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DIVINITY.

A SERMON,

Preached at the Assizes, Redford, March 10 1758:

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[CONCLUDED.]

3. We may, in the third place, consider a few of the circumstances which will follow the general judgment. And the first is the execution of the sentence pronounced on the evil and on the good. "These shall go away into eternal punishment, and the righteous into life eternal." It should be observed, it is the very same word which is used both in the former and the latter clause; it follows, that either the punishment lasts for ever, or the reward too will come to an end. No, never, unless God could come to an end, or his mercy and truth could fail. "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun, in the kingdom of their father, and shall drink of those rivers of pleasure which are at God's right hand for evermore." But here all description falls short; all human language fails! Only one who is caught up into the third heaven, can give a just conception of it. But even such an one cannot express what he hath seen; these things it is not possible for a man to utter.

The wicked, meantime, shall be turned into hell, even all the people who forgot God. They will be "punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power." They will be "cast into the lake of fire, burning with brimstone," originally "prepared for the devil and his angels: where they will gnaw their tongues for anguish and pain, they will curse God and look upward; there the dogs of hell—pride, malice, rage, horror, despair, continually devour them. "There they have no rest, day or night, but the smoke of their torment ascendeth for ever and ever. For their worm dieth not, and their fire is not quenched."

2. Then the heavens will be shrivelled up as a parchment scroll, & "flee from the face of him who sitteth on the throne, and there will be found no place for them." The very manner of their passing away is disclosed to us by the apostle Peter; "In the day of God, the heavens being on fire, shall be dissolved." The whole beautiful fabric will be overthrown by that raging element, the connexion of all its parts destroyed, and every atom torn asunder from the others. "The earth also, and the works that are therein, shall be burnt up." The enormous works of nature; the everlasting hills; mountains that have defied the rage of time, and stood unmoved so many thousands of years, will sink down in fiery ruin. How much less will the works of art, though of the most durable kind, the utmost efforts of human industry—tombs, pillars, triumphal arches, castles, pyramids, be able to withstand the flaming conqueror. All, all, will die, perish, vanish away, like a dream when one awaketh.

It has indeed been imagined by some great and good men, that as it requires that same Almighty Power to annihilate things as to create, to speak into nothing, or out of nothing; so no part of, no atom in the universe, will be totally or finally destroyed.

Rather, they suppose, that as the last operation of fire, which we have yet been able to observe, is to reduce into glass, what by a smaller force it had reduced to ashes; so in the day God hath ordained, the whole earth, if not the material heavens also, will undergo this change, after which the fire can have no farther power over them; and they believe this is intimated by that expression in the Revelation made to St. John: "Before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto Crystal."—We cannot now either affirm or deny this; but we shall know hereafter.

4. If it be inquired by the scoffers, the minute philosophers, how can these things be? Whence

should come such an immense quantity of fire as would consume the heavens, and the whole terraqueous globe? It is easy to answer, even from our own slight and superficial acquaintance with natural things, that there are abundant magazines of fire ready prepared, and treasured up against the day of the Lord. How soon may a comet, commissioned by him, travel down from the most distant parts of the universe! And were it to fix upon the earth in its return from the sun, (when it is some thousands of times hotter than a red hot cannon ball,) who does not see what must be the immediate consequence? But, not to ascend so high as the ethereal heavens, might not the same lightnings which give shine to the world, if commanded by the Lord of nature, give ruin and utter destruction? Or, to go no farther than the globe itself, who knows what huge reservoirs of liquid fire are contained in the bowels of the earth? Aetna, Hecla, Vesuvius, and all other volcanos that belch out flames and coals of fire, what are they, but so many proofs and mouths of those fiery furnaces? and at the same time, so many evidences that God hath in readiness wherewith to fulfil his word? Yea, were we to observe no more than the surface of the earth, and things which surround us on every side, it is most certain, (as a thousand experiments prove beyond all possibility of denial,) that we ourselves, our whole bodies are full of fire, as well as every thing round about us. Is it not easy to make this ethereal fire visible to the naked eye? and to produce thereby the very same effects on combustible matter, which are produced by sublunary fire? Needs there any more than for God to unloose that secret chain whereby this irresistible agent is now bound down, and lies quiescent in every particle of matter? and how soon would it tear the universal frame in pieces, and involve all in one common ruin?

