing death (Gen 5:24; Jude 14; Heb 11:5).

It might indeed be objected, that we see no appearance of the resurrection of the dead. We commit the bodies of our friends to the grave, and in a few years they are reduced to dust. Thousands of years have elapsed since the death of Adam and Abraham and the prophets, yet their bodies still remain under the power of death. This *affords* a handle to scoffers, who treat the doctrine of the resurrection with contempt, and inquire, “Where is the promise of his coning? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (2Pe 3:4). The apostle repels their objection, by reminding believers, that “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Pet 3:8). In the psalm before us, from which the words of the apostle are a quotation, the very same argument is employed; and hence we conclude, that when God is represented as saying, “Return, ye children of men,” or as it is translated in the Liturgy of the Church of England, “Come again, ye children of men,” it does not, as is very often supposed,

refer to His appointment that they should return to the dust, but to His promise of recovering them from that destruction to which they had been turned by His righteous appointment. In consequence of this promise, the sentence of condemnation, passed on fallen man, is no argument against sinners viewing God as their friend and dwelling-place.

In the subsequent verse, the frailty and mortality of mankind are described. One generation after another is swept away, as by a resistless torrent; human life is but a dream; all flesh is grass, which flourishes in the morning, and at evening falls before the mower's scythe. Thus is guilty man consumed by the anger of God, and troubled by His wrath; and thus, by the vengeance which He inflicts on transgressors, does He plainly demonstrate His abhorrence of iniquity. "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance. For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told" (Psa 90:8-9). "Thine own wickedness," it is elsewhere said, "shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the LORD thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord GOD of hosts" (Jer 2:19).

Whether human life was at that time shortened to its present date, we know not; but it is certain, that the tenth verse contains an accurate description of the measure of our days. "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."

The contemplation of the dreadful consequences of sin deeply affected the mind of Moses. "Who," he exclaims, "knoweth the power of thine anger?" (Psa

90:11). And although the question did not admit of a direct answer, he observes, that our fear of God should bear some proportion to the displeasure which He has expressed at man's apostasy, and the resistless power with which He punishes sin. "Even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath" (Psa 90:11).

But, aware of the hardness of the human heart, he adds, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Psa 90:12). The wisdom here spoken of, is, both in the Old and New Testaments, opposed to the wisdom of this world. It consists in resisting the allurements of earthly objects, and in seeking "those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1). In the book of Job, we have a striking description of the extent of human ingenuity, which enables man to surmount difficulties apparently insuperable, and to make himself master of the riches buried in the bowels of the earth. "But where," it is added, "shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28:12). This inestimable treasure is described as the exclusive property of God, in Whose works it shines conspicuous. In His Word He has also revealed it to the human race. "Unto man he said, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (Job 28:28).

Moses prays that, by our experience of the shortness of human life, we may be directed to this wisdom. He proceeds—"Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants" (Psa 90:13). This does not refer to his expectation of any change of purpose respecting Israel. The sentence of exclusion from Canaan was confirmed by the oath of God. This verse contains a request for the mercy of God unto eternal life. It is an acknowledgment of the wretchedness and misery

to which man has reduced himself and a prayer that God may not cast His people off forever, that His anger may not smoke against the sheep of His pasture (Psa 74:1). “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever” (Psa 103:8-9). In the faith of this, Moses entreats, that although all our days are passed away in His wrath, God may hereafter view His people with an eye of favor.

This interpretation is clearly established by what follows. “O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein thou halt afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil” (Psa 90:14-15). Moses, it has been formerly observed, was at this time eighty years of age. Like his ancestor Jacob, he felt that his days had been few and evil, and prays, that himself, and the rest of the people of God, might be made glad, according to the days wherein they had been afflicted; that they might be *early* satisfied with the mercy of God, and might rejoice and be glad in Him all their days.¹ Certainly this does not refer to a present world. He had already passed the limit of human life and knew that during forty years he must accompany Israel in their wanderings, unless previously released by death. Could he then expect much enjoyment in the land which flowed with milk and honey? No; like his great progenitor, “he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:10). By faith he beheld that land, the inhabitant of which “shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity” (Isa

¹ The expression, “O satisfy us early with thy mercy,” exactly corresponds with the exhortation of the apostle: “Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God” (2Pe 3:12).

