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Doctrine and Duty.

[FOR THE CHRISTIAN OBSERVER.]

The Mystery of the Present Dispensation.

No. III.

Perhaps enough has been said upon the fact of the present dispensation being unknown to the saints of former ages; we certainly find its clear account of it in the Old Testament. In Psalm cx. we read, "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thy enemies thy footstool." But we are not told how long this session was to continue, nor what was to be doing in the interim. In Daniel ix. 26. we read of Messiah being cut off, and having nothing; and of the prince coming, who should set his idols upon the battlements of the temple, which has yet to take place. But we have no note of the time which has to elapse between these two circumstances; nor any hint of an intervening dispensation. In chapt. xi. 33, we read, "Yet they shall fall by the sword, and by flame, by captivity, and by spoil many days." But we do not learn the number of the days, nor see any notice of a Gentile dispensation. For information respecting this we must turn to the New Testament.

1. The first notice that we have of this dispensation, I think, is in Luke xix. 11—27, in the parable of the pounds. The nobleman represents our Lord Jesus Christ; the servants, his church; the pound, its endowment with spiritual blessings; the trading with the pound, the improvement which we are required to make of these blessings; the citizens represent the Jews and mankind in general, who spurn the authority of the Saviour during his absence; the nobleman's return denotes the second advent, when he will reward his servants and destroy his foes. The parable of the talents is too much in keeping with the above to require remark. In the one, our Lord's faithful servants are rewarded in being made the sharers of his joy; in the other they are made rulers in his kingdom.

2. Another notice of this dispensation is given in Acts xv. 13—17, "And after they had held their peace, James answered,

saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, even all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things."

Here we have the nature and order of these dispensations distinctly pointed out.

1. A partial, elective one; in this God visits the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.

2. When this is done, he returns, visits, and restores Israel, and re-establishes the throne of David. This will be the time of blessing to the Jews.

3. Then comes the time of universal mercy and grace, when ALL the Gentiles shall seek the Lord, and be called by his name. Then the kingdom of our Lord will be established; and the knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth, as the waters cover the sea.

Attention to the nature and order of the Divine Dispensations, will go far to relieve the mind of perplexity respecting the apparently antagonistic principles of universality and limitation, both of which are especially prominent in the Holy Scriptures. The person who understands these will feel no embarrassment when he reads, That Jesus Christ tasted death for every man, and holding at the same time the doctrine of election by grace. With the late Rev. Robert Hall, he can maintain the universality of the Redeemer's atonement, in connexion with the Scriptural doctrine of election, because the latter is a separate arrangement, for a peculiar purpose, and for a limited time. The peculiar purpose is, to call out a people, who shall be able to suffer with Christ here, and then to reign with Him hereafter: and the limited time is, from the commencement of our Lord's ministry, down to His second advent: as an eloquent minister of the church of Scotland expresses it, "God has withdrawn His Son, for a time, from the world; and yet the church continues. A measure of the grace of the Spirit, which was given without measure to Jesus of Nazareth, is given

to them who believe in Him. By this means they maintain conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil; and honour and please God, in a sinful and ruined world. While the Son of God is absent from the world, Satan has the field to himself; and yet the believer in Christ Jesus is able to maintain conflict with him, and overcome by faith in the blood of the Lamb.

"The elect church is for the present the subject to which this grace is applied. God is taking from among the gentiles a people for Himself. But the first-fruits are gathered in due time; then the mystery of election shall cease; all rule, and authority, and power, but God's, shall be put down. At His second coming, Christ shall present to His Father, His Church, without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing. And when the espousals of the spiritual Eve to her Lord is celebrated, the command to increase and multiply, will be renewed, and souls will be born of God in multitudes. The dispensation of election will be ended, and that of universality begun. And then I, myself, will become a Wesleyan Methodist, and preach Christ the Saviour of all. And then I will proclaim the merit of His blood, and the benefit of His death to all. For why to all? Because so the wisdom of the order of the dispensation will have it." In Rev. xxi. 10, the bride, the Lamb's wife, is clearly distinguished from the nations of the saved, ver. 24, who walk in the light of the city, and who do bring their tribute of glory and honour into it. The former represents those who reign with Christ; the latter, "all people, nations, and languages, which shall serve Him." The difference, therefore, between the advocates of particular and general redemption, so far as it is justified by Scripture, is merely a question of time. The present is the time for taking out from among all nations, a peculiar people; but in the coming dispensation, of the fulfilling of the times, all persons, and things, in heaven and earth, will be gathered into one family in Christ, and all creation be restored to its pristine state.

3. A third notice of the peculiarity of the present dispensation is given Gal. iv. 1—7; "Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; but is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under