5. There is one circumstance more which will follow the judgment, that deserves our serious consideration. "We look (says the Apostle,) according to his promise, for new heavens, and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." The promise stands in the prophesy of Isaiah; "Behold I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered;" so great shall the glory of the latter be. These St. John did behold in the visions of God: "I saw (saith he) a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away;" and only righteousness dwelt therein. Accordingly he adds, "And I heard a great voice from (the third) heaven, saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God." Of necessity, therefore, they will all be happy; "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying; neither shall there be any more pain. "There shall be no more curse; but they shall see his face;" shall have the nearest access to, and thence the highest resemblance of him. This is the strongest expression of Scripture to denote the most perfect happiness. "And his name shall be on their foreheads;" they shall be openly acknowledged as God's own property; and his glorious nature shall most visibly shine forth in them; "And there shall be no night there, and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light; and they shall reign for ever and ever."

IV. It remains only to apply the preceding considerations to all who are here before God. And are we not directly led so to do, by the present solemnity, which so naturally points us to that day, when the Lord will judge the world in righteousness? This, therefore, by reminding us of that more awful season, may furnish many lessons of instruction. A few of these I may be permitted

just to touch on. May God write them on all our hearts!

1. And first, how beautiful are the feet of those who are sent by the wise and gracious providence of God, to execute justice on earth, to defend the injured, and punish the wrong doer! Are they not the ministers of God to us for good, the grand supporters of the public tranquility, the patrons of innocence and virtue, the great security of all our temporal blessings? And does not every one of these represent, not only an earthly prince, but the Judge of the earth: Him whose "Name is written upon his thigh, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords!" O that all these sons of the right hand of the Most High may be holy as he is holy! Wise with the wisdom that sitteth by his throne, like him who is the eternal wisdom of the Father! No respecter of persons, as he is none; but rendering to every man according to his works; like him inflexibly, inexorably just, though pitiful and of tender mercy! So shall they be terrible indeed to them who do evil, as not bearing the sword in vain. So shall the laws of our land have their full use and due honour, and the throne of our king be still established in righteousness.

2. Ye truly honourable men, whom God and the king have commissioned in a lower degree to administer justice; may not ye be compared to those ministering spirits who attend the Judge coming in the clouds? May you like them, burn with love to God and man! May you love righteousness and hate iniquity! May ye all minister in your several spheres (such honour hath God given you also!) to them who shall be heirs of salvation, and to the glory of your great Sovereign! May ye remain the establishers of peace, the blessing and ornaments of your country, the protectors of a guilty land, the guardian angels of all who are round about you!

3. You, whose office it is to execute what is given you in charge by him before whom you stand, how nearly are you concerned to resemble those who stand before the face of the Son of Man? those servants of his who do his pleasure, and hearken to the voice of his words. Does it not import you to be as uncorrupt as they? to approve yourselves the servants of God? to do justly and love mercy; to do to all as ye would they should do to you? So shall that great Judge, under whose eye ye continually stand, say to you also, "Well done, good and faithful servants: enter ye into the joy of your Lord!"

4. Suffer me to add a few words to all of you who are at this day present before the Lord. Should not you bear it in your minds all the day long, that a more awful day is coming? A large Assembly this! but what is it to that which every eye will then behold—the general assembly of all the children of men that ever lived on the face of the whole earth! A few will stand at the judgment-seat this day, to be judged touching what shall be laid to their charge; and they are now reserved in prison, perhaps in chains, till they are brought forth to be tried and sentenced. But we shall all, I who speak and you who hear, "stand at the judgement-seat of Christ!" And we are now reserved on this earth, which is not our home; in this prison of flesh and blood, perhaps many of us in chains of darkness too, till we are ordered to be brought forth. Here a man is questioned concerning one or two facts, which he is supposed to have committed; there we are to give an account of all our works, from the rattle to the grave: of all our words, of all our desires and tempers, all the thoughts and intents of our hearts; of all the use we have made of our various talents, whether of mind, body, or fortune, till God send, "Give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward." In this court, it is possible some who are guilty may escape for want of evidence; but there is no want of evidence in that court. All men wish whom you had the most secret intercourse, who were privy to all your designs and actions, are ready before your face, &c.

* Rev. xx. 12. † 2 Peter iii. 12. ‡ Ver. 10. § Rev. iv. 16.

* 2 Pet. iii. 12. † Isaiah lv. 17. ‡ Rev. xxi. 1. § 2 Peter ver. 5. ¶ Rev. xxi. 4. ¶ Rev. xxii. 3.