



Presbyterian His. Society



HOPE FOR THE DYING INFANT.

A

S E R M O N,

PREACHED

FEBRUARY EIGHTEENTH, 1827,

IN THE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

CHARLESTON, (S. C.)

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PASTOR OF SAID CHURCH.

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1827.

TO BEREAVED PARENTS
OF THE
SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
IN THIS CITY,
THIS DISCOURSE,
PUBLISHED BY DESIRE OF THE CONGREGATION.
IS VERY RESPECTFULLY
INSCRIBED
BY
THE AUTHOR.

Charleston, Feb. 20, 1827.

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S E R M O N.

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II SAMUEL XII. 23.

"I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

SUCH was the language of an afflicted father when the sentence of death had been passed, and executed, upon the child of his affections. He was not ignorant of the deprivation, as a possible event, even while health glowed in the cheeks of the little one: The prophet of God had distinctly said, "the child that is born unto thee, shall surely die." But plain as this prediction was, it did not drive the parent to despair. He knew that the threatenings of Jehovah were sometimes conditional; and guilty as he had been, he retained a hope that a renewed life of devotion might avert the suspended calamity. Disease received its commission and commenced its ravages. The affections of the father take alarm, and he pleads earnestly with God;—he fasts;—in the feeling of deep distress he throws himself upon the earth; and presents himself an object of pity, to awaken the compassion of the great arbiter of life and death.

It is hard to relinquish the child of affection; and "while there is life there is hope" we say;

and we nurture that hope, despite of the mysterious and portentous silence of our professional assistant: and despite of symptoms which contradict the expectations of partial love. So did the parent in our context, and it was not until some of those indications of a change which are so jealously watched by the parental eye, on the countenances of the attendants—not until that whisper, which such jealousy easily hears,—had been exchanged between them, that the father loosened his hold on hope, and ventured to inquire “*Is the child dead?*”

This was no time for even the parasites of a Throne to flatter : “*And they said, he is dead.*” But no burst of grief was heard from the lips of the mourner ; nor one of those extravagant exclamations which Eastern custom has always sanctioned, and which so naturally rise with the first feeling of isolation.

On the contrary, his whole demeanour was characteristic of a subdued and humble temper : It was that of one who had been taught to kiss the rod, and to bless the hand that wielded it. It furnished an example deserving the imitation of a pious mourner ; and a striking admonition to that dejected sullenness in which the afflicted so often fancy themselves at liberty to indulge.

It was worthy of a rational believer in divine revelation to restrict his grief within its proper bounds, and to accommodate himself to the cir-

cumstances in which providence had placed him. “*While the child,*” said he, “*was yet alive I fasted and wept: for I said who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again?*” But it was well becoming one who had a clear insight, by faith, into the nature of a future state, to meet his sense of loss with the words of our text, “*I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.*”

If I were to single the moment of greatest intensity of feeling to the bereaved, it would not be that of the dying struggle, the last farewell, or the final gasp which announces the departure of the spirit from its late habitation. Nor should it be the hour when the ministers of death have assembled to bear the body to the tomb—when we have given it a parting gaze—and when we hear that well known signal of roofing the narrow-house over its lifeless tenant. Gloomy as are these hours of domestic grief, there is something which moderates its power in the preparations for funeral rites; and, perhaps too, in our still holding possession of the mortal remains. But it is when we have returned from the place of tombs: When we have entered where every thing around us is associated with the memory of the deceased: and where every thing imparts a dreariness of feeling, and almost awakens a doubt whether all this be not a painful dream. It is that distressing sensation

of vacancy which ensues ; and which is followed by the natural inquiry,—whither has the spirit fled ?

It is in such a season as this that the hopes of immortality fill up the chasm of a bereaved heart. The Christian can withdraw from those idle fancies which are ever attendant on scenes of death : and far from being “ ignorant concerning them which are asleep,” he can look intently to the triumphs of the redeemed. And there is a mellow-ness in that sorrow which is tempered with the expectations of faith. There is all that is soothing in the thoughts of eternity. There is a gathering certainty of a Heavenly inheritance, and a sure prospect of a future re-union.

But these are the hopes which follow the decease of the Christian. They accompany that voice of Heaven which exclaims “ blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.” They remind us of the Redeemer’s assurance, “ I am the resurrection and the life : he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live : and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” They are a privilege of the faithful, relating to the fate of kindred spirits. But where no evidence testified a reason for such hopes,—where the sinner expires with no other sign in his behalf than that which a lawless charity fancies, it is a miserable comfort which the survivor attempts to collect from un-meaning and indiscriminating mercy. It is a sad

conclusion which he reaches in the end,—that at least he is not *sure* of the doom of the departed.

All this will meet your assent, touching the death of the righteous and the sinner. But there is another class, respecting whom public opinion is far from being settled. It is such as those, of whom our text furnishes an example—the spirit of the departed Infant. And is it not strange that there should seem so little certainty here? that so much darkness should shroud a question which, next to our own eternal interests, comes home to the feelings of every parent?

