

THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

"Thy love to me was wonderful."—2 SAMUEL i. 26.

THESE words form a part of the most touching and beautiful eulogium which the profoundest grief and the finest genius ever uttered. On reading it, one is left in doubt of which art David was the greatest master; whether it was in the use of the pen, the harp, or the sword. Jonathan found in him one worthy to preserve his memory, and record his remarkable virtues; and David's genius has preserved these like fragrant spikenard in a box of alabaster, or, as I have seen, a drop of water shrined within the crystal of a precious stone.

It is due to the Psalmist to remark that this noble panegyric does no less honour to his heart than to his head. Remember that the death of Saul had removed the only obstacle that stood between David and the throne, and had rid him of an enemy who had pursued him for some years with rancorous and unrelenting hatred. It is a

common and a just saying that we should say no ill of the dead. They are not here to defend themselves ; and, unless where great interests are concerned, their ashes should not be disturbed. In his circumstances the utmost required of David would have been to preserve a decent and becoming silence about Saul, burying all recollections of him in the grave. But he was incapable of this ; he was cast in a finer mould ; he was made of nobler metal. His generous heart, forgiving and forgetting every wrong, warmed at the recollection of those early, happy days, when the king drew the shepherd boy from obscurity, received him into the bosom of his family, showered royal favours on his head ; and when, harp in hand, he threw the chains of music over Saul's stormy passions, bidding the waves be still. David has buried Saul's faults in the grave, "earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes." But while he leaves the dross to lie undisturbed among the cold embers, he brings out the gold—the finer elements of Saul's character ; and without, after the fashion of many lying tombstones, imputing to him virtues which he never possessed, he tells all the good of Saul he can, and crowns his memory with the honours due to a king, a dutiful son, a kind-hearted father, and a man as brave as ever faced a foe. "From the

blood of the slain," he sings, "from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty. Saul and Jonathan were lovely in their lives, and in their death they were not divided. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions."

But Jonathan is the grand subject of this beautiful lament; the principal figure in the canvas. As in the case of others who have been the parents of distinguished children, the father here owes much of his celebrity to his son. Many a son has had a better father; but what father ever had such a son! In some respects, at least, Jonathan stands without a rival in all history, sacred or profane. Had we known him better, no doubt we might have thought less of him; we would have found some faults in him, and that it was true of him as of the best of fallen men, that the brightest sun is dimmed by spots. Yet there is no fault recorded of Jonathan; and, conferring on him more honour than on any one else whose name stands in this sacred book, God has not left a stain to blot his memory. If there ever was friendship in this world, pure, unalloyed by any inferior metal, disinterested, free of envy, without an element of selfishness, incapable of harbouring a suspicious thought, and capable of rejoicing in

another's gain, even to his own loss, it had glowed in the bosom that now lay cold on Gilboa's mountains. Battle spear never pierced such a generous heart; nor had war ever such a graceful victim offered at her blood-stained shrine. Man never possessed a friend such as David lost in Jonathan; for he stood in his love as much above the common crowd of men, as his father did in stature—towering head and shoulders high above the assembled tribes of Israel. If ever man loved his neighbour as he did himself, that man was Jonathan; and none with a head and heart can read his tragic history without feeling that he was worthy of this extraordinary, but not extravagant, laudation, "Thy love to me was wonderful."

Jonathan rests in honour. Let him rest. A greater than Jonathan is here. Yet let us not forget the honour due to the grace of God which purified, exalted, sanctified his fine natural temper; bringing out its excellences as the art of the polisher does the beautiful veins that lie concealed in the rough plank, or the colours that flash and glow in some precious stone. He was content that David should supplant him. God had so determined; "even so Lord, for so it seemeth good in thy sight." And I cannot believe that anything but a gracious resignation to the divine will could have welded his

heart to David's under such irritating, trying, circumstances. Silent as Scripture is on Jonathan's religious character, in the story of this matchless, and more than romantic friendship, I see the heavenly fruit of piety. Peace be to his ashes, and honour to his memory! We turn to a nobler subject; and although I would not pluck a leaf from his laurels, I cannot, nor could any one else, read the words of my text without thinking of a greater than Jonathan.

