

THE CHURCH'S VISITATION.

SERMON I.

For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God, and if it begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel? &c.—
1 PET. IV. 17, 18, 19.

OUR nature, as it is very backward to do good, so likewise to suffer evil; therefore the blessed apostle exhorts us at the latter end of this chapter, 'not to think it strange concerning the fiery trial, but to rejoice, inasmuch as we are made partakers of Christ's sufferings; wherein are many grounds of patience and comfort to the children of God.

(1.) That the thought of troubles should not be *strange* but *familiar* to them. Acquainting our thoughts with them, taketh away offence at them; though it be a *fiery trial*, yet it shall consume nothing but dross.

(2.) *Then* Christ joineth with us *in suffering*. Better to be in trouble with Christ, than in peace without him.

(3.) *The issue will be glorious*; for the Spirit of glory will not only support us with his presence, but rest still upon us.

To other grounds of comfort, he addeth some in the words of my text, as,

1. First, *that the church is God's house*, and therefore he will have a care of it.

2. That he will do it in the fittest *season*. Such is the exigence of the church and people of God, that they require a sharp visitation; and, therefore, such is God's love, that he appoints out a certain time for them.

3. From the different conditions of the *godly* and *ungodly* in *suffering*; both suffer, but differ much; (1) in order, *God begins with his own house*; (2) in measure, *where shall the ungodly appear?* Their judgment shall be most terrible and certain. It is set down by way of interrogation and admiration; what shall their end be? And as Pharaoh's dreams were doubled for more certainty, so here is a double question to make the matter more out of question, [1] what shall their end be that obey not the gospel? [2] where shall the ungodly and sinners appear?

Here is no unnecessary waste of words and arguments, for the Spirit of God knows that all is little enough to fortify the soul against the evil day. Unless the soul be well balanced, it will soon be overturned when storms arise. Therefore, the apostle in these three verses sets down, 1, some

foundations of comfort; and, 2, an *encouragement* to build upon them, 'wherefore let them that suffer,' &c.

The points considerable in the 17th verse are these:—

1. *That God's church is his house.*
2. *That this house of his will need purging; it will gather soil.*
3. *When God sees the exigent of it, that it must be so, he will be sure to visit and judge his own house.*
4. *That there is a certain time when he will do it, which those that are wise may easily gather.* For God comes not upon his church on the sudden, as a storm, or tempest, &c., but he gives them fair warning. There is a season when God begins judgment with his own house.
5. Lastly, *Why God begins with his own church and people.*

Of these in order.

Obs. 1. That the Church of God is his own house. First, *The Church of God is God's house.* God hath two houses, the *heavens*, which are called his house, because he manifests his glory there, and the *church* here below, wherein he manifests his *grace*. Yea, the whole world, in a sort, is his house, because he manifests his power and wisdom in it; but heaven and his church, in a more peculiar manner; and that in these respects:

- (1.) Because God by his grace hath *residence* in his church.
- (2.) Because by the means of salvation,—the *word*, and *sacraments* there administered,—he doth *feed* his church, as in a house.
- (3.) A man *rests* and takes *contentment* in his *house*; so God takes his best contentment in his church and *people*; they are the most beloved of all mankind.

(4.) As in a house we use to lay up our jewels and precious things; so God lays up in his church whatsoever is precious,—his praises, his graces, yea, whatsoever is good and of high esteem, that he bestows upon his church and people.

For the further clearing of this, we must know that the church and children of God are said to be his house, either,

- [1.] As a *family* is said to be a house; or,
- [2.] As the *fabric* or *building* is said to be the house.

God provides for his church as his own house. First, a man provides for his family, and he that neglects it, is worse than an infidel, 1 Tim. v. 8; so doth God provide for his church. The very dragons and ostriches, the worst of the creatures, all have some respect to their young ones; much more will God provide for his own. And as a man protects his house from all enemies, so will God protect his church and people, and be a *wall of fire*, and a defence round about them.

Now there is a mixture in the church, as in a house, of good and bad vessels; but the godly are especially God's house. As for hypocrites and false professors, they are no more in the house, than the excrements are in the body; they are in the body, but not of the body; and therefore, as Ishmael, Gen. xxi. 10, they must be cast out at length.

