

SERMON IV.

ON THE INFANCY AND  
YOUTH OF CHRIST,

LUKE II. 52.

AND JESUS INCREASED IN WISDOM AND IN  
STATURE, AND IN FAVOR WITH GOD AND  
MAN.

OF the infancy and youth of Christ, we have only a very concise account in scripture. The tales and conjectures, which have been multiplied on this subject, are sufficiently numerous; but they are not here to be introduced.

On how many occasions are we taught the necessity and importance of revelation? As we are favored with that light, and walk in it, we enjoy religious satisfaction; but where it ceases to shine, ages roll on without giving us the least additional knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The historical narrative of his infancy and youth, in the New Testament, is to this effect : That he was born at Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary; that, while an infant, he was taken into Egypt, to avoid the persecution of Herod ; that when brought back again to Judea, he was carried into Galilee, and afterwards to Nazareth ; that while he was there, he grew, and waxed strong in spirit, was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him ; that he continued in this obscure city till he was twelve years of age, and

that then, he went up with Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem ; that they missed him, on their return to Nazareth, and went back again to Jerusalem seeking him ; that they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing, and asking them questions; that all who heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers ; and that Mary, and Joseph, were amazed at his wisdom. We are further told, on their asking why he had served them thus, that he replied, Wist ye not, that I must be about my Father's business? But it is plain, however superior he was to Joseph and Mary, in understanding, he went down with them to Nazareth, and was subject unto them ; where, we are informed, he still increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.

It is the unavoidable lot of him that is born of a woman, to come into this world in a state of weakness; and, if he rises to eminence in it, gradually to increase in wisdom and in strength. The miraculous conception of Christ, did not exempt him from the common condition of humanity. Nor did he, in our nature, increase in excellence without the favor of God. Well, therefore, may the best of men, who are so inferior to him, say, By the grace of God, we are what we are.

If we consult the prophets concerning the private life of our Lord, we shall find, that agreement between their predictions and the history of the New Testament which is highly pleasing ; and, by comparing the one with the other, what is asserted in our text, will be the more confirmed.

Isaiah, seven hundred years before the Incarnation, said, And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots: and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him : the spirit of wisdom and understanding ; the spirit of counsel and might; the spirit of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord ; and shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord. The prophet adds, And he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes,

neither reprove after the hearing of his ears. But, says Isaiah, with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity, for the meek of the earth; and shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked: and righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. This prediction perfectly agrees with the son of Mary; and it agrees with no other object to whom it has been, or to whom it can be applied.

But, it has been objected, there is a seeming dissonance between what some of the inspired prophets have said of Jesus Christ : that Isaiah, speaking of him, says, He shall grow up before him, [his heavenly Father] as a root out of a dry ground ; that he hath no form, nor comeliness, and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him but that David, speaking of the same object, is pleased to say, Thou art fairer than the children of men ; grace is poured into thy lips ; therefore God hath blessed thee for ever. This apparent contradiction may be removed on two suppositions; neither of which is improbable. First, we may suppose, that Isaiah speaks of our Lord in his earliest appearance to the Jews after his nativity; and that David speaks of him in his mature age; when some of his miracles had been wrought, and much of his wisdom had been displayed. Secondly, we may suppose, that the son of Amoz drew his picture of the Messiah to agree with that opinion which unbelievers would form of him ; and that the son of Jesse, sketched his profile of Christ, in such a manner, that those who believed in his name, would allow it to be strictly just. If seeming paradoxes are apt to give us pain, we are ill qualified to enquire after truth; for though truth is immutable, yet as most of our affirmations are limited, beyond those limits very different things may be safely asserted of the same object. Young people would do well to remember this; and perhaps, some who are not young, may stand in need of such a remark.

But let us now descend to a few particular observations on the subject of this discourse.

In the first place; infancy and youth are terms which agree with our knowledge of human nature; but of the infancy and youth of the Word of God, we have no conception; and, I presume, of that, we have no belief.