The question of the future fate of Infants, like most other matters not explicitly revealed in Scripture, has had its history in the schools of Theology: and began, we have reason to believe, after many corruptions had crept into the Church; and after a mystical power was attached to the simple ordinances of God. The Jew knew no doubt, in regard to the children of the Covenant. The earliest Christians, as far as we can learn, either took but little interest in it, or considered it a question sufficiently settled. A few centuries afterwards, it possessed more importance when it assumed a place among the discussions of the day; and when with very few, if any, exceptions, it was believed that the unbaptized Infant dies without hope. And as during this time the apprehensions of parents must have given much anxiety, where baptism could not be administered according to the

form prescribed, it is worth while to observe the care that was taken to meet this solicitude. Lay-members of the church were permitted to perform the sacred office. Every possible pains were used to secure the salvation of the dying infant. And so far was this case of conscience met by a desire to accommodate parental fears, that it became a question whether females were not authorised, in such an exigency, to discharge the duty of the minister. A doubt which the Roman Catholics, in after-time, solved in a very accommodating manner.* In later years, the School-Divines found out a new solution of the difficulties with which this inquiry embarrassed them: And, very liberally for the age, decided that Infants not baptized in consequence of utter impracticability, might be saved, on account of the *will* of their parents to offer them in baptism:†—a presumption which met a check from many an able pen. They still, however, held the opinion, for the most part, that the punishment of the infantile spirit was only that of the loss of Heaven, or a low degree of positive suffering. In a subsequent age, the opinion of Wickliffe, that it is possible for God to save *some* unbaptized Infants, gave rise to more than a single charge of heresy. The stretch of charity on the part of the Hussites and the Lollards extended

* *Ritu. Rom. de Sacram. Baptism. Rubric. de ministr. Bapt.* p. 9.—Where we are taught that the administration of this ordinance has very little limitation in the *quality, person, or sex, of the administrator, in certain cases provided for.*

† See the third vol. of Hooker's Eccles. Polit. 252, note a.

no further. The Calvinistic Churches turned the question on the doctrine of election, and left the whole to the sovereignty of God, without making it an article of faith. The Church of England were rather more decided when they denied the ordinary office of burial to the unbaptized, and placed them on the same footing with the suicide and the excommunicated.

It could hardly be expected that a matter of such universal interest would not be attended by a variety of opinions. One Church mitigated the apprehensions of parents by assigning condemned Infants to a place—no one could imagine where—which they denominated *Limbus Infantium*: and which was equally distant between Heaven and Hell. A great Divine of the last century, not quite satisfied with this arrangement, reduces the matter to a syllogism: There is no salvation without faith; but Infants cannot believe, therefore Infants cannot be saved. On the other hand, he adds,—there is no condemnation without works of evil: Infants are incapable of these, therefore Infants cannot be damned. The conclusion was—Infants, dying such, will be *annihilated*: Others, again, have suspended all hope of their salvation upon the sincerity of parental vows, and the faith of parental piety. While at the present day not a few, who mistake the nature of the promises of the covenant of grace, and imagine them applicable to saving mercy as well as

to external blessings, maintain, with the darker ages, that baptism is inseparable from salvation in dying infancy. And of many a parent have we heard, who reproached himself for what he feared to be a fatal neglect, after the departure of his child : as if the doom of an immortal spirit might be sealed by the single delinquency of a parent ! A few conceive that sovereign mercy will embrace all who die at so early an age ; and hold this view, not from any substantial reasons, but, as a celebrated Pagan held the immortality of the soul,—because it is a happy reflection.

After all, however, very little has been said on the subject by Theological writers of modern time. And where they have introduced it at all, they have done so with those injunctions of caution which imply a sense of serious danger in deciding : not merely lest the inquiry lead to heretical opinion, but lest we tread on ground which is utterly forbidden. A still more profound silence is preserved in the pulpit, and in the parochial intercourse of ministers of the Gospel. Or where an irrepressible anxiety proposes a question, the inquirer is admonished to leave these secret things to God ;—*the judge of all the earth will do right.* Why this mysterious reserve which awakens all the superstitious dread of one recently bereaved ? The dreadful uncertainty which is thus supposed to veil the fate of these little ones, sets imagination at the worst of its workings, and produces a sus-

pense nearly allied to despair. “What!” exclaims the father,—“the son of my vows,—the pledge of a mutual love, snatched from my arms to become the possible heir of eternal wrath!” “What!”—exclaims the afflicted mother,—“does doubt hang over the destiny of my child?—has it possibly gone from my embraces to endure the everlasting curse of the God who gave it being?” And in such disconsolate moments the emissary of Hell knows how to deepen the agony of a mind penetrated with a sense of eternity. In vain you attempt to repress the fears of that heaving bosom by referring to the goodness and sovereignty of God, while both these qualities are deemed fully consistent with the endless suffering of “*the Infant of days.*” In vain you attempt to check a secret murmur which accompanies the gush of affectionate feeling for the departed. “I know not a thought in the whole compass of nature, that hath a more powerful tendency to produce suspicious notions of God, and a secret alienation of the heart from him.”*

But where is there a single warrant for condemning curiosity on this interesting matter, as idle and meddling? To say that the question should be left untouched because the word of God has not decided it, is to enter up an arbitrary decision at once. It is to affirm what we are disposed to deny; and it brings us afresh to the investigation

* Doddridge. Sermon on II Kings, iv. 25, 26.

of the subject. If I could lay my hand on a single passage which prohibits the inquiries to which such solicitude gives rise, I trust I have learnt to bow to dispensations which I do not understand, and to await their developement at the tribunal of my Creator. But until such passage shall appear, I see no presumption in the eager gaze of a parent's eye after the track of his departed child : and no high daring in the questions of benevolence relative to the future condition of one third of the human family. In such employment, I shall touch no hallowed ark,—I shall pry into no forbidden secrets.

On the threshold of the subject into which you are about to enter, I would desire your attention to a single position : that the nature of the evidences which we are to examine is of a cumulative character : each one may possess weight of different degree from another in minds differently constituted. But it is the collected force of the whole which we desire you to consider. Our first object will be to examine the negative of the question : Our second, to present those arguments which we believe to favour the salvation of children dying in infancy.