The heart of true Christians is God's private closet. And as in every house or building, there are some open places, and some private closets, &c., so is it here. God hath his private chamber, and his retiring-place, which is the heart of every true Christian. He counts it not sufficient to dwell in his house at large, but he will dwell in the best part of it, the heart and the affections. Therefore 'he knocks at the doors of our hearts for entrance,' Rev. iii. 20, and his best children are glad he will reside in them. They set him up in the highest place of their souls, and set a crown upon him;

their desire is, that God may govern and rule their whole conversation; they have no idol above God in their hearts.

Use 1. What a wonderful mercy is this, that we are God's house; that he will vouchsafe to dwell and take up his lodging in such defiled houses as our souls are. It is no mean favour, that God should single out us poor wretches, to have his residence and abiding place in our souls, considering there is so much wickedness in the hearts of the best of us.

Oh what comfort ariseth to a Christian soul from the due meditation of this point. If we are God's house, then God will be our house; 'Thou art our habitation,' saith Moses, 'from generation to generation,' Ps. xc. 1. Howsoever we shuffle in the world, now here and now there, having no certain place of abode, but are here to day, and gone to-morrow, yet in God we have an house, 'Thou art our habitation;' he is ours, and we are his. And what a comfort is this that we are God's house. Certainly God will provide for his own house. He that lays this charge upon others, and hath put that affection and care of provision into others for their families, will he neglect his own? he that makes us love, and puts that natural affection into us of those that belong unto us, hath he not infinitely more in himself? whenas that which we have, is but a beam or ray from his infinite brightness.

Use 2. This should then, instruct us to labour that God may dwell largely and comfortably in us, to deliver up all to this keeper of our house, and suffer him to rule and reign in us. The Romish Church is become the habitation of devils; that which was Bethel, is now become Bethaven (*a*). Why? because they would not suffer God to rule in his own house, but would have coadjutors with Christ, as if he were not a sufficient head of the church to govern it, but he must have a vicar, the pope; who, as if Christ were too weak, will not suffer him to exercise his kingly office, unless he may support and help him. Thus they set up the abomination of desolation in the temple of God.

O beloved, it much concerns us to cleanse and purify our hearts, that so we may entertain Christ, and he may delight to abide and dwell with us. You know how heinously he took it, when his house was made a den of thieves, Luke xix. 46, and will he not take it much worse that our hearts should be made the very sinks and cages of all manner of uncleanness?

How should we beg and cry to God that he would whip out these noisome lusts and corruptions out of the temple of our hearts by any sharp correction or terror of conscience whatsoever, rather than suffer them to reside there, still to grieve his good Spirit. We should take a holy state upon us, as being *temples of the Holy Ghost*, and therefore too good to be defiled with sin. Our hearts should be as the holy of holies; and therefore the apostle exhorts us 'to abstain from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit,' for this cause, 'that God may dwell amongst us,' 2 Cor. vii. 1; for, 'what communion hath light with darkness?' 2 Cor. vi. 14.

Use 3. Are God's people his house? Then let the enemies of the church take heed how they deal with them, for God will have a special care of his own house. Howsoever he may seem for a time to neglect his children, yet remember this, they are his house still; and no ordinary house, but a temple, wherein sacrifice is offered to him continually; and 'he that destroyeth the temple of God, him will God destroy,' 1 Cor. iii. 17.

Quest. Here a question would be answered, which some uncharitable spirits make, and that is this, Whether England be the house of God, or no?

* Qu. 'too?'—ED.

Ans. That the Church of England is God's house. I answer: the whole catholic militant church is but one house of God, though there be divers branches of the same. As there is but one main ocean of the sea, yet as it washeth upon the British coast it is called the British sea; and as it washeth on the Germans, the German sea, &c. It hath divers names of the divers countries which it passeth through, nevertheless there is still but one main sea; so it is with the house of God. God hath but one true church in the whole world, which spreads itself into divers nations and countries upon the face of the earth; one branch whereof is among us at this day.

Quest. How prove you that?

Ans. Doth not Christ dwell amongst us by his ordinances, and by his Spirit working effectually in the same? If a house be not in perfect repair, is it not still a house? I beseech you, let us rather give God cause to delight to dwell within us, than call in question whether he dwelleth amongst us or no.