As we muse on these words, Gilboa vanishes, and Calvary rises to view. The battle scene, with Jonathan standing like a lion at bay, or, faint from loss of blood, sinking beneath his wounds, shifts; and I see Jesus standing alone amid the impious crowd, or fainting beneath his cross in the streets of Jerusalem. The hill where, in the pale moonlight, all stiff and stark and bloody, Jonathan lies surrounded by heaps of dead, his face to heaven and his foot to the foe that have fallen before his arm, gives place to another scene. A tall cross tops the summit of Mount Calvary; and the sun's level beams shine on the drooping head and mangled, bloody form of the Son of God. To him these words best belong. We hang the harp of David on that cross; and, Jonathan himself consenting, we take this garland from his brows,

to weave it into the crown of thorns—saying, as we turn to Jesus, “thy love to me was wonderful.”

I. The love of Christ to us is wonderful, because there was nothing in us lovely.

In the spangled sky, the rainbow, the woodland hung with diamonds, the sward sown with pearly dew, the rosy dawn, the golden clouds of even, the purple mountains, the hoary rock, the blue boundless main, Nature's simplest flower, or some fair form of laughing child or lovely maiden, we cannot see the beautiful without admiring it. That is one law of our nature. Another is, that so far as earthly objects are concerned, and apart from the beauty of holiness, we cannot help loving what is lovely, and regarding it with affection. Our affections are drawn to an attractive object as naturally as iron is charmed by a loadstone. God made us to love ; and when brought near to such an object our feelings entwine themselves around it, as the soft and pliant tendrils of the vine do around the support it clothes with leaves, and hangs with purple clusters. Such analogy is there between the laws of mind and matter !

Without detracting from Jonathan's merits, it must be owned, that however wonderful the love

was which he bestowed on David, it was not bestowed on an unworthy object. One brave man loves another. In the old days of chivalry, men honoured courage in their enemies ; loving and admiring bravery even when it was in arms against them. And that gallant man who, leaving the camp alone, with no attendant but his armour-bearer, scaled the dizzy crag, and threw himself single-handed into the garrison of the Philistines, found an object worthy of his affection in the youth, who, armed only with sling and stone, went forth to defy the giant. And when that shepherd lad stood before Saul with the grim, dripping head of Goliath in his hand, and with modesty, like a foil, setting off his merit, told the story of the fight, no wonder to me that it is said that the "soul of Jonathan was kind to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul." They had much in common. In warlike achievements, in strong affections, in generosity of temper, in genuine piety, in courage that dared everything, and was daunted by nothing, these brothers in arms answered to each other as "face answereth in a glass to face;" and as I have seen two bright drops of quicksilver when brought to touch each other, run into one, so from that day forward, Jonathan and David were united.

We turn now from them to Jesus and ourselves ; and what do we find in man to win the love of Calvary? The day that saw Jonathan's soul knit to David's, saw David in arms fighting Jonathan's battle, and saving his father's crown. We were in arms too, but they were turned against Christ's rights, and his Father's throne ; we were fighting too, but it was on the wrong side—rebels against God in the ranks of the devil. It is not enough to say that there was nothing lovely in us ; that, as a holy God, God saw nothing in us to love. Sin, that abominable thing which he hates, the seed and germ of all evils, a thing so hateful that it is said, "he cannot look" on it, had so pervaded the nature of every individual man, and the whole race of men, that, it necessitated God to abhor his own creatures. Do not start at the expression. I use no language stronger than I can justify. Look at a corpse ! putrid, bloated, infecting all the air ; every feature of humanity shockingly defaced ; the bright eye ; the damask cheek ; the sweet lips ; the lovely form changed into vilest loathesomeness ; a banquet to worms which, as they creep out and creep in, give a horrible life to death ! Were the dearest, fondest object of our affections reduced to a state like that, how would we throw it, shudder-

