

The Practical Improvement of the Watchman's Answer.

by John Gill

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding prophetic times and doing good works according to the revealed will of God.

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 12:32, Zechariah 14:7, Matthew 5:16, Luke 21:28, 1 Corinthians 16:13, Ephesians 2:10, Titus 3:1, Hebrews 13:21, 2 Peter 2:11, Revelation 3:10

Topics: "Understanding the Times", "Faithful Living"

Description

John Gill emphasizes the importance of understanding the times and the responsibilities of the people of God, drawing from the example of the tribe of Issachar, who were wise and knowledgeable about what Israel should do. He encourages believers to be watchful and active in their faith, performing good works that align with God's will, and to remain steadfast in the face of challenges and temptations. Gill highlights the necessity of prayer, community, and adherence to the teachings of Christ, especially in times of spiritual decline. He calls for a proactive approach to faith, urging believers to strengthen their resolve and prepare for the coming of the Lord. Ultimately, he reassures that despite the darkness, a glorious morning of redemption is promised for those who remain faithful.

Transcript

THE PRACTICAL IMPROVEMENT

OF

THE WATCHMAN'S ANSWER.

A SERMON,

Preached at a Wednesday's Evening Lecture,

in

GREAT EAST-CHEAP, JAN. 1, 1752.

1 Chronicles 12:32.

And of the children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do: the heads of them were two hundred, and all their brethren were at their commandment.

In this chapter we have an account of the persons that associated with David, showed him favour and assisted him when he was obliged to flee from Saul; and also of those of the several tribes of Israel, and the numbers of them, that came to him in Hebron after the death of Saul and Abner, to make him king over all Israel. And among the rest, those of the tribe of Issachar are mentioned; who, though but few, but two hundred, when those that came out of the other tribes, were several thousands; yet being the principal men of the tribe, and having all their brethren at their commandment and beck, it was as well as if the whole tribe had come in a body: and besides, being men of skill and understanding in certain affairs, had an influence over all the tribes; for they knew and could tell all Israel what they ought to do; and so must be very beneficial and useful to David at this juncture.

What the understanding of these men lay in is not easy to say; interpreters are divided about it: some take them to be chronologers or astronomers, whose skill lay in the computation of times, in fixing the beginning of the year, and the beginning of the month, and in the intercalation of the year; and so were very serviceable to Israel to let them know when the new year began, when it was new moon, when it was right to intercalate the month Adar; as they sometimes were obliged to intercalate a whole month together, to make their account of time come right; and when to keep their feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles: hence it is thought this tribe is said to call the people to the mountain (Deut. 23:19); to the place of worship, the tabernacle or temple in mount Zion; there they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness: and this is the general sense of the Jewish writers.

Were this the true sense of the words, and known to be so, since this is the day in which a late act of parliament, concerning altering the style of the year, begins to take place, it might be thought that my views in reading this passage of scripture was to amuse you with the difference of old and new style, and to show you the superior excellency and usefulness of the one to the other; but as this is an affair that is not within my province, so I have that which is of greater moment and importance to lay before you.

Others choose to call them astrologers, who had skill in the motions and revolutions of the heavenly bodies, and their influences upon the earth, which they had learnt from their neighbors the Phoenicians: or else, being a people much employed in husbandry, hence it is said of this tribe, that it saw that the land was pleasant, to till and manure; it delighted in agriculture; and bowed his shoulder to bear (Gen. 49:15; Deut. 33:18), and carry in the corn when ripe; and dwelt in tents, to keep its fields, or look after its flocks; they by frequent and constant observations had acquired a sort of rustic astrology, and could discern the face of the heavens, and prognosticate what weather it would be; and they knew the proper times and seasons of doing business; and so could inform Israel, or the rest of the tribes, when they should plow, and sow, and reap, and plant, and the like.