Obs. 2. That the house of God needs visiting and purging, and the reasons of it. But to proceed. Hence further we see that the house of God after some time will need visiting and purging, seeing it will soon gather soil. There will abuses and disorders creep into it, so that it will need reformation. And this the apostle seems to insinuate when he saith, 'The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God.' The Lord saw cause for what he did. For,

1. First,—Such is the weakness of man's nature, that evil things soon discourage us; and good things, except we wrestle with our spirits, prove a snare to the best. Even the church of God, after a long time of peace, is apt to gather corruption, as water doth by standing, and as the air itself will do if it have not the wind to purge it. And as it is in the bodies of men, if they be not curiously looked unto; after a certain time, they will gather such a burden of humours as will rise to a distemper, so that they must be let blood or purged, &c., so it is with the church of God. Such is the infirmity of man's nature and the malice of Satan, that enemy to mankind, that the best of God's people will quickly gather some distemper or other, and stand in need of purging. You know a house will gather dust of itself, though clean at the first.

2. Most certain it is that the church of God cannot be long without some affliction, considering that it is now in a state of pilgrimage, absent from God, in another world as it were. We live in a gross, corrupt air, and draw in the corruption of the times, one defiling another. 'I am a man of polluted lips,' saith Isaiah, 'and dwell with men of polluted lips,' Isaiah vi. 5; ill neighbours made him the worse.

Use. This should stir us up to lament the miserable estate of man's nature, that even the best of men, the church and people of God, whilst they remain in this world, stand in need of continual purging and winnowing. Crosses are as necessary to us as our daily bread, because we carry that about us which wants them. We are as much beholden to God's corrections as to his comforts, in this world. The church needs keeping under, for the most part. God will not have us settle upon our dregs, Ps. lv. 19; Jer. xlviii. 11. This should teach us to bewail our condition, and to desire to be at home, where we shall need no purging, where we shall be as free from sorrow as from sin, the cause of it.

Obs. 3. That God will come to visit and purge his house when need is. Observe we further, that as the church will stand in need of chastisements, so

God will come and visit his temple when need is, and but when need requires neither;* for God is no tyrant, yet he will shew that he hates sin wheresoever he finds it, even in his own dear children and servants, Amos iii. 2.

If God should bear with the abuses and sins of his own church and people, it would seem that sin was not so contrary to his holy disposition as it is. Therefore, in whomsoever he finds sin, he will punish it. Our blessed Saviour found this true, when he took upon him the imputation of our sins, and became but only a surety for us. You see how it made him cry out, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Mat. xxvii. 46. Those glorious creatures, the very angels themselves, when they kept not their own standing, God would endure them no longer, but thrust them out of heaven.

Obj. But why doth God chiefly afflict his own people more than others?

Ans. 1. *Why God afflicts his own people before others.* Because they are of his own family, and are called by his name, Num. vi. 27. Now the disorders of the family tend to the disgrace of the governor of it. The sins of the church touch God more nearly than others, and therefore 'judgments must begin at the sanctuary first,' Ezek. iv. 6. 'I will be sanctified in all that come near me,' saith God when he smote Aaron's sons, Lev. x. 3. The nearer we come to God, if we maintain not the dignity of our profession, undoubtedly the more near will God come to us in judgment. We see the angels, who came nearest to God of all others, when once they sinned against him, they were tumbled out of heaven, and cast into the bottomless pit. Heaven could then brook them no longer.

2. Beloved, *the gospel suffers much through the sides of professors.* What saith the wicked worldling? These be your professors! See what manner of lives they lead! what little conscience they make of their ways! &c. Little do men know how much religion is vilified, and the ways of God evil spoken of, through the loose carriage of professors of the gospel, as if there were no force in the grace and favour of God to make us love and obey him in all things; as if religion consisted in word only, and not in power. What a scandal is this to the cause of Christ! It is no marvel God begins with them first. 'You have I known above all the families of the earth, and therefore will I punish you,' Amos iii. 2. A man may see and pass by dirt in his grounds, but he will not suffer it in his dining chamber; he will not endure dust to be in his parlour.

3. *The sins of the godly more heinous than others.* The sins of God's house admit of a greater aggravation than the sins of others; for, (1) they are committed against more *light*; (2) against more *benefits and favours*; (3) their sins in a manner are *sacrilege*. What! to make 'the temple of God a den of thieves,' to defile their *bodies and souls*, that are bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ, is this a small matter? Again, (4) their sins are *idolatry*; for they are not only the *house* of God, but the *spouse* of God.

