

THE SINNER'S MOURNING-HABIT

Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.—Job xlii. 6.

AFFLICTION is a winged chariot, that mounts up the soul toward heaven ; nor do we ever so rightly understand God's majesty as when we are not able to stand under our own misery. It was Naaman's leprosy that brought him to the knowledge of the prophet, and the prophet brought him to the saving knowledge of the true God. Had he not been a leper, he had still been a sinner. *Schola crucis, schola lucis*,—there is no such school instructing as the cross afflicting. If Paul had not been buffeted by Satan, he might have gone nigh to buffet God, through danger of being puffed up with his revelations.

The Lord hath many messengers by whom he solicits man. He sends one health, to make him a strong man ; another wealth, to make him a rich man ; another sickness, to make him a weak man ; another losses, to make him a poor man ; another age, to make him an old man ; another death, to make him no man. But among

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them all, none despatcheth the business surer or sooner than affliction ; if that fail of bringing a man home, nothing can do it. He is still importunate for an answer ; yea, he speaks, and strikes. Do we complain of his incessant blows ? Alas ! he doth but his office, he waits for our repentance ; let us give the messenger his errand, and he will begone. Let him take the proud man in hand, he will humble him : he can make the drunkard sober, the lascivious chaste, the angry patient, the covetous charitable ; fetch the unthrift son back again to his father, whom a full purse had put into an itch of travelling, Luke xv. 17.

Job was not ignorant of God before, while he sat in the sunshine of peace ; but resting his head on the bosom of plenty, he could lie at his ease and contemplate the goodness of his Maker. But as when the sun shines forth in his most glorious brightness, we are then least able to look upon him,—we may solace ourselves in his diffused rays and comfortable light, but we cannot fix our eyes upon that burning carbuncle,—these outward things do so engross us, take up our consideration, and drown our contemplative faculty in our sense, that so long we only observe the effects of God's goodness, rather than the goodness of God itself. Necessity teacheth us the worth of a friend ; as absynthium (wormwood) rubbed upon the eyes

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makes them smart a little, but they see the clearer. Therefore Job confessed that in his prosperity he had only, as it were, heard of God ; but now in his trial he had seen him. Such a more full and perfect apprehension of God did calamity work in this holy man ; and from that speculation proceeds this humiliation, 'Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'

In spiritual graces let us study to be great, and not to know it, as the fixed stars are every one bigger than the earth, yet appear to us less than torches. *In alto non altum sapere*, not to be high-minded in high deserts, is the way to blessed preferment. Humility is not only a virtue itself, but a vessel to contain other virtues : like embers, which keep the fire alive that is hidden under it. It emptieth itself by a modest estimation of its own worth, that Christ may fill it. It wrestleth with God, like Jacob, and wins by yielding ; and the lower it stoops to the ground, the more advantage it gets to obtain the blessing. All our pride, O Lord, is from the want of knowing thee. O thou infinite Maker, reveal thyself yet more unto us ; so shall we 'abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes.'

The children of grace have learned to think well of other men and to abhor themselves. And indeed when we consider what master we have

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served, and what wages deserved, we have just cause to abhor ourselves. What part of us hath not sinned, that it should not merit to be despised? Run all over this little Isle of Man, and find me one member of the body, or faculty of the soul, that can say with Job's messenger—'I alone have escaped.' Where is that innocency which desires not to stand only in the sight of mercy? What time, what place are not witnesses against us? The very Sabbath, the day of rest, hath not rested from our evils. The very temple, that holy place, hath been defiled with our obliquities. Our chambers, our beds, our boards, the ground we tread, the air we breathe, can tell our follies. There is no occasion which, if it do not testify what evil we have done, yet can say what good we should and have not done. How far soever we have run out, we hope to make all reckonings even when repentance comes; but what if repentance never comes?

