

SERMON III.

ON THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST.

LUKE II: 7.

AND SHE BROUGHT FORTH HER FIRST-BORN SON, AND WRAPPED HIM IN SWADDLING CLOTHES, AND LAID HIM IN A MANGER; BECAUSE THERE WAS NO ROOM FOR THEM IN THE INN.

NEVER was any object so much expected, or so ardently desired, as Jesus Christ; yet never were any people more disappointed than those who waited for his appearing. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and it knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. In short, after all the prophets had said, and all that John could say, unto the Jews he was a stumbling block; and after every thing the Apostles could urge, and Paul himself could preach, unto the Greeks, Christ was foolishness. How are we to account for this contempt of the Son of God? That may be done sufficiently, by giving a due attention to prophecy and history, and by serious reflections on our own behavior towards the same object.

From prophecy, it appears that other, and better treatment of our Lord in the vail of his flesh, was not, at first, to be expected. He cometh, saith Malachi, but who may abide the day of his coming? And who may stand when he appeared? How beautiful upon the mountains, said Isaiah, are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings ; that published peace; that bringing good tidings of good; that saith unto Zion, thy God reigneth ! Yet the same

prophet, speaking of our Lord's first appearance after his Incarnation, asks, Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? And declares he is despised and rejected of men.

From history, it is manifest, such was the state of the church and world, at the Incarnation of Christ, (of which sufficient proof will be given in its proper place,) that it was not probable that his visit would be welcome either to the Jews or Gentiles. When he was born, there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the inn; and when he went up to Jerusalem, there was no room for him in the temple. In the moment the Virgin was to be delivered, she was obliged to withdraw into a stable; and when her son said, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! At that moment, the heads of houses in the abandoned city conspired to put him to death. Nothing could soften their resentments. Unable to take away his life themselves, they applied to Pilate, and roared out, If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend.

From reflection on our own behavior towards the Son of God, we have reason to believe, that had we lived in those days, we might have been carried away with the frenzy of the times ; and either have mocked the Lord of glory, or have thought him an object beneath our notice. If in a Christian country, we have sincerely embraced that report which the Prophets and Evangelists have given us of him, and have believed unto righteousness, it has been owing to that grace which excites our wonder, and mortifies our pride, and by which, we have often confessed, all ground of boasting is effectually excluded.

Having removed an objection which seemed to stand in our way, let us now give a closer attention to the Incarnation of our Lord: not with a view to explain what is incomprehensible, but with a wish, and endeavor, to make such remarks as may confirm our faith in it;

as may incline us to be more thankful for salvation by him, and may lead us to be more obedient to his will.

Previous to these remarks, permit me to say, that in this discourse, and throughout these lectures, ye are rather to regard the SUBJECT which is introduced, than to expect a minute attention to the words of the TEXT. It being my purpose to treat on the character of Christ, every lecture will bring forward a distinct subject subservient to that deign. I wish therefore your attention to them as they are produced; and perhaps it will be found, that such a method of preaching may include a better exposition of the leading words of the text than some are apt to suppose.

My first observation on the present subject is, that very much depends on our obtaining right notions of Him who was made flesh and dwelt among us. We are not allowed to say, he was the Father, or the Holy Spirit; much less are we permitted to say, he was a created angel; least of all are we at liberty to say, that he who became incarnate was in his former state, a man.

Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness: and what less could be expected, if God was manifest in the flesh? The moment any person positively rejects this great mystery, he sinks into something which is absurd, and cannot avoid falling into the crudest contradictions. This is the more remarkable, because by a bold effort to comprehend what is only open to belief, he is justly left to grope as if he had no eyes, and to stumble at the noon day as in the night.

Who our Lord was in his pre-existent state has been considered ; and upon a review of that subject, it is thought, that while we live in belief of his being the Son of God, we need not be alarmed at the most formidable opposition which can be made to our faith. But should we turn aside from what God hath testified of his Son, to embrace the doctrines of those men, whose rage for erring reason

hath pushed them into notice; or should we be seized with the frenzy of explaining inexplicable things, we have every thing unpleasant to expect. For God resisteth the proud, though he giveth grace to the humble.

Secondly; the Incarnation of Christ was not only the subject of prophecy for four thousand years, but the great thing promised to be fulfilled at the commencement of the present dispensation. It was a prediction of this event, which first terrified Satan for his seduction of Eve. It was the promise of the seed of the woman, which gave our trembling parents the first ray of hope; and from that hour to this, Satan has fled from no other adversary: nor by any other advocate than Jesus Christ the righteous, hath one burdened conscience been properly relieved.