I. THE NEGATIVE OF THE QUESTION.

1. We will commence this division with the objection that *the Scriptures are silent respecting the fate of Infants.* It is rather for the sake of argument than from a conviction of its truth, that

we invite your consideration to this difficulty. It cannot be doubted that many who have turned over the pages of the Bible in search of some *explicit* warrant for a persuasion they desired to cherish, have relinquished the inquiry with all the hopelessness of failure ; and with that tendency to extremes which disappointment always creates, have concluded that what God has not, in so many words, revealed, cannot be a part of the divine arrangements. But is this altogether consistent ? Had such an inquirer been looking for a contrary statement, would he have concluded that all Infants would be saved because he discovered no explicit declaration that they would be lost ? The truth is, that both conclusions would be the result of false reasoning. The very nature of this question keeps it without the circle of explicit revelation. The word of God was designed “*for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*” Matters, therefore, which are not of *practical* value, and which do not in any measure bear on our conduct in life, seldom stand out in relief on the pages of the Bible. Many an article on whieh we desire to be informed, respecting the condition of both body and spirit, is left unnoted. Around others the light of some neighboring doctrine may be shed, amply sufficient to assist our conclusions. And very many others which make up parts of our belief, are

simple deductions rather than points of plain disclosure,—inferences, and not originals. Some of these relate to subjects of Ecclesiastical practice. We have no express direction to admit females to the Sacrament of the Supper: but who would prohibit them? The baptism of Infants is nowhere formally directed; and yet if they are to be excluded, we lose a foothold on the promises of God: We abandon the hope of a covenant which constitutes our greatest security: and the very silence of the Redeemer here, as fully proves that this covenant was never abolished, as the abolition of certain laws, in an empire, and the silence respecting others, more positively establish the existence of the latter. It is of no importance, therefore, that nothing explicit has been said on this question. It is fully satisfactory if we are able to gather deductive proof: and this, we shall hereafter attempt to shew you, is by no means impracticable.

2. It is said that *when the Scriptures describe the judgments of God upon sinners, they necessarily embrace Infants as part of the sufferers.* One or two examples will be sufficient here. “The inhabitants of the old world were destroyed on account of their transgressions. But many of these must have been helpless children; and they are represented by the Apostle Peter as ‘Spirits’ in the ‘prison’ of *Hell.*” The fact of this general desolation is undeniable. But that fact does

not furnish evidence that every sufferer was eternally lost. The expression of the Apostle demonstrates the contrary, if it approach any where near the point under discussion ; or if it has any relation to the present case. The miserable sufferers now in prison were warned by the Spirit of God, in the ministry of Noah : they disobeyed the Divine orders : and vengeance overtook their high-handed impiety. But did the Spirit of God appeal to the subjects of our present discussion ? Were *they* ranked among the disobedient ? And could the Apostle have had an eye to *their* present condition ? Would not such a reference have been foreign to his purpose as far as we can understand it ? The same answer may be given to the quotation of the case of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The reasons assigned for the destruction of this brutish people can have no possible application to a state of infancy. Other instances of a similar character might be adduced, all of which would prove that children may be involved in the temporal ruin of their parents : a conclusion which we are not prepared to deny, but which is wholly foreign from the matter before us. Without a miracle, this would be a consequence of these national judgments. But the death of the tender child would no more prove his eternal ruin then, than now :—when one of a multitude, than when singled out, by the hand of death.

3. *Some Scriptural expressions are believed to*

imply the loss of Infants. Among these is that awful declaration that God will “visit the iniquities of the fathers upon the children.” It has been just admitted that the conduct of parents may entail temporal evil upon their offspring: and we are witnesses of this melancholy result every day, in the reproach, poverty, and disease which are transmitted from father to child. But the text before us is supposed to refer to a spiritual curse. This is a mere matter of opinion. Judicious commentators, with one or two exceptions, apply the language wholly to temporal affliction. And this seems more consistent with the nature of the government under which the Hebrews lived: While the limitation, “unto the third and fourth generation” produces an additional argument in its favour. Besides, the expressions in the xviiith of Ezekiel are explanatory of this clause of the second commandment. Here we learn that the Divine Being does not punish children *for* the iniquities of their fathers, in the ordinary acceptation of the term:—The idea is, that the moral character of the parent will descend, and the offspring will approve of their progenitor’s conduct. On the other hand, it is expressly said, “*The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.*” The statement is a plain one: ‘the precepts and example of an

impious father will taint the mind of his descendant: but the parental sin is not imputed to the child.'

Again. "Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come." More stress is laid upon this expression than upon any other in the word of God, on the present subject. It is admitted that the Apostle refers to the cases of idiocy and infancy; and that, in the general scope of his argument, he alludes to the whole of that death which is the penalty of sin. But it is not quite so plain that spiritual doom is the subject of this particular verse. Doddridge, Edwards, and many other judicious divines consider it with reference to temporal death: and until some error can be detected in their interpretation, it is hardly worth while to discuss objections arising from the passage.

4. A more specious obstruction to our hope is found in the *natural depravity of the heart*. This is indeed so evident from Scripture, and from observation, that it would be futile to attempt setting aside the melancholy truth. We will meet it as it is. And in doing so, it is necessary to examine the common impressions entertained on the subject, for a single moment: It is ordinarily said, that natural corruption implies some positive evil; and hence such terms as *infection*, *quality*, and

others of similar import, are adopted to express the idea intended. But such terms as these are likely to mislead us. "In order to account for a sinful corruption of nature, yea, a total native depravity in the heart of man, there is not the least need of supposing any evil quality *infused*, *implanted*, or wrought into the nature of man by any positive cause."** The evil is *privative*. And although it is true that the loss of the divine image, and the want of spiritual life, will expose the child to all those personal transgressions which we see in the very commencement of moral agency, if he should survive until that time ; yet, before that period arrives, I cannot discover an exclusion from the possibility of salvation, solely on the ground of this natural defect. Nor can I find any threat of condemnation apart from personal transgression. Nor have you or I ever beheld a case of conviction independent of it. The best man living has reason to lament his depravity—his corrupt propensities, and his sinful affections. But it is more than doubtful whether the Holy Ghost ever gathered remorse to the soul for either the imputed iniquity of our progenitor, or the dispositions of early infancy. And it is equally true that we have never been called upon to repent of either. Now, as the whole of the evil which, at this period, exists in the heart, is of hereditary descent, I see not why Infants may not be