Others think they were historians and annalists, such as those in Esther 1:13, where the same phrase is used of those whom Ahasuerus consulted, when Vashti his queen refused to come into his presence at his command, to know of them what had been done in such cases in times past: and so these men were well versed in the history of ancient times, and had made their observations on things that had been done in former times; and were capable of giving advice what should be done in like circumstances.

Though others seem more rightly to interpret this understanding of theirs of political prudence; they were men that knew how to time things, when was the fittest opportunity to do any thing: and whereas the

present business was to turn the kingdom to David, they saw, and so acquainted the rest of the tribes, that this was the proper time to do it in, now Saul was dead, and Abner also, a powerful commander in the interest of his family; and David was the most likely person to humble the Philistines, who of late had been so victorious over Israel.

Besides, they knew that there was the word of the Lord for it, verse 23, or a prophecy that had been given out, that he should be king, which was known in Saul's lifetime, and with which he himself was acquainted; for so said he to David, I know well, that thou shalt surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in thine hand (1 Sam. 24:20). And these men knew that the time was now come, and all circumstances concurring, they told Israel what they should do at this juncture.

The use that I shall make of this, shall be to accommodate the passage to the prophetic times, and the knowledge of them to the present ones, or what may be coming on; and shall sum up the whole in the following observation: "That those who have any understanding of prophetic times, relating to the church of God, and interest of Christ, should inform the true Israel of God, what they ought to do in them, or in the prospect of them." There are some times fixed in prophecy, which by diligence, attention, and application, men may arrive to some understanding of.

There are indeed some times and seasons, the knowledge of which is not to be attained unto; and it would be wrong, as well as in vain, curiously to search into them. It is not for us to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power; for he has determined the times before appointed, when every thing that he has purposed or promised should come to pass; and he has fixed a time for every purpose under the heaven, for the performance of every thing he has designed shall be; a time to be born, and a time to die, and for every intermediate event (Acts 1:7; 17:26; Eccl. 3:1, 2): but these times are not known beforehand, until things are brought into execution.

There are others, and very remarkable events, the times of which are pointed at in prophecy; and which with diligence and application, the knowledge of them may in some measure be attained unto: as for instance, the first coming of Christ into this world to save men; the time for it was not only agreed upon, and settled between the Father and the Son, called the fulness of time (Gal. 4:4), but there were several prophetic hints of it; nay, not only was it described by some general circumstances, as that it should be before the second temple was destroyed, since he was to come into it, and while the scepter was in the tribe of Judah; but the precise time was fixed by Daniel's seventy weeks, or 490 years, which were to commence from a date given him; and before the expiration of which, the Messiah was to come: and so, as he, by reading Jeremiah's books, knew the time when the Babylonish captivity should end; another, by reading his prophecies, might know when the Messiah would come; and accordingly about the time when those weeks were drawing near to an expiration, there were many that were looking for the Messiah, and redemption by him, as knowing that it was about the time, by these weeks, that he should come.

There is a time set for his second coming, and God in his times will shew him, or cause him openly to appear; and though he will come in an hour we know not of, yet there are some circumstances pointed out in the word of God, by which it may be known that it is nigh at hand; as that the day when the Son of man shall be revealed shall be as the days of Noah and Lot, when men indulged themselves in pleasure, lived in great security, unaware of the ruin coming upon them; and that when the Son of man cometh, faith will not be found in the earth (Luke 17:26, 28; 18:8); whether this be understood of the grace or doctrine of faith, or of faith with respect to Christ's coming: and when we compare these things with the present times, and consider the luxury, love of pleasure, carnal security and infidelity that abound among us, we might

conclude that the coming of Christ is just at hand; were it not that there are many things, which require time, yet to be fulfilled, previous to it; as the destruction of antichrist, the conversion of the Jews, and the bringing in the fulness of the Gentiles.

So the last judgment, which will take place at the second coming of Christ, and is most certain, being early known, and often spoken of; Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of it, and of Christ's coming to it; the day is appointed when it will come on, though "of that day and hour knoweth no man, not the angels in heaven, but the Father only;" but then the principal things that should come to pass, relative to the church, between the first and second coming of Christ to judgment, are signified to us in the book of the Revelation; and by diligence, attention, and application, the understanding of the times of their fulfillment may be come at.

