

SERMON CX

ON THE DISCOVERIES OF FAITH

“Now faith is the evidence of things not seen.” Hebrews xi. 1.

1. FOR many ages it has been allowed by sensible men, *Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuit prius in sensu*: That is, “There is nothing in the understanding which was not first perceived by some of the senses.” All the knowledge which we naturally have is originally derived from our senses. And therefore those who want any sense, cannot have the least knowledge or idea of the objects of that sense; as they that never had sight, have not the least knowledge or conception of light or colours. Some indeed have, of late years, endeavoured to prove that we have innate ideas, not derived from any of the senses, but coeval with the understanding. But this point has been now thoroughly discussed by men of the most eminent sense and learning; and it is agreed by all impartial persons, that although some things are so plain and obvious, that we can very hardly avoid knowing them as soon as we come to the use of our understanding; yet the knowledge even of those is not innate, but derived from some of our senses.

2. But there is a great difference between our senses, considered as the avenues of our knowledge. Some of them have a very narrow sphere of action; some a more extensive one. By *feeling* we discern only those objects that touch some part of our body; and, consequently, this sense extends only to a small number of objects. Our senses of *taste* and *smell* (which some count species of *feeling*) extend to fewer still. But, on the other hand, our nobler sense of *hearing* has an exceeding wide sphere of action; especially in the case of loud sounds, as thunder, the roaring of the sea, or the discharge of cannon; the last of which sounds has been frequently heard at the distance of near a hundred miles. Yet the space to which the sense of *hearing* itself extends is small, compared to that through which the *sight* extends. The *sight* takes in at one view, not only the most unbounded prospects on earth, but also the moon

and the other planets, the sun, yea, the fixed stars; though at such an immeasurable distance, that they appear no larger through our finest telescopes than they do to the naked eye.

3. But still none of our senses, no, not the sight itself, can reach beyond the bounds of this visible world. They supply us with such knowledge of the material world as answers all the purposes of life. But as this was the design for which they were given, beyond this they cannot go. They furnish us with no information at all concerning the invisible world.

4. But the wise and gracious Governor of the worlds, both visible and invisible, has prepared a remedy for this defect. He hath appointed *faith* to supply the defect of *sense*; to take us up where *sense* sets us down, and help us over the great gulf. Its office begins where that of *sense* ends. *Sense* is an evidence of things that are seen; of the visible, the material world, and the several parts of it. *Faith*, on the other hand, is the "evidence of things not seen;" of the invisible world; of all those invisible things which are revealed in the oracles of God. But indeed they reveal nothing, they are a mere dead letter, if they are "not mixed with faith in those that hear them."

5. In particular, *faith* is an evidence to me of the existence of that unseen thing, my own soul. Without this I should be in utter uncertainty concerning it. I should be constrained to ask that melancholy question:—

Hear'st thou submissive, but a lowly birth,
Some separate particles of finer earth?

But by *faith* I know it is an immortal spirit, made in the image of God; in his natural and moral image; "an incorruptible picture of the God of glory." By the same evidence I know that I am now fallen short of the glorious image of God; yea, that I, as well as all mankind, am "dead in trespasses and sins:" So utterly dead, that "in me dwelleth no good thing;" that I am inclined to all evil, and totally unable to quicken my own soul.

6. By *faith* I know that, besides the souls of men, there are other orders of spirits; yea, I believe that

Millions of creatures walk the earth
Unseen, whether we wake, or if we sleep.

These I term angels; and I believe part of them are holy and happy, and the other part wicked and miserable. I believe the

former of these, the good angels, are continually sent of God "to minister to the heirs of salvation;" who will be "equal to angels" by and by, although they are now a little inferior to them. I believe the latter, the evil angels, called in Scripture, devils, united under one head, (termed in Scripture, Satan; emphatically the enemy, the adversary, both of God and man,) either range the upper regions; whence they are called "princes of the power of the air;" or, like him, walk about the earth as "roaring lions, seeking whom they may devour."