33:24). He anticipated the period when death shall be swallowed up in victory; when the Lord God shall wipe away tears from all faces, and take away the rebuke of His people (Isa 25:8); when “the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: [when] they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isa 35:10).

In the book of Job, there is a prayer which resembles and seems to illustrate the petition of Moses: “Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.” When contemplating the misery of human life, Job exclaims, “O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me!” (Job 14:13). Here the patriarch anticipates a period when the wrath of God against His people shall cease; when He shall remember those whom He has doomed to return to the dust. But reflecting on the improbability of the dead being raised, he inquires, “If a man die, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14). Yes, as surely as God giveth a body to the seed which is cast into the ground and dies, so surely will He raise up the bodies of His people (1Co 15:36-42), and, in the faith of this, Job answers his own question, “All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come. Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee: thou wilt have a desire to the work of thine hands” (Job 14:14-15).

Death is not the change for which Job was to wait; he refers to the renovation, which fallen man must necessarily undergo, before entering on the enjoyment of that happiness which God has prepared for His people. On this subject the language of the apostle is explicit: “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot

inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (1Co 15:50-54).

At the “appointed time,” Job was confident that God would call, and that he should answer Him. How exactly does this correspond with the language of the New Testament! “The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth” (Joh 5:28-29). “The Lord himself shall descend...with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1Th 4:16). God turns man to destruction; He reduces to dust the human body, so “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psa 139:14), but, in that day, He will repent concerning His servants; He will remember them, and once more have a desire to the work of His hands. His loving kindness shall be declared in the grave, and His faithfulness in destruction (Psa 88:11).

Moses, having prayed for the enjoyment of that rest, which remaineth for the people of God, makes intercession in behalf of future generations. “Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children” (Psa 90:16). When the sentence of exclusion from Canaan was passed on Israel, God thus addressed them: “Your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, them will I bring in, and they shall know the land which

ye have despised” (Num 14:31). Moses entreats that this promise may be accomplished, that when he and the present generation had gone the way of all the earth, their children might serve God, and behold His glory in the promised land. He concludes: “And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it” (Psa 90:17). Moses and those who feared God had been in part involved in the sentence passed upon Israel. They were suffering under the rebuke of God, and the work which they had undertaken had for the present miscarried. But a period was approaching, when the beauty of the Lord their God should be upon them”—when the triumph of Israel over the nations of Canaan should be complete, and thus the work of their hands should be established. Perhaps, also—enlightened by the Holy Spirit to look forward to the new dispensation—Moses beheld the glory of God appearing to their children in that astonishing display of His character, which is made in the incarnation, sufferings, and death of His Son. Perhaps he foresaw how the perverseness and rebellion of Israel in the wilderness would afford a salutary lesson to believers in Jesus (1Co 10:1-12; Heb 3:7-12), while his own faith, and that of those who united with him in opposing the folly of the multitude, would be exhibited for the imitation of the people of God in after-ages (Heb 11:27; 3:16). Thus, in point of fact, has the beauty of the Lord been upon them, and thus has the work of their hands been established.

Such appears to be the scope of this beautiful psalm. Such is assuredly the doctrine of the Word of God. In this world, we must endure affliction; this is not our rest, “because it is polluted” (Mic 2:10), but those who have been taught by grace to apply their hearts to wisdom—who, in the language of the New Testament,

have been made “*wise unto salvation*” (2Ti 3:15)—shall ever find, amidst the sorrows of life, a source of comfort and of joy, which the world can neither give nor take away.

3. Practical Application

The writings of Moses and the prophets are declared by our Lord sufficient to instruct men in regard to a future state, and to render those inexcusable who seek their portion in this life (Luk 16:29-31). But Jesus has “abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2Ti 1:10). The certainty of the resurrection of the body is established by the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ; and, as the forerunner of His people, “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29), He is gone to prepare a place for them in His Father’s house. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (1Pe 1:3-7).