The state of the church in all ages is described by the seven churches of Asia, which were prophetic emblems and representations of it. The truly apostolical church is signified by the church at Ephesus, which could not hear them that were evil either in doctrine or practice: the church under the ten persecutions is represented by the church at Smyrna, which had tribulation ten days. And those that lived in the times of Constantine, that had a spiritual discerning of things, when they saw the riches and glory of the world brought into the church, might know that they were in that state which was pointed at by high towering Pergamos.

And such who were in the darkest times of Popery, who had any spiritual light into things, might see that they were in the Thyatiran church-state, in which Jezebel taught her pernicious doctrines, and the depths of Satan, and the mysteries of iniquity were practiced. As we now, by comparing our case with what is said of the church at Sardis, may perceive that we are in the Sardian church-state; and so may arrive to some understanding of the times in which we are, and what are yet to come; as the Philadelphian church-state, which will bring on the spiritual reign of Christ, in which there will be an open door of the Gospel, large conversions of Jews and Gentiles, much holiness and brotherly love, and great spirituality; after which the church, being proud of its gifts, and the spirit withdrawn, it will sink into lukewarmness and security; which will bring on the Laodicean state, which will issue in the general judgment, as its name signifies, the judgment of the people.

Moreover, there are certain very memorable events, the dates of which are peremptorily fixed; as the treading of the holy city forty-two months; the witnesses prophesying in sackcloth, and under discouragements, a thousand two hundred and threescore days; during which term of days also the church is to be nourished in the wilderness even for a time, and times, and half a time; and power is given to the beast, or antichrist, to continue forty and two months (Rev. 11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; 13:5).

All which began, and will end together; for these dates are exactly the same, one thousand two hundred and sixty days being equal to forty-two months, and forty-two months to one thousand two hundred and sixty days, reckoning thirty days to a month, as was used in the Eastern nations; and could we be certain when these dates begin; we should have no difficulty about the expiration of them, or how long it is to it; good men have been mistaken in their calculations for want of this: however, though we can come at no certainty as to the precise time when these things shall be, yet some degree of understanding of these times may be come at; and from the circumstances of things it may be concluded, that these dates cannot reach beyond an hundred and fifty years more, and it may be they may expire much sooner.

In the annual sermon delivered to you about this time last year, and since published, you will remember I gave you some account of the revolutions of morning and night which have been, and will be to the second coining of Christ; and how that we are entering into a dark night, the thickest darkness and midst of which will be the time of the slaying of the witnesses; after which a glorious morning will break forth; and it shall he said to the church, Arise, shine, for thy light is come.

And now what I shall further do, and which is my principal view in reading these words, is to show that this affair is not to be considered as a mere nicety, as a matter of speculation only, but as what should influence our practice. Theory without practice is of little avail; all knowledge is to be reduced to practice; and seeing these things shall be, and these times will come, what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness (2 Pet. 2:11)? I shall therefore attempt a practical improvement of these things, and what you may call, if you please, an Application of my former discourse referred to; which brings me to observe, II.

The things which those who have skill in prophetic times should make known to the Israel of God, as what they ought to do in such times, or in prospect of those to come. And, First, There are some things which true Israelites ought always, and at all times to do; even every good work, which they should be always ready unto, and should pray to God to perfect and fit them for, and make them fruitful and establish them in (Tit. 3:1; Heb. 13:21; Col. 1:10; 2 Thess. 2:17). I shall briefly consider, 1.

What these are. 2. The necessity of doing them, and why, and for what purposes they ought to be done. And, 3. That of all men, Israel, or Israelites indeed, ought to do these things. 1. What these good works are that should be done; and it may not be amiss to show first, what a good work is; it is often said that not nouns but adverbs make good works; that it is not merely doing (bonum) a good thing, but doing that good thing (bene) well; which is what the apostle calls well-doing (Gal. 6:9): an action may be materially good, when it is not circumstantially so.