* Edwards'—Original Sin, chapter on God's being the author of sin.
See also Bellamy.

embraced in that general clause of mercy : “ *As by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners : so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous :—where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.* ” The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is tendered to all, as amply sufficient to free from the curse of sin. Where it is rejected, that awful penalty must take its course. But where no such evil rejection is, no such consequence will ensue. And have we no ground of hope in the delightful truth of the super-abounding of grace over corruption and sin ?—that the death of the Redeemer will remove the consequences of the fall from those who never thrust aside his overtures of mercy ? I must confess that this passage presents as much reason, to my own mind, for the salvation of Infants, as the consideration of their depravity furnishes against it.

Moreover, if we have all reason to complain of our natural depravity, to mourn over our unsubdued and unholy dispositions—if the most eminent saint laments the warring of the law of his nature against the law of his mind—and if, notwithstanding this, there remain a strong hope of salvation, why should the existence of these evils in a less degree, preclude the safety of Infants ?

5. This last inquiry leads to another objection arising from the *doctrine of Election*. Since there is nothing in children of tender age to shut them out from the power of grace, the doubt must be solv-

ed by the sovereign will and pleasure of their Maker. But the doctrine of election, wherever it is presented to our notice, is connected with human agency and means, to fulfil its particular purpose. No individual will ever have a right to complain that a divine decree kept him from the mercy of his God. His free agency will constitute his accountability ; and his *practical* enmity to God will be the reason of his condemnation. But, in the case before us, there is no will to choose good or evil. And the decree must have gone forth in a manner wholly arbitrary, without giving the condemned the privilege of choice.

To this there is a very natural reply, in the probability that if the lost one had lived to a maturer age, he would have evinced an open opposition to the divine commandments. But such a reason goes too far. It shews why the being in question should not have been brought into existence, and not why he should now be condemned. The Creator passes no prospective sentence, to condemn what *might have been* ; or else we should stand accountable for all the crimes from which restraining grace has withheld us. If the doctrine of election, then, lead to any conclusion on this subject, it must be in favour of the view we have taken. And I should be inclined to coincide with the conclusion of the most vehement advocate which that doctrine has had—that all dying in infancy are among the Elect.*

* Toplady.

6. *There is no salvation without faith, but Infants cannot believe.* This is the most summary of all objections against that side of the question which we have assumed. It has indirectly produced more effect than any other. And it has led to conclusions, which, while they are wholly foreign from our inquiry, are in opposition to divine revelation. The faith of the parent has been supposed a substitute for that of the child : and to stand, in the incapacity of the latter, as an equivalent in his behalf. And hence has arisen the prevalent notion that baptism is the security of the child : a notion which is no better founded than the hope of salvation from participating in the sacrament. Both ordinances are explicitly directed : and any but a most careless observer will see that the injunction is positive : but eternal salvation was certainly never hinged upon either ; for there might be cases in which both would be utterly impracticable.

The difficulty before us involves many others. And in this instance, at least, it may be said to involve so many as to defeat itself. They who "*have not the law, will perish without the law,*" is the language of an Apostle : But, "*how shall they believe on him of whom they have not heard ?*" is a question of the same Apostle. Our conclusion is a plain one respecting the Heathen, who are here intended : and it is, that the ultimate fate of this vast proportion of human society, must rest on other than Gospel principles ; because they are

destitute of such principles until the sacred requirements are placed before them. Are Infants, then, to be condemned for not believing that of which they know no more than the Heathen? It is not my province now to inquire into the future condition of the unchristianized world: but it is perfectly plain that their law of judgment cannot be that of a revelation of which they never heard. And the same rule of decision is applicable here. The demands of God are suited to the capacities of his creatures, so far as their understanding is concerned: and to their capabilities of execution. Directions, therefore, which are given to some can have no application to others. When the Apostle has said, "if any will not work neither should he eat," he could not have meant that the sick and infirm are to be deprived of subsistence. But Infants are about as capable of believing as are even the most infirm, of performing an act of personal labour. The conditions of salvation, then, as they could never have been intended for Infants can have no possible reference to them.

I foresee a scriptural objection to this reasoning: "*He that knew not (his Lord's will) and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes.*" And it is hence concluded that although the sufferings of tender children will be comparatively mild, yet they will suffer still.—There are several objections to this conclusion: one or two will suffice. First,—it relates to de-

grees of knowledge of duty, and while it gives a solemn admonition to each of us, it can have no reference to Infants, who are of necessity wholly ignorant. Second—it refers to an *agency*,—a practical effort—a regard to obligations, as far as they are understood,—and therefore is foreign from the limits of our question. And if indeed, it advanced within those limits, it would furnish an additional argument to the affirmative: for if ignorance of the divine will lead to the neglect which was punishable with *few stripes*, surely an utter incapability of ascertaining that will—a complete unconsciousness of all law—and an incapability of discharging a single prescribed duty, must lead to something *less* than a few stripes.

Such are the principal difficulties which embarrass our desire to believe in the salvation of Infants. It is supposed that the solution of these will apply to any others of less importance which may rise up in the investigation. With respect to the *manner* in which divine grace may fit the dying child for a scene of incorruptible glory, ignorance should be no hindrance to our faith. The most perfect Christian understands but little of that process of heart and mind which he has undergone, under the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit. He can say, “*whereas I was blind, now I see:*” but he is very little competent to trace those springs of action which moved on his soul

in a newness of life. And if neither the Moral law, nor the law of Faith can apply to the Infant, may there not be a power and an influence inconceivable to us, bearing upon a mind so dissimilar to our own ?

