

A
S E R M O N

Occasioned by the

D E A T H

O F T H E

Rev^d. Mr. Samuel Wilson,

Who departed this Life October 6,

In the Forty-eighth Year of his Age,

PREACHED October 14. 1750.

By *J O H N G I L L, D. D.*

Published at the Request of the Church.

THE THIRD EDITION.

L O N D O N :

Printed and Sold by G. KEITH in *Mercers-Chapel,*
Cheapside; and J. ROBINSON at *Dock-Head,*
Southwark. M.DCC.L. Price 6d.



ACTS xx. 38.

*Sorrowing most of all for the word
which he spake, that they should see
his face no more.*

BEING desired by you, the brethren and members of this church, to assist, in your sorrow, on account of the death of your late dear pastor, in which I sincerely bear a part with you; and no passage of scripture being left by the deceased, nor any given me by his surviving relative, or by you, I considered with myself what would be most proper and suitable on such an occasion; I thought of one portion of scripture, and of another, but none hung upon my mind so much, and continued with me so long as the words I have read unto you; and therefore I determined, through divine assistance, to make them the subject of the following discourse.

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The words manifestly refer to a single expression used by the apostle *Paul*, in a very moving and pathetic address, delivered by him to the elders of the church of *Ephesus* at *Miletus*, where he had convened them for that purpose; but before I enter into a particular consideration of them, I shall take leave to make some few remarks upon the address itself; and the rather, as it will not lead us out of sight of the text, but will open to us the true source of the sorrow expressed in it, and furnish us with reasons accounting for it. And,

1. The apostle observes what was his constant work and employment whilst he was in *Asia*, and his manner of performing it, ver. 18, 19. His work was *servicing the Lord*; not himself and his own belly; not seeking to gratify his sensual lusts, or to acquire riches and honour to himself, as the false teachers did; he was no time-server or man-pleaser, for then he would not have been the servant of Christ; but he served the Lord, Jehovah the father, in the gospel of his son, with all his heart and soul; and he served the Lord Christ by fully and faithfully preaching him, and in so doing became the servant of the churches for Jesus sake. His manner of performing this service was *with all humility of mind*;

mind ; for though he was favoured with extraordinary gifts, and was called to an extraordinary office, by which he was set not only above common saints, but above ordinary ministers of the word, and was not behind the chief of the apostles ; yet he was not lifted up with these things, but thought himself *less than the least of all saints* ; being sensible of his own unworthiness to be employed in such service, and his insufficiency for it ; and well knowing it was by the grace of God he was what he was, and did what he did, he therefore walked humbly before God, and in the sight of men ; not assuming a dominion over the faith of any, or lording it over the heritage of God. And it was *with many tears* that he went through his work ; he sowed the precious seed of the word in tears, and watered it with them ; grieved he often was at the hardness, impenitence and unbelief of many that heard him, and was greatly affected with the troubles of the saints, both inward and outward ; who was offended or afflicted, and he burned not ? and would frequently weep over the scandalous lives of carnal professors. And his service also was attended with *temptations that beset* him, not only from satan, and his own heart, but from a wicked world, and especially *by the lying*

In wait of the Jews, who sought to take away his life ; and which were trials of his faith and patience, and of his courage and constancy in the service of his Lord ; and now a minister so constant and laborious, so humble, so compassionate, and so self-denying, is it to be wondered at that sorrow should be felt and expressed at parting with him ?