The dispensation under which we live is very different from that under which Israel was placed. Moses indeed taught the same things to which our attention is directed by the apostles of Christ (Act 26:22-23). But he taught with a veil upon his face (2Co 3:13). In his

writings, spiritual and eternal things were exhibited in types and shadows; but “the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth” (1Jo 2:8). The apostles “use great plainness of speech” (2Co 3:12), and, in reference to our superior privileges, thus address believers: “Ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:) But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel. See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven” (Heb 12:18-25).

The curtain which overspread the invisible world is at length drawn aside (Isa 25:7), and we behold our great high priest entered “into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Heb 9:24). We hear the songs of the redeemed, expressive of their gratitude to Him, Who loved them, and washed them from their sins in His own blood, and hath made them kings and priests unto God (Rev 1:5-6; 5:9-10). We see our friends in Jesus, from time to time, joining the blessed assembly. We hear the voice of their Savior and our Savior,

encouraging us not to sorrow “as others which have no hope”; informing us, that the resurrection of Christ, attested as it is by the most infallible proofs, is not more certain than the resurrection of those who have fallen asleep in Jesus (1Th 4:13-14).

We are assured, that the sickness which has deprived us of the society of our beloved Christian friends, “is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby” (Joh 11:4); that believers, when “absent from the body,” are “present with the Lord” (2Co 5:6-8); that, when committing their remains to the dust, we are sowing the seed of a glorious harvest (1Co 15:42-44); and that our sorrow shall ere long be turned into joy.

Such is the “strong consolation,” under all the sorrows of life, which God has given to those “who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before” them (Heb 6:18). “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psa 30:5). To believers it shall be “a morning without clouds” (2Sa 23:4); for “the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended” (Isa 60:20).

It is impossible, however, to reflect on the ample grounds of consolation, afforded by the word of God to Christians whose friends have died in the faith, without adverting to the almost indiscriminate confidence, respecting the happiness of the dead, so generally expressed in this country.² Nothing is more calculated to produce false security in the living than being accustomed to hear all represented as having made a happy change on leaving the world. It is true, such

² This is carried still farther on the Continent. In the North of Europe, the blessed Mr. _____ is, to this day, the common form of expression respecting the dead.

representations are generally considered as words of course. The worth of the deceased and the happiness which he now enjoys are topics of conversation perfectly understood between the relations of the deceased and those who pay them a visit of condolence. But they know little of human nature who are not aware that the frequent recurrence of such conversations must have a powerful effect, either in convincing men of the truth of what is so often repeated, or in making them altogether careless and indifferent about eternity.

At first sight it may seem strange that those whose attention is wholly engrossed with the things of time should, on being deprived of their friends, become so confident of their eternal happiness. But when we recollect that this apparent concern about a future state implies no sacrifice—no diminution of eagerness in worldly pursuits; that those who express such confidence run no risk of being charged with enthusiasm or of being esteemed righteous overmuch, the difficulty vanishes. Man can never be wholly unconcerned about a future state; although, when it comes in competition with his worldly interests, he may practically disregard it, he is generally prepared to admit its importance. And when deprived of his friends by death—when every worldly prospect in regard to them is at an end—no wonder that he should fondly cherish the hope that they may still be happy, and that when he shall be laid in the silent grave—when the bustle and the business of life are over—he may join them in the realms of bliss. In such a state of mind it is natural to grasp at the doctrine of Scripture, and by its authority to endeavor to confirm his hopes.

But this is not all. A great proportion of those who profess to believe the scriptures consider Christianity as chiefly intended to promote the welfare of society. They

are aware of the importance of something more than temporal punishments to restrain the wickedness of man; and they see how powerfully the doctrine of a future judgment tends to produce this effect. They are also sensible that the dispositions enjoined in the word of God are well adapted to promote security and happiness among men. They view the religion of Jesus merely as it stands connected with the tranquility of the state; and hence the impatience and irritation with *which* numbers hear of any attack on Christianity, while they are ignorant of its principles, and completely mistake its object.

It is not to be expected that such persons should entertain any doubt of the happiness of their departed friends, who have been amiable and useful in society. The hope of happiness in a future state is congenial to the mind of man: it has prevailed in every age and country; and those who enjoy the benefit of divine revelation too often employ it merely to sanction their preconceived notions, as deists borrow the divine attributes from the Bible to render their systems of natural religion more imposing.