The circumstances requisite to a good work, and by which it may be defined, are, that it must be according to the declared and revealed will of God; must spring from love, be done in faith, in the name of Christ, and to the glory of God. If any of these circumstances are wanting, it is not properly a good work. It must be a part of that good, perfect and acceptable will of God; or otherwise it will come under the denomination of will-worship, or voluntary humility, and will be rejected by the Lord, as not being required by him.

By this rule many things will be excluded from the name of good works, which may have a show of devotion and sanctity; as the traditions of the elders among the Jews, and many things done by Papists and others, which may carry an appearance of religion and piety in them. It must also spring from love to God; "charity is the end of the commandment, and love the fulfilling of the law;" this is not only the matter of it, but the source of obedience; which should be yielded to, not through fear of punishment, or hope of reward, but without any sinister, selfish, and mercenary views, in pure affection to God that requires it; and that work is best done that is done in the view, and under the influence of the love of God.

It must be also done in faith, the thing itself must be believed as right to be done; for whatsoever is not of faith, is sin (Rom. 14:23): and it should be done in the exercise of faith on God that enjoins it, and on Christ, in whom alone it is acceptable; for without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6); and therefore what is without it cannot be a good work: the apostle puts the superior excellency of Abel's sacrifice to Cain's, not so much upon the matter of them, though there was a difference between them in that respect, as upon the manner of performing them, the one being done in faith, the other without; by

faith Abel offered unto God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain (Heb. 11:4): as faith without works is a dead faith, so works without faith are dead works also.

A good work must be done in the name and strength of Christ, without whom we can do nothing spiritually good and acceptable to God. If we pray, it must be in the name of Christ, which is always prevalent; if we give thanks, it must be to the Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus; if we give an alms-deed to any of his people, it must be in his name, and because they belong to him; whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17): and every good work must be directed to the glory of God; if men seek themselves, the applause of men, their own glory by what they do, as the Pharisees did by their prayers and alms-deeds, their works cannot be properly called good works.

But to proceed to the particulars of those things which true Israelites ought always to do. (1.) Every thing that relates to God, his will, and his worship. Every thing that is of a moral nature, or belongs to the moral law; for though the law is abolished, as it was a ministration of Moses, and as it is a covenant of works; and as to justification by it, and the curse and condemnation of it; yet is it to be regarded as a rule of walk and conversation; and believers are not without law to God, and are under the law to Christ (1 Cor. 9:21): as king and lawgiver.

Morality, in its utmost extent, in all its branches, ought to be attended to, not only what is in the decalogue or ten commandments, but whatever is to be found elsewhere. The decalogue is a good system of laws drawn up for the use of the Jewish people; but as all that is in it is not moral, so the whole of morality is not contained in that body of laws; and not only what is in that, but every thing of a moral nature that is to be found in any part of the word of God, either in the Old or New Testament, whether in David's psalms, Solomon's proverbs, the writings of the prophets, Christ's sermons, or Paul's epistles, or any others, is to be observed and done.

Likewise, whatsoever is of divine appointment, of positive institution, relating to the worship and service of God; not indeed any thing of this kind that was under the former dispensation, such as circumcision and other rites of the ceremonial law, the law of commandments contained in ordinances now abolished; let no man judge you in meat or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, &c., that is, let no man condemn you for the non-observance of these things; which are a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ (Col. 2:16, 17): but every thing of this nature under the Gospel-dispensation ought to be carefully observed and complied with; the ordinance of Baptism ought to be submitted unto, and the Lord's Supper should be kept as it was instituted, and all things which Christ has commanded should be done; all his precepts should be esteemed, and impartially regarded; Israel should "walk in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless;" the assembly of his saints should not be forsaken; his word should be constantly heard, and every ordinance kept as delivered; and the Lord our God should be worshipped, and he only should be served.