ing, from our embraces; regard it with the utmost horror; and turning away our eyes, call in pity for a grave to bury our dead. This may teach us how sin makes those whom God once loved with divine affection abhorrent in his sight. Nor any wonder that a God so holy, that "even the heavens are not clean in his sight," and that he "charges his angels with folly," should abhor man! Why, so soon as man sees himself aright, so soon as, with eyes illuminated by the Holy Spirit, he sees his own heart with all its corrupt passions, and his life with its many vile and hateful sins, he abhors himself. Does he not? Listen to one whose words will find an echo in every converted heart—"I have heard of thee with the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee, wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Historians relate how, with all her baseness, her duplicity, her cruelty, her bloody bigotry, the passions and crimes that have left an indelible stain on her memory, Queen Mary had much queenly grace. So perfect was her form, her face so beautiful, her smile so winning, that it was only men cast in the stern mould of Knox that could resist their witchery. And to advert to better attractions than the beauty which is consumed before the moth, I have seen some who, with not a little calculated to repel,

possessed in moral and mental excellencies, some loveable, compensating, and redeeming properties. But, in the sight of God's infinite and unspotted holiness, sin left us none. Nor was there anything at all but human misery to draw down divine mercy. Sin left nothing in man which it did not touch; and, like blow-flies, whatever it touched, it tainted. The whole man was affected—head and heart, soul and body, the reason and affections, the imagination and the will. The deadly venom of the serpent's fang, like a subtile poison thrown into the circulation, was borne throughout all the frame. And hence the humbling, graphic words of the prophet, The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint, from the sole of the foot even unto the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores. If it be true of all mankind that they are altogether become filthy; true that there is none that doeth good, no, not one; true that "every imagination of man's heart is evil continually;" true that we may all adopt the words of the Apostle, and say, I know that in me, that is in my flesh, there dwelleth no good thing,—then sin left us with nothing to engage, but everything to repel, the affections of a holy Saviour. Salvation, therefore, must be all grace; and a Saviour's love must have its meetest and

majestic emblem in the sun of heaven. Sustained in the sky by no pillars that rest on earth, it hangs on nothing; and its bright beams, unlike the stone, the dropping rain, the blazing, dying meteor, that fall to the earth in virtue of its attraction, are sent forth by a power within itself. So with love divine; the healing beams of the Sun of righteousness. Salvation is all of mercy, and not at all of merit. "By his mercy he saves us;" and in embracing not the lovely but the loathsome, well may we transfer this eulogium to the love of Jesus, "thy love to me was wonderful!"

II. The love of Christ to us is wonderful, because there was nothing in us loving.

We love what loves us. Such is the law of our nature; and love comes in time to see its own face reflected in the heart of another, as in water at the bottom of a draw-well. We cannot resist loving what loves us; it matters not who or what it is; though but the dog that barks, and bounds, and wheels in joyous circles around us on our return—"the first to welcome and foremost to defend." I would hold his friendship cheap who did not love a dog that loved him; and care little for the child that would not drop some tears on the grave of his

humble but faithful playmate—or, to borrow a figure from Bible story, of the “little ewe lamb which the poor man nourished, which ate of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was to him as a little daughter.” Let a poor dumb creature love us, we are drawn to love it in return, by a law of nature as irresistible and divine as that which draws a stone to the ground, or makes the stream flow onward to the sea.