Now, for a spouse to be false and adulterous, this is greater than fornication, because the bond is nearer; so the nearer any come to God in profession, the higher is the aggravation of their sin, and as their sin grows, so must their punishment grow answerable and proportionable. They, therefore that know God's will most of all others, must look for most stripes if they do it not, Luke xii. 47, 48.

Use 1. *No privilege can exempt us from God's judgment.* Hence, therefore, learn that no privilege can exempt us from God's judgments, nay, rather the contrary. Where God doth magnify his rich goodness and mercy to a people, and is, notwithstanding, dishonoured by them, he will at last,

* That is, 'He will neither visit nor purge it, except when need requires.'—ED.

magnify his righteous justice in correcting such disobedient wretches. Some of the fathers (Augustine, Salvianus) were forced to justify God in visiting his church more sharply than other people, because Christians are so much worse than others, by how much they should be better. Their sins open the mouths of others to blaspheme. We should not bear out ourselves on this, that we are God's house, but fear so much the more to offend him, else all our privileges will but increase our guilt, not our comfort.

Use 2. Secondly, if God begins with his own house, let the church be severe in punishing sin there most of all; because God's wrath will break out first there. What a shame is it that the heathen should make such sharp laws against adultery and other sins, and we let them pass with a slight or no punishment at all! No doubt but God blesseth a State most, when sin is discountenanced and condemned most; for then it is the State's sin no longer, but lieth upon particular offenders. But I hasten.

Obs. 4. God appoints a particular time for his visitation. As God will visit his church, so there is a certain time for it. God, as he hath appointed a general day to judge the world in, so he appoints particular times of judgment in this life; he is the wise dispenser of times. God doth not always whip his church, but his ordinary course is to give them some respite, as, Acts ix. 31, after Paul's conversion, the church had joy, and grew in the comforts of the Holy Ghost. God hath rejoicing days for his people as well as mourning days; fair weather as well as foul; and all to help them forward in the way to heaven. Beloved, God gives many happy and blessed times to encourage weak ones at their first coming on, that they may the better grow up in goodness, and not be nipped in the bud; but after a certain time, when through peace and encouragement they grow secure and careless, and scandalous in their lives, then he takes them in hand and corrects them. God hath scouring days for his vessels.

Quest. What be those times wherein God will visit his church?

Ans. 1. What be the times of God's visitation? I answer, in general, the time of visiting the church of God is from Abel to the last man that shall be in the earth. The church began with blood, continues with blood, and shall end with blood. The whole days of the church are a time of persecution. 'From my youth upward,' saith the psalmist, 'I have suffered,' Ps. lxxxviii. 15. So may the church of God say, 'Even from my cradle, from my infancy,' I have been afflicted; yea, 'for thy sake we are killed all the day long, and counted as sheep for the slaughter,' Ps. xlv. 22. But this is not here meant.

2. The church is afflicted when the light of the gospel hath most clearly shined. The time for the church of God to suffer is when the glorious manifestation of the gospel is more than in former times. We see the ten first persecutions were after that general promulgation of the gospel, whereby the world was more enlightened than formerly (*b*). We read in the Revelation of a *white horse* that Christ rides on, and a *pale horse* of famine, and a *red horse* of persecution that followed after him, Rev. vi. 2, 4, 8. So presently after the preaching of the gospel, comes the fan and the axe, or though not very presently, yet after a certain time, when our need requires it; for God will wait a while to see how we entertain his glorious gospel, and whether we walk worthy of it or not.

3. That now is the time of the church's affliction. More particularly, even now is the time of Jacob's trouble; even now God hath put a cup into the church's hand, and it must go round. The sword hath a commission to devour, which is not yet called in.

Quest. But what be the more especial times wherein a man may know some judgment is like to fall upon the church of God?

Ans. 1. *How we may know when some judgment approacheth.* The Scripture is wondrous full in the point. God usually, before any heavy judgment, visits a people with lesser judgments. His footsteps first appear in some small token of his displeasure; but if that prevails not, then *he brings a greater.*

Sign 1. 'This, and this have I done,' saith the Lord, 'and yet ye have not returned unto me,' Amos iv. 6, 7. There be droppings before the ruin of a house. Lesser judgments make way for greater, as a little wedge makes way for a greater; and, therefore, where less afflictions prevail not, there cannot but be an expectation of greater. 'Why should I smite you any more?' saith God; 'you fall away more and more,' Isa. i. 5; that is, I must have a sweeping judgment to carry you clean away.