In him, there is no ground for progressive improvement. But when he assumed our nature, he took it into the strictest unison with himself, with all its innocent infirmities. As the son of man therefore, he gradually advanced through the different stages of humanity, from infancy to childhood, to youth, and riper years; and as really grew in wisdom, and in stature, as John the Baptist, or as any other person. The means likewise of his corporal, and intellectual improvement, appear to have been what is common to mankind. He ate, drank, and slept; read, reflected, and prayed, as other holy men.

This throws an air of mystery over the subject of this sermon, which they who plume themselves on being very rational, are anxious to avoid. But those reasoning's which are destructive of faith, or are intended to supply its place, are not to be trusted; and it will be found that they who have most of all indulged them, have reason to repent of their splendid indiscretion.

Of the true humanity of Christ, I have spoken my mind freely, and with some strength of language. So that perhaps, ye may say, If the son of Mary was in so many respects like us, wherein did he differ from us? This question would be very difficult to answer on certain principles which are now pushed into notice, and too much esteemed, But on my principles, the answer is easy; whether it is just, judge for yourselves. I reply then, that our Lord differs from us in his miraculous conception; in his being born without sin ; in the ineffable union between him who was born of the Virgin and the Word of God ; in his being anointed in our nature, with the oil of gladness above his fellows ; in the peculiar ground of his relation to his father, and to his people ; by those offices he is invested with,

and honors ; and by that work which he alone was called to perform, and which he declared he had finished. By these and other articles of distinction, our Lord had, and has, the pre-eminence; and they who believe in him, rejoice and triumph, in the pleasing disparity between him and those he hath redeemed to God by his blood.

Secondly; what positive assistance was granted to the man Christ Jesus, from his union with the Word of God, is not for us to say: reason will not reach the subject, and revelation hath not gratified our curiosity. From the latter, it appears, that he was chiefly, if not entirely, assisted in his obedience, temptations, and sufferings, by the same spirit that helpeth our infirmities. This is evident from the words which have been introduced from the prophecy of Isaiah [\*]. See Page 84.] Were more quotations wanting, more might be added to a large amount. But if this fact is admitted, we may infer that the human nature of Christ made no change in the person of the Word of God. When he who is so denominated, was made flesh, it was in a manner which produced no confusion between the divine nature and that which he assumed. The flesh to which he was united, continued to be flesh, and was subject to all the laws of our nature in its undefiled state.

If it is difficult to believe, that he who was in the form of God, should be found in fashion as a man, it is more difficult to believe, that a mere man, upon his resurrection from the dead, should take upon him the form of God. He that is not God by nature, is not God at all. For the Incarnation of the Son, of God, we can assign the strongest reasons. In the light of holy writ, we can say, that the salvation of men, the satisfaction of divine justice, the conservation of true religion, the manifestation of divine mercy, and the hope of our future glory, depended on this great event. But what can unbelievers urge, that he who was a mere man, for more than thirty years, what can they urge, that he should be deified on his resurrection from the dead? Doth the pardon of sin, the government of the world, the exercise of providence, the performance of

miracles, the conversion of men, their preservation, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, the future felicity of believers, or the final condemnation of the wicked, depend on such extravagance ? In no wise. Shall we then, ever give up those doctrines which are allowed, to be of difficult interpretation, only to embrace what is at bottom absurd? God forbid! It is written, that God will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. May this just and awful sentence, make us very mindful of the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation.

From the manner in which the human nature of Christ was supported in this world, we may further infer, that they who believe in him, may expect to be supplied in the whole of their present conflict, and duty, by the same spirit. This is a pleasing consideration. It awakes their hope, and keeps alive their highest expectations. If we have not the spirit of Christ, we are none of his. But if that Spirit which dwelt in him, dwelleth also in us, what temptation may we not resist? What duty may we not perform?

It is true, the Father gave not the spirit by measure unto him; which implies he doth to others; but if we are an habitation of God, through the spirit, and by his influence mortify the deeds of the body; if our love, obedience, and strength, are by the power of his grace, he that helpeth our infirmities, will grant that measure of it, that will be sufficient for us. Unless we live in this belief, we cannot possess becoming courage; but on the other hand, we need not tremble, either at our own weakness, or at the most formidable opposition, when we ardently seek, and humbly enjoy, this divine assistance.