2. The apostle goes on to take notice of the subject-matter of his ministry, or of what he chiefly insisted upon in it, ver. 20, 21. In general it was what *was profitable, suitable, and convenient* for them. He did not amuse his hearers with philosophical notions, or read lectures of mere morality to them, or deliver out speculative notions in divinity ; but he taught them solid and substantial truths, the doctrines of the everlasting Gospel, the wholesome words of our Lord Jesus, such as men are nourished up with unto everlasting life ; things profitable for doctrine and instruction in righteousness ; even such doctrines as relate to the knowledge of the divine Being, Father, Son, and Spirit, to the state and condition of man by nature, as a fallen creature, and to his recovery both by redeeming and efficacious grace : and of these things he *kept back nothing* ; he did not withhold them either in whole or in part, nor did he with-
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draw or fetch back, as the word ^a used may signify, what he had before said to them ; but abode by it, and pronounced an anathema on such who preached any other gospel than what had been preached and received already ; and this he *shewed* unto them, and made it clear, plain, and evident ; and *taught* them it *publicly, and from house to house* ; first publicly in the *Jewish* synagogue, then in the school of *Tyrannus*, chap. xix. 8, 9, 10. and in whatsoever public place of worship the people met together ; and also privately in their own houses ; which shows his diligence, and industry, and concern for their spiritual welfare ; and what he taught in the one place, and in the other, was uniform and all of a piece. In particular, the doctrines he chiefly insisted upon, or the whole of his ministry, were reducible to these two heads, *repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus*. God, against whom man has sinned, is the object of the one ; and Christ, who is the Redeemer and Saviour, is the object of the other : repentance must be toward God ; it lies in a true sense of sin, and godly sorrow for it, in shame and blushing at it, and in owning and forsaking it, flowing from a view of the love of God, and of pardoning grace
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^a ὑπεβίβασεν. See Heb. x. 38, 39.

and mercy thro Christ, attended with faith in him, and hope of falvation by him : faith has Christ for its object ; and it is a believing in his person, blood, righteousness, and sacrifice, a looking to him, leaning on him, trusting in him, and expecting grace, life, and falvation from him. These two doctrines went together in Christ's ministry, and are what he ordered his disciples to teach, and which they did, endeavouring first to bring men to a sense of sin, and then encouraged them to believe in Christ : and this is the usual order in the Spirit's work upon the soul thro' the ministry of the word, first to convince men of sin, then to work faith in their hearts, and take of the things of Christ, and shew and apply them to their souls for their peace and comfort : and those doctrines were taught by the apostle without respect to persons, he testified them *both to Jews and Greeks* ; and now a minister who made it his business to deliver out such interesting truths, doctrines of such moment and importance to the souls of men, and was so faithful and diligent herein, is there not good reason that those to whom he had ministered should be filled with sorrow and trouble, and shew deep concern of mind at his departure from them ?

3. The apostle declares the view he had of what sufferings he was to endure for the sake of the Gospel, and which was not at all discouraging to him, ver. 22, 23, 24. He says he was going *bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem*; not in his own spirit, as being bound in conscience to perform a piece of service he had undertaken to do to the poor saints there from the *Gentile* churches; and much less as if he was compressed, and straitned, and uneasy in his mind at what he was to suffer at *Jerusalem*, for this would be contrary to what he after says; but in and by the Spirit of God, by which he was moved to go up to *Jerusalem*, notwithstanding the persuasion of his friends to the contrary, and what he should endure there; by which he knew he should be put in bonds there; and by the revelation of the Spirit he saw it as clearly as if he was bound already. Yet *not knowing the things that should befall him there*: that is, other things besides bonds, which are after excepted; or whether those would issue in death there or elsewhere; as yet this was not made known unto him: *save that the Holy Ghost witnessed in every city, that bonds and afflictions abode him, or waited for him.* This he knew not only from the common lot of Christ's ministers, and his own experience,
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but from the Holy Ghost in the prophets, which were in every city where there was a church ; who were all in this tone, having a spirit of prophecy in them, that he was going to endure great sufferings for the sake of Christ and the Gospel ; or the Holy Ghost in himself testified before-hand to him of his sufferings, assuring him that in every city he came unto, and particularly in *Jerusalem*, persecution and affliction would attend him ; and which, by the way, is no inconsiderable proof of the deity of the blessed Spirit. *But none of these things moved him from his intended journey to Jerusalem, which he was resolved upon ; nor from preaching the Gospel as he went along ; nor did they disturb and distress his mind ; neither did he count his life dear unto himself, than which nothing is dearer to men. Skin for skin, yea all that a man hath, will he give for his life^b. Yet this he made no account of ; he did not value and regard it ; he was willing to lay it down, so that he might but testify the Gospel of the grace of God ; or bear a testimony to it, which he was willing to do both by life and by death ; even to that Gospel, which is a declaration of the love, grace, and mercy of God, which asserts salvation to be all of grace, and is the means of*

^b Job ii. 5.

of conveying and implanting the grace of God in the hearts of men ; and in so doing fulfil *the ministry* he had *received of the Lord Jesus* ; and which he had, as also gifts for it, as well as a commission to enter upon it, and execute it ; and by all which he would *finish his course*, the race of his life, and course of his ministry *with joy*, as he did ; for a little before his death he could say ^c, *I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith ; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day.* Now who could forbear shedding tears at parting with such a brave and courageous minister of the Gospel, so undaunted at sufferings, so willing to lay down his life for the sake of the Gospel, and the dear interest of the Redeemer ?

