

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

LED

IN UNKNOWN WAYS:

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SABBATH EVENING, MAY 29, 1842,

IN THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

RICHMOND, VA.,

BY REV. ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER, D. D.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

RICHMOND:
J. B. MARTIN & CO., PRINTERS,
Exchange Printing-Office.
1842.

SERMON.

ISAIAH xlii. 16: And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them."

The person who speaks, in this place, is **JEHOVAH**, whom the Prophet describes in strains of true sublimity. "Thus saith God the **LORD**, He that created the heavens, and stretched them out: He that spread forth the earth, and that which came out of it: He that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein. I am **JEHOVAH** that is my name, and my glory will I not give to another, nor my praise to graven images."

In the whole of the former part of this chapter, the character of the Messiah and his rich endowments, are described and predicted. And in the words of our text, Jehovah speaks of his chosen people, whom he hath determined to bring to **Mount Zion**, when the throne and kingdom of Messiah is established forever. "And I will bring the blind," &c. They are called "blind," because in their state of alienation, they know nothing spiritually of the true God, nor of the way of return to **Mount Zion**. Their condition is often represented by that of Israel in captivity, in a foreign land, who are entirely ignorant of the way in which they can be released, or of the pathway by which they may return to **Mount Zion**. Spiritual blindness hangs heavy on the eyes of all the true Israel, in their natural state. They are "darkness"—they are "children of wrath even as others."

But Jehovah promises to lead his blind people in the right way to **Zion**.

Jerusalem and **Zion** were the established types of the true spiritual church of God; and the way along which they were conducted, in their return from **Babylon**, or any foreign land of captivity, will represent the way of salvation. Of this

way, God's own chosen people are entirely ignorant, until the are led into it by the teaching of the Word and Spirit of the Lord. And they are not merely ignorant of this way, but have taken up exceedingly erroneous conceptions of it. The people of God, in their unregenerate state, are involved in the same darkness which enshrouds the minds of others; and when effectually called, are often found wandering in devious paths, at the remotest distance from the right way.

But in Scripture, "darkness" is not only the emblem of ignorance and error, but of misery also. The place of future misery, is always represented as a place of extreme darkness; and the same figure is often employed to set forth the miseries of this mortal life. And, truly, man in his natural state, is subject to all that this expressive emblem imports. He feels a thousand things which he can neither remove nor mitigate: and the burden of his misery increases with his years. Often, too, such reflections and apprehensions enter his mind, as convince him that the thousandth part of the woe to which he is heir, is not yet felt. He dreads the arrival of that day which will fully make known to him how miserable he is. Against these approaching and accumulating evils, he is acquainted with no better refuge than to shut his eyes and refuse to look the danger in the face; as some silly birds are said to do when closely pursued.

But by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, this darkness is turned into light. The sun of righteousness arises upon the long benighted soul; and the eye which never saw before, is opened to look upon "a new heaven and a new earth." The darkness disappears, and the dawn of a heavenly day is experienced. "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away, behold all things are become new."

But JEHOVAH not only promises to make darkness light before them, but "crooked things straight." The ways of iniquity are called "crooked," because they are deviations from the perfect rule of God's law, which is represented by a straight line. And they may be so called, because of their inconstancy and inconsistency. The sinner first pursues one forbidden object, then another. Continual change seems to be the com-

mon lot of transgressors. In childhood, youth, manhood, old age, different objects are pursued. There is a perpetual turning from one pursuit to another ; yet every path in which he goes is "crooked." And his ways are also inconsistent. There is no harmony in sin. One strong passion impels the sinner in one direction ; then another urges him in a different course ; and sometimes the one, and sometimes the other, gaining a governing influence over the man, his ways are rendered "crooked." As a ship without rudder or compass, driven by fierce winds, pursues no steady course ; so sinners are driven by every gale, and pursue every course but the right one. But from these crooked paths the sheep of Christ shall be reclaimed, and shall "make straight paths to their feet." They are made to hear the Shepherd's voice, and follow Him, and shall wander no more ; but be led in the highway, which will conduct them through green pastures, and by pleasant streams, to Mount Zion, where, collected in the peaceful fold, they "shall go no more out." And, finally, **JEHOVAH** promises that he "will not forsake them." This last promise is essential to their comfort ; for if the Great Shepherd should only bring the wandering sheep into the right way, and then forsake them, soon would they be found fatally straying, and would inevitably be lost. Or, after leading them along the right way for years, if He, at the last stage of the pilgrimage, should leave his redeemed saints to themselves, the consequence would be, that not one of them would be able to reach the heavenly Jerusalem. So true is that saying of **JESUS**, "without me ye can do nothing." But our covenant-keeping **JEHOVAH** pledges his truth, and faithfulness, to his people. He says, "These things will I do unto them, and **NOT FORSAKE THEM.**" Let this sweet promise be as a cordial to our desponding hearts. It is a promise often repeated, as being much needed, for the comfort of God's people. He solemnly declares, "**I WILL NEVER LEAVE THEE NOR FORSAKE THEE.**" But lest our timidity and unbelief should suggest that there is still no security, because, we may forsake God after all our experience of his love ; to render assurance doubly sure, He says, "I will not turn away from them to do