The erroneous principle to which we have referred necessarily involves a total misapprehension of the doctrine of Scripture. The influence of Christianity in ameliorating the state of society is doubtless most beneficial; but it was not to secure a transient happiness for the ruined race of man that the Son of God left the throne of His Father's glory. It was to remove the enmity of the human heart against God (Col 1:21; Eph 2:16), and to reconcile man to his Maker (2Co 5:20)—to deliver him “from this present evil world” (Gal 1:4)—and by creating him anew in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:10), to make him worthy of the inheritance of the saints in the blissful realms of light and of glory (Col 1:12). Wherever

the love of the truth is received, these effects are produced. Religion is then felt to be a personal concern. Its infinite and eternal importance to every individual is now perceived. It is no longer viewed merely, or principally, as it bears on society by restraining the lower classes and operating as a substitute for those principles of honor, by which, it is alleged, the higher orders are influenced. When a man believes the truth as it is in Jesus, he understands what formerly appeared to him absurd, that a person may be amiable and exemplary as a member of society—that he may be an affectionate husband, a kind parent, and a sincere friend—that he may be a good master, upright in his dealings, and liberal in relieving the wants³ of the poor—in short, that he may appear to be adorned with all those qualities which are so justly esteemed among men, and may yet be living without God in the world.

So far from giving countenance to the expectation of the future happiness of all who have been useful members of society, the scriptures represent the people of God as a “little flock” (Luk 12:32); they exhort us to “enter...in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Mat 7:13-14). We are not only taught that those who commit gross sins shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1Co 6:9-10; Gal 5:20-21), but we are informed that a man may be an able and eloquent defender of Christianity—may give all his goods to feed the poor; may be a martyr in the cause of truth—and yet have neither part nor lot in the salvation of Jesus (1Co 13:1-3).

³ **wants** – needs.

The man who is distinguished by his virtue and benevolence justly claims from us the homage of respect. Beloved by his friends, esteemed and venerated by the world, he has his reward. But if he has not learned that lesson which "flesh and blood" cannot teach; if he has not learned the utter corruption of his heart and its estrangement from God; if he has not been led to that river which flows from Zion, and where alone his guilt can be cleansed—then we may rest assured that there is something hollow in all those actions which we cannot but approve. He may not be a hypocrite, he may feel conscious of rectitude, but all cannot be right. The heart is diseased, the fountain is poisoned, and the stream cannot be salubrious. The world is the portion of those who do not belong to Christ; and wherever the man we have supposed does not act merely from the impulse of natural good temper, he is generally actuated by a desire to gain the applause of his fellow-man. In some cases, a desire to have something whereof he may glory before God may be superadded, or even seem to have the ascendancy in the mind. But this, alas, is not the offspring of humility, and has in it an insincerity, of which even the man himself may be little aware. How beautifully is this melancholy truth illustrated in the story which is recorded by the Evangelist of the rich young man (Mar 10:17-23). Trusting in his unimpeached moral character, priding himself in the fancied purity of his motives, and eager to learn how he might most successfully pursue the career of what he esteemed true virtue, he came to Jesus and asked what he should do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus recounted to him the commandments of the second table of the decalogue, he at once replied, "All these have I observed from my youth" (v. 20). He seems to have

spoken the language of ingenuous⁴ sincerity. But who can fathom the deceitfulness of the human heart? None but the divine Master, in whose presence the young man stood, could have at once stripped him of all his boasted excellence, and shown him that rich as he might fancy himself in good works, he was poor indeed before God. The Savior, we are told, did not repulse him as a proud self-righteous Pharisee, but looking on him with love, said, “Go...sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor” (v. 21). This was too much to hear; he felt that his treasure was garnered up on earth, and he went away overwhelmed with sorrow.

Eternal life is in scripture expressly limited to those who by faith are united to Christ (Rom 8:1; 1Jo 5:12), who know the true God and Jesus Christ Whom He hath sent (Joh 17:3); and this faith is plainly declared to be the gift of God (Eph 2:8). This knowledge, it is positively affirmed, is not obtained by education, but is the effect of the teaching of the Spirit of God (Joh 6:45). According to Scripture, every Christian has experienced a change of heart and character (2Co 5:17), and without this change, which is compared to a new birth, the Judge of the world has declared that none shall see the kingdom of God (Joh 3:3).

