

The Pleasantness of a Religious Life

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... for instruction in righteousness ...

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TO THE READER.

THAT distinction which the learned Dr. Henry More insists so much upon, in his explanation of the grand mystery of godliness, between the animal life and the divine life, is certainly of great use to lead us into the understanding of that mystery. What was the fall and apostacy of man, and what is still his sin and misery, but the soul's revolt from the divine life, and giving up itself wholly to the animal life? And what was the design of our Redeemer, but to recover us to the divine and spiritual life again, by the influences of his grace? And to this his gospel has a direct tendency; his religion is all spiritual and divine, while all other religions savour of the animal life. Christianity (saith he) is that period of the wisdom and providence of God, wherein the animal life is remarkably insulted, and triumphed over by the Divine. Book II. Chap 7. And so far and no further, are we Christians indeed, as this revolution is brought about in our souls.

The conflict is between these two: nothing draws more forcibly than pleasure. In order, therefore, to the advancing of the interests of the divine life in myself and others, I have

TO THE READER.

here endeavoured, as God has enabled me, to make it evident, that the pleasures of the divine life are unspeakably better, and more deserving, than those of the animal life; were people convinced of this, we should gain our point.

The substance of this was preached last year in six sermons, in the ordinary course of my ministry, among many other reasons why we should be religious. I was then solicited to make it public; and now take this opportunity to prepare it for the press, when, through the good hand of my God upon me, I have finished the fifth volume of my Exposition, before I go about the sixth. And herein, I confess, I indulge an inclination of my own; for this doctrine of the pleasantness of religion is what I have long had a particular kindness for, and taken all occasions to mention. Yet I would not thus far have gratified either my friends' request, or my own inclination, if I had not thought, that by the blessing of God, it might be of some service to the common interest of Christ's kingdom, and the common salvation of precious souls.

MAT. HENRY

May 31, 1741.

THE PLEASANTNESS

OF A

RELIGIOUS LIFE.

Prov. iii. 17.

**HER WAYS ARE WAYS OF PLEASANTNESS,
AND ALL HER PATHS ARE PEACE**

TRUE Religion is often in Scripture, and particularly in this book of the Proverbs, represented and recommended to us under the name and character of "Wisdom," because it is the highest improvement of human nature, and the best and surest guide of human life. It was one of the first and most ancient discoveries of God's mind to the children of men. When God made a "weight for the winds" and a "decree for the rain," when he brought all the other creatures

under the established rule and law of their creation, according to their respective capacities, then he declared this to man, a reasonable creature, as the law of his creation,—“Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil, is understanding,” Job xxviii. 28.

The great men of the world, who engross its wealth and honours, are pretenders to wisdom, and think none do so well for themselves as they; but, though their neighbours applaud them, and “their posterity,” who reap the fruit of this worldly wisdom, “approve their sayings,” yet “this their way is their folly;” and so it will appear, when God himself shall call them “Fools,” and require their souls. The learned men of the world were well-wishers to wisdom, and modestly called themselves “Lovers of wisdom;” and many wise principles we have from them, and wise precepts, and yet their philosophy failed them in that in which man’s great duty and interest lies—acquainting himself with his Maker, and keeping up communion with

him ; herein they that “ professed themselves to be wise, became fools,” and “ the world by wisdom knew not God.”

But true Christians are, without doubt, the truly wise men. They understand themselves best, and on which side their interest lies, who give up themselves to the conduct of Christ and his word and Spirit ; who consult his oracles and govern themselves by them, which are indeed the true oracles of reason. Men never begin to be wise till they begin to be religious ; and they then leave off to be wise, when they leave off to do good.

Now, to recommend to us the study and practice of this true wisdom, to bring us into a willing subjection to her authority, and to keep us to a conscientious observance of her dictates, the great God is here, by Solomon, reasoning with us, from those topics which, in other cases, are usually cogent and commanding enough. Interest is the great governess of the world. Every one is for what he can get, and therefore applies himself to that which he thinks he can

get by. The common inquiry is, "Who will shew us any good?" We would all be happy, would all be easy.

Now it is here demonstrated by eternal Truth itself, that it is our interest to be religious; and therefore religion deserves to be called wisdom, because it teaches us to do well for ourselves. And it is certain, that the way to be happy, that is, perfectly holy hereafter, is to be holy, that is, truly happy now. It is laid down for a principle here, "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom," that finds the principles and habits of it planted in his own soul by divine grace; that, having diligently sought, has at length found, that "pearl of great price."

This is that which the text speaks of. We are here assured, that the ways of religion are ways of pleasantness; not only pleasant ways, but "ways of pleasantness;" as if pleasantness were confined to those ways, and not to be found any where else; and as if the pleasantness arose not from any foreign circumstance, but from the innate goodness of the ways themselves. Or it denotes the

superlative pleasantness of religion; it is as pleasant as pleasantness itself.

Wisdom's ways are so, that is, the ways which she has directed us to walk in, the ways of her commandments. They are such, that if we keep close to them, and go on in them, we shall certainly find true pleasure and satisfaction.

It is added that "all her paths are peace." Peace is sometimes put for all good; here some take it for the good of safety and protection. Many ways are pleasant; they are clean, and look smooth: but they are dangerous, either not sound at bottom, or beset with thieves: but the ways of wisdom have in them a holy security, as well as a holy serenity; and they that walk in them, have God himself for their "shield," as well as their "sun," and are not only joyful in the hope of good, but are, or may be "quiet" also "from the fear of evil." But we may take it for the good of pleasure and delight; and so it imports the same as the former part of the verse. As there is "pleas-

antness" in wisdom's ways, so there is "peace" in all her paths.