4. The next thing observable in this moving speech, is the apostle's solemn appeal to those to whom he addressed himself for his faithfulness in the ministration of the Gospel to them, ver. 25, 26, 27. which is introduced after this manner ; he tells them, that he *knew*, and was assured, and which therefore was not a mere conjecture of his, but he had
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^c 2 Tim. iv. 7, 8.

it by revelation, that none of them *all*, meaning not only those before him, but all the christians in *Asia*, among whom he had gone preaching the kingdom of God ; the kingdom of the Messiah, the kingdom of grace and glory, more especially the latter, and the things appertaining to it ; as what is a man's meetness for it, regeneration by the spirit of God ; and what is his right unto it, the justifying righteousness of Christ ; and what the glories of it, which are in some measure brought to light by the Gospel ; all such persons to whom he had preached these things in *Asia*, he affirms, should *see his face no more* ; which was the cutting wounding stroke, which touched them to the quick, pierced to the very heart, and set them weeping and forrowing as they did. And this is the word referred to in our text. Upon which he calls them to bear witness that day, that he was *pure from the blood of all men* ; he had acted the part of a faithful watchman in giving warning from the mouth of the Lord ; he had laid before men their state and danger ; he had truly represented their condition to them ; he had told them, that without repentance towards God, and faith in Christ, they would die in their sins ; he had pointed out the only way of life and salvation by Christ unto them,

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so that they would not perish for want of knowledge and the means of it; nor was he any ways necessary to their ruin; their destruction was of themselves; their blood was upon their own heads; he had nothing to answer for, he had faithfully discharged his duty to them: *for*, says he, *I have not skinned to declare to you all the counsel of God; not the secret purposes and decrees of God, those counsels of old which are faithfulness and truth, which are only known by prophecy, or by the dispensations of Providence; but the Gospel-revelation, and the whole scheme of it, which is the produce of divine wisdom; this he fully made known to all to whom he ministered, so that they, as well as Timothy^d, knew fully his doctrine as well as manner of life: he made use of no artful methods to conceal his principles, no ambiguous phrases, or words of double, or doubtful meaning; he renounced all such hidden things of dishonesty, and by manifestation of the truth, commended himself to every man's conscience in the sight of God: and now is it at all marvellous, that the persons to whom the apostle said these things, should have their hearts filled with sorrow, or that there should not be a dry eye among them, when a minister, so honest*

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^d 2 Tim. iii. 10.

and ingenuous, so faithful and open-hearted, was taking his leave of them, and especially when they are told, that they should see his face no more ?

5. Next follows the pressing exhortation of the apostle, ver. 28, 29, 30, 31. to the elders of the church at *Ephesus*, to *take heed* to themselves ; to their doctrine, that it be agreeable to the word of God, and to their conversation, that it was becoming the Gospel of Christ : *and to all the flock* ; the whole church of God, and every member of it, and watch over them, and preserve them from the error of the wicked : *over the which the Holy Ghost had made them overseers* ; by bestowing gifts upon them, qualifying of them for such an office, and inclining their hearts to take the oversight of them cheerfully ; and which is an argument why they should be careful of them, *to feed the church of God* ; with wholesome food, with the substantial truths of the Gospel, which hold forth Christ and his grace, as the bread of life, and water of life ; and the rather they should look upon themselves under obligation so to do, since Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever, has purchased this flock or church, not with corruptible things, as silver and gold, but *with his own blood* ; which is exceeding precious, and of great value and efficacy.