Such are the explicit declarations of the Word of God, and yet many profess to believe the Scriptures, while these subjects have never occupied their attention. To not a few, the doctrine of the necessity of a change of heart and character produced by the influence of the Holy Spirit appears enthusiastic and visionary. How come they thus to treat a book, which they profess to consider to be a revelation from God? If this be indeed the case, every part of it demands our most serious

⁴ **ingenuous** – honest.

attention. It is at our peril that we receive only what we approve and overlook the rest as speculative and mysterious and unintelligible. The Bible is either all true, or all fable. If it contains anything erroneous, anything superfluous, any false principle, it does not proceed from Him Whose wisdom is infinite. Human writings are imperfect: in them truth and falsehood are constantly blended; and therefore, in perusing them, we must choose the good and reject the evil. But the Scripture disclaims all imperfection; it asserts that the whole is given by inspiration of God (2Ti 3:16); and consequently, challenges the most scrupulous investigation, and the most implicit obedience.

It describes all mankind to be naturally alienated from God and under His curse (Gal 3:10-13); to be lost (Luk 19:10); and without strength to recover themselves (Rom 5:6). It assures us that the death of Christ is the only foundation of the sinner's hope (1Co 3:11), and that every unbeliever, whatever be his character, is condemned already (Joh 3:18). It declares that the good news of salvation through Christ "is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Rom 1:16); that "the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (1Co 1:18); that the grace of God, which "hath appeared to all men," teaches believers, "that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world" (Titus 2:11-12).

All in this country consider themselves Christians; but how many do we find who are strangers to the power of this doctrine—who know not the value of Christ's atonement; whose minds are engrossed with the cares and pleasures of this life; who are "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb 3:13)! They confess indeed

that they are sinners; but they are not aware of their guilt and danger. Disregarding the declaration of Him Who has not only said that “the whole world lieth in wickedness” (1Jo 5:19), but that “though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished” (Pro 11:21), they comfort themselves with the idea that God is merciful, and that they are not worse than others. They are willingly ignorant of the destruction of an ungodly world by a flood, while a single family was preserved in the ark. They know not, that “the heavens and the earth which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment, and perdition of ungodly men” (2Pe 3:7). Destitute of the love of God (Joh 5:42-43), they can hear without emotion the humiliation, and sufferings, and death, of Jesus, while angels delight to dwell on the wondrous theme (1Pe 1:12). Let such be entreated to consider their ways; let them behold the evil of transgression in the cross of Him in Whose person the divine and human natures are united. Let them there learn God’s abhorrence of iniquity and attend to the solemn question of Jesus, in the immediate prospect of His sufferings, “If they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?” (Luk 23:31).

Let us not think that any external reformation will exempt us from danger; or imagine that we can either atone for our past sins or deliver ourselves from the dominion of iniquity. “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (Joh 1:29). Let us look to Christ for salvation; his blood cleanseth from all sins (1Jo 1:7); and “by him all that believe are justified from all things” (Act 13:39). Trusting in His death for pardon and acceptance, we shall not be confounded (1Pe 2:6). The great Shepherd of the sheep was “brought...from the dead...through the blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb 13:20). Thus God declared that justice

was fully satisfied; and, through the same blood, shall all His people be raised to eternal life.

Let us look also to Christ for that “holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). He, and He alone, is able to save us from our sins (Mat 1:21); to bless us in turning us away from our iniquities (Act 3:26). Let the life then which we live in the flesh be “by the faith of the Son of God” (Gal 2:20); let all our confidence be in Him; for “neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Act 4:12).

Depending on His grace, we shall be “accepted in the beloved” (Eph 1:6). “Sin shall not have dominion over [us]” (Rom 6:14). We shall receive the communication of His Spirit (Joh 7:38-39). He will put his laws into our mind and write them on our hearts (Heb 8:10); and “being made free from sin, and become servants to God,” we shall have our “fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 6:22-23). ∞