In the third place; the manner in which our Lord attended to relative duties, notwithstanding he was filled with the spirit, is both a pleasing, and instructing trait in his wonderful character. It is well known, how apt, in common, men are to swell on all occasions. Their birth, their family, and parts; their portion, titles, offices, and I know not what beside, elate their minds, and

contaminate their conduct. But, though the birth of Jesus was miraculous, though by his union with the Son of God, he was the Lord from heaven, and appointed heir of all things, though he was wiser than Solomon, and knew that he was the Messiah, yet, in his private life, he was cheerfully obedient to Mary and Joseph; and even unto death, was wonderfully attentive to his mother's welfare.

After such an example, on what pretence can disobedience to parents be defended? Not, it may be said, on the ground of their poverty, but upon the plea of their being vicious. How! Vicious? Is this true? Take care, young man, how you admit the charge. But if it cannot be denied, do you mean to say, your parents wish their children to be vicious as themselves? (Remember, I am not speaking to the dregs of mankind, but to a Christian congregation.) Suppose the worst; does the young man think his parents were vicious in rocking his cradle, in relieving his numerous wants, in being at the charge of his education, in providing for his future subsistence, and in doing all this, frequently with more pleasure than he received the favor? These surely, are obligations not easy to be discharged; these are benefits which should never be forgotten. But my parents are defective in understanding. He that makes this excuse to justify the want of filial obedience should consider whether he does not underrate the talents of his parents to his own reproach. Perhaps they would not supply the extravagance of him that wanted discretion. Perhaps they justly rebuked him, when his vanity led him to expect their partial applause. Ah! young man, should you live to have a child, and to do as much for it as your parents have done for you, possibly you will then form better notions of domestic wisdom, and of the duties of those who preside in that important station.

Similar pretences have often been made, and taught, to promote disobedience to kings, and to all that are in authority. But were these people attentive to the injunctions, or to the example of our Lord, those pretences would perish, and a very different line of conduct would be pursued. But we are told, Christianity has

nothing to do with our civil behavior. Now, to refute such pernicious insinuations, you have but to open your New Testament, in order to see whether it does not abound with rules, motives, and examples, on that subject, which no other book can supply. Believe me, if these are despised, or forgotten, ye will at last find, that wiser rules, more noble motives, and better examples, will be sought for without success.

Fourthly; we may observe, that Christ, as a man, was brought up without, what is commonly called, a liberal education. He was not educated at Gamaliel's feet, nor at the feet of any other Rabbi. He was not assisted in his progressive improvements, by any philosopher; nor did the princes of this world take him under their protection. The word of God and prayer were his delight; and by these, he obtained that wisdom, and excellence, which never, in any other instance, adorned human nature.

I do not mean to infer from this, what hath too frequently been inferred, that a liberal education is to be despised. But I do mean to infer, it is not essential to human happiness, or to excellence of the highest kind. If they in particular, who are called of God to preach the gospel, were to give themselves up to the reading of his word, and prayer, they would become more able ministers of the New Testament, than by spending their money for that which is not bread, and their labor for that which satisfieth not.

I now allude to those courses of study which are magnified so much by some, and so much extolled by others. It is doubtless, very desirable, that some ministers should be acquainted with the scriptures in their original language ; but this, so far as it relates to general edification, is, by no means, such an arduous task as some interested tutors are disposed to represent it. On the other hand, it is idle to imagine, that very important consequences will follow, merely because any man is versed in Hebrew, Chaldee, and Greek. For others, as learned as himself, will always differ from him in theological opinions; and how are the bulk of mankind to settle the

dispute? Besides; every body knows, or may know, that they who have read any part of the scriptures in their own vernacular language, have as grossly misinterpreted the sacred text, as those who were never able to read it, but by the medium of an imperfect translation. Some of the most important controversies now subsisting are those in which, on both sides, the sacred text is allowed to be well translated.

