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THE DUTY AND BENEFITS OF SEARCHING
THE HOLY SCRIPTURES:

A

SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

PARISH CHURCH OF ST. PIERRE,

On SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4, 1835;

BY

ROBERT JACKSON, B. A.,

CURATE OF ST. PIERRE AND MOUNTON, MONMOUTHSHIRE, AND CHAPLAIN TO THE
RIGHT HON. VISCOUNT KENMURE.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

BRISTOL:

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED FOR THE AUTHOR,

BY J. CHILCOTT.

MDCCCXXXV.

THE DUTY AND BENEFITS OF FRANCHISING
THE BODY OF THE PEOPLE

SERMON

PREACHED AT THE CHURCH OF ST. PETER'S

ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1844.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE following Sermon was composed without any idea of publication: if it be the humble means of directing attention to those rapid strides now making by the ancient and implacable foe of our protestant faith, the Author cannot regret having complied with the wish of his congregation in making it public.

POOLMEYRIC LODGE,
Near Chepstow.

ADVERTISEMENT

The following Section was composed without any idea of publication: it is the humble means of directing attention to those who might wish to make for the ancient and unchangeable of our present faith, the Author cannot regret having consulted with the wish of his congregation in making it public.

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“SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES.”

John v. 39.

IF we were wandering through a dangerous and gloomy desert, which led, either to a beautiful and happy country, or to a land of darkness and misery;—if we were ignorant, when our journey would be finished, though constantly drawing nearer to the end—if we were in doubt where our present path would take us, supposing we found a map or chart, pointing out the way, warning us of the turns and difficulties in the road, and of the dangerous places; should we not eagerly examine it, to find out our present situation? And if we had left the right path, should we not try to regain it, to inform ourselves of the dangers we might meet, and prepare to avoid them? Again; if we had begun a voyage to a distant country, where we were compelled to go; and if at the first our vessel sailed pleasantly over the smooth water; but afterwards the sky began to darken, the storm to arise, and the waves of the sea to be tossed by the tempest; suppose other ships, which at first had sailed with us, were wrecked in the

storm;—should any one on board declare that he had a book, which could not only help us in our present danger, but guide us safely to the haven where we would be; how anxiously should we read it, and how thankful should we be for this unexpected and welcome help of Providence! Hope would follow despair; and we should exert ourselves with confidence, to escape from our perilous situation.

Such, my brethren, is our case; we are travelling the journey, we are sailing the voyage, of human life. Our journey may sometimes be wearisome, and perplexed with doubts and difficulties. We may feel a painful uncertainty with respect to our future lot, and have no trust in God, no reliance on ourselves. Or we may find the voyage of life rough and tempestuous; we have long since left the smooth water, for the wide and troubled sea, and our shattered bark seems to be threatened with instant destruction. Many of our companions have sunk in the depths of eternity, and we know not how soon this may be our fate. A book is offered, which plainly teaches us our present state and future prospects. It informs us of our dangers, and how we may escape them. It has been inspired by the eternal truth and wisdom of God. This book, the volume of the sacred scriptures, may be possessed and studied by the poorest amongst us,

and its teaching will make us all *wise unto salvation*. On this very day three hundred years ago, the whole Bible was completed in our language. Several parts had been before translated, at different times, and by different persons; but now it appeared in the full light of perfect truth, to instruct human nature in its ignorance, and to settle the grand question of religion for ever. God has at sundry times and places spoken to man by different dispensations: and where men have not lived under these dispensations, they have sunk in the scale of being, or have been distressed by doubts and conjectures respecting this life, and what will follow death. Though with the feeble light of natural conscience, we have reason to hope, many have been a law to themselves; yet we must feel thankful that we are favoured with a revelation which has brought life and immortality to light. We have now a resting place for our souls, sure and steadfast, the ark of the eternal covenant will receive us, after having surveyed the waste of waters without finding any comfort, and we may remain there, in the blessed hope of an immortality, where faith shall be lost in sight, and we shall know even as we are known. The opinions which men formerly held, are nothing to us. We care not for the opinions of the different sects of Christianity at the present day: we can consult