If our inference were to be drawn in this stage of our subject it would be something like the following : that, as there is no saving ordinance appointed by God, either all dying in infancy will be lost—or divine sovereignty will make an arbitrary distinction—or they will be universally saved.—That there is at least a strong hope in favour of the last of these conclusions may be gathered from the second division of our subject.

II. WE WILL NOW ATTEMPT TO FURNISH SOME ARGUMENTS OF A POSITIVE CHARACTER.

The first of these we will take from the fact that *Infants are not accountable*. I am aware that this assumption may be deemed too bold. ‘We cannot tell,’ it has been said, ‘what passes in the infantile mind. Whether there may not be a law unknown to us?’ This is speculation ; not proof. It indicates a strong bias on the part of the objector against the hopes of benevolence. But it goes no further. Now the simple truth is, that whenever children of such tender age are brought to notice in connection with the accountability of man, they are described as incapable of sharing in it. In the address of Moses to the Israelites contained in the first chapter of Deuteronomy,

the patriarch uses the following language : “ *Moreover, your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, and your children, which in that day HAD NO KNOWLEDGE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL, they shall go in thither and unto them will I give it.*” The allusion is to the promised land ; which their fathers had forfeited by their disobedience, but which the ignorance of children rendered it impossible for them to forfeit. And may not the same unaccountability furnish a hope respecting the Heavenly Canaan ? In other instances in Scripture, the language is equally explicit.*

But it is a dictate of reason, as well as a statement of revelation,—as has already been intimated,—that the accountability of any being must be commensurate with his capacity and his capability. Infants have neither. And there is, therefore, nothing of which they can stand convicted.

The manner in which the word of God adverts to the day of judgment coincides with this conclusion. The transgressor is warned of his danger with an energy that ought to confound him. He is admonished and entreated with all those sanctions before him which are adapted to awaken the most careless. Call after call reaches him :— And his conscience bears witness, beforehand, of the equity of eternal wrath. A full description is given of those against whom the sentence of a final curse shall go forth. From the hypocritical

* Is. 7, 16—Jonah 4, 11.

and profane, down to the mere lover of the world, a long and fearful catalogue is presented to the sight ; and ‘ he that runneth may read.’ The final sentence which fixes the doom of the lost will vindicate the righteousness of the King Eternal ; and the conscience of every sinner, while it seals his lips, will testify the justice of the decision.—Now is there no presumptive proof of the position we are endeavouring to establish, in these circumstances ? Can we see any application here to the case of Infants ?

Further—A metaphorical expression which is adopted on this subject strengthens the force of our inference. ‘ The books shall be opened, and the dead are to be judged out of those things which are written in the books.’ Now every arraigned sinner is to be judged according to his *works*,—whether the guilt of neglect, or that of positive transgression. But what record of personal transaction can be found in the books of Heaven against the infant soul ? Must not a sentence against such proceed from some other principle in the divine government than that which God has been pleased to reveal ? And must there not be a justice, which we cannot understand, offended by these little ones ?

The intimation of Scripture that “ *small and great* ” shall stand before the judgment seat, is no evidence of the future trial of Infants ; or of any who are not capable of *works*.” The expression

is generally understood in application to rank in society, and not to bodily stature.

2. If the manner of the judgment be not such as to warrant our belief of the trial of Infants, the *nature of the doom which awaits the impenitent* is no less against that belief. The pangs of eternal remorse—the rage of appetite unbridled—the warning of passion—the memory of abandoned hope—and the horrible sense of an endless and just retribution—these—this worm that never dies—how may it fasten on a spirit who never began his account with conscience?

And if this terrible sentence is to rest on personal transgression, it would seem necessary that Almighty power, departing from the ordinary laws of his government, teach this infantile mind to appropriate to itself the consequences of the first transgression, as a matter of personal guilt; as a matter for which it has to curse the day of its being—a doing of its own. To gather remorse from any other source than this is utterly impossible.

Nor is it a just inference, that while the incapability of Infants to commit evil secures them from the punishment of personal and actual sin, the same incompetency, by preventing works of righteousness, shuts them out from the Kingdom of Heaven. Works of iniquity are the ground of condemnation. But works of righteousness are never the meritorious cause of our acceptance.

Nor, again, is the supposed incompetency to suffer the torments of the damned equally applicable to the enjoyment of Heaven: Since, this can never arise from the remembrance of our own faithfulness. The chorus of praise is to the "Lamb that was slain." Gratitude occupies the bosoms of the Redeemed: gratitude to him who bought our salvation with his blood. To me it is quite enough to know, that, from the very nature of God's dispensations, dying Infants cannot undergo the infliction of judicial vengeance. What method will be adopted to render them capable of spiritual enjoyment is not of the smallest moment. I am not anxious to know how the atmosphere of a Heavenly world will develope and expand the tender intellect: how, or how soon, a grasp of mind shall be given to the ascended spirit; and the late little sufferer gaze with "wrapt admiration," at unfading glories. It is enough for me that I can say with a late eminent and pious writer: "Though we cannot affirm how this change is to be wrought, yet, I suppose, few are so rash as to imagine it impossible that any Infants can be saved. The power that produces this change in some can produce it in all.— And therefore I am willing to believe till the Scripture forbids me, that Infants, of all nations and kindred, without exception, who die before they are capable of sinning after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who have done nothing in the body of which they can give an account, are included

in the election of grace. They are born for a better world than this. They just enter this state of tribulation, they quickly pass through it, *their robes are washed white in the blood of the Lamb*, and they are admitted, for his sake, before the throne.*

It is not necessary to sustain this belief by what has been said. The considerations which follow furnish much more strength of positive testimony.

