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CONTENTS

OF THE

SIXTH VOLUME.

- I. Ruth the Moabitess, or the Power of True Religion. By the Rev. A. Alexander, D. D.
- II. Love to an unseen Saviour. By the Rev. A. Alexander, D. D.
- III. The Lord will give Grace and Glory. By the Rev. W. S. Plumer, D. D.
- IV. The Spiritual Office of the Deacon.
- V. On Backsliding.
- VI. The Duty of Family Religious Instruction. By the Rev. J. P. Carter.
- VII. The Light-House, or Jesus Christ the Light of the World.
- VIII. Soliloquy of an Injured Christian.
- IX. A Word of Counsel to Professors on Moral Honesty.
- X. Love not the World.
- XI. Sympathy with an Afflicted Christian.
- XII. How to use the Bible. By the Rev. W. S. Plumer, D. D.
- XIII. How Sinners are Accepted.
- XIV. On Union with Christ.
- XV. The Application of Redemption, or What is Effectual Calling? From Dr. Green's Lectures on the Shorter Catechism.
- XVI. On Brotherly Love. From James's Christian Professor.
- XVII. Come to Jesus. By Newman Hall, B. A.
- XVIII. It is I, or the Voice of Jesus in the Storm. By Newman Hall, B. A.
- XIX. What Presbyterians believe. By the Rev. A. G. Fairchild, D. D., author of the "Great Supper"
- XX. Plain Divinity or a brief Sketch of the Doctrines of Revelation. By James McEwen.
- XXI. The Young Convert Instructed.

RUTH THE MOABITRESS.

THE wisdom of God is often remarkably displayed in overruling the errors and sins of men so as to accomplish his own ends. Elimelech, a man of the tribe of Judah, and an inhabitant of Bethlehem, who lived in the time of the Judges, was induced by the existence or prospect of want, to emigrate from the Holy Land and settle in Moab, with his wife and two sons. The course which he pursued cannot be justified. He seems to have been a man in good circumstances, for his wife Naomi said on her return, "I went out full," and certainly his condition during the famine would not have been worse than that of many others who remained. But it was especially deserving of censure that he chose for his residence a country where the true God was not known, and where idolatry of the worst kind prevailed. The result answered to the rashness of his conduct. Death, from which he fled, overtook him in a strange land, where the usual helps and means of piety were wanting. His sons, as might have been anticipated, took wives from the daughters of Moab, by which their integrity must have been greatly endangered and their temptations increased, and by which their return to Canaan was rendered more difficult. Indeed, it was determined that they never should return, for they both died shortly, and without children.

By some means, also, the substance which Elimelech brought with him had wasted away in a foreign land, and now his own widow, and the widows of his two sons, were left poor as well as desolate. Parents often emigrate on account of some difficulties which beset them, or to increase their wealth, and imprudently take their families into places

where there are no Sabbaths observed, no sermons heard, no sacraments administered; and where their children grow up under the influence of society as corrupting as that of the Moabites, and form alliances with irreligious people, which prove their snare and vexation, if not their utter ruin. This is a frequent and deplorable folly, and such parents will have a heavy account to give for sacrificing the souls of their children for the sake of worldly advantages.

Naomi, hearing that plenty was restored in Israel, determined to return. Probably she never wished to leave her own land, and therefore, as soon as she had the opportunity, resolved to go back; for the very evil, to avoid which when distant, she had left home, had now come upon her, and made it necessary for her to throw herself upon the kindness of her own relations. She was evidently stricken with poverty, for she seems to have had neither servant nor assistant, except her daughters-in-law, and to have performed the journey on foot. "I went out full," said she to her old neighbours, "and the Lord hath brought me home again empty."