Sign 2. Again, usually before some great calamity *God takes away worthy men*, 'the councillor, and the captain, and the man of war,' Isa. iii. 2, 3. This is a fearful presage that God threateneth some destruction, for they are the pillars of the church and the strength of the world; they are those that make the times and places good wherein they live; for they keep away evil and do good by their example and by their prayers many ways. A good man is a common good. The city thrives the better, as Solomon saith, for a righteous man, Prov. xi. 10, 11, Eccles. ix. 15. Therefore, we have cause to rejoice in them, and it is an evil sign when such are removed.*

Sign 3. God usually visits a people when some *horrible crying sins reign amongst them*, as (1) atheism. Beloved, God stands upon his prerogative then, when he is scarce known in the world; when they say, Where is God? God sees us not, &c. So, likewise (2), when idolatry prevails. This is spiritual adultery and a breach of covenant with God. Again (3), when divisions grow amongst a people. Union is a preserver. Where there is dissension of judgment, there will soon be dissension of affections; and dissipation will be the end if we take not heed. For the most part, ecclesiastical dissensions end in civil; and therefore we see, before the destruction of Jerusalem, what a world of schisms and divisions were amongst the Jews. There were Pharisees and Sadducees, &c. It was the ruin of the ten tribes at length, the rent that Jeroboam caused in religion. It is a fearful sign of some great judgment to fall upon a church, when there is not a stopping of dissensions. They may be easily stopped at first, as waters in the beginning; but when they are once gotten into the very vital parts of the church and commonwealth, we may see the mischief, but it is hardly † remedied.

Sign 4. Again, when sin goes with some evil circumstances and odious qualities, which aggravate the same in the sight of God, as when sin grows ripe, and abounds in a land or nation. At such a time as this a man may know there is some fearful judgment approaching.

Quest. But when is sin ripe?

Ans. 1. When it is impudent; when men grow bold in sin, making it their whole course and trade of life. When men's wicked courses are their 'conversation,' ‡ they cannot tell how to do otherwise.

2. When sin grows common and spreads far. It is an ill plea to say, Others do so as well as I. Alas! the more sin, the more danger.

3. When there is a security in sinning, without fear or dread of the Almighty, as if men would dare the God of heaven to do his worst. Oh,

* Compare reflections on Sibbes's own death, by Catlin. Appendix to Memoir, pp. cxxxiii-v.—G.

† That is, 'with difficulty.'—G.

‡ That is, 'habitual.' Compare 2 Peter ii. 7; 1 Peter i. 15, *et alibi*.—G

beloved, such persons as go on still in their sins to provoke the Lord, do put a sword, as it were, into God's hands to destroy themselves.

The old world, you know, was very secure. No doubt, they mocked at holy Noah when he made the ark, as if he had been a doting old man. Notwithstanding, he foretold them of the wrath to come. And our Saviour, Christ, saith, 'Before the end of the world it shall be as in the days of Noah,' Mat. xxiv. 38. Beloved, God hath his 'old worlds' still. If we have the same course and security of sinning, we must look for the same judgments. And, therefore, compare times with times. If the times now answer former times, when God judged them, we may well expect the same fearful judgments to fall upon us.

Sign 5. Unfruitfulness threateneth a judgment upon a people. When God hath bestowed a great deal of cost and time, he looks we should answer his expectation in some measure. The fig-tree in the gospel had some respite given it, by reason of the prayers of the vine-dresser; but afterward, when it brought forth no fruit, it was cut down and cast into the fire. Beloved, who amongst us would endure a barren tree in his garden? That which is not fit for fruit is most fit for fire. We can endure a barren tree in the wilderness, but not in our orchards. When God, the great husbandman in his church, sees that upon so great and continual cost bestowed upon us, we remain yet unfruitful, he will not suffer us long to cumber the ground of his church.

Sign 6. Again, decay in our first love is a sign of judgment approaching. God threatened the church of Ephesus to remove his candlestick from among them, for their 'decay in their first love,' Rev. ii. 4; that having surfeited of plenty and peace, he might recover her taste by dieting of her. Decay in love proceeds from disesteem in judgment; and God cannot endure his glorious gospel should be slighted, as not deserving the richest strain of our love. The Lord takes it better where there is but little strength and a striving to be better, than when there is great means of grace and knowledge, and no growth answerable, but rather a declining in goodness. I beseech you lay these things to heart. The Lord is much displeased when Christians are not so zealous as they should be; when there is not that sweet communion of saints among them, to strengthen and encourage one another in the ways of holiness as there might be; when there is not a beauty in their profession to allure and draw on others to a love and liking of the best things; when there is not a care to avoid all scandals that may weaken respect to good things, and bring an evil report on the ways of God; when they labour not with their whole hearts to serve the Lord in a cheerful manner, &c. The very not serving God answerable to encouragements, is a certain sign of ensuing danger, Deut. xxviii. 47.