3. *The character of God, as specially displayed in the attribute of mercy.* I know how easily, and to what a melancholy extent, this holy attribute is daily abused : how readily the impenitent sinner perverts it into an encouragement of folly and guilt. But if I can see no reason for accountability—if I can discover no violation of law—no insulting rejection of grace—no corruption of heart, which the blood of Jesus Christ may not wash away—and no divine declaration against the Infant before me,—the nature of my inquiry is changed, and I have to ponder on the character of Him with whom I have to do. If the decision, whatever it may be, is to emanate from a principle of pure sovereignty, it becomes us to know the character of that sovereign. And what is the result? I can behold a divine equity which no considerations of mere feeling can ever alter—the stern utterance of an unchangeable decree against the impenitent—the desolation of the earth

* John Newton : Sermon on Rev. v. 9.

rather than the infringement of a tittle of his word. But I can see, too, a tenderness and compassion apart from the terrible brightness of justice. I can hear the expostulation "*why will ye die?*" and the earnest effort to win, "*how shall I give thee up, Ephraim?*" and the lament over a devoted city-- and the solemn protestation, "*I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth.*" And I know that the objects of all this long suffering and forbearance had forfeited, in numberless ways, all claim to any other dispensation than that of eternal wrath. Would it not, then, be with an eye of tenderness that such a Sovereign would look on the helpless being before me ?

Now if our inquiry were arrested here, it would be at a point of strong presumptive hope. I should believe in the safety of the dying Infant, because I could ascertain nothing valid against it ; and something, in the general character and dealings of God, in its favour. And although I should possess less evidence than on many other points, I should be within reach of enough to quiet my apprehensions. But there is a more important link in the chain of this reasoning. Our Creator has left on record still less ambiguous intimations than those we have mentioned. And these may be seen in

4. *The special regard of God for Infants*, as observable in the following instances : God charges the perverse Israelites with, among other abominations, "*the blood of the souls of poor INNO-*

CENTS ;” or as the expression means, the blood of the lives—the life’s blood.* It is hardly fair to apply this language to the *innocent poor*, as has been done; and the mass of the best authority is in favour of our present reading. Now, whether this passage refer to the sufferers’ ill desert of death, or is used as one of those diminutives which affection adopts, is not much to the purpose. In either case, it indicates a compassionate interest in the welfare of children so young, and so helpless. And it is certain that in the ordinary adoption of such a term as, “*poor innocents*,” we should understand a compassionate and interested feeling in their behalf.

The book of the same prophet from whom we have taken this expression, contains another, of a still more pointed character: “*Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle. Because they have forsaken me and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other Gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, nor the Kings of Judah, and have filled this place with the BLOOD OF INNOCENTS.*

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* Jer. II. 34. † id. xix. 3, 5.

of which was adapted to thrill the heart of the hearer.

And this concern which prohibits injury to the "innocents," was manifested in the plainest manner on other occasions. An example may be given where the parents had no claim to Covenant privileges, and yet a strong desire was manifested by the Almighty to spare their tender offspring: It is the instance of the Ninevites.* When the prophet murmured on the blasting of his gourd, and on the display of mercy to the impenitent city, God expostulated with him in the following language : "*Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither made it grow; which came up in a night and perished in a night; and should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left?*" Now if any given number of this vast multitude should die without being yet able to "discern between their right hand and their left," wherein could they have forfeited that divine solicitude so plainly expressed by their Maker ?

The impression that benignant feelings were entertained on the part of the Creator, toward young children was general. And hence when national calamity pressed severely on the people, and they assembled to present themselves in the attitude of supplication, they took with them their

* Jonah iv: 10, 11.

tender offspring, under the belief that the spectacle would excite his compassion.* And in one instance at least, they were expressly directed to do so.†

There is something remarkable, too, in an expression contained in the prophet Ezekiel: “*Moreover thou hast taken thy sons and thy daughters whom thou hast borne unto me, and these hast thou sacrificed unto them to be devoured. Is this of thy whoredoms a small matter, that thou hast slain my children?*”‡ The force of this reproof lies in the pronouns *me* and *my*, indicative of a personal claim upon the offspring: and yet the parents of these children had abandoned their covenant with Jehovah, and ranked with the vilest of idolaters.

But our prospects on this subject brighten when we descend to the time of the Redeemer, observe his conduct, and hear his language. The looks of favour with which he eyed the young Ruler—or if this expression be too strong, the tender feeling which he exhibited towards him, when it is said he “*loved him*”—is surely not consistent with indifference to the fate of the still less sinful child. And it seems in perfect keeping with this tenderness, that he manifested a special regard for those of this early age. The following examples not only speak closely to this purpose, but, if we err not, they remove part of that veil of secrecy which covered the fate of the departed Infant:

* II. Chron. xx. 13.—Judith iv. 9, 12, † Joel ii. 16. ‡ Ez. xvi. 20, 21.

*“Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, verily I say unto you except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Whosoever, therefore, shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.”*** It is trifling to say that this example was not given to create a hope of the salvation of Infants because the lesson derived was inculcated only on adults. And I admit that it would be disingenuous to attempt proving hence that Infants are not depraved : for this would imply that there can be no entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven,—or in other words that it would be impossible to become a disciple of Christ—without a complete removal of this moral malady. All that the Saviour means, is, that the dependence and docility of children are indispensable requisites for acquiring a practical knowledge of his own meek and lowly doctrines. And this was in direct opposition to the overweening pride, and intractable temper of both the Jewish teachers and their scholars. But could it be likely that with a docility and disposition suited to be an example to the inquirer for salvation, and dying in that state, some dire necessity might exclude them from mercy?—that Jesus would acknowledge them in the very condition *exemplarily* fitted for the reception of divine grace, if the next instant the

* Math. xii. 2, 4.

stroke of death could consign them to an unblessed doom ?

