

SERMON II.

BY JOHN MARTIN

1793

ON THE PRE-EXISTENCE OF CHRIST.

JOHN VIII. 58.

BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS I AM,

IN this sermon, it is taken for granted, we have no knowledge of the Pre-existence of Christ, but what the scriptures impart ; and that what they say on this subject is of the highest authority. But it is also taken for granted, that our judgment of what is there written is not infallible.

On these principles, it becomes us to search the scriptures carefully; to speak of what we find, or think we have found in them, with caution ; and to be reasonably open to conviction :—but, on these principles, it also becomes us to be deaf to every false alarm.

Should any man, however respectable, attempt to terrify us, by

pronouncing a curse on those who cannot subscribe to his opinion, surely, we have no reason to tremble at his intemperate resentment. We may be confident, the curse causeless shall not come.

A different disposition, it is hoped, will pervade this discourse. It is the result of some reading, and of many thoughts, on this mysterious subject will it be enlarged, on any intention to exasperate men of understanding, or merely to fill up this part of my proposed plan. No, it will contain the best account I am able to give of the Pre-existence of our Lord, and such additional remarks as may supply what is defective in it, or shew that the substance of that account deserves your re-consideration.

That our Lord, according to the flesh, was born of the Virgin Mary, in Bethlehem, under the reign of Tiberius, is undoubted. Whether before he was the reputed son of Joseph, he existed, and in what character, we are now to inquire.

The Jews, in general, believed (what some authors now believe) that Christ did not exist till he was born of Mary ; and that he was a mere man. Christ affirmed of himself, that he had a prior existence. Your Father Abraham, said he, rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old; and hast thou seen Abraham? Our Lord replied, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was I am. At this answer, the Jews were highly offended. The words I AM, were held by them in great reverence. They could not apply them to any object but JEHOVAH: but that Jesus had any, the least claim to such honor, they denied with indignation. They even took up stones, and cast at him.

We are now to consult the scriptures on this-article of our creed. To do this with caution, let us first consider what evidence they afford us of the Pre-existence of Christ; and then, by the same medium, discover if we can, what our Mediator was before his Incarnation.

I. The evidence which the scriptures exhibit of the Pre-existence of Christ, is more than careless readers imagine; more than prejudiced readers will admit; and much more than can be produced in a single sermon. Perhaps, the following abridgement of it will be thought sufficient for this discourse.

In the Old Testament we find one object who frequently appeared to the ancient patriarchs, distinguished from every other. This illustrious person, in a manner we cannot explain, appeared to Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Manoah, and others, with a kind of dignity that must have been dangerous, unless he had been truly that prophet that should come into the world.

From these appearances, and from what inferior prophets said of him, the ancients: Jews firmly believed he was the Lord of Hosts: so Isaiah called him, when he saw his glory, and spake of him. Solomon introduces this illustrious object in one of his sublimest compositions, speaking thus: Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom. I am understanding. I have strength. The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way: before his works of his old I was set up from everlasting ; from the beginning, or ever the earth was.—Then was I by him, as one brought up with him ; and I was daily his delight : rejoicing always before him. Rejoicing in the habitable parts of His earth: and MY delights were with the sons of men.

It is easy to say, that these words are to be explained, by conceiving that Solomon speaks of an impersonal quality, agreeable to the vivid colouring of the eastern stile, and not of any person then actually existing, and who was afterwards to be manifested in the flesh. But, the literal sense of scripture is not to be given up, where it contains nothing inconsistent with the analogy of faith, or with the context of the sacred writer. On this principle, the words of Solomon may be safely applied to Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament, as we have seen, the Pre-existence of our

Lord is strongly asserted; and the evidence exhibited of the same fact in the New Testament, is as clear and strong; taken together, it would be petulant in us to wish for more.

John says, In the beginning was THAT Word which was afterwards made flesh, and dwelt amongst us, full of grace and truth. In another place he says, That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the word of life ; [For the life was manifested ; and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested to us :] THAT which we have seen and heard, declare we Unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us : and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

The words of John are worthy that Evangelist; and the following words are worthy of Jesus Christ. He was risen from the dead. John was in banishment, in the isle of Patmos, for the word of God. Our Lord appeared to him in that lonely place, and said, I am Alpha and Omega; the first and the last. John turned to see from whom this voice proceeded; and being turned, he saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. When he saw him, he fell at his feet as dead. But he who spake to him, laid his right hand upon him, and said, Fear not, I am the first, and the last. I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen. And have the keys of hell and death.—If this does not prove it was JESUS that appeared to John, and that he is Alpha, or from the beginning, we must I believe, despair of obtaining satisfaction of the Pre-existence of Jesus Christ.