Use. Therefore, I beseech you, let us look about us whether these be not the times wherein we live, that judgment must begin at the house of God. The Lord complains in Jeremiah, Jer. viii. 7, that the turtle and other silly creatures knew the time of their standing and removing, but his people did not know his judgments. Do the creatures know their times and seasons, and shall Christ complain that we know not the day of our visitation? What a shame is this! I beseech you, let us know and consider our times. If we have a time of sinning, God will have a time of punishing.

And have we not just cause to fear that judgment is not far from us, when we see a great part of God's house on fire already in our neighbouring countries? We have had lesser judgments, and they have not wrought

kindly with us; we need a stronger purge. If we look to the carriage of men, what sin is less committed now than formerly? How few renew their covenant with God, in sincerity of resolution, to walk closely with him!

And what the judgment will be, we may probably foresee, for usually the last judgment is the worst. We have had all but war, the worst of all; for in other judgments we have to deal with God, but in this we are to deal with men, whose very mercies are cruelties, Prov. xii. 10. The sword hath a long time been shaken over our heads, a cloud of war hath hung over us to affright us, but we rest still secure in our sinful courses, and think 'to-morrow shall be as to-day,' Isa. lvi. 12, and that 'no evil shall come nigh us,' &c., Micah iii. 11. O the frozen hearts of Christians, that thrust the evil day far from them! do we not see the whole world in a manner in a combustion round about us, and we, as 'the three young men in the fiery furnace,' Dan. iii., untouched? Beloved, we have outstripped them in abominable wickedness; and however the Lord is pleased that we should only hear a noise and rumour of war, yet we in this land have deserved to drink as deep of the cup of the Lord's wrath as any people under heaven.

Quest. What course should we take to prevent the judgment of God, and keep it from us?

Ans. *Of the means to prevent and escape God's judgments.* 1. *Labour to meet God by speedy repentance, before any decree be peremptorily come forth against us.* As yet there is hope to prevail; for, blessed be God, as we have many things to fear, so we have many things to encourage us to go unto God with comfort. We have enjoyed a succession of gracious princes that have maintained the truth of God amongst us; we have many godly magistrates and ministers, together with the ordinances, and many other experiences of God's love vouchsafed unto us. We have yet time to seek the Lord. Let us not defer till the very time of judgment come upon us; for that is but self-love.

Note. Assure thyself thus much, thou canst have no more comfort in troubles and afflictions when they do come, than thou hast care to prevent them before they come; answerable to our care in preventing now, will be our comfort then.

Therefore if we would be hid in the day of God's wrath; if we would have God to set his mark upon us, and write us in his book of remembrance, and to gather us when he 'makes up his jewels,' Mal. iii. 16; if we would have him to own us then, look to it now, get now into Christ, be provided now of a sound profession of religion, and that will be as an ark to shelter us in the evil day. What we know let us do, and then we shall be built on a rock, that if waves or anything come, we shall not be stirred.

Usually God in dangerous times leaveth some ground of hope, which worketh differently with men. Such as are carnal, grow presumptuous hereupon; but the godly are drawn nearer to God upon any appearance of encouragement; the good things they enjoy from God, work in them a more earnest desire to please him.

It is the custom of the Spirit of God to make doubtful, imperfect, and as it were half promises, to keep his people still under some hope; whence we read of these and such like phrases in Scripture, 'It may be God will shew mercy,' Amos v. 15; and 'who knoweth whether he will hear us?' &c., Joel ii. 14.

2. Again, *examine and try, upon what ground thou professest religion, whether it will hold water or no, and stand thee in stead when evil times shall come.* Beloved, it nearly concerns us all, seriously to consider and narrowly to search,

upon what grounds we venture our lives and souls ; try our graces, our knowledge, repentance, faith, love, &c., of what metal they are. Those that have coin, bring it to the touchstone, and if it prove counterfeit they presently reject it and will have none of it. O that we had this wisdom for matters of eternity ! If men would search and plough up their own hearts, they would not need the ploughing of God's enemies. We should not need God's judgments, if we would judge ourselves. The church complained that the enemies had made long furrows on her back, but if she had ploughed herself, she had saved the enemies that labour, Ps. cxxix. 3.