On another occasion, “ *he took a child and set him in the midst of them; and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name receiveth me: and whoso shall receive me, receiveth not me, but Him that sent me.*” The whole spirit of this injunction is the direction of kindness towards those who resemble these little ones : identifying the condition of his disciples with that of infancy, and then declaring the reception of them the same with the reception of himself.

Again. “ *Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in Heaven.*”* If there were not such discrepancy of opinion respecting the meaning of this text, and if it were suffered to pass with the construction which an ordinary reader would attach to it, it would put an end to all dispute on the subject. Some writers insist on a figurative explication of the words “ *little ones;*” and apply them to Christians, exclusively. Others include children. While a third class expound the passage of children alone. Authorities of great respectability are ranged on all sides. From the *second* to the *sixth* verse of the chapter it seems undeniable that the application is thus limited : He placed

* Math. xviii. 10.

a little child in the midst of the disciples : he retains sight of him,—and, while so doing, deduces an important lesson to those around him : “ *Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.*” Thus far, the lowly disciple and the child are distinct ; and if any change take place in the design of the Saviour until the fifteenth verse, so as to exclude the latter entirely, it would seem not quite consistent with an answer to the question which gave rise to these instructions—“ *Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven ?*” Besides, of the very numerous instances in which the term “ *little ones*” is used, in the Bible, there are no cases in which it does not refer to little children, unless we include two or three of very questionable meaning.

It is not, however, of the least moment whether the humble disciple is included in this paternal mention of children, or not. It does not weaken our argument. It is enough to know that Jesus places them on a parity. And while I learn that he watches over the infantile spirit with benignity and kindness, and forbids their being despised, I can account for his displeasure when the disciples would have kept them back from his arms.*

A late author† considers the word “ *angels*,” in the passage before us, to mean the souls of children

* Mark x. 13, 16.

† Toplady.

dying in infancy ; because a ministering angel could not “*always*” behold the face of God.—Without passing an opinion on this exposition, the conclusions are plain from this chapter—That children, are under special care—that they are embraced within the design of Him who came “to save that which was lost”—and that it is not the will of God ‘that one of these little ones should perish.’

If, then, such had been the views of the ancient church ; and if those who lived under the old economy entertained a firm hope that their offspring, while in a state of infancy, were under favour of God—an opinion so well corroborated by subsequent testimony—it is no wonder that the afflicted father, in our text, looked from an earthly loss up to a Heavenly gain.

Nor is it here undeserving of note, that this instance of a parent anticipating a glorious reunion with his departed offspring—this instance of assurance of faith in the happiness of a fled spirit of infancy—is one where, humanly speaking, hope would have been most dim. The child was the offspring of crime. Domestic infidelity and murder were necessarily associated with his name. And his removal was the first of the many judgments which succeeded the complicated guilt of the father. Still not a doubt of his salvation seems to have clouded the mind of the parent. The struggle of anxiety being past, and the fearful

hour of suspense gone by, he merges every sorrow into the delightful feelings of faith—" *I shall go to him.*"

And now, brethren, with testimony such as this before me, am I obtruding beyond the right of belief? am I cherishing a forbidden hope? am I guilty of presumption, in asserting a full conviction of the redemption,—the free and full redemption—of every departed Infant? or could I, after evidence which I have just examined, see that hope unhinged by mere human authority, the creeds and confessions of Churches or Councils? Could I, after all, watch, as a parent over the couch of my dying child, and fancy that I hear the thunders of Sinai, and see the glare of its flame already approaching the spirit that flutters before me? And shall I exclaim with all the bitterness of one who beholds the lifeless body of the reprobate—" *Oh my son, my son, would God I had died for thee?*" And shall I fancy around the tomb, to which the body is consigned as a loan, a misty uncertainty dark as the doubts of the Pagan mourner? and shall I come back to the chamber of desolation and read in all that reminds me of the departed, *doubt*,—awful, agonizing *doubt*? I cannot. Nor do I envy the happiness of that mind which loves to shroud the scene with needless and unmeaning mystery; and seems to take pleasure in efforts to prove that there can be no certainty here. I will believe that before the tears of the afflicted

parent have ceased to fall on the yet unchilled frame, the immortal spirit has already mingled with the hosts of the redeemed : in those brief minutes, has already outstripped the attainments of earth's best saint, and reached a dignity and intelligence beyond the loftiest mind it left.

Lastly. Our subject leaves more than a single important inference in our hands. Had it been a mere desire to satisfy an idle curiosity which induced me to occupy your attention so long, the employment would have been unworthy the place and the hour. But if such an inquiry meet a natural solicitude :—if it tend to keep us from a narrow and illiberal spirit ;—if, without abating our reverence for the will of God, it confirms our views of the goodness and compassions of the Redeemer ; and if it consoles, while it admonishes, the surviving parent, our occupation has been neither ill-timed nor unprofitable.

I. *Our subject furnishes a delightful source of consolatory thought to the pious bereaved parent.* Oh, it is cheering to hear the conclusions of a pious mourner, as he returns from the place of the dead, and gathers comfort from the promises of God : “ How can I desire that this young immortal should be degraded to the world again ? If the glorified creature be happy—if God be pleased,—“ who am I, that I should interpose a selfish feeling, “ to arrest that career of bliss and glory ? Already has the little one answered the end of its being

" on earth : Already the companion of its maker,
 " and the contributor of praise among the millions
 " who surround the throne of Eternal Majesty,
 " why should I remand it back to scenes of care,
 " distrust and strife ? Oh no ! There is a protect-
 " ing hand more powerful than mine, and a pa-
 " rental love far more endearing, and a tenderness
 " far more wise, to secure and bless and cherish
 " the beatified spirit. For me—I would not have
 " thee exchange the chorus of the redeemed for
 " the din of earth, nor the ennobling employ-
 " ments of Heaven for the most honoured en-
 " gagements below !"