them good ; but I will put my fear into their hearts, that **THEY SHALL NOT DEPART FROM ME.**"

Having given a general exposition of the text, my object in the remainder of the discourse will be, to shew, that from the beginning to the end of their pilgrimage, God leads his people in a way, which, previous to experience, they knew not.

This truth I will endeavor to illustrate, by the induction of a number of particulars, connected with the leadings of the Spirit and providence of God.

All the acts and operations of the Almighty, in the world of nature, as well as grace, are inscrutable. "There is none by searching can find out God." "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but can'st not tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth, so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

But to speak of the mysteriousness of these divine operations in nature, providence, or grace, is not the object now in view. The nature of the Christian's experience is the subject which will be presented for your consideration.

1. The true nature of conviction of sin, is a thing of which the "called of God," have no distinct knowledge, prior to experience.

There is, no doubt, a great diversity in the exercises and circumstances of souls under conviction. Some are agitated with awful terror, while others are gently led to a view of the aberrations of their hearts and lives from the law of God. But in all that is essential to conviction, there is a precise similarity in the experience of all Christians. The end attained in every case is the same, though the steps, by which it is arrived at, may be exceedingly different.

Every man who is brought under the convictions of the Spirit—for all true conviction is his work—is made serious, and brought to a solemn consideration of his ways. Serious consideration, therefore, may be said, always, to be the first step in a religious life. The multitude are destroyed for want of this. They cannot be persuaded to lay aside their frivolity, and their worldly cares ; to **CONSIDER** what they are ; and whither they are going. But the first touch of divine influ-

ence on the mind, renders the hitherto careless soul deeply serious. An awakened attention to divine things is experienced. The man begins to hear with other ears, to see with other eyes, and to entertain other thoughts and feelings, than he was wont to do. The past, the present, and the future, engage his attention. He asks himself, "What am I? whither am I tending? What have I been doing all my life? and what are my prospects beyond the grave?" Though accustomed to hear the word all his life, it now appears like a new thing—like a message from God to himself. And he can hardly be persuaded, that the preacher has not undergone a great change; or has learned to preach new doctrines; for the truths which now rivet his attention, he never understood; nor did they before make any impression, more than momentary, on his mind. The awakened soul is often ready to exclaim, "Surely I never heard these awfully solemn, and highly interesting truths before, or I should have been affected by them." But, not only the word preached, but read, appears new. He takes down from the shelf, the long neglected Bible, which was kept in the house more for the sake of decency, than for use; and shaking off the dust of years, he opens the sacred volume; and whilst he reads, he holds up a faithful mirror, which exhibits to him his own moral features. Here he sees the evil of his past life reflected in a clear, strong light, upon his conscience. Sometimes the truth is so pungent, and penetrates the feelings, with so much pain, that he is tempted to lay aside the book. The more the awakened sinner reads, meditates, and hears of the truth, the more uneasy he becomes, and the more dangerous does his condition appear to be. At first, gross sins, or palpable neglects of duty, engage his attention, and affect his conscience; and these defects he attempts to reform; but he soon is made to see, that not merely a few, but all his actions have been "evil, and only evil, and that continually, from his youth up." And as the light of conviction increases, he becomes conscious that the fountain from which these streams issue, is within him, and is entirely polluted—that "the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked"—and is continually