efficacy. And the reason why the apostle was so importunate, and so pressing in this matter, was, because he knew by divine revelation, that *after his departing* from hence, or by death, *grievous wolves*, false teachers, wolves in sheeps cloathing, fierce, ravenous, and greedy ones, would *enter in among* them privily; *not sparing the flock*; but fleecing and worrying it: yea, not only such should enter from without, but even of themselves, out of their own community, there should rise up men *speaking perverse things*; contrary to the scriptures, to the Gospel, and things very pernicious, to the souls of men, whereby they would *draw away the disciples after them*; make rents and schisms in the church, form new parties, and set up themselves at the head of them: now of this the apostle had warned them incessantly for the three years last past, in the most tender and pressing manner, even with tears, which he desires them carefully to remember. And can it be thought that such an affectionate servant of Christ could be parted with, without tears shed for him, who had so great a regard both to the present and future well-being of the church, to which these elders belonged?

6. In the most affecting manner he takes his farewell of them, ver. 32. commending them
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them *to God*; to his grace to supply and support them, to his wisdom to direct them, and to his power to preserve and keep them; *and to the word of his grace*; either the written word, the same with the Gospel of the grace of God, to make it the rule and subject of their ministration; or Christ the essential Word, who is full of grace and truth; each of which, both God, and his word, were *able to build them up* on their most holy faith, and carry on and finish the work of grace upon their souls, and make them useful to build up others on the rock of ages; and when they had done their work, *to give them an inheritance among all them which are sanctified*; both a meetness for, and a right unto the incorruptible and undefiled inheritance, that fades not away, and is reserved in the heavens, and will be only enjoyed by sanctified persons; for 'tis an inheritance of the saints in light. And the whole speech is concluded with the apostle's declaration of his being free from the sin of covetousness; for the truth of which he appeals to the persons present, and exhorts them to imitate him, provide for themselves, and support others; to which he animates them by the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, ver. 33, 34, 35. and then closes all in prayer to God with them, and for them; upon which they all burst out
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into tears, and lift up their voice and weep, and one after another fall upon the apostle's neck and kiss him, ver. 36, 37. A most moving scene this ! It is hard to form just and adequate ideas of it, and still more difficult to express them in proper language ; I cannot do it better than in the words of a very spiritual and affectionate commentator^e on the place, who represents it in the following manner. “ How can I part with this “ dear creature, this blessed *Paul*, saith one, “ in whom my life is in a manner bound up ? “ Farewel, my dear friend, saith another, a “ thousand thanks to thee, and ten thousand “ to God for thee, and for all the pains thou “ hast taken with me for my good : And “ must we part ? saith another, must I lose “ my spiritual father, nurse, and guide ? “ What will become of us now, saith another, when we shall no more have him “ to apply to, and receive direction from ? “ What shall I do, if the Lord take away “ my master from my head ? *My father,* “ *my father, the chariot of Israel, and the* “ *horsemen thereof.*” And then follow the words I first read, *sorrowing most of all for the word which he spake, that they should see his face no more.* There were several things
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^e Mr. Henry in loc.

in this farewell-discourse, which affected them, and filled their hearts with grief and trouble; as what the apostle was like to suffer for the sake of Christ and his Gospel, and what sad havock false teachers would make in the church under their care hereafter; but what most of all afflicted them was, that they were now just going to part with the apostle, and should never see him more. What I shall further do with these words, will be,

I. To consider what that is which chiefly and principally affects and afflicts a people at parting with a Gospel-minister, which is, *that they shall see his face no more.*

II. Shew the nature of that sorrow which is, and may be expressed on such an occasion.

III. Observe some reasons which induce such a sorrow, and which will serve to justify it when it is within due bounds.

IV. Offer some things to consideration, in order to abate it, on the above account, and to regulate it, and keep it within proper limits.