What a contrast, too, does the state of a departed Infant afford with the possible issue, if the prayer of the parent had been favourably answered, and the life of the dying had been granted. Who can tell—if such speculation may be a moment indulged—who can tell whether the spared offspring may not have planted thorns in the pillow of the parent, and mixed, "in the cup of his father's house," the wormwood and the gall? "I cannot part with my child," exclaimed a doating mother as she bent over the cradle of a little sufferer—God heard the petulant and rebellious murmur,—withdrew the nearing chills of death, and suffered the idol to live. And when twenty years had passed, "I die of a broken heart," exclaimed that mother as she sunk down, the victim of filial ingratitude! Such is a simple tale of fact.

And such the answer which the frown of Providence may give to the unsubmissive temper.— And oh, if the lingering death of a broken heart can receive an augmentation of pain, it must be from the memory of that murmur, “I CANNOT PART WITH MY CHILD !”

Bereaved Christian ! it is not a mere restraint from the rebellious murmur, nor a mere check to the repinings of a wounded affection; which our subject affords. “*I shall go to him,*” you say. “Oh that the sundering of a tie which bound me here, may loosen my desires from earth, and fix them in the Heavens. Come, my soul,—let me relinquish every impediment,—let me abandon every unholy thought,—let me break with every lust, that keeps me back from the contemplation of awaiting glory. Behold ! a hand so recently bedewed with my tears, beckons my sluggish spirit away. Yes; I will follow thee, young member of Messiah’s family ! And from this good hour I break from the claims of all unhallowed hope.” Were these your resolutions ? Then indeed, were afflictions “blessings in disguise.” Then do you ‘ sow in tears only to reap in joy.’

II. But it is not the pious parent alone, whose bosom is pregnable to this shaft of sorrow. Death makes no distinction between those who have hope, and those who have none. He never asks, are you ready ? ‘ before he strikes’ the daring sinner down. He never inquires, are you resigned ?

before he summons the offspring of the vilest, from the arms that fondly pressed it to the bosom. The commission is dated in the hour of its execution ; and it leaves no interval for parley.

Oh, there is indeed a wide space for the arrows of affliction, in the breast of the thoughtless soul. And they can be made from every little incident of momentary crossing : and they can be lodged with an aim that is careless, to drink up the spirits that flowed in confidence and gaiety. And how should we close such a wound ? Shall we say to the mourner—"the departed dwells in the realms of light ?" But how will this calm the disquietude of a bosom, whose affections mix with all that is earthly ? How may a heart that is sensual, extract peace from intelligence which serves only to wound its selfishness ? And yet there is something that is consolatory here—something that possesses a negative consolation—even to the man who never yet grasped the hope of salvation in his own behalf. A faint expectation that some change may hereafter be in himself, will sustain his spirits respecting the fate of his own soul--and a *very* faint expectation may suffice—But where the doom is already fixed for the child, that parent has abandoned the government of nature, and is lost to nature's appeal, who is contented without a vigorous hope that all is well with his departed offspring : and this, too, without being aware of the admonition such an assurance furnishes.

And if it be so—if we say to the bereaved, *all is well*—“*it is well with the child*”—what have we done? We have covered the wound; but we have accomplished no more. Sorrow tells a tale—sorrow gives a lesson—sorrow utters a prophecy—and, would to God, when we attempt to explain, and interpret, we could carry the moral into the intimacies of the heart. It is here we fail. It is here we encounter the danger of concealing instruction under a momentary comfort.

Irreligious, but bereaved parents,—after all, what avails the safety of the departed to you? While hope for your own souls holds aloof so far—while the appeals of mercy are repeated in vain—while conscience tells so fully, and so truly, that the offer of salvation has ever been tendered in vain—what boots the rest? What is it to you that the hope of a glorious resurrection enters the dark and dank habitation of the little one? You meet again: but if there be a single feeling of horror above all others to our present conception, it is that of the ending of a natural and social law, at the judgment seat of God. It is that of a law of affection availing nothing. Your little one became the property of Jesus—not by virtue of any prayer of faith that *you* had uttered—not by a free-will offering you had made—but by that blood of atonement you have thrust so often from you—by that distinguishing grace whose attractions were too faint for your eye.

Yet you have watched by the bed of the departing spirit of infancy : and you have caught the last sigh, as the soul winged its passage from earth. And even the loneliness of that sad moment seemed broken by an admonition—"FATHER!"—"MOTHER!"—"COME AWAY!" You heard—you thought—eternity neared—earth interposed—and you returned to its bosom again.

Impenitent, but bereaved Parent! When a future world, in some hour of reflection, flings its shadow over your path ; and, despite of all your efforts, presses its realities upon your attention, *remember*—that no bond of parental love may abide hereafter, when the frown of an offended God settles the destiny of the lost, and the only relationship that exists, is that of the family of Christ.

If the tender mercies of the Saviour were too little engaging to win your admiration—if the worth of your own soul has not entered into your thoughts of the future—behold what an argument is furnished by an afflictive dispensation ! You loved the departed. To that very affection a most solemn providence of God has appealed. It bids you gaze from Earth to Heaven. It reminds you of the abode of glorified Spirits. It admonishes you to inquire, "am I also ready?" It intimates, most earnestly and clearly, that the only true consolation which ever succeeds the stroke of sorrow, must be connected with a reconciliation to God,

and an humble hope in the Redeemer's blood. Let these be yours, and your peace will be independent of the precarious tenure of human life. Faith shall scatter the darkness, and explain the mystery, so readily attendant on affliction. You shall look up from the tomb to the late object of your solicitude and care. You shall exclaim with a confidence sure and steadfast,—“ though he shall not return to me”—“ I SHALL GO TO HIM !”