II. But now, a deeper question calls for our attention. For the question is, WHAT was Christ in his pre-existent state?

That he was a person, we may take for granted. They who deny it, whatever may be their consequence on other subjects, are upon

this, of no consequence at all. Still it remains to be considered, whether our Lord, in that state, was a man, an angel, or, in a peculiar sense, the Son of God.

The first of these propositions, I venture to deny; and say, he was nor a man. My reasons are, because he was afterwards, and not before, made in the likeness of men; and because what is attributed to him, prior to his Incarnation, cannot be ascribed to any thing that we know, or believe of human nature. We are told, that God made man; and therefore, it seems incredible that he would say to him, Let us make man, in our image, after our likeness.

But, whatever our Lord was before he dwelt amongst us, we must admit, if he existed before the foundation of the world, that he was a person of uncommon excellence, and possessed of exuberant understanding. Yet Luke says, of the child Jesus that he grew and waxed strong in spirit. If this be true ; if the child that was born of Mary, gradually grew in wisdom and in stature; if, while the Virgin held him in her arms, he really knew not what homage was paid him by the eastern Magi, and afterwards by others ; are we to suppose his previous intellectual excellence was lost ? Or, that though he seemed a babe, he was then as rich in understanding as he that made the world, and upholdeth all things by the word of his power? If he really lost his former wisdom, what end was it to answer? Wherein could such waste of the highest worth be a benefit to us? or how could such an example produce humility ? If, on the contrary, the child of Mary only seemed to be a babe in understanding, but was, in truth, as wise then as now, this conclusion bears hard on the character of an inspired writer; and should that be given up as indefensible, where are we to stop, and on what must we rely in reference to the character of Christ?

Further; I contend, that our Lord in his P re-existent state, was not an angel, in the common acceptation of that ambiguous term. It is

well known the word angel is not expressive of the nature of any agent, but of his office; and that it literally signifies a messenger, whether he is more or less important.

There is a wide difference between created angels and that Lord who is called the messenger of the covenant. Of him, it is said, And thou, Lord, in the beginning, hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands. They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old, as doth a garment; and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed ; but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail. Thus spake the Father to his Son. But to which of the angels said he, at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool ? Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation? I conclude, therefore, that since our Mediator was neither a man, nor an angel, before his Incarnation, he was a person superior to both : not that I mean to say, he was super-angelical (a phrase as arbitrary as it is un-instructing) ; no, from what has been adduced, and from other portions of scripture, I am fully persuaded, that he who became Incarnate was, in a sense peculiar to himself, THE SON OF GOD.

The Sonship of Christ is a subject far above our comprehension. I am glad it is: for could we, with our slender abilities, comprehend this mystery, the object comprehended by us would sink in our esteem. But as an article of faith, I have long thought, and yet think, that the sonship of Christ is of such importance as by no means to be given up, however unpopular it may appear, or though we should meet with some objections extremely difficult to be removed.

You will not wish me to explain what I never professed to understand. On this subject, I am merely a believer; and my belief amounts to this : that the term, Son, is not to be applied to the divine nature of our Lord, but to his person; that so considered, he is the only begotten Son of God ; that the term, begotten, is not to

be taken up either in the metaphorical or literal sense of that expression ; but is to be interpreted as a term which gives us an analogical notion of a real fact; and that no other word will convey to us exactly the same meaning. It is most certain, God is not a man. To argue, therefore, as if he was, and, because he is pleased to speak to us in our own language, to suppose there is but little difference between the human nature and the divine, is extremely rash. 'Tis hard to say, whether a contempt of reason, or a rage for reasoning, have done the most mischief. If that from which we reason is not at all understood, our deductions, however numerous or ingenious, are delusive. We are therefore, on those subjects which are to us of the greatest moment, compelled to live by faith, or to live in error : but we may safely believe many things of which we neither have, nor can have, direct and adequate notions ; provided our faith rests on that authority which our reason tells us it would be foolish and wicked to resist.

As to self-existence, were they who plead for it, to confess they do not comprehend what they assert, so far, by their modesty, they might attract attention; but when they seem to know much of that which passeth all understanding, and proceed to apply self-existence to the person of Christ, they give offence, and will find at last that their positive assertions can by no means answer their sanguine expectations.