It is not many years, more incitations, and abundance of means, that can work it; but repentance is the fair gift of God. One would think it a short lesson, yet Israel was forty years a-learning it; and they no sooner got it but presently forgot it. Rev. xvi. 11, we read of men plagued with heat, and pains, and sores, yet they repented not. Judas could have a broken neck, not a broken

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heart. There is no such inducement to sin as the presumption of ready repentance, as if God had no special riches of his own, but every sinner might command them at his pleasure. The king hath earth of his own, he lets his subjects walk upon it ; he hath a sea, lets them sail on it ; his land yields fruit, lets them eat it ; his fountains water, lets them drink it. But the moneys in his exchequer, the garments in his wardrobe, the jewels in his jewel-house, none may meddle with but they to whom he disposeth them. God's common blessings are not denied ; his sun shines, his rain falls, Matt. v. 45, on the righteous and unrighteous. But the treasures of heaven, the robes of glory, the jewels of grace and repentance, these he keeps in his own hands, and gives not where he may, but where he will. Man's heart is like a door with a spring-lock ; pull the door after you, it locks of itself, but you cannot open it again without a key. Man's heart doth naturally lock out grace ; none but he that 'hath the key of the house of David,' Rev. iii. 7, can open the door and put it in. God hath made a promise to repentance, not of repentance ; we may trust to that promise, but there is no trusting to ourselves. Nature flatters itself with that singular instance of mercy, one malefactor on the cross repenting at his last hour. But such hath been Satan's policy, to draw evil

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out of good, that the calling and saving of that one soul hath been the occasion of the loss of many thousands.

Wheresoever repentance is, she doth not deliberate, tarries not to ask questions and examine circumstances, but bestirs her joints, calls her wits and senses together ; summons her tongue to praying, her feet to walking, her hands to working, her eyes to weeping, her heart to groaning. There is no need to bid her go, for she runs ; she runs to the word for direction, to her own heart for remorse and compunction, to God for grace and pardon ; She resolves that her knees shall grow to the pavement, till mercy hath answered her from heaven. As if she had felt an earthquake in her soul, not unlike that jailor when he felt the foundations of his prison shaken, she 'calls for a light,' Acts xvi. 29, the gospel of truth, and springs in trembling ; and the first voice of her lips is, 'O what shall I do to be saved?' She lows with mourning, like the kine that carried the ark, and never rests till she comes to Bethshemesh, the fields of mercy. The good star that guides her is the promise of God ; this gives her light through all the dark clouds of her sorrow. Confidence is her life and soul ; she draws no other breath than the persuasion of mercy, that the 'king of Israel is a merciful king,' 1 Kings xx. 31. Faith is the

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heart-blood of repentance. The matter, composition, constitution, substance of it, is amendment of life ; there be many counterfeits that walk in her habit, as King Ahab had his shadows, but that is her substance. Her countenance is spare and thin ; she hath not eyes standing out with fatness. Her diet is abstinence ; her garment and livery, sackcloth and ashes ; the paper in her hand is a petition ; her dialect is *Miserere* ; and lest her own lusts should be bane within her, she sweats them out with confession and tears.

We know there is no other fortification against the judgments of God but repentance. His forces be invisible, invincible ; not repelled with sword and target ; neither portcullis nor fortress can keep them out ; there is nothing in the world that can encounter them but repentance. They had long since laid our honour in the dust, rotted our carcasses in the pit, sunk our souls into hell, but for repentance. Which of those saints, that are now saved in heaven, have not sinned upon earth ? What could save them but repentance ? If I should give you the picture of repentance, I would tell you that she is a virgin fair and lovely ; and those tears, which seem to do violence to her beauty, rather indeed grace it. Her breast is sore with the strokes of her own penitent hands, which

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are always either in Moses's posture in the mount, lift up towards heaven, or the publican's in the temple, smiting her bosom. Her knees are hardened with constant praying; her voice is hoarse with calling to heaven; and when she cannot speak, she delivers her mind in groans. There is not a tear falls from her, but an angel holds a bottle to catch it. She thinks every man's sins less than her own, every man's good deeds more. Her compunctions are unspeakable, known only to God and herself. She could wish, not only men, but even beasts, and trees, and stones, to mourn with her. She thinks no sun should shine, because she takes no pleasure in it; that the lilies should be clothed in black, because she is so apparelled. Mercy comes down like a glorious cherub, and lights on her bosom, with this message from God, 'I have heard thy prayers, and seen thy tears'; so with a handkerchief of comfort dries her cheeks, and tells her that she is accepted in Jesus Christ.

In dust and ashes.—I have but one stair more, down from both text and pulpit; and it is a very low one—'dust and ashes.'