That the woman from whom the promised seed was to be expected, should be a virgin, Isaiah plainly foretold. Behold, said he, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name IMMANUEL. That this virgin was to be of the house and lineage of David, when that illustrious house had fallen from its former splendor; that her son should be born at Bethlehem, when the sceptre was departing from Judah; that he should be persecuted as soon as he was born; that he should rise superior to persecution, temptation, and death, and live, and reign for ever all this the Prophets foretold all this God promised to fulfill all this, God hath performed!

What could seem more incredible than these things? The Incarnation was contrary to the course of nature; and, in a moral view, who could expect such mercy to be manifested to a ruined world, and to an apostate church? Yet so it was, that when the days were accomplished in which the Virgin should be delivered, she brought forth her first born son. How great is the power, and the faithfulness of God! How wonderful his mercy to mankind! He delights, yes, he delights to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think! And surely, we may infer, if he hath not

withheld from us his only begotten son; if he hath not spared him, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him, also freely give us all things.

In the third place; the Incarnation of our Lord, may be considered as miraculous. If a miracle is an extraordinary work of God, in which he subverts, changes, or suspends, the known courses, or settled laws of nature, the conception of the Virgin, must be allowed to have been truly miraculous; and as this miracle was repeatedly foretold, we must confess, that both miracle and prophecy concur to teach us the importance of what is commonly called, the Incarnation.

Of miracles, I am to speak hereafter. But if the birth of Christ was miraculous, let me here observe, that a miracle may be the subject of our belief, before we have any sensible evidence of the fact. It was not thought proper to leave the holy Virgin in a state of perplexity; yet if Gabriel had not said unto her, Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and, bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus; if he had not answered her natural question, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? The same miracle might have been performed; and it seems it was wrought, before she had any sensible evidence that she had conceived. At first, Mary was merely a believer; and her faith was deservedly, very much commended. After Gabriel delivered his message to her, she arose, and went into the hill country in haste, and entered into the house of Elizabeth: and Elizabeth said unto Mary, Blessed is she that believed, for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

I fear we seldom possess accurate apprehensions of our own corporal, or intellectual abilities. In our estimations they are too frequently, every thing, or nothing, just as some idle persuasion happens to prevail. Either we are fettered by defective definitions, or disdaining those limits, like comets, we wander out of sight, and know not whither we wander, or where we are to rest.

But why should this miraculous conception of the Virgin seem to any of us incredible? If we admit there was a first man, we must admit, that the manner in which he was to be brought into existence, must have been very different from those who descended from him by ordinary generation. He was created, they are begotten; and, if the manner in which Adam was made, may not be considered as a miracle, this, at least, may be safely asserted, that we know of no miracle that more abundantly displays the power of God than Creation. To form, settle, and preserve, what is commonly called the course of nature, is as wonderful as any deviation from it; and, on the other hand, any deviation from the common course of things, is just as easy for the Almighty to effect, as to keep unbroken the usual rotation of common events. To say, therefore, that human nature must of necessity exist, either by creation, or by generation, is to advance what we cannot prove, and to indulge a kind of temerity that admits of no defense.

Fourthly; the Incarnation of Christ was an event, on which every thing depended that relates to the redemption of his people. By this the power of Satan was to be destroyed, and the kingdom of God in us, to be established. Had not our Lord taken on him the seed of Abraham, he could not have been made of a woman, nor made under the law. How then could he have redeemed them that were under it, or how were they to receive the adoption of sons? Had he not been Incarnate, he could not have been tempted, nor have performed that obedience which yields the tempted Christian his only hope of being victorious. Had he not been found in fashion as a man, who had ever heard of his death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession? But, having performed, in our nature, the functions of the high priest's office on earth, he, by virtue of his own blood, entered into the holiest place of all, having thus obtained eternal redemption for us.

Since then, by man came death, by man came also the resurrection from the dead. These words are applied, by the apostle, to the first and second Adam. The first Adam, however, was a mere man in

every condition; when he was in paradise, when ejected from it, and after he had obtained grace: nor can our first father be any thing greater than man even in glory. But the second Adam is the Lord from heaven, and that quickening spirit who is the life of all them who put their trust in him. The result of these remarks terminates in this, had not our mediator been a MAN, he could not have redeemed us unto God; and had he not been IMMANUEL, our redemption must have ceased for ever.