sending forth streams of wicked thoughts and desires. To reform the life, where habits of iniquity have become inveterate, is no easy task; but who can regulate the thoughts, desires, and volitions? Who can command the affections to fix them with due intensity on their proper objects? Who is found able to purify the inner man, and restrain all wanderings of thought and desire? Alas! boasted ability turns out to be a mere illusion of an unenlightened mind; and yet the sinner, under conviction, excuses not himself on account of his inability. He is deeply conscious that it is his own fault. It is the very core of his iniquity. He feels most sensibly that he ought to love God, but his wicked heart refuses. He is convinced that it is his duty to come believingly and penitently to Christ for grace and salvation, but his obstinate will is reluctant; and his heart remains callous and ungrateful under all the representations of God's wonderful love, and Christ's tender compassion, which induced him to endure the cross and despise the shame. This conviction of deep-rooted depravity, and helplessness, is a state of mind the most distressing that can well be conceived. The convinced sinner feels as if he could take vengeance on himself, for having acted so shamefully, so foolishly, so wickedly. He groans under the burden of his iniquity, like a slave under hard bondage, and under the lash of a severe task-master. But the sinner thus convinced, does not feel tenderly; nor is he sensible of pungent pain. This want of tender feelings, and sensible heart-breaking, is the very thing which gives him most distress. Such an one will often be heard to exclaim, "I have no conviction of sin—no conviction bearing any proportion to my enormous transgressions—I am quite stupid and insensible—Surely, there never was lodged in any human breast, a heart so impenetrably hard. Nothing moves or softens it in the least. It remains equally unaffected with the joys of paradise, and the pains of hell; even the bitter agonies of Christ in the garden, and on the cross, produce not tender relentings." Another unexpected conviction which is commonly experienced, is, that the person is growing worse instead of better. Some have strenuously maintained

that this is the truth of the fact ; concerning which we will not now dispute : that which is asserted is, that to the apprehension of the convinced sinner, it seems to be a truth, that he is growing worse and worse ; but this can be accounted for from the mere increase of light. Just as a man placed in a dark and loathsome dungeon, if he should have the light let in gradually, would see the filth increasing on every side : so the heart when the covering which conceals its turpitude is withdrawn appears to become more and more vile and abominable.

Now, say to one under these convictions, if you feel nothing as you say, why do you yet complain ? What mean these deep fetched sighs, and these abundant tears ? Why are you not contented and at ease, as the multitude are, and as you once were ? To such questions and expostulations, he would reply, " I am distressed because I feel so little distress—I am grieved, because I cannot feel grief—My most earnest desire is, to fall under deep conviction of sin—O, if I could feel my heart sensibly pained, and tenderly affected, I should be in a comfortable state compared with that which I experience." Now this is real conviction ; and it is one of those paths into which the blind are led, of which they knew nothing prior to experience. Before this, indeed, they may have formed a conception of the feelings of a convinced sinner—they imagined that by some flash, like lightning—by some awful stroke, by which their souls should be stunned, as by the thunder bolt, and shaken to the very centre, and melted as the ice by the rapid heat, conviction of sin would be effected. And very commonly the awakened person strives to produce conviction of the kind conceived, by bringing up to view the most frightful images, by reading the most awful and affecting descriptions of death, judgment, and hell ; and frequents that preaching which denounces with the most awful severity the wrath of the Almighty ; still hoping and praying to be overwhelmed with such feelings as have been described. But if the convinced sinner could realize all the feelings of which he has conceived, and for which he longs and prays, the end of conviction would not be at all answered ; for the end of

conviction is to lead the sinner out of himself—to destroy all self confidence and self-complacency; to show him how evil and how helpless is his condition. But if he could experience such feelings as he wishes, he would think well of himself, as being in the frame in which he ought to be. The views and feelings produced by the conviction of the Spirit, lead the soul to despair—to despair of ever saving itself. Thus self-righteousness, which is so deeply inherent in every man, is cut up by the root. “I through the law, am dead to the law,” says Paul, “that I might live unto God.” Again, “I was alive without the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.” Thus, “the law is a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.” It is an unexpected thing, of which the blind could form no practical conception, that the nearer the sinner approaches towards deliverance, the farther he recedes from hope and comfort, in his own apprehension. That is found true, therefore, in spiritual things, which has been remarked in natural things; that the darkest hour is that which immediately precedes the dawning of the day. When the convinced sinner is brought to the point of fully condemning himself, acknowledging that the sentence which dooms him to misery is perfectly just, then is the time of God’s mercy; so that, in the moment when it expected nothing but death, salvation is found. Thus the richness and freeness of the grace of the gospel are magnified, and the saved sinner is prepared to give all the glory to God, and ever afterwards to confess that he deserved nothing but to be cast off forever.