Whatever secrets this key unlocks ; whatever strange and singular marriages it may explain, it does not open the mysteries of Calvary ; it does not explain the love of Christ. I have, indeed, seen some that had abandoned themselves to a life of vice who still respected virtue, and looked back with remorseful regret to their days of childhood and the innocence of a father’s home. I have seen a profligate son, who, though wringing a pious mother’s heart and bringing her grey hairs with sorrow to the grave, yet love her ; mourning his own failings, he returned her affection ; yielding to sin, still he clung to his mother as a drowning wretch to a piece of the wreck which he hopes may float him to the shore. Now, if our love of goodness had survived the loss of it ; if we had retained any love to God after we had lost his image ; if we had cast back some lingering looks on Eden ;

and, like Absalom, who felt pained at being two whole years in Jerusalem without being admitted into his father's presence, if we had been grieved at God's displeasure, then, with such goodly vestiges of primeval innocence, Christ's love to us would not have been so wonderful. But there were no such feelings in man to awaken the love of Christ. Hateful, man is by nature hating. I appeal to the unconverted. Do not your hearts, prove that? and how do those who have been converted, see it in the memory of those days on which they now look back with horror—wondering how, when they were in arms against God, trampling on his laws, despising his mercy, scorning his grace, he should have borne with them as he did. Then, how plainly is that written also in the Bible, in such sentences as these, The carnal mind is enmity against God ;—Herein is love indeed, not that we loved God, but that he loved us ;—God commendeth his love to us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us. And what is graven deep on our hearts, and written so legibly on the pages of the Bible, I see in still more affecting characters on the body of him who sits throned in heaven. More than wounded for our transgressions, he was wounded by the hands of the transgressors. The nail-prints on the hands that our Advocate

holds up in prayer, and that deep scar on his side, were not the work of devils. To the question, What are these wounds in thine hands and thy side? how truly may he answer, These are the wounds with which I was wounded in the house of my friends! Inflicted by the hands of men, the marks of a love that, throwing its arms around enemies, embraced the unloving as well as the unlovely, hatred as well as loathsomeness, let the shining throng that stand before him with crowns of glory, and in the white robes of victors, join the church on earth, and weave these words into the anthems of the skies, Thy love to us was wonderful!

III. This love is wonderful in its expression.

“Art thou in health my brother?” So Joab saluted Amasa, as he took him by the beard to kiss him; and the last word had not left his lips when he stabbed him to the heart. Smiting him under the fifth rib, he passed on. Not so the people that followed Joab to battle. As they came up, the sight arrested their steps; and they stood in gathering crowds—gazing with surprise and horror on Amasa, as, victim of basest cruelty, he wallowed in blood on the highway. Any dead body lying on the street would gather a crowd around it; and

stay alike the steps of men on business, of the gay, of stooping age and tottering childhood. Exclamations of pity, of surprise, of horror, would burst from all lips; while the questions passed from person to person, How did it happen? Who is he? Where did he live? Who are his friends? And how would it move us, move the roughest men, to see some trembling, bent, grey old man, or a distracted mother, rush through the throng, and fling themselves on the body with a shriek, a wild, piercing cry, Oh, my son! my beloved son! Would God I had died for thee, my son, my son!

That stays the foot of man. But a sight is here that might have stayed an angel's wing; and filled both heaven and earth with wonder. Who is this? Hear, O heavens, and be astonished, O earth! By the cross where he dies, the ear of faith catches the voice of the Eternal: "This is my beloved Son!" He there, who is buffeted by cruel hands, and meekly bears the blows; who faints from loss of blood, and sinks beneath his cross; who hangs upon the tree, while the blood streams from his hands and feet; whose dying ear is filled, not with holy prayers and psalms, but with the shouts and mockery of an impious crew; he, hanging mangled and lifeless on the middle cross, with head dropped on his breast, the pallor of death spread over his

cheek, the seal of death on his lips, the film of death on his eyes, is the Son of God. The Prince of life has become the prey of death; at once its noblest victim and its almighty conqueror.