Some indeed, have thought it indecent to say, God could not have redeemed sinners without the death of Christ; and, when we consider, that our salvation was not necessary, but is of grace, it does not become us to limit the holy One of Israel. But, on the other side of the question, it may be observed, had there been ten thousand ways in which the elect might have been saved, they were all of them, perfectly known to the Almighty, and that every other way but this, he hath rejected. It becomes us therefore to suppose, that this way is chosen on sufficient grounds for the preference that is given unto it ; and since we are told, without shedding of blood there is no remission of sin ; since upon any opposite supposition, we must have false notions of the evil and the strength of our depravity, ungrateful apprehensions of the death of Christ, and of the love of God, in the gift of his Son, we may be confident, that in the redemption of sinners by his blood, he hath abounded towards us in all wisdom and prudence ; and we may be satisfied, if we cordially approve of that grace which bringeth salvation, the just inference is, that we have not heard of it in vain.

In the fifth place; the grace of our Lord in his being found in fashion as a man, will still be the more conspicuous, if we consider, as was promised, the state of the church and world at the period of his Incarnation.

The Jews, in every age, from the death of Joshua to the birth of Christ, waxed worse and worse. If some reformations intervened, they were partial, of short continuance, and constantly followed by

chocking relapses into the worst of crimes. Their kingdom had been unhappily divided long before the birth of Christ; and the ten revolted tribes, some centuries before that event, had been carried into captivity far from the land of promise. Judah also, had suffered captivity in Babylon forty years; and, though returned with a mixed company, to their own land, at the Nativity, they were extremely corrupt, and in bondage to the civil power of Rome. The occasion of our Lord being born at Bethlehem, strongly marks their subjection to the Roman mate. For there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. This decree brought Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem; and thus were the words of the prophet fulfilled: And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah, for out of thee shall come a Governor that shall rule my people Israel. But what a picture is given us of this people! They denied that Jesus had any right to rule over them; they hired false witnesses against him, and, on no better testimony, they treated him as a blasphemer in their supreme court of justice, and charged him as guilty of sedition at the bar of Pilate. There, by clamor, threatnings, and chocking imprecations, they obtained at last, sentence of death against him, and took care to see it executed, not only with rigor, but with insults which were extremely outrageous.

Who does not see from all this, that if Christ is to reign over Israel, he must rise from the dead, and that if the sons of Jacob are to submit to his sceptre, it must be owing to the plenitude of his power after his exaltation ? Believing this, David said, Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty; with thy glory and thy majetty; and in thy majesty ride prosperously, because of truth, and meekness, and righteousness! All who are well glided to the kingdom of our Lord, will say Amen!

If we turn from the Jews to the Gentiles, we perceive among them, at the same period, that idolatry, immorality, and pride, every where abounded, and was every where applauded. We have no reason to suppose that any of the Gentiles in those days, were

superior to the Romans in might, in mental abilities, or in moral worth. Yet if we regard what Saint Paul has said of them, we must own, that their crimes were equal to any thing we have yet known of the corruption of human nature. If we surmise that his account is not exact, or that the exceptions were more numerous than is commonly imagined, Horace and Ovid, Seneca, Juvenal and Persius, have each of them said more than enough to make us revoke the suspicion.

In such a church and world, what could induce our Lord to appear? Surely, if the best of men were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another, his Incarnation must be attributed to his loving kindness, and the object of it the salvation of sinful men : not according to works of righteousness which they had done, but according to his mercy, by the washing of regeneration, and by the renewing of the Holy Ghost that being justified by his grace, they should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

If the Apostle Paul himself, if Titus, and others, like them, owed every thing to such grace, it was necessary to their salvation: and if they could not be saved at less expense, shall we imagine that inferior favor will give us the hope of heaven?

Yes, it is said; for their case and ours is not the same. They were brought up either in ignorance of Christianity, or under violent prejudices against it: whereas we were born in a Christian country, and brought up in the belief of the Christian religion.

