

by H. Borlase

PRESENT PROSPECTS.

THE knowledge of the mind of God is the Christian's only security both for determining his true position in the world, and his being preserved in it steadfast and immoveable. Where this is not ascertained, all must be doubt and perplexity, and his path must be uncertain—nay, inevitably wrong. Where it is known, he is, in a certain sense, omnipotent. This consideration has an especial application to the present state and prospects of the people of God. Many may say, indeed, as to any inquiry beyond present things, What is truth? But the Scripture sets before us the clear and definite counsels of Him who changeth not; marks out the distinct character of every principle, whether good or evil, in His view; traces their respective advances, and exhibits the great general results, to which they are severally progressing. And these things the Church is directed to observe.—“We have also a more sure word of prophecy, whereunto ye do well to take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, *until the day dawn.*” And the same Apostle, after portraying the characters of evil in the last days, specifies *this* as the safeguard of the saints, “*That they know these things before*” (2 Pet. i. 19; iii. 17).

All our light then is darkness, unless our apprehension of the circumstances in which we are standing accord with the revealed truth of God concerning them. To take a

practical example.—One principal anxiety of the believer, (I mean of one who is accepted in the Beloved,) with regard to himself, is that his service be given wisely to the Lord. But it seems evident, that unless the purposes of God for this dispensation be gathered by him from the written word, his labours must often be misdirected, and possibly, as to their results, given more to the house of the stranger (Prov. v. 10) than to God's: for instead of ministering according to his ability in God's husbandry, his powers may be diverted into channels whence no enduring fruit is returned to the Lord's glory, and where His Spirit would never have led him; and to all that is not done in that Spirit the word of Jesus applies, "He that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad." Unless the unchanging distinction between the Church and the world, up to the "time of the end" be seen, the expectation of a gradual diffusion of Christianity must constantly operate to the consuming of our services upon that which will absorb in itself all the energy and power of the labourer, and still remain the WORLD.* But the subject assumes an import even still more weighty, when considered with regard to the consummation declared in that portion of the revelation of God's will, which embraces the present age. For it must inevitably make a wide practical difference in the Christian's position in the world, whether he considers it as going on to blessedness, or on the contrary to judgment; since on this must, to a great extent, depend the actual character in which it appears to his eyes, and, consequently, his own conduct and views with regard to it. The views of surrounding things, taken by two believers, one of whom considers them to be thus far in

* Of course I do not here speak of preaching the Gospel, or of otherwise meeting the world in testimony, the only way in which a Christian can meet it.

their progress to perfection, while the other sees that sentence upon them is delayed, only because "the long-suffering of the Lord is salvation" (2 Pet. iii.), must be as different as light from darkness. Nor is it too much to say, that the character of their testimony will equally vary; for testimony is given in power, only in proportion as the truth of the circumstances in which he stands is recognised by him who has to give it; and if his mind is resting upon the hope of a progressive enlightening of the world, while it may be that fearful darkness is fast closing in, all his wisdom will be folly. Most of the Lord's people indeed, in common with others, feel that the aspect of the times is sufficiently awful: yet, perhaps, the greatest number are inclined to consider it as temporary, with the hope that it will subside. Let us then briefly try present things by the test of Scripture, for to this will be our safest appeal. If we judge by *sight* of anything, we shall assuredly err; and therefore it is only by taking the word as our criterion, though appearances may seem ever so contradictory, that our judgment can be true.

First, then, how does Scripture uniformly describe the character of the Church throughout the dispensation? And here we at once meet with the incontrovertible fact, that the whole tenor of the commands and exhortations throughout the Gospels and Epistles to the people of God, are from their very nature applicable only to a comparatively small number, in the midst of a world lying in wickedness. The irreversible principle of the dispensation is, that "MANY are called, FEW are chosen:" and with this correspond all the practical addresses of the Lord and His Apostles. It is therefore in absolute contrast to a dispensation in which it is said, "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord." The two can never become identical, for, on the supposition

that this dispensation should grow into one of universal truth, the whole character of the Apostolic Epistles would gradually become inappropriate to the circumstances of the Church.— The characters to whom they are addressed, are thus described: “The sons of God in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world” (Phil. ii. 15). “Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God; therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not” (1 John iii). “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in the wicked one, ἐν τῷ πονηρῷ” (1 John v. 19). “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Pet. iii. 9). But more especially is the nature of this dispensation as regards His followers described by the Lord: they are said to be “*the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the persecuted for righteousness’ sake; they are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, as sheep among wolves, as the wheat among tares, which grow, increase, and ripen together, until, in the end of this age, the Son of man shall send to gather out of His kingdom all things that offend.*” The present is a dispensation of witness, and of witness only, (Matt. xxiv. 14): and as such, essentially incongruous with one of universality. The insignia of God’s people *throughout*, are, *the Cross* and *the Reproach of Christ*. In truth, the position of the Church in the world, if it were faithful, never could be any other; and in the present earthly glory of the professing Church, the light of Scripture exhibits only the deceit of Satan and apostasy.