Her daughters-in-law appear to have lived with her, and the only difficulty of returning was, how to dispose of these young women, for they were greatly attached to her. However, she set off, accompanied by them, who went perhaps to aid her on the journey, until she should leave their borders; or perhaps determined to go with her all the way. She, however, unwilling that mere attachment to her should induce them to forego all their worldly prospects, begged them now to return to their mothers' houses, and prayed for a parting blessing on them: "The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that each of you may find rest in the house of her husband." Here a tender scene occurred between them. "She kissed them, and they lifted up their voice and wept; and they said, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people." But Naomi, though no doubt very willing to have them with her,

yet knowing that by such a step they would forsake all their earthly comforts, and not wishing that they should be sufferers on her account, used many arguments to persuade them to return to their friends. The effect of the discussion was different on the two persons, although they were both greatly distressed at the thought of parting with her, for "they lifted up their voice and wept," again; "and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and returned, but Ruth clave unto her. And she said, Behold, thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods; return thou after thy sister-in-law. And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." These last words, I have no doubt, furnish the true reason of Ruth's invincible resolution. Orpah probably loved her mother-in-law as tenderly as Ruth, but she was not weaned from her gods. This seems to be intimated in what Naomi says, "she is gone back unto her people and her gods." But Ruth, by the conversation and instructions of this pious mother in Israel, had been brought to the knowledge and love of the God of Israel. The same means are not equally effectual with all. No doubt they both heard the same truths; but one was taken and the other was left. Thus often two persons hear the same sermon, and beforehand were in much the same state of mind; but to one it proves an effectual call, to the other an empty, or almost a pleasing sound; to the one a savour of life, to the other a savour of death. Thus is the election of grace manifested—brothers are distinguished—sisters are separated. Ruth the Moabitess furnishes a striking example of the power of true religion, which will more manifestly appear by the following observations:

1. The power of true religion appears in making persons willing to abandon all idolatry, and all false notions and corrupt institutions of religion, in which they have been educated,

or to which by inclination they may have been attached. The mind of man is formed to be affected by religion. Man cannot exist in a state above that of the savage without religion. If he forsakes the true, it will be to adopt a false religion; and when the mind falls under the power of any superstition it is held in bondage by a force not easily resisted; and, indeed, the mind thus enslaved has no desire to be liberated until some foreign influence is experienced. It matters not how repugnant the superstitions of any religion are to common sense, or common decency, or even the natural affections and humanity; the conscience once enslaved bows to every deformed idol, worships the meanest reptile, and does violence to all the feelings of human nature without the least resistance. False religions, however, often draw their votaries by the lure of sensual pleasure, or infatuate them with the flatteries of spiritual pride. It is difficult for us to conceive how strongly they are bound who have been educated in a superstitious worship. Montesquieu remarks that men are much more attached to irrational superstitions than to a rational religion. The power which breaks these chains must indeed be mighty. Here, then, we see the triumphs of Christianity to be glorious. At the simple preaching of a few unlearned men thousands and tens of thousands abandoned those religions in which they had been brought up, and to which they were attached by all the principles of corrupt nature and inveterate habit. They threw away their dumb idols and turned to the service of the living God. And every instance of conversion from Paganism now shows the power of true religion, which is no other than the power of God.*

* See the wonderful power of the gospel in the conversion, civilization, and exaltation, of the people of the Sandwich Islands.

See the same among the besotted inhabitants of Southern Africa, and also among the aborigines of our own country. Here are facts which cannot be denied, and to what cause can they be attributed but to the power of God accompanying the gospel?

Ruth the Moabiteess was brought up an idolater, no doubt, but sovereign grace had touched her heart. By hearing she had been brought to believe, and under the influence of this new principle she turns her back on all the false deities which she had been accustomed to revere, and says to a pious Israelite, "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." But, in truth, all who ever turn to God are influenced by the same power. Though not open idolaters they have their idols. They are bound in fetters of iniquity. They are under the dominion of pride, of covetousness, of ambition, of envy, of intemperance, of the love of pleasure, of evil habits, of irregular passions, of craving appetites. They know not God, nor love him, however carefully educated. They are "by nature children of wrath even as others." If any have been converted unto God, every such person is a witness of the power of religion. The opposition in none is small. Every heart in its natural state is blind and dead, "at enmity with God, and not subject to his law;" and all those who have experienced this blessed change are ready to think and say that they, of all others, were farthest off from God, when he was pleased effectually to call them by his grace. They have also abandoned their false notions of religion: "Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