the unerring word of God for ourselves. We allow no human authority to decide for us, because all men are liable to mistake. The Holy Spirit of God alone, not the wisdom of man, can lead us into all truth. What are the notions of saints and fathers to us? if they are in the scriptures, we heartily believe them; if they are not in the scriptures, we reject them without scruple, or consider them of little importance. We may be mistaken, so may they; but God will never punish an unintentional mistake, such as neither affects our faith nor our obedience. Religion is a matter of common sense; and no person is required to give up his reason when he becomes religious. This is the religion of the Bible, and this alone:—We believe we have all sinned, and come short of the glory of God, through our fallen nature; and that the Holy Spirit strives with every man coming into the world; that in consequence of the striving of this Holy Spirit, we repent, we think of our past evil deeds with shame and sorrow: we grieve that we have dishonoured God, or injured man, and that we have hitherto disappointed his gracious plans for our salvation. Here, then, is the first step to religion; others must follow. If our penitence be sincere, (and no other is worth mentioning) it will produce a forsaking of sin; we shall be roused to a godly jealousy, proving and examin-

ing ourselves, to discover our *besetting* sin, and to cast it far from us. We shall watch and pray, lest we turn again unto folly, and our last state be worse than the first. Besides humbling ourselves before God, we shall feel it our duty to make every possible reparation to man. No longer living for ourselves alone, but living for the love and service of our Maker and fellow-creatures. The spiritual light which rouses us to repentance and reformation, will also convince us of God's purity and hatred of sin; it will point out the worthlessness of our best actions, that after we have done all, we are unprofitable servants; and that as our former wickedness was displeasing to him, so our present comparatively virtuous life cannot merit salvation. And here follows the next step in the religious life, necessary for man's acceptance with God,—faith in the merits of Christ, who by the grace of God has tasted death for every man; trust or confidence, that the imperfect obedience which we offer to God, (through our repentance) however worthless in his sight, will be accepted and consecrated through the merits of our Redeemer: and thus the perfect righteousness of Christ will be a mantle to cover this imperfect obedience of man.

This doctrine was revealed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, though veiled under the general type

of sacrifice ; for Abraham saw the day of Christ, and was glad. In the course of time, it was lost amongst his posterity ; who, through their vain traditions (not to be found in either the law or the prophets,) put an end to all sincere religion, or religion of the heart, and left in its room, useless ceremonies, hypocritical prayers, and almsgivings to be seen of men. This doctrine was likewise left by Christ and his disciples in the care of the Christian church ; but the candlestick of truth was soon withdrawn. The converts from among the Jews wished to introduce their old ceremonies, and keep their former opinions. Heathen converts likewise wished to mix idolatry, or the worship of images, with Christianity, and thus the church was left, and continued many ages in darkness. Besides all this, the sacred scriptures were carefully confined to a few, and were strictly forbidden to be read by the people : ignorance was called the mother of devotion. Thus nearly all ranks were compelled to take upon trust whatever was told them ; and if any seemed inclined to examine matters for themselves, they were severely punished in this world, and threatened with eternal perdition in the next. The necessity of translating the holy scriptures into the language of any country, where they are desired to be read, (and they ought to be read in all countries) is very clear ;

and accordingly we find they have now been rendered, almost, into every language under heaven. In this country, John Wyckliffe translated the Old Testament, about five hundred years since. His translation was endeavoured to be put down by government; but through the influence of the king's uncle, no law was made against it. The clergy of that day (this was before the Reformation) took the alarm, and published an edict, forbidding any one hereafter to translate any text of the holy scripture into English; and that no book of the kind should be read. This led the way to great persecution; and many persons were punished most severely, and even with death, for reading those parts of scripture, which had been furnished to the anxious enquirer after divine truth.

In the reign of Henry VIII. between three and four hundred years since, Martin Luther, a German monk, accidentally found a copy of the scriptures in a monastery, which he carefully read; and soon perceived how contrary the practices of the church were to the revealed word of God. At that time most shameful and scandalous conduct prevailed, by the express permission and encouragement of the pope and the superior clergy: I allude to the sale of indulgences, as they were called. Persons went about to sell pardon for past and future sins.