2. Conversion, also, turns out, in experience, to be a very different thing from what was anticipated. The awakened sinner, having heard of persons being translated from darkness “to the marvellous light of the gospel;” and having, perhaps, heard or read of some remarkable conversions, expects to be brought through the new birth in a way perfectly similar to these extraordinary cases, which, however, are very imperfectly understood. They, therefore, endeavor to place themselves in the same circumstances as those in which others were when they found peace with God. And they continue to look and wait for some sudden and almost mi-

raculous change; and they often endeavor, beforehand, to imagine what their views and exercises will be when conversion shall take place. These expectations are never realized, and are always erroneous; for when this blessed change actually occurs, the light is commonly like that of the dawn; obscure at first, but shining more and more to the perfect day. And instead of the views being miraculous or strange, they appear to arise in the mind like other thoughts and feelings. The only marked difference is not in the manner of the views, but in the spiritual beauty and glory of the objects contemplated. Instead of a sudden and violent agitation, there is a sweet exercise of the mind in directing its thoughts to Christ, and to the glorious perfections of God, as exhibited in his works and in his word. The soul reposes with delightful complacency on the truths to which its attention happens to turn; and besides the light afforded by the Spirit shining on the word, there is often a suggestion of precious scripture promises, or other evangelical truths, suited to the condition and wants of the new born soul. These sometimes come dropping into the mind, successively, as precious morsels on which it feeds. As the recently born infant instinctively thirsts for the nutriment which the mother's milk supplies; so new born souls as naturally thirst for the sincere, or pure, milk of the word, that they may grow thereby.

One circumstance, which will appear strange to those who have not learned it by experience, is, that in the first exercises of the new convert, there is frequently no thought or question, whether these are the genuine exercises of one born of God. There is no room, at present, for such reflex acts; the mind is completely occupied with the objects of its contemplation; and often, when these views are clear, forgets itself, and is absorbed in beholding the glory of God in the Mediator; or the wonders of redemption as set forth in the gospel; or the beauty of holiness, as manifested both in the law and the gospel. Thus often Christ is received, true faith is exercised, the heart is humbled in penitence, and exercises sincere love to God, without knowing or even asking what

the nature of these exercises may be. And these views and exercises come on so gradually, in many cases, that their origin cannot be traced. So far is it, then, from being true, that every regenerated man knows the precise time of his renovation; that it is a thing exceedingly difficult to be ascertained. It is not difficult to know, that on such a day our minds were thus and thus exercised; but whether those were the exercises of genuine piety, is quite another question; or whether, if they were, they were the first of this kind, is still a different question. Some who speak confidently of the day and hour of their conversion, never were truly converted, but were imposed on by a mere counterfeit. Others who have the same confidence of knowing the precise time of their conversion—though true Christians, are mistaken as to that matter. They were enabled obscurely to view the truth, and feebly to believe, long before the period at which they date their conversion. And some attain a full assurance of hope, who do not pretend to know when their spiritual life commenced. All they can say is, with the blind man in the gospel, "One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see." As in the dawning of the natural day, we often can know assuredly that the day has commenced, because the objects around us are distinctly visible, when we could not tell the precise moment when the day dawned. Sincere souls, which have the scriptural evidences of piety, need not be distressed because of their ignorance of the day and hour of their vivification. But let not those who have never experienced any change, take comfort from this, as though it were possible that they also may have experienced regeneration while they knew nothing about it. In regard to such we may truly say, you cannot be converted without knowing something about it; ye cannot be the subjects of a series of new views and feelings, without being conscious of these spiritual exercises.