2. The power of religion is manifest in making persons willing to forsake their nearest and dearest earthly relatives, when their duty to their God and Saviour requires it. Those ties which bind men together are often so strong that they will lay down their lives for the preservation of those who are nearly related to them. But the love of Christ is stronger than all natural affections—stronger than the love of life itself. If our Lord had not known the power of his religion, he would never had laid down such terms of discipleship, as to forsake *father and mother, wife and children, houses and land, yea our own life for his sake*. But what he requires

he strengthens his disciples to perform. Who can tell how often the tender bonds of nature and friendship have been severed by an invincible resolution to follow Christ? This has often set the daughter against the mother, and the mother against the daughter. The religion of Christ has been the innocent occasion of sowing discord among the nearest relatives, not because it has any such tendency in itself, but because it powerfully and effectually calls poor sinners from among their friends, who, being dead in sin, are unwilling to let them go, and vainly strive by force to keep them back from following Christ. Thus parents have been found obstructing their children's way to heaven, and husbands that of their wives, by which the words of Christ are verified, "And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." Ruth left all her friends for the sake of God and his people. Her own mother was still living, but she would not be persuaded to stay back on her account. She had formed a new connection paramount to all natural bonds. She is now in heart one of the Lord's people, and with them she is determined to go. Whether her friends attempted to hinder her we are not informed. The probability, however, is, that they neglected no persuasion, spared no pains, to detain their amiable relative. But however they might allure or threaten, her language, we may suppose, was, "Hinder me not. The love of God and his people constraineth me. I cannot part with God and his service to gratify you." And even now it is often the case, that they who will be Christians in reality, have to leave their dearest friends behind them, and not unfrequently incur their displeasure. How this comes to pass in a Christian land may be difficult to understand, but that such is often the fact is indisputable. Parents are displeased with their children for engaging in the service of the great Creator, and husbands with their wives. But the grace of God enables them to triumph. They would gladly take all their friends with them to heaven; but if they

will not go, they must bid them farewell. And Christ will, even in this world, make up their loss "an hundred fold." In matters of salvation we must not follow our friends and forefathers, unless we are convinced they were right.

3. The power of true religion is again manifest in leading its votaries to choose the service of God, and the people of God, although the choice is in direct opposition to natural inclinations and worldly interests, and even though poverty and affliction should be the inevitable consequence. This is a good description of true religion. It consists in the deliberate choice of God as our God, and of his people as our people. They who make this choice have been divinely illuminated. Of all such it may truly be said, "flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto them, but their Father who is in heaven." But to those who have spiritual knowledge of God's glory, and some experience of the preciousness of a Saviour, crosses, poverty, and even persecution, appear to be trifling considerations, which have no effect in hindering them from continuing steadfast in adherence to the service of God. Ruth might have had good prospects of earthly comfort in Moab—but she did not regard these. Her mother-in-law, to whom for the sake of her God she attached herself, was very poor; and in the land of Israel the inheritance of her husband had been alienated, and she had no near relatives to redeem it. She returned therefore with the full prospect of pinching poverty before her. Hard labour, and the kindness of her old neighbours, seem to have been her only earthly resources; and yet Ruth, knowing all this, consents to cast in her lot with her, to share this poverty, and this labour; not merely consents, but will not be persuaded to relinquish the object. She chooses it with all her heart, determined to live and die with her friend. Her solemn asseveration when urged to return, was, "The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me." Thus Moses "refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing

rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season!" And thus every true Christian chooses Christ and his cross, well knowing that if there is no cross, there will be no crown. We must deliberately count the cost and come to a decision, that let others do what they may, as for us we will serve the Lord.