The character of the world also is no less clearly and decisively given, as being ever in invariable opposition and enmity to God and to His Christ; and so characterised, not

in a vague and generalising way, but as a definite mass, in which the "*Prince of the power of the air rules, even the god of this world, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.*" Any supposed amelioration of the world as such, is only Satan's lie to bring the children of God into contact with it in some way or other, by inducing the supposition that the principles of God are working in it, to unite by degrees all in the truth. Yet is the Church's state spoken of as being ever a suffering one till her Lord return; and HE has spoken of no time of blessedness to her, or to the groaning creation, until then. "She that is a widow indeed and desolate, trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day." But the sure word of prophecy does not fail us here. The last days are shown to terminate in the deepest shades of moral evil; and they have been written for the Church's warning, if her eyes were but open to read them. "This know also that in the last days perilous times shall come, for men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false-accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, **HAVING A FORM OF GODLINESS, but denying the power thereof**" (2 Tim. iii.) "There shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of His coming?" (2 Pet. iii.) "Little children, it is the last time, and as ye have heard that *Antichrist shall come*, even now there are many Antichrists" (1 John ii. 18). The whole of Jude is also an awakening testimony to the same effect. But above all, in the last book of Prophecy, is the Dispensation presented in its true aspect both in progress and

consummation. And here, whatever difference there may be as to details of interpretation, the *principles* exhibited in it are at least distinctly stated. Not a word is contained in it of progressive advance in the world, not one of the gradual spread of Christianity, but darkness, fearful darkness, is brought out in direct, unvarying opposition to the Light of Life; for the conclusion is, that *the earth* and the *whole world* are gathered together in collective array against the Lamb (xvi). We see presented in it (and this excluding all theories of interpretation), the principles upon which the world is acting, and how they end: and God's principles, their full and marked separation from the world, and their result; the separation of the powers of holiness and sin. The obvious practical application to all, even to the poor and unlearned, for "blessed is he that readeth and they that hear the words of this prophecy, *and keep those things which are written therein,*" is in the observing the characters of evil which are described in this book, in order to avoid being in any way mingled with them, and the final judgment in which they are indiscriminately involved. The principles on which the world proceeds must clearly end, not in peace, but in judgment. And whatever may be predicted from present appearances of the moral elevation of the world, all things that the children of this generation esteem—the riches, the luxury, the magnificence, the pride of man, come only to this—"Alas! alas! that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come!" Let our hearts weigh this well, if we are looking for any thing better from the strength and power of man, or are connected with that which gives place and distinction in the world. "The Lord alone will be exalted in that day."

But is there nothing *now* corresponding to these dark fea-

tures? I say nothing as to the time when the full consummation of these things shall take place, though we may believe them not to be afar off: but is not the Mystery of Iniquity now working, and are not all the principles already in operation, which, as soon as the restraining hand of God upon evil is removed, will burst forth into the full manifestation of the power of darkness? Let us watch the present movement in this country—in Ireland—nay, over the whole of Europe, and we shall see that it is not a superficial modification of things which is now in progress, but an impulse arising from the very central springs of this world's action: the mind of the age is working definitely and steadily to one object, which, to the infidel and the philosophising Christian, may seem the commencement of the renovation of society, but it cannot but be seen, by one who looks below the surface, that the very foundations of the established constitution of things are breaking up under an irresistible influence, which may produce the explosion at any hour; and that the apparent approximation to unity is but the selfish principle of man's nature, gathering together all which ministers to his senses or his intellect, for himself and against God,—in a word, the unity of Antichrist. For a season, indeed, there may be an appearance of calmness on the face of things; but this we are prepared to expect, for deceivableness is the special character of the last days; and therefore the Spirit of God is more than ever needed to detect the falsehood which surrounding circumstances ever convey to the eye of sense, and to enable the Christian to judge of them as they are in the estimate of God. The natural man, judging according to sense, must necessarily err in all his conclusions, for they are drawn from external appearances. Reason may be correct enough in

its deductions from *natural facts* ; but reason does not recognise the *one great fact*, that **SIN IS IN THE WORLD** ; and therefore all its conclusions are astray, because they are not based upon that which alone enables the spiritual man to account for all the apparent strangeness and contrariety of existing things. Man has not a thought in communion with God, except through His Spirit, which dwells in those who believe and know the truth : and it is marvellous, seeing that the Fall brought utter disunion from God, and that fallen nature, under every colouring that may be superinduced by the pride of civilised man, is still nature separated from God and acting for itself, that the supposition should be entertained by any of our Christian brethren, of a state of universal peace and righteousness being established through the causes which are at present in operation. There is, and can be, no foundation for the reign of holiness (setting aside all that prophecy teaches as to the introduction of this period) in a state of things built up by man, arising out of the necessity of his case ; for the whole result of the energy and power of the world is based upon a system of necessity, and that necessity springs from its alienation from God. Nay, such a reign as is looked for, would be nothing but the dominion of Satan, using for his own purposes the folly and self-will of men, and bringing them into confederated union with every outward display of human glory, against the glory and truth of the King of kings and Lord of lords ; and if this day be expected, it may not be far distant. The evident tendency of all the principles now at work in the world, is to bring men into organised association, upon the ground of their common wants and pleasures ; and the result, hastened as it will be by the resources afforded by modern invention and facility of intercommunication, will be the acting upon