I. I shall consider what that is, which of all things does mostly affect and afflict a people at parting with a Gospel-minister, which is, *that they shall see his face no more.* And let it be observed,

1. That there are many cases which affect, but not so much affect as this : as for instance, to part with a minister for a while, for a few weeks or months, when his urgent affairs call him elsewhere, or his presence is necessary in another branch of Christ's interest, for the service of it ; this is not grateful to a people by whom he is beloved ; it is with some reluctance he departs from them for a season ; but then they hope for his return, and, with as much patience as they can, wait for it : had this been the case here, it would have been bearable. The saints at *Ephesus* had an experience of this before. When the apostle was first with them, his stay was short ; they would fain have had him continued longer with them, but he refused, which no doubt was grieving to them ; but he returned again, and abode with them for the space of two years, and then was obliged to leave them through an uproar, but not without expressions of their tender regard to him ; they *embraced* him in their arms, and no doubt wept over him : and now a third time he visits them, by sending for them at *Miletus*, and tells them, that they shall see his face no more ; had he given some hopes of visiting them again, though he should for

the present depart, or signified his intentions to do so, if it was the will of God, this would have been tolerable; but to assure them they should never see him again, this cut them to the heart.

Again, to part with a Gospel-minister wholly, to have him removed from one part of a country to another, from one church to another, there to abide, and not return again, this is more affecting and afflicting than the other case, but not like this in the text. This may be, and sometimes is the case, that a minister does, and lawfully may remove from one people to another; as when errors and heresies obtain, and they can't be rooted out; or immorality prevails, and no reformation can be made, the discipline of Christ's house is neglected, and the people will not suffer his laws to be put in execution; or when a due maintenance is not, or cannot be provided for him, but both he and religion are exposed to the reproach of the world; or disaffection between him and the people rises so high, on one account or another, that peace and fellowship cannot be maintained, nor the ends of the ministration of the word, and administration of ordinances be answered: but then in such a case as this, as there
may

may be some persons to whom he has been a spiritual father, or who have received comfort and edification by his ministry, and consequently must be greatly troubled and distressed at his removal from them; so they may, if convenience will permit, go along with him; or however they may hope to see his face, and hear his voice again one time or other.

Moreover, to have a gospel-minister drove away by the force of persecution, and removed into a corner, so that a people can't behold their teacher in the place where they were wont to see him; this must be very grieving and distressing, but not like this, seeing his face no more; because in such times of persecution, they may both see and hear him in private houses, in cellars, and solitary places, in fields and woods, as our forefathers did. The witnesses prophesy, tho' in sackcloth; and the church is fed and nourished with the word and ordinances, tho' in the wilderness: besides, hope may be entertained, that such a state of persecution will not last always; God will not suffer the rod of the wicked always to continue on the lot of the righteous; he gives his churches rest from adversity, and they walk in his fear, and in the comforts of his spirit, and are edified and multiplied.

For a gospel-minister to be ill treated, reviled, and persecuted, to be haled to prison, and laid in fetters and bonds, must be very grievous to such to whom he has been useful ; but this is not like to that, of being in such a case as never to see his face more ; because such, as they have compassion on him in his bonds, and sympathize with him, so they may visit him in prison, see his face, hear his voice, and be the more strengthened in their faith in Christ, and in the good ways of God, by his bonds. The case of the apostle *Paul* is a most affecting one, when he was stoned by his furious persecutors, and dragged out of the city, and left for dead, round about whose bruised and mangled body, and as supposed, dead, the disciples stood, no doubt sorrowing and weeping ; and yet on a sudden he rose up alive and well, and they saw his face with pleasure ^f.

When a minister of the gospel is indisposed, and thro' sickness cannot attend his charge and work, it greatly affects a people that love him, and to whom he has been serviceable ; as the sickness of *Epaphroditus* was distressing to the *Philippians*, when they heard of it, which caused heaviness in him, who knew it would be so to them, tho' it was not unto death ^g :
whilst

^f Acts xiv. 19, 20.

^g Phil. ii. 26, 27.

whilst there is life there is hope of seeing him again; but when death has done its work, there is no more hope of seeing him again in his ministerial work; and this is the cutting thought. Wherefore,

2. What is the affecting case of all, is parting with a minister by death, when the eye that has seen him shall see him no more, in the place it formerly did; and that place in which he has been seen shall know him no more: death changes his countenance, alters his face, and the lineaments of it, so that it is not to be seen as it was before; and he is sent away, his body returns to the dust, and the spirit to God, that gave it; so that his *πρόσωπον*, his person, as the word also signifies, is not to be beheld any more. The phrase here used supposes, that they had seen his face, and that with pleasure; for it is used of beholding persons and things with rapture and joy^h; so a people may, and often do see the face of their minister in the time of life and health with pleasure; and especially when in his master's work, personating his lord, and speaking in his name, they have sometimes seen his face as the *Jews* did *Stephen's*, as if it had been the face of an angel, and have received and embraced him as an angel of God, even