7. But I know by faith that, above all these, is the Lord Jehovah; He that is, that was, and that is to come; that is God from everlasting, and world without end; He that filleth heaven and earth; He that is infinite in power, in wisdom, in justice, in mercy, and holiness; He that created all things, visible and invisible, by the breath of his mouth, and still upholds them all, preserves them in being, "by the word of his power;" and that governs all things that are in heaven above, in earth beneath, and under the earth. By faith I know, "there are Three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and that these Three are One;" that the Word, God the Son, "was made flesh," lived and died for our salvation, rose again, ascended into heaven, and now sitteth on the right hand of the Father. By faith I know that the Holy Spirit is the giver of all spiritual life; of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost; of holiness and happiness, by the restoration of that image of God wherein we are created. Of all these things, faith is the evidence, the sole evidence, to the children of men.

8. And as the information which we receive from our senses does not extend to the invisible world, so neither does it extend to (what is nearly related thereto) the eternal world. In spite of all the instruction which either the sight or any of the senses can afford,

The vast, the' unbounded prospect lies before us;
But clouds, alas! and darkness rest upon it.

Sense does not let in one ray of light, to discover "the secrets of the illimitable deep." This, the eternal world, commences at death, the death of every individual person. The moment the breath of man goeth forth, he is an inhabitant of eternity. Just then time vanishes away "like as a dream when one awaketh." And here again faith supplies the place of sense, and gives us

a view of things to come: At once it draws aside the veil which hangs between mortal and immortal beings. Faith discovers to us the souls of the righteous, immediately received by the holy angels, and carried by those ministering spirits into Abraham's bosom; into the delights of paradise, the garden of God, where the light of his countenance perpetually shines; where he converses, not only with his former relations, friends, and fellow-soldiers, but with the saints of all nations and all ages, with the glorious dead of ancient days, with the noble army of martyrs, the Apostles, the Prophets, the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: Yea, above all this, he shall be with Christ, in a manner that he could not be while he remained in the body.

9. It discovers, likewise, the souls of unholy men; seized the moment they depart from the quivering lips, by those ministers of vengeance, the evil angels, and dragged away to their own place. It is true, this is not the nethermost hell: They are not to be tormented there "before the time;" before the end of the world, when every one will receive his just recompence of reward. Till then they will probably be employed by their bad master in advancing his infernal kingdom, and in doing all the mischief that lies in their power, to the poor, feeble children of men. But still, wherever they seek rest, they will find none. They carry with them their own hell, in the worm that never dieth; in a consciousness of guilt, and of the wrath of God, which continually drinks up their spirits; in diabolical, infernal tempers, which are essential misery; and in what they cannot shake off, no, not for an hour, any more than they can shake off their own being,—that "fearful looking for of fiery indignation, which will devour God's adversaries."

10. Moreover, faith opens another scene in the eternal world; namely, the coming of our Lord in the clouds of heaven, to "judge both the quick and the dead." It enables us to see the "great white throne coming down from heaven, and Him that sitteth thereon, from whose face the heavens and the earth flee away, and there is found no place for them." We see "the dead, small and great, stand before God." We see "the books opened, and the dead judged, according to the things that are written in the books." We see the earth and the sea giving up their dead, and hell (that is, the invisible world) giving up the dead that were therein, and every one judged according to his works.

11. By faith we are also shown the immediate consequences of the general judgment. We see the execution of that happy sentence pronounced upon those on the right hand, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." After which the holy angels tune their harps, and sing, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors, that the heirs of glory may come in!" And then shall they drink of the rivers of pleasure that are at God's right hand for evermore. We see, likewise, the execution of that dreadful sentence, pronounced upon those on the left hand, "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." And then shall the ministers of divine vengeance plunge them into "the lake of fire burning with brimstone; where they have no rest day or night, but the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever."

12. But beside the invisible and the eternal world, which are not seen, which are discoverable only by faith, there is a whole system of things which are not seen, which cannot be discerned by any of our outward senses. I mean, the spiritual world, understanding thereby the kingdom of God in the soul of man. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard this; neither can it enter into the heart of man to conceive the things of" this interior kingdom, unless God revealed them by his Spirit. The Holy Spirit prepares us for his inward kingdom, by removing the veil from our heart, and enabling us to know ourselves as we are known of him; by "convincing us of sin," of our evil nature, our evil tempers, and our evil words and actions; all of which cannot but partake of the corruption of the heart from which they spring. He then convinces us of the desert of our sins; so that our mouth is stopped, and we are constrained to plead guilty before God. At the same time, we "receive the spirit of bondage unto fear;" fear of the wrath of God, fear of the punishment which we have deserved; and, above all, fear of death, lest it should consign us over to eternal death. Souls that are thus convinced feel they are so fast in prison, that they cannot get forth. They feel themselves at once altogether sinful, altogether guilty, and altogether helpless. But all this conviction implies a species of faith; being "an evidence of things not seen;" nor indeed possible to be seen or known, till God reveals them unto us.