The soul, under the leadings of the Spirit, is often brought near to Christ when it apprehended he was far off. Their first intercourse with the Redeemer, is like that of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. Their eyes are, as it were, holden, that they do not know, in very deed, that the person

with whom they are conversing is Christ. But afterwards, like those disciples, they can say, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he opened to us the scriptures, and while he communed with us by the way." In such a conference, under such a sermon, while meditating on such a passage of scripture, did we not feel our minds to be elevated, warmed, enlightened? What could this be but the risen Saviour whispering his love into our hearts? But when he thus comes near when we are not aware of his being present, he will not keep the veil long before our eyes, which conceals his true features. He will come nearer still; and in "the breaking of bread," or in some other divine ordinance, he will stand revealed before our eyes, and we shall recognise him as our FRIEND and our BELOVED. And if it should be but a glimpse which he affords us, before he vanishes from our wistful sight; yet even this transient view will be sufficient to convince us, that "He is altogether lovely, the chief among ten thousand."

3. God leads his once blind but chosen people in the way which they know not, as it relates to the means and progress of their sanctification. All the children of God are inspired with an ardent love of holiness; and they are much delighted with the thought of having the power of sin destroyed; and it is often the burden of their prayer, that the very principles of iniquity within them may be eradicated. But little do they know or consider, how this is to be effected. They have no idea how slow and painful will be the process of mortifying the old man with his deeds which are corrupt. Upon their first conversion, they were often filled with comfort, rejoiced in hope, and found sweet satisfaction in attendance on divine ordinances. And they entertained the fond hope that it would always be thus, or better. They were like little children dandled on the parents knee, and not exposed to hardship or required to labor. But soon the scene changes. Darkness hangs over them; difficulties perplex; conflicts discourage them. Inbred corruption begins to stir sensibly, and evils appear which were not believed to exist. The power of temptation is felt; and the christian finds it to

be literally true, that he is engaged in a warfare. Pride rises and attempts to regain its former mastery ; passion swells and becomes impetuous ; the baits which the world presents to avarice, ambition, and the love of ease and pleasure, are found to be far more fascinating than was expected. The pleasures of religion too have subsided, and the lively relish for the service of God is abated. Prayer, meditation, and self-examination, once so delightful, now too often are a burden, and are therefore frequently neglected, or hastily and carelessly performed. A distressing reluctance to spiritual duties is experienced ; and all the pleasures of religion have vanished. Now the Christian may be compared to a weaned child, from which the mother turns herself away, and refuses it its wonted refreshment ; or perhaps is better represented by the child sent off from his father's roof, to shift for himself, in a wide and unfriendly world. And to increase his affliction external troubles often combine with those which are inward and spiritual. Malignant enemies rise up to annoy and persecute ; friends die, or become unkind ; ministers, on whom perhaps too much dependence was placed, are removed ; zealous professors turn back to the world ; religion is wounded in the house of her friends ; truth lies bleeding in the streets ; family comforts decay ; and poverty and debt succeed to affluence and comfort ; and to crown all Satan comes forth with a frightful roar ; and endeavours to worry whom he knows he cannot devour. Now, indeed, the feeble, timid soul is pressed beyond expression. It groans "being burdened ;" almost wishes for death ; not because conscious of preparation for a better world, but as a release from trouble. Sometimes, under these afflictions, especially when bodily health is impaired, or a good name blasted by the tongue of calumny, the soul grows pettish and impatient ; and the feelings, if expressed in words, would be something like this, "Why am I thus ? Why am I left to buffet the storm without help or refuge ? Why am I abandoned of God, and made a reproach to my enemies ?" who daily say, scoffingly, "Where is now your God, in whom you trusted ? There is no help for him in God." Or more commonly.

the afflicted and heavy laden soul, sinks into despondency, and concludes that it never has been in the right way ; that surely, if it was one of God's dear children, it would never be thus forsaken and left to sink in the horrible pit and miry clay. Surely, it exclaims, this cannot be the way in which Jehovah leads his own dear children, whom he hath redeemed. And were it not that now and then there is "a little reviving" in the midst of these years of affliction ; unless, after long intervals of thick darkness, some rays of cheerful light gilded the dark scene, and some drops of refreshment fell into the cup of sorrow, it would be overwhelmed with a burden which human strength is unable to bear.