To say that Christ is a son by office, is less artful than it is evasive. If he who is in office is not a son, what must that office be that can give existence to filiation? Some post it seems, under the economy of Salvation. But God is above all his works. Creation, Redemption, and Providence, may make manifest what God is to angels and to men; yet neither these divine operations, nor all the blessings of grace, are the ground of that eternal and immutable relation which subsists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Such are my notions of the Pre-existence of Christ. If this discourse be shorter than you expected, the difficulty of treating the subject

with becoming caution, must be my apology. However, before we conclude, and for the purposes which have been mentioned, I shall now add the following remarks.

I. If Christ did not pre-exist his dwelling amongst us, he had no knowledge of the church or world, of himself or his heavenly Father, till some years after he was born of Mary. But is it possible to believe, that patriarchs, prophets, and an innumerable company of angels, take the lead of our Lord in the antiquity of their understanding? He that can believe this, may believe more; and indeed, there is nothing more silly than the credulity of unbelievers. It deserves your notice, that they who have jested most at orthodox sentiments, have, by a just series of consequences, been given up to believe the most unaccountable things that ever were circulated amongst mankind. For my own part, I have long since observed, that they who affect to sneer at creeds, have always one of their own. Every man believes something; and he who deviates most from that testimony which is the standard of religious truth, lives in the belief of those sentiments which believers have a right to despise.

II. If Christ did not pre-exist, it must follow, that he did not execute any public office till after he was baptized. But what are we to suppose that the Church of God was actually without a prophet, priest, and king, till Jesus, according to the flesh, began to be about thirty years of age? If so, the prophets, priests, and kings, under the Levitical economy, had a priority which contradicts all that is testified of them in the sacred scriptures. To attempt a formal refutation of this wild opinion would be a waste of time, an abuse of your patience, and an affront to your religious understanding.

III. If Christ did not pre-exist, his Incarnation must be denied. The birth of Christ was not as ours, but by his own choice. He made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant.—For as much as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same.—For verily

he took not on him the nature of angels ; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Here are such evident marks of our Lord's being Incarnate by his own choice, that they cannot be set aside. Nor can we wish them to be effaced. To what end? Since where choice has no place, religion has no power. His assumption of our nature did not make him a person; but his Incarnation makes it manifest that his person is divine. On any other supposition we cannot conceive he could have taken hold of angels; and, unless this be granted, on the seed of Abraham he could not have taken hold.

Of the Incarnation of our Lord I am to speak in the following discourse ; all therefore, now contended for is, that between it and his Pre-existence, the connection is so close, that if the latter be denied, the former must be given up.

To introduce a different turn to these inferential remarks, instead of negative deductions, let us take it for granted, that our Lord really did pre-exist as the 'Word of God. If this be admitted, we must allow, that in dignity, he is greater, not only than Moses and Aaron, but that, as the Son of God, he is far above all principality and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come. Should it be said, this text speaks of our Lord's exaltation after his resurrection, we answer, neither his resurrection, nor any thing else, makes his person to be that it was not from the beginning.

In the beginning, he was the Son of his Father, in truth and love. How else, to believers in him, could Paul have reasoned thus: If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ? When we consider that Jesus Christ is the word of God, the Son of God, the Lord from heaven, the quickning Spirit, the Messenger of the Covenant of Grace, the same yesterday, to day, and for ever; when we are told, that being in the form of God, he thought it not robbery to be equal with God; we must confess, we meet in these

expressions, a grandeur we can neither overlook, nor comprehend.

I am aware, that the sense of some of these words, and of others, which relate to the divinity of Christ, is controverted: and shall only say, that what is here quoted in favor of that article of our faith, seems to me to admit of ample defense. But by defending the divinity of our Lord, I mean, the giving a good account why we are persuaded of it, and not to insinuate it is in our power to make that evident to our reason, which is only revealed to our faith.

Some believers, while Christ was on earth, beheld his glory, as the glory of the only begotten of his Father, full of grace and truth; but since his ascension, who can say how many, with open face, have beheld, as in a glass, the glory of the Lord? But still, as in a glass. If that mirror is removed, we either lose sight of his glory, or form fantastic notions of it; as it is regarded, the glory of our Lord is to believers, at once, incontestable and incomprehensible.