4. The power of true religion is remarkably manifest in this, that it enables its possessor to stand firm when others turn back. When religion flourishes, there will be some who profess to follow Christ, and yet *have no root in them*. The blessed Saviour most strikingly characterizes them by the seed sown on a rock, which, though it quickly sprung up, soon withered away. During Christ's ministry, many followed him for a season,—but they were led on by low and selfish motives. And when their carnal expectations were disappointed, they would proceed no further, but "went back from him." Thus it was in the apostolic churches; some of high professions and high standing fell away. But the foundation of God is immovable, for the "Lord knoweth them that are his." "They went out from us because they were not of us." These are sifting times. Satan is ready to suggest to the sincere disciple, "you may as well follow the example," and for a moment the pious soul may be ready to slide, while he sees those apostatising of whose piety he had entertained a much more exalted opinion than of his own. But there is in him an imperishable seed, and he cannot sin deliberately. No, *his heart is fixed*, and however many may *draw back unto perdition*, his resolution becomes stronger; like the oak shaken by the storm he takes firmer root. When Orpah took her last leave of Naomi, and turned her back on Canaan and on the God of Israel, and returned to her former people, and to her gods, it was a thing well adapted to shake the resolution of Ruth, for their circumstances were alike; but she does not hesitate, she seems more determined than ever to go forward—"Entreat

me not," is her language. True grace never shines brighter than in the day of trial. If all should forsake Christ within the reach of his acquaintance the true disciple will not.

5. The power of religion appears, not only in *resolving* and *choosing*, but more especially in *acting* and *enduring*. Ruth goes to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law. The whole town is moved on their arrival, "And they said, Is this Naomi?" And she said, "Call me not Naomi, (which signifies *pleasant*) but call me Mara, (which signifies *bitter*) for the Almighty hath dealt bitterly with me." Ruth is now in a strange land, and her mother-in-law being old, the burden of labour falls on her. The poor in Israel had a right by the law to the scattered stalks which the reapers left, and to every handful which they dropped, and to any sheaf which they forgot, and to what grew in the corners of the field. The poverty of these two widows is further evident, from the circumstance of Ruth's going out to glean after the reapers, from day to day. But she made no complaint. She cheerfully performed her duty, and patiently submitted to these humiliating circumstances.

True religion shows its power when it produces true contentment in indigent circumstances, especially if those who exhibit it have seen more prosperous days. Pride is clamorous, and unbelief discontented and desponding, but godliness is contented with food and raiment, and thankful for the very crumbs which others despise.

There is scarcely any situation in which piety appears more charming, than when exhibited in humble, obscure circumstances, cheerful, contented, and industrious. If such piety should be scorned by proud men, there is one who regards it with complacency, and often delights to exalt the humble. Jesus himself set the example of a life of poverty, and he will not be unmindful of those who walk in his steps, and occupy the same station which he voluntarily assumed, for he had no place to lay his head, and condescended to

subsist on the bounty of the women of Galilee, who ministered unto him.

1. The first application of this subject will be to the young. Be decided—be resolute. Determine like Mary to make choice of the one thing needful; and like Ruth, that God shall be your God, and his people your people. Especially to young women—endeavour to become truly pious and to form connections with pious people. Be willing to leave all for Christ. Venture to trust him, and he will compensate.

2. The next application will be to the poor, and especially to poor widows in reduced circumstances. Let such trust in the Lord and do good. Let them be incessant in prayer, night and day, for the importunity of such will prevail. Let them learn how to be abased and to be in want, and to bear the reverses of fortune with cheerful submission and contentment. God is honoured, and is pleased with the exercise of trust, submission and contentment.

3. God often grants great and unexpected relief to his suffering poor. He raises up friends who are able to help them, and sometimes he advances the pious from a low condition to great honour and affluence. Ruth, though obliged to glean in the field after the reapers for a scanty subsistence, was destined to fill a higher station, for God had prepared for her a husband, a rich and honourable man. And she became the ancestor of David and Solomon, and all the kings of Israel, and what was an infinitely greater honour, of the Messiah, “the desire of all nations.”

4. We see the encouragement which pious females have to be constant and faithful in their exertions to do good to their relations, who may be ignorant of God and negligent of their salvation. Their instructions may not take effect on all, but if they can be the means of converting one soul, how great the reward!