It is confessed, we have reason to be thankful for the place and period in which we were born. But, if from providential favors, it is concluded we have no need of special grace; if because we were born of Christian parents, it is conceived we must of course be Christians, we are very much deceived. Besides; as our advantages are many, our disadvantages are not a few. We see not those strik-

ing examples of the truth and excellence of Christianity, which were so conspicuous in the apostolic age: when men hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. On the contrary, many are now called Christians who are only so in name; and much is held up amongst us, as Christian doctrine, which is inimical to Christianity. What is still more affecting, some of the most grievous corruptions of Christianity are now propagated, under pretence of bringing us back again to its original simplicity. Let no man; therefore, rely on his being born in Britain, or on the privileges of his education; since it is still a fact, that unless he is born again, or from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Sixthly; the different dispositions of men when our Lord appeared amongst them, and the manner in which the report of his birth was varied to these discordant charmers, is worth our notice. There was at that time, a general expectation that the Messiah would soon appear; but, as we have seen, that hope was blended with very erroneous apprehensions of him. The greater part looked for nothing more than a worldly prince; some of them had confused notions which they could neither explain, nor surmount; while a few, a very few, expected the promised Saviour.

Characters so evidently opposite were not to be treated alike; nor were they so treated. The Virgin was informed of the approaching advent of her son by an angel. Joseph was admonished of the birth of Christ by a dream. Zechariah and Elizabeth were instructed by inspiration; and they had their faith confirmed by a visit from Mary. The shepherds heard of the glad tidings from the heavenly host. The Magi had their attention raised by a star: while Herod, and those who sided with him, had little more than confused reports of the Incarnation of our Lord. Who but the Almighty could thus have varied the mode of information? And who does not perceive, that both wisdom and grace are conspicuous in these variations? The consequence is, that we who are favored with a narrative of these things, must either disbelieve it, or confess, that Christ is he who should come, and that we are not to look for any other.

In the last place; the different effects which these tidings produced, were such as might have been expected. The most amiable and venerable charmers received from them abundant consolation. Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord; and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour! Zechariah said, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited, and redeemed, his people! Simeon blessed God and said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation! And Anna, coming in at that instant, gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. The shepherds, with that good sense, and with that simplicity, which are recorded to their honor, said, Let us go now, even to Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came in haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying that was told them, concerning this child. The wise men from the East, persevered in their intentions; and seeing again that star which first excited their curiosity, they rejoiced with exceeding joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child, with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts ; gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream, that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way. While these amiable and venerable persons, thus rejoiced, Herod was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Their consternation was inevitable ; not because their crimes had been many and great ; for crimes as often repeated, and as atrocious, our Lord came to forgive but because they despised that relief which God had provided for the chief of sinners, and attempted to justify themselves in their opposition to his anointed. They knew, if Jesus was the Christ, their vicious notions of a carnal Messiah, were replete with folly, and that they were as dangerous as they were absurd. Enraged therefore, at current reports, concerning the new-born babe, they

endeavored, by every form of opposition, to suppress the growing opinion that he was born a king. But all their efforts were in vain. The Lord laughed at their impotent attempts: he had them in derision. The word of his testimony prevailed. It yet prevails; and ever will be prevalent in the thing whereunto he is pleased to send it.

After all; the important question is, How are we ourselves affected with the Incarnation of Jesus Christ? Ye have heard my sentiments on this subject. Allow me to add, his Incarnation appears to me, the most remarkable, and important epoch of time, that was ever adopted by the sons of men. Without the prediction and history of the Incarnation, the world must have been left where our Redeemer found it; in the region and shadow of death. The abasement of our Lord was essential to our happiness. By his poverty, we are enriched; by his humility, we have hope; and by that hope, we are humbled. Our resurrection is connected with his death; and the quickning influences of the spirit, with his ascension into heaven. Now, by faith, we see our own nature, complete and perfect, in the holiest place of all: and, by faith, we follow our fore-runner into heaven itself; expecting hereafter, to be with him, where he is, to behold his glory.

But for his Incarnation, such a prospect had been impossible, and such a hope un-enjoyed. It was in believing views of this, that David rejoiced before the ark; and it is beholding the glorious effects of our Lord's humility, that angels, and elders, rejoice before the throne. With a loud voice, ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, in heaven, say, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.

Ye will perhaps reply, What are our feeble voices, compared with this grand, and un-expiring shout? True; but what is IT, compared with that mercy, and with that majesty, which exceeds all praise? We have no reason to be dejected, because, compared with the

heavenly inhabitants, we seem but as grasshoppers in our own apprehension. Let us rather wonder we should have any power to perceive, and any disposition to rejoice in, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. If he be formed in us, he cannot despise his own image, even where the impression of it is faint, and frequently obscured. A bruised reed he will not break; the smoking flax he will not quench. No, he will bring forth judgment to victory. In us, may the gospel of his grace be continually victorious; and over every thing that obstructs its reign in our hearts, may we be more than conquerors through him that loved us!—Amen.

SERMON IV.