For my own part, I see no reason why any person who has a taste for theological understanding, should be checked in his pursuit after a critical knowledge of the original text; but if some institutions are very likely to send out the best of pastors, or the best of writers, on religious subjects, it will be to many a pleasing, disappointment. After all, it is our duty to keep a steady eye on plain facts, and to rejoice in whatever turns out well, though we may not be able to account for what we see. Of one thing, at least, we may be certain, that every good gift, and every perfect gift, is from above, and cometh down from the father of lights; with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

We may further observe; that our Lord was not only brought up without what is usually called, a liberal education, but under those outward repulses which were not easy to be surmounted. Yet was he fairer than the children of men. I do not mean, in his form, or natural complexion, of which we have no proof; but in the excellence of his understanding, and in the dispositions of his heart.

There is a hurtful notion widely spread amongst mankind, which is, that nothing great can be expected from the poor and affected, or from those who are under the oppressor's rod, or beneath the tyrant's frown. This is so far from being true, that not only the best of men have reaped advantage by their distresses, but there is reason to conclude, that without their greatest trials, neither their invention, prudence, nor piety, would have been so considerable, or so conspicuous. Besides; there are virtues which are never visible to us, but in the hours of adversity. As some spices do not emit

their odours unless they are bruised, so some of the most excellent graces of Christianity remain, if I may so express it, in their quiescent state, till affliction calls them forth to action, and to excite applause.

In holy writ, the names of many are recorded who became eminent as their trials most of all abounded. The names of Moses, Jacob, Joseph, and Job, are amongst those worthies; and a much larger catalogue may be found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In Pagan history, we read of AEsop, Epictetus, and of others, not a few, who have given posterity a higher notion of their inherent value, than their lords and masters have given us of theirs: and I could mention a long list of excellent men of modern date, who were never stimulated to study by the charms of affluence and ease who were never soothed to write by the prospect of external indulgence.

Was our Lord then, or was he not, pleased to take upon him the form of a servant, that, among other things to be answered by such amazing condescension, he might encourage us, however tried, to aspire after that excellence which is rarely eminent in the splendid ranks of life? There is reason to believe this was his kind intention. May we never therefore forget his illustrious example! Remember he was of no account in the Jewish church or State. His own countrymen received him not. They procured his crucifixion! And when at the bar of Pilate, who appeared in his favor? All forsook him and fled. His purity and wisdom indeed, commanded transient admiration; but could not, in that adulterous age, procure his release. Barabbas was preferred, and Jesus rejected! Remember how he endured the contradiction of sinners against himself! Think of the magnanimity of his temper: his devotion to his father; and his compassion towards his persecutors. Call to mind the renown of his sufferings, and the relief and instruction which they impart; and under every oppression, set that Lord before you, who, in defiance of all that could be formidable, sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Any other improvement of this subject than has been made already, must now be comprised in a narrow compass.

We may just observe, that the benefits and blessing of early piety are strongly recommended by our Lord's example. Other things being equal, he that is pious in the dew of his youth, will reap the advantage of it, if he is spared, in the withering hours of old age. But every display of the grace of God is glorious; nor should those who have slighted it long, despair: though it must be owned, that they who have been most of all kept from neglecting their own salvation, have the greatest reason to rejoice.

We must not, however, dictate to God. It is at his option to quicken whom he will, and when it seemeth good in his sight. Let us also remember, that in Christianity, as well as in common life, there is a state of infancy, childhood, youth, and advanced age. In the former, as well as in the latter, we are dependent on God, and subject both to external injuries, and to internal disorders. In the former, as well as in the latter, he that is an infant commonly becomes a child, and he that is a child, wisheth to be a young man, and he that is a young man, equally wisheth to be a father. But all these wishes are right or wrong as they are or are not, accompanied with resignation to God; and with a proper use of those means which he has appointed for our growth in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I shall only add, that having been your stated Minister almost twenty years, I see, with pleasure, some young people growing up before me, who from their childhood, have known the holy scriptures ; and who are, I trust already, made wise unto salvation. If my annual sermons to them, or any other part of my public labors, have been owned for their good, from the present subject also, I pray God they may derive some additional advantage. AMEN.

SERMON V.