^h *ὄρασις*. See John xvii. 24. Acts vii. 56.

even as Jesus Christⁱ; how beautiful are the feet, and much more the mouth and lips of a messenger of peace, and publisher of the glad-tidings of salvation by Christ! but when a minister is dead, tho' his face may be seen before his interment, yet not without an alteration, and not with joy and pleasure.

But let it be observed, that when the apostle told the persons spoken of in the text, that they should see his face no more; and they believed him and therefore sorrowed, it is not to be understood as a contradiction to, or a denial of the resurrection of the dead: the apostle knew, and so did they, that tho' he would die, and never pay them another visit; yet he would rise again in power, in glory, in incorruption, and with a spiritual body, and so would they, and have the same eyes they had, and with them behold, as the God-man and mediator-Christ, or Christ in human nature, and that for themselves, and not another, so they should see each other, and that face to face; but the meaning is, that he would die, and should not rise again till the heavens be no more, till the Lord shall descend from heaven with the voice of an archangel, when the dead in Christ will
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ⁱ Acts vi. 15. Gal. iv. 19.

rise first, till the last trumpet sounds, and the dead rise incorruptible and immortal.

3. It may be very well thought, that there is in these words a figure which *Rhetoricians* call a *meiosis*, by which less is said than is understood, and more is designed than is expressed; and besides, the word here used not only signifies face or countenance, and also person, but all exterior, attending and surrounding circumstances; and so we may consider it as expressing the person of a gospel-minister in every view of him, and in every part of his office, who ceases to be viewed in it when death has done its own. And then,

His people see his face no more in his own house, to which they have at times resorted, to have their cases of conscience answered, their doubts resolved, or advice given them in matters of moment and difficulty. They see his face no more in their own houses; that is, they have no more of his friendly visits; no more his fervent prayers with them, and for them; no more his hearty counsel to them, and feel no more his sympathizing heart with them in their troubles, whether of a spiritual or temporal nature; the weak are no more supported, nor the feeble-minded
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comforted by his private instructions. They see his face no more at their church meetings, there presiding over them, shewing the house to the house, the form and fashion of it, the goings out and comings in, and all the laws and ordinances of it; pointing who are to be admitted, and who to be rejected from the communion of the church; directing to every part of discipline, and to the rule of God's word for it; exhorting and reprovng with all long-suffering and doctrine, such sharply who have erred, that they be found in the faith, and such publickly who have sinned before all; laying on, and taking off censures, by the suffrage of the church; all which is no more to be seen as done by him. They see his face no more in the pulpit: they hear no more the silver trumpet blown by him, nor the joyful sound pronounced with delightful accents, nor the messages of peace, life, and salvation by Christ brought by him: they now remember how his mouth spoke wisdom, and his tongue talked of judgment; how their hearts have burned within them, while he has been opening the scriptures to them; how he has stirred up their minds by way of remembrance of Gospel-truths, and endeavoured to establish them in them;

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in what a clear light he has placed them, and with what strength of argument he has defended them ; and with what fervency, and in what a pressing manner he has exhorted them to love and good-works, and to adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour. But the cutting thought is, he's gone, and is no more seen, nor no more to be seen and heard. They see his face no more at the table of the Lord, there delivering out the memorials of his sufferings and death ; setting forth so evidently before their eyes a crucified Christ, as if he was just then crucified and slain among them ; pointing to his bleeding side and wounds, and directing to his pierced hands, and feet ; explaining the divine emblems, as representing the body of Christ bruised and broken for their sins, and his precious blood shed for the remission of them ; insensibly, and at an unawares, leading them at once into the height, and depth, and length, and breadth, of the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge ; engaging and encouraging their faith and hope in his blood and sacrifice ; stirring up their love, and exciting them to thankfulness to him, and not forget his benefits ; such as healing their diseases, and forgiv-

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