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DIVINITY.

THE GREAT ASSIZE.

A SERMON,

Preached at the Assizes, Bedford, March 10 1768:

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ROMANS, xiv. 10.

We shall all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ.

1. How many circumstances concur to raise the awfulness of the present solemnity! The general concourse of people, of every age, sex, rank, and condition of life, willingly and unwillingly gathered together not only from the neighbouring, but from distant parts; criminals speedily to be brought forth, and having no way to escape; officers waiting in their various posts, to execute the orders which shall be given; and the representative of our Gracious Sovereign, whom we so highly reverence and honour. The occasion likewise of this assembly adds not a little to the solemnity of it, to hear and determine causes of every kind, some of which are of the most important nature; on which depends no less than life and death; death, that uncovers the face of eternity! It was, doubtless, in order to increase the serious sense of these things, and not in the minds of the vulgar only, that the wisdom of our forefathers did not disdain to appoint even several minute circumstances of this solemnity. For these also, by means of the eye or ear, may more deeply affect the heart; and when viewed in this light, trumpets, staves, apparel, are no longer trifling or insignificant, but subservient in their kind and degree, to the most valuable ends of society.

2. But as awful as this solemnity is, one far more awful is at hand. For yet a little while, and "we shall all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ." "For as I live," saith the Lord, "every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." And in that day, "every one of us shall give account to God."

3. Had all men a deep sense of this, how effectually would it secure the interests of society! For what more forcible motive can be conceived to the practice of genuine morality; to a steady pursuit of solid virtue; and uniform walking in justice, mercy, and truth? What could strengthen our hands in all that is good, and deter us from all evil, like a strong conviction of this, the Judge standeth at the door and we are shortly to stand before him?

4. It may not therefore, be improper, or unsuitable to the design of the present assembly, to consider.

1. The chief circumstances which will precede our standing before the judgment-seat of Christ.

2. The judgment itself; and,

3. A few of the circumstances, which will follow it.

1. Let us in the first place, consider the chief circumstances which precede our standing before the judgment-seat of Christ.

And 1st.* "God will shew signs in the earth heathenish;" particularly he will "arise to shake terribly the earth. The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage. There shall be earthquakes," (not in divers only, but "in all places;" not one only, or a few, but in every part of the habitable world; even "such as were not, since men were upon the earth, so mighty earthquakes and so great." In one of these, "every island shall flee away, and the mountains will not be found." Mean time all the waters of the terraqueous globe will feel the violence of those convulsions; "the sea and waves roaring," with such an agitation as had never been known before, since the hour that, "the foundations of the great deep were broken up," to destroy the earth which then stood out of the water and in the water. The air will be all storm and tempest, full of dark & vapour and pillars of smoke, resounding with thunder from pole to pole, and torn with ten thousand

lightnings. But the continuation will not stop in the region of the air; "the powers of heaven shall be shaken. There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars;" those fixt, as well as those that move round them. "The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. The stars shall withdraw their shining," yea, and "fall from heaven," being thrown out of their own orbits; and then shall be heard the universal shout, "from all the companies of heaven, followed by the voice of the Archangel, proclaiming the approach of the Son of God and man; and the trumpet of God, sounding an alarm to all that sleep in the dust of the earth. In consequence of this, all the graves shall open, and the bodies of men arise. "The sea shall give up the dead which are therein," and every one shall arise with his own body; his own in substance, although so changed in its properties, as we cannot conceive. "For this corruptible will (then) put on incorruption, and this mortal put on immortality." Yea death and *hades*, the invisible world, shall deliver up the dead that are in them: so that all who ever lived and died since God created man, shall be raised incorruptible and immortal.

2. At the same time the Son of Man shall send forth his angels over all the earth. "And they shall gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." And the Lord himself shall "come with clouds, in his own glory, and the glory of his father, with ten thousand of his saints, even myriads of angels, and they shall sit upon the throne of his glory. And before him shall be gathered all nations, and he shall separate them one from another, and shall set the sheep (the good) on his right hand, and the goats (the wicked) upon the left. Concerning this general assembly it is that the beloved disciple speaks thus: "I saw the dead (all that had been), small and great, stand before God. And the books were opened (a figurative expression, plainly referring to the manner of proceeding among men), and the dead were judged out of those things that were written in the books according to their works."

3. These are the chief circumstances which are recorded in the Oracles of God, as preceding the general judgment. We are, secondly, to consider the judgment itself, so far as it hath pleased God to reveal it.