3. Before any judgment comes, *let us store up the fruits of a holy life* ; every day be doing something ; do that now, which may comfort thee then ; store up comforts against the evil day. When the 'night is come, we cannot work,' John ix. 4. Let us therefore 'walk while we have the light,' John xii. 35 ; let us look about us and do what good we can 'whilst we have time,' as the apostle saith, 1 Cor. vii. 29. The time will come ere long that thou wilt wish, O that I had that opportunity and advantage of doing good as I have had ! O that I had such means of doing good as I have had ! but then it will be too late ; then that whereby thou shouldst do good, will be in thy enemies' hands ; and therefore, while we have time, let us be doing and receiving all the good we can.

4. Again, if we would have God to shield us, and be an hiding-place in the worst times, *let us mourn for our own sins and the sins of the times wherein we live*. Let us keep ourselves unspotted of the sins of the world ; let us not bring sticks to the common fire ; let us not make the times worse for us, but better, that the times and places we live in may bless God for us.

And let us not only mourn for the sins of the times, but labour also to repress them all we can, and stand in the gap, endeavouring by our prayers and tears to stop God's judgments.

5. *And we should set a high price upon that religion and the blessings of God which we do enjoy*, lest we force God to take them from us ; and so we come to know that, by the want of it, which we did not value when we possessed it. Oh, let us esteem the treasure of the gospel at a higher rate than ever we have done. We see how it is slighted by most of the world ; how they shake the blessed truths of God, and call them into question, being indifferent for any religion. Is this our proficiency, beloved ? It behoves us to store up all the sanctified knowledge we can, and to take heed we yield not to any, that would either weaken our judgment in religion, or our affections to the best things. We should, every one in his place, labour to stop dissensions in this kind, and knit our hearts together as one man in unity and concord. Factions have always fractions going with them. Unity makes strong, but division weakeneth any people. Even Satan's kingdom, Mat. xii. 25, 26, divided against itself, cannot stand.

What is the glory of England ? Take away the gospel, and what have we that other nations have not better than ourselves ? Alas, if we labour not to maintain truth, we may say with Eli's daughter, 'The glory of God is departed from us,' 1 Sam. iv. 21.

Sarah had her handmaid ; and so hath religion been attended with prosperity and peace, preservation and protection amongst us, even to the admiration * of other countries. Shall we not, therefore, make much of that religion, which, if we had it alone, joined with many crosses and sufferings, yet were an inestimable and unvaluable blessing ? And shall we not now much more, considering it hath been attended by so many mer-

* That is, 'wonder.'—G.

cies, cherish and maintain the same all we can? Do we think it will go alone when it goes, whensoever God removes it from us? No, no. Therefore, I beseech you, let us highly esteem of the gospel, whilst we do enjoy it. If we suffer that to be shaken any way, our peace and prosperity will then leave us, and judgment upon judgment will come upon us. If we will not regard the truth of God, which he esteemeth most, he will take away outward prosperity, which we esteem most.

But I come to the fifth point, *that judgment must begin at the house of God.*

Quest. Why doth God begin with his own church and people?

Ans. Reason 1. Usually because he useth *wicked men* and the *enemies* of his church for that base service, to *correct and punish them.*

Reason 2. To take away all excuse from *wicked men.* That they, seeing how severely God deals with his own dear children, might be stirred up to look about them, and consider what will become of themselves at the last, if they go on in their sinful courses. So many crosses as befall God's children, so many evidences against secure carnal persons; for if God deal thus with the green tree, what will he do with the dry? If he scourge his children thus with rods, certainly the slaves shall be whipped with scorpions.

Reason 3. God begins with his own servants, *that his children might be best at last.* If he should not begin with them, they would grow deeper in rebellion against him, and attract more soil and filth to themselves, and be more and more engaged to error and corruption. God's love to his people is such, that he regards their correction before the confusion of his enemies.

Reason 4. Again, God doth this, *that when he sends them good days afterwards, they might have the more taste and relish of his goodness.* After an afflicted life, we are more sensible of happy times. God deals favourably, therefore, with a man when he crosseth him in the beginning of his days, and gives him peace in his latter end.