An adorned body is not the vehicle of a humbled soul. Job, before his affliction, was not poor. Doubtless he had his wardrobe, his change and choice of garments. Yet now, how doth his

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humbled soul condemn them, as if he threw away his vesture, saying, I have worn thee for pomp, given countenance to a silken case ; I quite mistook thy nature ; get thee from me, I am weary of thy service ; thou hast made me honourable with men, thou canst get me no estimation before the Lord. Repentance gives a farewell not only to wonted delights, but even to natural refreshings. Job lies not on a bed of roses and violets, as did the Sybarites ; nor on a couch beautified with the tapestry of Egypt ; but on a bed of ashes. Sackcloth is his apparel ; dust and ashes the lace and embroidery of it. Thus Nineveh's king, upon that fearful sentence, 'rose from his throne, laid his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes,' Jonah iii. 6. Oh, what an alteration can repentance make ! From a king of the earth to a worm of the earth ; from a footcloth to sackcloth ; from a throne to a dung-hill ; from sitting in state to lying in ashes ! Whom all the reverence of the world attended on, to whom the head was uncovered, the knee bowed, the body prostrated ; who had as many salutations as the firmament stars,—God save the king !—he throws away crown, sceptre, majesty, and all, and sits in ashes. How many doth the golden cup of honour make drunk, and drive from all sense of mortality ! Riches and heart's ease are such

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usual intoxications to the souls of men, that it is rare to find any of them so low as dust and ashes.

Dust, as the remembrance of his original; ashes, as the representation of his end. Dust, that was the mother; ashes, that shall be the daughter of our bodies.

Dust, the matter of our substance, the house of our souls, the original grains whereof we were made, the top of all our kindred. The glory of the strongest man, the beauty of the fairest woman, all is but dust. Dust, the only compounder of differences, the absolver of all distinctions. Who can say which was the client; which the lawyer; which the borrower, which the lender; which the captive, which the conqueror, when they all lie together in blended dust?

Dust; not marble nor porphyry, gold nor precious stone, was the matter of our bodies, but earth, and the fractions of the earth, dust. Dust, the sport of the wind, the very slave of the besom. This is the pit from whence we are digged, and this is the pit to which we shall be resolved. 'Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return again,' Gen. iii. 18. They that sit in the dust, and feel their own materials about them, may well renounce the ornaments of pride, the gulf of avarice, the foolish lusts of concupiscence. Let the covetous think, What do I scrape for? a little golden dust;

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the ambitious, What do I aspire for? a little honourable dust; the libidinous, What do I languish for? a little animated dust, blown away with the breath of God's displeasure.

Oh, how goodly this building of man appears when it is clothed with beauty and honour! A face full of majesty, the throne of comeliness, wherein the whiteness of the lily contends with the sanguine of the rose; an active hand, an erected countenance, an eye sparkling out lustre, a smooth complexion, arising from an excellent temperature and composition; whereas other creatures, by reason of their cold and gross humours, are grown over, beasts with hair, fowls with feathers, fishes with scales. Oh, what a workman was this, that could raise such a fabric out of the earth, and lay such orient colours upon dust! Yet all is but dust, walking, talking, breathing dust; all this beauty but the effect of a well-concocted food, and life itself but a walk from dust to dust. Yea, and this man, or that woman, is never so beautiful as when they sit weeping for their sins in the dust: as Mary Magdalene was then fairest when she kneeled in the dust, bathing the feet of Christ with her tears, and wiping them with her hairs; like heaven, fair sight-ward to us that are without, but more fair to them that are within.

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An old man is said to give Alexander a little jewel, and told him that it had this virtue, so long as he kept it bright, it would outvalue the most fine gold or precious stone in the world ; but if it once took dust it would not be worth a feather. What meant the sage, but to give the monarch an emblem of his own body, which, being animated with a soul, commanded the world ; but once fallen to dust, it would be worth nothing, 'for a living dog is better than a dead lion,' Eccles. ix. 4.

I conclude ; I call you not to casting dust on your heads or sitting in ashes, but to that sorrow and compunction of soul whereof the other was but an external symbol or testimony. Let us rend our hearts and spare our garments, humble our souls without afflicting our bodies, Isa. lviii. 5. It is not a corpse wrapped in dust and ashes, but a contrite heart, which the Lord will not despise, Ps. li. 17. Let us repent our sins and amend our lives ; so God will pardon us by the merits, save us by the mercies, and crown us with the glories of Jesus Christ.