1. The person by whom God will judge the world is his only begotten Son, whose "goings forth are from everlasting, who is God over all, blessed for ever." Unto him, being "the out-beaming of his Father's glory, the express image of his person," the Father "hath committed all judgment, because he is the Son of man;" because, though he was "in the form of God, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God, yet he emptied himself, taking upon him the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men," Yea, because, "being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself (yet farther) becoming obedient to death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God hath highly exalted him," as man, to try the children of men; to be the "Judge both of the quick and the dead; both of those that shall be found alive at his coming, and of those who were before gathered to their fathers.

2. The time termed by the Prophet, "The great and terrible day," is usually in Scripture stiled the *day of the Lord*. The space from the creation of man upon the earth to the end of all things, is the day of the souls of men; the time that is now passing over us is properly *our day*. When this is ended, the *day of the Lord* will begin. But who can say, how long it will continue? "With the Lord, one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." And from this very expression, some of

the ancient fathers draw that inference, that what is commonly called the *day of judgment*, would be indeed a thousand years. And it seems they did not go beyond the truth; nay, probably they did not come up to it. For if we consider the number of persons who are to be judged, and of actions which are to be inquired into, it does not appear that a thousand years will suffice for the transactions of that day. So that it may not improbably comprise several thousands of years. But God shall reveal this also in its season.

3. With regard to the place where mankind will be judged, we have no explicit account in Scripture. An eminent writer (but not he alone; many have been of the same opinion) supposes it will be on earth, where the works were done, according to which they will be judged, and that God will, in order thereto employ the angels of his strength,

"To smooth and lengthen out the boundless space,
And spread an area for all human race."

But perhaps it is more agreeable to our Lord's own account of his coming in the clouds, to suppose it will be above the earth, if not "twice a planetary height." And this supposition is not a little favoured by what St. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, "The dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who remain alive, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air," 1 Thes. iv. 16, 17. So that it seems most probable, that the great white throne will be exalted high above the earth.

4. The persons to be judged, who can count, any more than the drops of rain, or the sands of the sea? "I beheld," saith saint John, "a great multitude which no man can number, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands." How immense then must be the total multitude, of all nations, and kindreds, and people and tongues? Of all that have sprung from the loins of Adam, since the world began, till time shall be no more! If we admit the common supposition, which seems no ways absurd, that the earth bears, at any one time, no less than eight hundred millions of living souls, men, women, and children: what a congregation must all these generations make, who have succeeded each other for seven thousand years!

"Great Nexax's world is ours, proud Canaan's host,
They all are here, and here they all are lost:
Their numbers swell to be discerned in vain,
Lost as a drop in the unbounded main."

Every man, every woman, every infant of days, that ever breathed the vital air, will then hear the voice of the Son of God, and start into life, and appear before him. And this seems to be the import of that expression, *the dead small and great*: all, universally; all, without exception; all, of every age, sex, or degree; all that ever lived and died, or underwent such a change as will be equivalent with death. For long before that day, the phantom of human greatness disappears, and sinks into nothing! Even in the moment of death, that vanishes away. Who is rich or great in the grave?

5. And every man shall there "give an account of his own works;" yea, a full and true account of all that he ever did while in the body, whether it was good or evil. O what a scene will then be disclosed in the sight of angels and men! Nor will all the actions alone of every child of man be then brought to open view, but all their words; seeing "every idle word which men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment," *Matth. xv. 33*. So that "by thy words," as well as works, "thou shalt be justified, or by thy words thou shalt be condemned," ver. 37. Will not God then bring to light every circumstance also that then appear in every word or action; and if not altered the nature yet lessened or increased the goodness or badness of them? And how easy is this to him, who is about our heart, and about our path, and speaketh out all our ways? We know "the darkness is no darkness to him, but the night shineth as the day."

* Acts ii. 19. † Luke xxi. 31. ‡ Rev. xvi. 20. § Luke xxi. 25. ¶ Joel ii. 30.

* Luke xxi. 25, 26. † Joel ii. 31. ‡ Joel iii. 15. § 1 Thes. iv. 15. ¶ Rev. xv. 13. † 1 Cor. xv. 53. ** Matth. xxiv. 31. †† Matth. xxv. 31, &c. †† Rev. xii. 12. †† Heb. i. 2. ††† John v. 22, 27. ††† Phil. ii. 6, 7. †††† 1 Pet. iii. 8.