There is not only peace in the end of religion, but peace in the way. There is not only peace provided as a bed, for good men to lie down in at night, when their work is done, and their warfare is accomplished ; but there is also peace provided as a shade, for good men to work in all day, that they may not only do their work, but do it with delight ; for even the "work of righteousness," as well as its reward, "shall be peace ;" and the immediate "effect of righteousness," as well as its issue at last, "quietness and assurance for ever," Isaiah xxxii. 17.

There is not only this peace in the way of religion in general, but in the particular "paths" of that way. View it in the several acts and instances of it, in the exercise of every grace, in the performance of every duty, and you will find that what is said of the body of Christianity, is true of every part of it—it is peace. Look into all the paths of wisdom, make trial of them all, and

you will find there are none to be excepted, none to be quarrelled with. They are all uniform, and of a piece. The same golden thread of peace and pleasure runs through the whole web of serious godliness.

We cannot say so of this world, that all its paths are peace, however some of them may pretend to give the mind a little satisfaction. Its pleasures have their alloys. That which one thing sweetens, another comes presently and embitters. But as there is a universal rectitude in the principles of religion, as "all its precepts concerning all things are right;" so there is an universal peace and pleasure in the practice of religion. All our paths, if such as they should be, will be such as we could wish.

The doctrine, therefore, contained in these words, is this—true piety has true pleasure in it; or thus—the ways of religion are pleasant and peaceful ways.

CHAPTER I.

THE EXPLICATION OF THE DOCTRINE.

IT is a plain truth which we have here laid down, and there is little in it that needs explication. It were well for us, if we would but as readily subscribe to the certainty of it, as we apprehend the sense and meaning of it. Nor will any complain that it is hard to be understood, but those who know no other pleasures than those of sense, and relish no other, and therefore resolve not to give credit to it. Those who think, 'How can this be, that there should be pleasure in piety?' will be ready to ask, 'What is the meaning of this doctrine?' and to call it a 'hard saying.'

You know what pleasure is. I hope you know, in some degree, what the pleasure of the mind is, a pleasure which the soul has the sensation of. And do

you not know, in some degree, what piety is, a due regard to a God above us, and having the eyes of the soul ever lifted up unto him? Then you know what I mean when I say, that there is an abundance of real pleasure and satisfaction in the ways of religion and godliness.

I. But to help you a little in the understanding of it, and to prevent mistakes, observe, first, that I speak of true piety, and of that as far as it goes.

1. Hypocrites are very much strangers to the delights and pleasures of religion; nay, they are altogether so, for it is joy which those strangers do not intermeddle with. Counterfeit piety can never bring in true pleasure. He that acts a part upon a stage, though it be the part of one that is ever so pleasant, though he may exhibit the pleasantness well, does not experience it. The pleasures of God's house lie not in the outer court, but within the veil. None know what the "peace of God" means, but those who are under the dominion and operation of his grace; nor

can any that “deny the power of godliness,” expect to share in the pleasures of it. “When wisdom enters into thine heart,” takes possession of that, and becomes a living, active principle there, then, and not till then, it is “pleasant unto thy soul,” Prov. ii. 10. They who aim at no more than the credit of religion before men, justly fall short of the comfort of it in themselves.

Hypocrites have other things that they delight in—the satisfactions of the world, the gratifications of sense; and these put their mouths out of taste for spiritual pleasures, so that they have no pleasure in them. They who have their hearts upon the marketings, are weary of the “new moons” and the “sabbaths,” Amos viii. 5. With good reason therefore does Job ask, “Will the hypocrite delight himself in the Almighty?” No; his soul takes its ease in the creature, and returns not to the Creator as its rest and home.

Some transitory pleasure a hypocrite may have in religion, from a land-flood

of sensible affections, who yet has not the least taste of the "river of God's pleasures." There were those who "delighted to know God's ways;" they met with some agreeable notions in them, which surprised them and pleased their fancies, but they did not delight to walk in them. The stony ground "received the word with joy," and yet received no lasting benefit by it. Herod "heard John gladly." He found something very agreeable in his sermons, and something which natural conscience could not but embrace, and yet he could not bear to be reprov'd for his Herodias. A florid preacher, such as Ezekiel was, may be as "a very lovely song of one that can play well on an instrument," and yet, at the same time, the word of the Lord, if it touch the conscience, and shew the people their transgressions, is to them a reproach.

They whose hearts are not right with God in their religion, cannot have the pleasures of communion with God; for it is the soul only that converses with

God. "Bodily exercise profiteth little," and therefore pleases little. The service of God is a burden and a task to an un-sanctified, unrenewed heart; it is out of its element when it is brought into that air. Nor can they take any pleasure in communing with their own consciences, or in their own reflections; for they are ready, upon all occasions, to give them uneasiness by charging them with that which is disagreeable to their profession, and gives the lie to it. And though they cry "peace, peace," to themselves, they have that within them, which tells them that the God of heaven does not speak "peace" to them; and this casts a damp upon all their pleasures; so that their religion itself gives them pain; God himself is a terror to them; and the gospel itself condemns them for their insincerity. In time of trouble and distress none are so much afraid as the "sinners in Zion," the secret sinners there; and fearfulness is the greatest surprise of all to the hypocrites that were at "ease in Zion," and thought its strong-holds would be their security,