How did it happen? One word conveys the answer—that word is Love; love to sinners, to the greatest, guiltiest sinners. Love brought him from the skies; love shut him up in Mary's womb; love shut him up in Joseph's tomb; love wove the cords that bound his hands; love forged the nails that fastened him to the tree; love wept in his tears, breathed in his sighs, spake in his groans, flowed in his blood, and died upon his cross. It is impossible to think who he was, and we were, what and for whom he suffered; to stand beside that cross, with its noble, bleeding, dying, divine burden, and not address that dear, sacred body, saying, Thy love to me, to me a poor sinner, an ill-doing, and hell-deserving sinner, a guilty and graceless, a hateful and hating sinner, was wonderful—passing the love of women; passing the loves of angels; passing any tongue to tell; passing figures to illustrate or fancy to imagine, thought to measure or eternity itself to praise.

It was and it is still a common custom in the East for one man to express his friendship to another by presenting him with rich and costly

vestments—by taking his own robe and putting it on him. I saw it related how the present Emperor of France, having marked the dauntless bravery of a soldier in the very thick and whirlwind of the fight, took his own Cross of the Legion of Honour, and, in the enthusiasm of his admiration, fixed it on the brave man's breast. In harmony with such customs, the Scriptures tell us that Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him, and gave it to David, and "his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle."

And when that shepherd lad, having doffed his homely attire, now stands before the court, and camp, and king, apparelled as a prince, we have a faint image of what Jesus does for us. Son of God, he denuded himself of his visible glory, and, as it were, exchanged vestments with us. Taking not only our nature but our guilt upon him, he put on our shame, that he might apparel us in his glory. What an exchange! Our sins are imputed to him, while his righteousness is imputed to us; and thus with a crown of thorns he purchases us an immortal crown, and ascends the cross, that we might ascend to the skies. Behold how he loved us!

In illustration also of the love of Jonathan, we are told that he said to David, "Whatsoever thy soul desireth I will do it for thee:" The very lan-

guage which Jesus addresses to his people! He cannot withhold anything from those to whom he has given himself. How can he? It were unreasonable to believe it. If he never said to any of the sons of men, Seek ye my face in vain, far less will he hold such language to those whom he purchased with his blood, and has enshrined in his heart of hearts. Nor has he promised what he wants either the will or the ability to do. Jonathan's was a large and loving-hearted promise, but alas! the day came when the heart that loved and the hand that would have helped David were cold in death. "Thy love to me *was* wonderful." Bitter thought! it was a thing in the past, a sacred memory: no more! The arrows of the Philistine had drunk up that love. The iron mace of war had shattered this sweet fountain. It lay empty and dry. The ear into which David once poured his sorrows was heavy in death. The heart that loved him had ceased to beat. Jonathan was gone—dead and gone; and all left was the memory of joys never, never to return. He should see his face no more: and so, he flung himself on his bloody grave, crying, "I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan; the beauty of Israel is slain on his high places. Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women!"

How much happier the circumstances of a lover of Jesus! He is no broken cistern; but a fountain ever full and overflowing. His name is, "I am he that liveth and was dead." The angel guards an empty tomb; and dries up the women's tears, saying, He is not here; he is risen. From the Cross that held him, and the sepulchre that entombed him, we rise in imagination to follow his track along the starry skies, onwards to the gate of heaven; and still on, and still up, through lines of shouting angels, to the throne of the Eternal. He is there now; and changing the tense, as we behold him forgiving our daily sins, supplying our daily wants, pouring down daily blessings on our heads, we say not, Thy love to me *was*, but thy love to me *is*, wonderful. And never till we ourselves have passed in at heaven's gate, and behold its lofty thrones and shining ones, the glory that Jesus has with the Father and shares with his brethren, never till the palm of victory is in our own hands, and a blood-bought crown is on our own heads, never till we walk the streets that are paved with gold, and join the songs that are as the voice of many waters, shall we sufficiently understand what we owe to the love of Christ; how justly we may address to him these words, Thy love to me was wonderful.