But how is this the way of sanctification ? It looks more like the path of declension and apostacy. But remember, that before we can ascend we must descend ; before we can be filled with the divine fullness, we must be emptied of self and sin. To bring us to feel our weakness and entire dependence, we must be left to try our own strength ; and to convince us of the evil of sin, we must, for a season, be left to struggle against its power ; and to learn to know the "depths of Satan." To cure us of the undue love of the world, the world must be "crucified to us, and we to it ;" and to preserve us from idolizing the creature, the objects of our too fond affections must be snatched away from our embrace. But, doubtless, this is a way which the people of God did not know, until they were led into it. Even when forewarned by experienced Christians, of the difficulties and dangers of the way, they heeded them not ; as either not understanding what they meant, or as not giving full credit to their testimony.

4. Another thing in the dispensations of God to his people which, prior to experience, they never distinctly understood, and which cannot easily be explained, is his leaving them for a season to backslide ; and then recovering them by the exercise of the same sovereign grace which first brought them into the path of life.

The young convert cannot believe that he shall ever grow cold and decline in piety, much less that he may be left to

commit some grievous sin, to the sore wounding of his conscience, and perhaps the dishonor of his profession. But, notwithstanding his strong confidence, which leads him to boast "my mountain standeth strong, I shall never be moved," it will not be a new thing on the earth, or in the church, if he should add one more beacon to the many with which this coast is already strewed, to be a warning to those who come after him. Backsliding begins in the heart, shows itself in the closet first, and soon diffuses its paralyzing influence through the life. The backslider for a while may preserve a fair exterior; his public devotions may appear to be punctual and fervent, while in secret he is cold and careless. The Christian while in this declining state, differs so little from the hypocrite, that it is not easy to discriminate between them. Indeed, to the man himself, this is commonly impossible, and happily so; for when love grows cold, fear must be brought to operate on the natural feelings. If backsliders possess assurance, it is the assurance of delusion; while thus departing from God, they cannot possess satisfactory evidence of his favor, for the exercise of grace is its evidence. The symptoms of backsliding are evident enough. The want of lively faith, and love, and penitence, is the root of the evil. The reality, beauty, and importance of eternal things, are out of view; the world, therefore, rises in magnitude, and seems clothed with new interest, and its objects appear more desirable. Seriousness of spirit is now succeeded by levity, and that tenderness of conscience which shuddered at the mere "appearance of evil," by stupidity. The spirit of the world gains too great ascendancy; and conformity to the corrupt maxims and customs of the world becomes manifest. Even lawful objects are sought with too much ardor, and the too anxious desire to be rich has often entangled the souls of professors in many hurtful snares from which some are never extricated, but their souls are finally pierced through with many sorrows, and drowned in perdition.

When backsliding once begins, there is no knowing how far the declining Christian may depart from God. It cannot be a matter of much surprise, therefore, that in an evil hour,

and under the power of temptation, some insidious lust should prevail against him, and should carry him into captivity. Indeed, such is the frailty of the best men, that there is no security for their not falling into gross sins, but in the conservative grace of God. And when Christians begin to backslide they never recover themselves, and return by their own efforts; but by the kind interposition of their faithful Shepherd, whose love to his sheep leads him to leave the ninety and nine and to go into the wilderness to reclaim one straying lamb. He makes his voice to be heard and recognized. If the common warnings of the word, and gentle suggestions of the Spirit have been neglected, or resisted, it is usual with him to apply the rod. Providence is made to co-operate powerfully with grace; or rather is made a part of that system of gracious means, which God makes use of to preserve and reclaim his erring people. And in the corrective dispensations of Providence, there can often be remarked a connexion between our sin and God's chastisement. Often the objects which have been the occasion of our sin, are some how made the instruments of our punishment; or in some way and by some association observed by us, God points as with a finger, by his dispensations of affliction, to sins long since committed and perhaps almost forgotten. The riches which were too eagerly sought, "make to themselves wings and fly away," as the eagle to heaven, or those for whom these riches were so painfully accumulated, are taken away. If we make an idol of any creature, God will often judge it best to remove the stumbling block and make room for himself in our affections. Our heavenly Father knows how to direct the rod so as to produce the desired effect. He knows our frame, and can pierce the point of sensibility and thus rouse us from our apathy, or from our dreams of worldly pleasure and ambition. The backslider is now arrested in his downward course, is brought to pause and consider his ways. He now sees how far he has departed from the right path. He is convinced of his folly and sin, in forsaking "the fountain of living waters, and hewing out broken cisterns which can hold no water." The convictions of sin in the

case of the backslider, are often attended with keener compunction and anguish, than were experienced under his first awakening. Sometimes he almost despairs of mercy ; or if he dares to cherish a trembling hope of acceptance ; yet he expects no more kind and gracious dealings from his heavenly Father. He calculates, like the returning prodigal, to be placed on the footing of "a hired servant," rather than that of a son. But here again he is led by a path which he knew not ; for his God not only "heals his backsliding," but graciously forgives all his aggravated sins ; receives him as a child, without upbraiding ; draws him with loving cords, even the bands of a man, and says "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for mine anger is turned away from him."