Again; if Christ pre-existed as has been supposed, his condescension bears a proportion to his dignity.—Paul said to the Romans, Mind not high things; but condescend to men of low estate. Yet, where, I pray, is the wonderful condescension in one Roman being respectful to another? Or in one man being courteous to another? Vanity often makes us think we have condescended greatly, when common sense would have drawn a very different conclusion. The character of Christ is not liable to such censure. The more attentively we consider it, the more we are convinced his condescension is without the shadow of equality among the sons of men. The same mind may be in us which was also in Christ Jesus; but it is not possible that the same charmer should belong to us and him. Whatever resemblance there may be between Christ and Christians, the disparity is as conspicuous, and as instructing, as the agreement. Our condescension must be tintured with our low and weak condition; and, on that account, it can never be so great to our fellow men, as it is sometimes represented; but the voluntary humility of the Son of God, is such

as produces in heaven itself, lasting admiration.

Further; from the pre-existence of Christ it appears, that his compassion to his people is as great as his condescension. It is said, Because the children were partakers of flesh and blood, he likewise himself partook of the same. Who is not touched with such goodness, and charmed with such commiseration? But Why this painful sympathy, this holy partiality, to the children? Were they by nature,

nature, or without grace, better than others ? No, in no wise. Why, therefore, so compassionate to them? The answer is, that through death, [his own death, his death on the cross] he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest, in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of his people.

Wonderful compassion! Have we not felt it's force? Shall we ever forget its sacred influence? Allured by it, we have taken courage to approach unto God, when otherwise, we had been driven far from him. Feeling its power, our resentments to our fellow men have died away, and we have put on at once, and with ease, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, and long suffering. May we reflect on those moments with the most grateful acknowledgments, and, by a renewal of them, more and more adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour!

It now, I hope, appears that from the pre-existence of our Lord, believers may derive strong consolation. It is that which makes his Incarnation illustrious, his obedience glorious, his atonement precious, and his resurrection the solid ground of their lively hope. But for the union of the divine and human nature in Christ, how could we confide in him, or believe, that all power in heaven and

earth is put into his hands? Till we behold Immanuel, we are always exposed to delusion, or distress. But resting on the divinity and filiations' of our Lord, the Vail of his flesh does not diminish, but increase our confidence in his mediation. It removes the fear of our being thought presumptuous; since we are told, that is the new and living way which is consecrated for us; and that in it we are ever welcome to draw near unto God.

Were we, my brethren, constantly to walk up and down in the name of the Lord, and to live by faith on the Son of God, in a settled and sound persuasion, that he has loved us, and given himself for us, and has made us kings and priests unto God and his Father, we should live in the best manner it is possible to live in this world, and should leave it, when we are called hence, not only without regret, but in hope that the grace bestowed upon us, will terminate in glory.

These are strong inducements to believe in Christ: yet how great is the number of unbelievers! What must they feel, when they shall be convinced of having deliberately rejected the only name under heaven, whereby they must be saved!

How are we to address this unthinking, or deluded set of people? To say we pity them, while they think they need it not, is but to provoke resentment, and, in their eyes, to make ourselves ridiculous. To throw out illiberal invectives, would ill become us, who have so frequently confessed, we are saved by grace. To connive at their folly, and form apologies for it, would be equally offensive to the Almighty. What then remains, but that we reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with all long suffering and doctrine. This is our duty, as a capacity, and a proper opportunity to discharge it, are united; nor is it then, on any pretence, to be omitted.

They who are left without remedy, are always left without excuse. Unbelief gains no dominion over them, without the evil dispositions of their own hearts. If they imagine, THAT is not to be

accounted evil, which, by their own power, they cannot resist, or remove, they are deceived; and the deception, I fear, is very common. The question is not, what they can, or cannot be, as independents; (for no man, accurately speaking, is an independent, except in his own imagination ;) but the question is, what they might avoid, and pursue, by divine assistance. This question, however, can never be answered by speculation. Up and try, in that way which God hath directed, is essential to the sober solution of it.

But it is said, The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God; and, that God is not in all his thoughts. Now, though God should be found of them that sought him not; yet should he leave such persons to die in their sins, they would justly perish in their own folly. How far any of us ever indulged this evil temper, let each of us, for himself, consider: and may we remember, that though our unbelief may be accounted for by the depravity of human nature, yet that faith which accompanies salvation, must be attributed to sovereign grace!

SERMON III.