a grander and more daring scale the scene of gathering together against God, which has been prefigured at Babel; for now "nothing will be restrained from them which they have imagined to do;"—to be succeeded, indeed, by an outpouring of judgment, to which the scattering of the nations, the destruction of the whole world, and the fires of Sodom, have been merely faint shadowings. "As it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man; they did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise also, as it was in the days of Lot: they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed" (Luke xviii. 26).

It may be well imagined, if these things are so, and the present dispensation ends in apostasy and consequent excision, that the whole policy of Satan will be used to divert the minds of believers from the consideration of them; and thus in truth it is: and we may observe his power exercised, both in leading some into unholy and unscriptural speculations, and also in using these as instruments for bringing the study of the simple truth itself into discredit in the estimation of others. Either way his end is gained, for "*if we know not these things before, there is no security against being led away by the error of the wicked*" (2 Pet. iii).

In the mean time what is the Church doing,—that which should be the light in the world, bearing a clear-shining testimony for God, and against all the deceivableness of unrighteousness, in separation from all evil? Even as it has ever done, seeking its own, and not the things of Jesus Christ.

We have one portion of the Establishment (in Ireland) defending its present position, on the lately discovered plea, that “*The body that professes to be guided solely by the written word, is certain to be wrong in principle, and defective in practice,*” and proposing *tradition* to be taken as the supplement of this deficiency in the means provided for the guidance and instruction of the Church of Christ.* Another division (at Oxford) having discovered the insufficiency of former vindications, have so far progressed towards Romanism, as to rest their claims upon Apostolic Succession alone, and already speak of *dispensing the sacrifice*.† In another quarter, the Dissenters are marshalling themselves in the ranks of the Infidel and the Socinian, and grasping at all the power and privilege that the world can give them; and the Evangelical body, alas! more guilty and inconsistent than all, inasmuch as they profess a form of sound doctrine, seeking to unite the confession of Jesus with the possession of credit and influence in the world, instead of being content to take the only portion of His followers here, even suffering for His name’s sake. Each party is contending for their own in present things, but in one thing they are all united—in closing their ears to the whole succession of fearful warnings which are pealing around them, and in soothing into slumber themselves, and those to whom they should be as watchmen, in utter disregard of the clear and distinct announcements which, line upon line, are given in Scripture, of the manner in which this dispensation arrives at its close. “The vision of all is become as the words of

* See a Tract lately published by the Rev. W. Burgh, Dublin,

† An advance towards Popery, which is so far honest and consistent; for to this the principles of a true churchman would necessarily lead, if followed out to their legitimate extent. See Tracts published at Oxford; also a Sermon lately preached by the Archdeacon of Totnes in Exeter Cathedral.

a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned saying, Read this, I pray thee ; and he saith, I cannot, for it is sealed : and the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee ; and he saith, I am not learned” (Is. xxix. 11).

All these are indications of the latter days, which the Scripture leads us to expect ; but there is nothing in them which need for a moment move or perplex the mind that looks at them in the light of God’s word ; nay, the rushing in of evil on all sides even becomes, in mercy, the means of establishing the Christian more firmly, *because it has been spoken of before* ; and that which in itself might disturb, does, in reality, only add to his confidence in the sure word of Him who has written it for his warning, and who will deliver those who have kept “ the word of His patience,” “ from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world, to try them *which dwell upon the earth.*” Yea, there is yet more, far more of comfort to be drawn from the evil day : one thought in which the believer may find rest, even in the hope of the coming and kingdom of Jesus, the period of resurrection-glory to His saints, and of righteousness and peace to the earth ; when the kingdoms of this world shall change their present rulers, even Satan, and wicked spirits in heavenly places (Eph. vi. 12), and become the kingdoms of our LORD and of His CHRIST. “ Ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice,” was the especial character of the period of His absence ; but He has fixed no interval to faith, and the point on which the eye of His disciple rests, is His coming ; when the word of promise shall be fulfilled, “ I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”

In the present crisis, as ever, there is but one position

for the church to occupy, and this in separation from "all that is in the world," and in keeping the "testimony of Jesus;" a position, of which the strength is in knowing that *in it* God is *on our side*, and *against all sin*. It is a day in which it well behoves believers to look to themselves, that on the one hand they may be found walking in the Spirit, and on the other, that they may not be connected with any form of evil, however accredited. "Judgment must begin at the house of God;" and since nothing of human might or device will stand in that day, it is of the deepest importance, if we look for it, to stand clear of all that will be swept away at His appearing. May the Lord enable us to abide in Him, and to walk in that simplicity which alone is wisdom, and which will remove every difficulty from our path.

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