This abounding of free grace and pardoning mercy to backsliding believers, is one of the most wonderful things in the way in which God leads his blind people. When they were looking for nothing but wrath, behold he shows his reconciled face, and manifests his pardoning mercy with all the tenderness of a kind father. It is by such dispensations of love and mercy, that God proves to us how superior He is to all our highest conceptions ; that He is God, and not man, is the reason why his people are not consumed. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

It should not be inferred from what has been said, that God leads all his people in precisely the same paths ; for while there is generally a similarity, there is a particular diversity. The case of every Christian has probably something peculiar in it ; both as it relates to the work of grace within him, and to the dispensations of Providence without him. And there are some individuals who are led in a way remarkably different from the common paths of the flock. They are conducted through the world in a gentle, peaceful course ; exposed but little to the fierce blasts of adversity with which others are assailed and almost overwhelmed ; and seem to be pe-

served from those terrific conflicts, and satanic temptations, which others are called to endure. While to others the path is hedged up and full of difficulties throughout. But often, while the first stages of the pilgrimage are smooth, the latter may be rough and painful, or the reverse. During a long season of prosperity the store house of afflictions is filling up ready to be poured forth at a future day. Indeed, according to the order of natural events, it must be so ; for if all the members of a large family are, for many years, spared, there are only so many more marks for the arrows of future adversity ; for all these are subject to various misfortunes, and all these must die, sooner or later, as well as others. Those, therefore, who seem for a while to be exempt from adversity, will in due season have their full share ; unless in mercy they are " taken away from the evil to come."

5. Finally, the people of God are often conducted through the " valley and shadow of death" in an unexpected manner. We learn, that anciently there were some " who were all their lives subject to bondage, through fear of death ;" whom Christ came to deliver. Well ; that bondage of fear is still experienced by many sincere, but timid Christians ; and many anxious thoughts are felt in relation to this awful but inevitable event. Yet when the trying moment arrives—when death appears near, and the evident symptoms of approaching dissolution are experienced, they find themselves supported and comforted, far beyond their highest expectation : and, as this last enemy comes nearer, he appears less formidable : his sting is extracted ; and sometimes he seems to assume the face of an angel of light ; so that the dying Christian can often say, " O death where is thy sting ?" " For me to die is gain." And this peaceful end is not reserved for those alone, who appeared, in life, to possess a strong faith, but doubting, desponding believers, are often thus raised above their gloomy fears, and are enabled to triumph in a dying hour. The faithful Shepherd of Israel is always present to guide the sheep of his purchase through this gloomy valley. Although they are blind and know not the way, yet with his rod and his staff will he both guide and protect them. Happy they who have God for their guide.

INFERENCES.

1. We may learn from what has been said, the end to be accomplished by the various dispensations of God to his people is, to humble their pride, to divest them of self-righteousness and self-confidence—to lead them to appreciate the grace and faithfulness of the Saviour; and to give exercise to the several virtues of the Christian life, and thus to prepare the soul for its heavenly state.

2. Believers, by being led in this way, are instructed in the knowledge of the deep depravity of their nature; the deceitfulness of the heart; the turpitude of sin, in its various forms and aspects; of the malice and subtlety of the grand adversary; and consequently of the riches of divine grace; the wonderful wisdom of the plan of redemption; the tender sympathy, as well as the faithful care, of the Mediator; and of the desirableness of a better rest than this world can afford. Our estimation of heavenly joy will have some relation to our conflicts and afflictions upon earth. No doubt the gratitude of the redeemed, on Mount Zion, is increased exceedingly, by the consideration that they "have come out of great tribulation."

3. Let us learn then to trust implicitly in the providence and in the promises of a covenant keeping God. His providence extends to the hairs of our head, and his "promises are all yea and amen in Christ Jesus, and are **"EXCEEDING GREAT AND PRECIOUS."**