This is a point of marvellous comfort and encouragement to the faithful servants of God; for,

Use 1. Though God correct them sharply, yet he shews thereby they are of his household. When a man corrects another, we may know it is his child or servant, &c. God shews that we are of his house and family by the care he takes to correct us. The vine is not hated because it is pruned, but that it may bring forth more fruit; the ground is not hated because it is ploughed, nor the house because it is cleansed.

Quest. But what is meant by judgment here?

Ans. Judgment is correction moderated to God's children. Judgment is twofold in Scripture. The statutes of God are called judgments, and the corrections of God are called judgments. The statutes are called judgments, because they judge what we should do, and what we should not do. Now, when we do not that we should, he is forced to judge us actually with real judgments.

The real judgments of God are either (1), upon the *wicked*, and so they are judgments *in fury*, for there is not the least taste of his love in them to wicked men. They can make no sanctified use of them, because they are not directed to them for their good; or (2), to *God's children*, and so they are *moderate corrections*; and therefore the prophet so often urgeth, 'Correct us, Lord, in judgment,' &c., Jer. x. 24. God always moderates afflictions to his own children, but as for the wicked, he sweeps them away as dung, as dross, and as chaff, &c.

Use 2. Again, it is a comfort to God's children that he begins with them *first.* Rather than God will suffer them to perish and be condemned with

the world, he begins with them here. They have their worst first, and the better is to come.

Use 3. This likewise is some comfort, that the *time* when God corrects his children is most *seasonable* and fit for them. God pruneth his trees in the fittest time. A plant cut unseasonably, dieth, but being cut in due time it flourishes the better. All the works of God are beautiful in their season. Every Christian may truly say, God loves me better than I do myself. He knows the best time of purging and visiting his people. 'This is the time of Jacob's trouble,' &c., Micah ii. 3. Therefore we should lay our hands upon our mouths, kiss the rod, and stoop under judgments, as considering God's time to be the best time, and that he knows better what is good for us than we do ourselves.

Thus you see, though we have cause of fearing God's judgments, yet there is something to comfort us in the midst of all. God mingles our comforts and crosses together whilst we are here, both to keep us in awe of offending his Majesty, and to encourage us in well-doing. *Securitatis custos timor*. Therefore let us always look what matter of fear and what matter of hope we have, for both these are operative affections. *Spes exercitat ad opus*. Oh that I could stir up this blessed fear in you. It is that which preserves the soul; and God hath promised that 'he will put his fear into our hearts, that we shall not depart from him,' Jer. xxxii. 40. I beseech you, ply the throne of grace, and desire the Lord that it may be to every one of your souls according to his good word.

Labour likewise for encouragement in the ways of holiness. Blessed be God, yet we have a time of respite. God forbears us with much patience and goodness. Answerable to our good courses that we take now, will be our comfort in the evil day. If we carelessly go on in sin, and think it time enough to renew our covenant with God then, when his judgments are abroad and ready to cease* upon us, we do but delude our own souls, and expose ourselves to inevitable dangers. Mark what the Lord saith, Because I called, and you would not hear, &c., therefore will I laugh at your destruction, Prov. i. 24, 26. Is it not strange that the merciful God should laugh at the calamity of his poor creatures? Yet thus it is with every wilful sinner that dallies with God, and puts off his repentance from time to time. God will take pleasure in the ruin of such a man, and laugh when his fear cometh, because those that seek him then, do it not out of any love or liking of God and the ways of goodness, but merely out of self-love and respect to their own welfare.

* Qu. 'rest?' or 'fall?'—Ed.

NOTES.

(a) Page 375.—'That which was Bethel, is now become Bethaven.' That is, what was 'Bethel,' which means 'house of God,' was become 'Bethaven,' which means 'house of idols,' a sort of *jeu de mot* applied to Bethel, after it became the seat of the worship of the golden calves.

(b) Page 378.—'First ten persecutions.' The first was under Nero, A.D. 64; the second under Domitian, 95; the third under Trajan, 100; the fourth under Adrian, 118; the fifth under Severus, 197; the sixth under Maximinus, 235; the seventh under Decius, more bloody than any preceding; the eighth under Valerian, 257; the ninth under Aurelian, 272; and the tenth under Dioclesian, which lasted ten years, 302. G.