There was no crime, however great, but for a sufficient sum of money might be forgiven. Nay, the forgiveness of God was sometimes said to be purchased for a crime to be committed hereafter, and which the intended perpetrator would not avow. This, my brethren, shews the bad consequences of confining the scriptures to the priests; if these scriptures had been generally read and understood, such impious and audacious fraud would never have been attempted. A child in the present day, who has received a religious education, could not thus be deceived; and would know that no priest, that no saint nor angel, that none but God alone, can forgive sin. Martin Luther, through the light which had so mercifully beamed upon his understanding, proceeded to write and publish against this disgraceful conduct. He appealed to the Bible for every thing he maintained: the eyes of the people were opened, and the Reformation began to spread rapidly through all ranks and countries. In England a zealous and learned man, named Wm. Tyndall, having been convinced of the justice of the accusations against the Roman Catholic church, became very zealous in the cause of pure and scriptural religion. He was, however, persecuted to such a degree, that he was compelled to fly the country. Whilst abroad he translated the New Testament, and sent it over to England. It

was eagerly and joyfully received by the people, who read it, and employed every means to diffuse it throughout the kingdom. This excited such alarm among the followers of the old system, that the Lord Chancellor and Bishop of London at that time caused all the copies which they could purchase or otherwise procure, to be publicly burnt, and the severest penalties were threatened to those who should dare to sell them. In the mean time, this fearless servant of the most High God began to translate the Old Testament into English, and would doubtless have finished the whole Bible, had he not been seized and imprisoned by a foreign king; and through the influence of the Roman Catholics in this country, put to death. A friend of his, named Myles Coverdale, afterwards Bishop of Exeter, however, continued the translation, and collected both the Old and New Testaments into one work, which he finished on the 4th of October, 1535. This is the 4th of October, 1835; and therefore our highly-favoured country has possessed this invaluable treasure for three hundred years. I need not mention the trials and persecutions which were endured by the first professors of Protestant faith. Men, women, and children were burnt, and for five years the utmost cruelty was practised against such as would not confess their belief in certain doctrines which

they considered repugnant to scripture and common sense. But, blessed be God, the religion of the Bible could not be put down; and we trust that the Most High will never suffer the light of his truth to be extinguished. Whilst his revelation has free course, it must prevent such gross darkness and ignorance from again oppressing the people: and whatever may be the attempts of mistaken or designing men to place our church, or any part of our church, under the same spiritual tyranny, we humbly trust the endeavours to prevent them will continue to be successful:—"He that sitteth in the heavens will laugh them to scorn; the Lord shall have them in derision."

Let us regard the errors of our Roman Catholic brethren with pity and charity; let them have the full and free exercise of their ceremonies and worship; let those who interrupt or insult them, be severely punished; but let them never be permitted to rule any Protestant church, or usurp the government of any Protestant country. We have had bitter experience of the past; let us profit by it, and use every means consistent with justice and Christianity, for the preservation of the Protestant faith, which is the faith once delivered to the saints.

I have thus given you a short sketch of the history of the introduction of scriptural know-

ledge into this country, through the free and almost universal circulation of the Bible. It is in the hands of nearly every one, and might be in the hands of all. It is read publicly to you in our services; it is explained from the pulpit; its doctrines, its duties, and its claims, are enforced, exemplified, and submitted to all who join our communion; and are enrolled amongst our members. The pure word of God, not the traditions of men, is made the foundation of morality and belief. You are invited to compare what you hear in God's house with his holy word, and to see and judge for yourselves, whether we preach the truth to you as it is in Christ Jesus. We tell you that your priest cannot answer for you at the bar of Christ, you must answer for yourselves: you ought therefore to use the reason which God has given you, to determine what the Bible commands you to believe and practice. The ministers of God's word administer the sacraments and the consolations of our religion; they may explain to you the allusions to different customs and countries mentioned in the Old and New Testaments; they may bring before you the different parts of their history, and the evidences for their truth; they may likewise enforce the duties of life by arguments and appeals to your judgment: this is their business, and it has been the particular