13. But still let it be carefully observed, (for it is a point of no

small importance,) that this faith is only the faith of a servant, and not the faith of a son. Because this is a point which many do not clearly understand, I will endeavour to make it a little plainer. The faith of a servant implies a divine evidence of the invisible and the eternal world; yea, and an evidence of the spiritual world, so far as it can exist without living experience. Whoever has attained this, the faith of a servant, "feareth God, and escheweth evil;" or, as it is expressed by St. Peter, "feareth God, and worketh righteousness." In consequence of which he is, in a degree, as the Apostle observes, "accepted with Him." Elsewhere he is described in those words: "He that feareth God, and keepeth his commandments." Even one who has gone thus far in religion, who obeys God out of fear, is not in anywise to be despised; seeing "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Nevertheless, he should be exhorted not to stop there; not to rest till he attains the adoption of sons; till he obeys him out of love, which is the privilege of all the children of God.

14. Exhort him to press on, by all possible means, till he passes "from faith to faith;" from the faith of a *servant* to the faith of a *son*; from the spirit of bondage unto fear, to the spirit of childlike love: He will then have "Christ revealed in his heart," enabling him to testify, "The life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*,"—the proper voice of a child of God. He will then be "born of God;" inwardly changed by the mighty power of God, from "an earthly, sensual, devilish" mind, to the "mind which was in Christ Jesus." He will experience what St. Paul means by those remarkable words to the Galatians, "Ye are the sons of God by faith; and because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father." "He that believeth," as a son, (as St. John observes,) "hath the witness in himself." "The Spirit itself witnesses with his spirit, that he is a child of God." "The love of God is shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him."

15. But many doubts and fears may still remain, even in a child of God, while he is weak in faith; while he is in the number of those whom St. Paul terms "babes in Christ." But when his faith is strengthened, when he receives faith's abiding impression, realizing things to come; when he has received the

abiding witness of the Spirit, doubts and fears vanish away. He then enjoys the plerophory, or "full assurance, of faith;" excluding all doubt, and all "fear that hath torment." To those whom he styles *young* men, St. John says, "I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one." These, the Apostle observes in the other verse, had "the word of God abiding in them." It may not improbably mean the pardoning word, the word which spake all their sins forgiven; in consequence of which, they have the consciousness of the divine favour without any intermission.

16. To these more especially we may apply the exhortation of the Apostle Paul: "Leaving the first principles of the doctrine of Christ," namely, repentance and faith, "let us go on unto perfection." But in what sense are we to leave those principles? Not absolutely; for we are to retain both one and the other, the knowledge of ourselves, and the knowledge of God, unto our lives' end: But only comparatively; not fixing, as we did at first, our whole attention upon them; thinking and talking perpetually of nothing else, but either repentance or faith. But what is the perfection here spoken of? It is not only a deliverance from doubts and fears, but from sin; from all inward as well as outward sin; from evil desires, and evil tempers, as well as from evil words and works. Yea, and it is not only a negative blessing, a deliverance from all evil dispositions, implied in that expression, "I will circumcise thy heart;" but a positive one likewise; even the planting all good dispositions in their place; clearly implied in that other expression, "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul."

17. These are they to whom the Apostle John gives the venerable title of *Fathers*, who "have known him that is from the beginning;" the eternal Three-One God. One of these expresses himself thus: "I bear about with me an experimental verity and a plenitude of the presence of the ever-blessed Trinity." And those who are fathers in Christ, generally, though I believe not always, enjoy the plerophory, or "full assurance, of hope;" having no more doubt of reigning with him in glory, than if they already saw him coming in the clouds of heaven. But this does not prevent their continually increasing in the knowledge and love of God. While they "rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything

give thanks," they pray in particular, that they may never cease to watch, to deny themselves, to take up their cross daily, to fight the good fight of faith; and against the world, the devil, and their own manifold infirmities; till they are able to "comprehend, with all saints, what is the length, and breadth, and height, and depth, and to know that love of Christ which passeth knowledge;" yea, to "be filled with all the fulness of God."

YARM, June 11, 1788.