object of their education. Beyond this, however, their functions are mere matters of discipline, and not of faith. If you repent of and forsake your sins, they will be pardoned for Christ's sake, whether the priest pronounces the absolution or not; and should you be prevented by any just cause from receiving the holy communion, *if you truly repent of your sins*, and steadfastly believe that Christ has suffered death upon the cross for you, and shed his blood for your redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits you thereby receive; and giving him hearty thanks,—you do eat and drink the body and blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to your soul's health, although you do not receive the holy sacrament with your mouth. We do not say but we may be mistaken, because it is probable that every sect of religion is mistaken in some points; but we contend that if we read the Bible in humility, and with a sincere wish for instruction, asking for wisdom and grace to understand and apply it, God will pardon our mistakes, because they will not be mistakes respecting the more important and vital doctrines of Christianity. We do not impudently pretend that we are infallible, or deny that there may be other sheep who are not of this fold, whom Christ will bring with him, that they may be eventually one fold, under one Shepherd.

But we do assert that we have no right either to alter the plain and evident meaning of scripture, or to disbelieve our senses, to suit our religious views.* How could I, as a minister of Christ, exhort you to pray to the Virgin Mary, when it plainly declares in the Bible, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve? Or how could I, in administering the holy sacrament, withhold the cup, when Christ said, drink ye *all* of it? How dare I tell you the wine is changed into blood, when your sight, taste, and smell convince you that it is still wine? Christ called it his blood, and he likewise called himself the bread of life; but he meant not the actual bread of animal life, but the spiritual bread of spiritual life: so also he called the wine his blood, i. e. his figurative blood; not the blood which was shed upon the cross. Again, how can you believe that the popish mass is offered to God, a true, proper, and propitiatory sacrifice for the quick and dead, and that those who disbelieve this doctrine are accursed, when you learn from holy writ, that Christ is the propitiation of our sins, and that by his one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. How can you imagine that it is lawful to represent God and the Holy

* Vide Horne's Protestant Memorial.

Trinity by images ; and that these images, and the images of saints are to be duly honoured, venerated, and worshipped, when the second commandment forbids us to make any graven image and likeness, and to bow down and worship them ? What can you think of that church which forbids her priests to marry, when the scripture says, marriage is honorable in all ? In fact the time would fail me were I to enumerate all the absurdities and errors of the Roman Catholic faith, contrary to common sense, and forbidden by the word of God. Its ministers do indeed by their traditions, transgress the commandments of God, which they have thus made of none effect ; “in vain do they worship God, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.” And how can its rulers justify themselves to God and their own consciences, in thus misleading the church, and deceiving those for whom Christ died ? And what right have they, like the scribes and pharisees of old, to bind burdens on men’s shoulders, grievous to be borne, and totally useless in the article of our salvation ? Let us pray that the Divine Spirit would illuminate their understandings, and dispel their prejudices ; that it would move them to reject those husks and carnal ordinances of ceremonial worship, for a worship of spirit and truth. May they depend no longer upon the prayers of saints and angels,

but upon the atonement of Jesus Christ, who maketh intercession for us at the right hand of God. May they drink no more the waters of broken cisterns, but of that spiritual rock which follows through this world's wilderness, even Christ.

To conclude:—If then the want of God's word has been the cause of such errors and crimes, we ought to remember that suitable knowledge and holiness will be required of us who can apply to it for instruction in righteousness. Perhaps no Christian privilege involves such an awful responsibility, as the general spread of the scriptures in this country; and the opportunity given to every one of fixing his religious views, and his habits of life. If in former ages crowds would flock to the place where they fancied they could hear instruction, and receive answers to various and difficult questions; and if the queen of the south travelled far to hear the wisdom of Solomon, what is our condition who have the lively oracles of God in our hands, and can refer to them on all occasions? We remember the punishment of him who knew his Master's will, and did it not: he was beaten with many stripes. There may be some excuse for those who are forbidden to read the Bible, or are permitted only to read an erroneous translation, which wilfully misrepresents its doctrines and perverts

its meaning. But what is our crime, and what will be our punishment if we neglect so great a salvation? May the Divine Spirit rouse in us the feelings of gratitude and diligence, that we may thankfully cultivate our Christian privileges. May we apply the words of life to the government of our conduct, and at last hear the approving sentence, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

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