Particularly, the duty of prayer should be attended unto; men should pray without ceasing; our Lord put forth a parable to encourage his people to pray always, and not faint: prayer in the closet should be constantly kept up; when thou prayest, says Christ (Matt. 6:6), enter into thy closet, &c., and prayer in the family should be daily used; if neglected, God will resent it: he will pour out his fury on the families that call not on his name (Jer. 10:25). A prayer is a powerful means of keeping up the spirit and life of religion, and without it, it cannot be kept up with vigor.

Praying, says a good man, will either make you leave off sinning, or sinning will make you leave off praying. (2.) Every thing which concerns our fellow-creatures, whether as men or Christians, ought to be done by the Israel of God; they should love their neighbors as themselves, and do that to men, which they would have done to themselves; nay, it becomes them to love their enemies, to do good to them that hate them, to feed them when hungry, and give them drink when thirsty, and to overcome evil with good.

And as for their fellow-Christians, they should by love serve them both in things temporal and spiritual; they should do good to all, but especially to the household of faith; they should "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ;" they should "support the weak, and comfort the feeble minded;" they should give advice and counsel where it is wanting, pray with, and for one another, "build up each other in their most holy faith." But I go on to show, The necessity of doing these things, or why Israel, or the people of God, ought to do them: there are certain necessary uses, as the apostle (Tit. 3:14) calls them, for which good works are to be done; the question is, what they are?

And, (1.) Negatively: they are not to be done in order to procure the love and favor of God; as, if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be condemned (Cant. 8:7); so if he was to perform ever so many good works, and those ever so well, they would not obtain the love of God, which is altogether free and unmerited; nothing out of God can be the cause of it: the reason why he loved Israel of old, and why he loves any, is, because he would and will love them; he will be gracious to whom he will be gracious (Ex. 33:19): nor are they to be done to make atonement for sin, or to make peace with God.

Was a man to bring thousands of rams, or ten thousands of rivers of oil, or do ever so many works of a ceremonial, moral, or evangelic nature, they would never atone for his sins; present service due to God, can never make atonement for former transgressions, or reconcile sinners to God: atonement and reconciliation for sin, and peace within God, are made by another hand, and in a better way, even by Christ and the blood of his cross. Nor are they to be done to justify us in the sight of God, and to render us acceptable to him; there is no justification before God by the works of the Law; were there, men would have wherefore to glory in his presence; but boasting is excluded by the law, or doctrine of faith, by the doctrine of faith, by the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ's righteousness: if righteousness was by the law and its works, the death of Christ would be in vain, and his obedience and sufferings useless, but it is certain that a sinner is justified without the works of the law, and by a righteousness imputed to him without them: nor are they necessary to salvation, or to be done in order to procure it; salvation is neither according to them, nor by them; it is wrought out by Christ, and is so complete and perfect, that nothing can be added to it to make it more so: he is the sole author of it, his own arm has brought it in; it is in him, and in no other.

Nor are they to be performed with a view to merit any thing at the hand of God: it is impossible for a creature to merit any thing of God by what he does: men may talk of enthusiasts and visionaries, but they are the greatest, who dream of the merit of their good works; the least thing cannot be merited by us, not a morsel we eat, or a rag we wear, much less the above things relating to eternal salvation. That by which we merit should be profitable to him of whom we merit; but "can a man, or any thing he does, be profitable unto God?"

It should not be due to him of whom we merit; but all our works are due to God, he has a prior right to the performance of them: what is done in a way of merit, should be done in our own strength, without any assistance from him of whom we would merit; whereas our best works are done in the strength of the Lord, and by the assistance of his grace: to which may be added, there should be some proportion

between that which is merited, and that by which we merit; but there is none between eternal salvation and our works; wherefore these are not the necessary uses for which they are to be done.

But, (2.) Positively: these things ought to be done, and there is a necessity of doing them, with, respect to God; because it is the will of God that should be done, he has commanded them, and because they are approved of by him, and are well pleasing to him through Christ when rightly done; besides, they are the means of glorifying God, not only by the persons that do them, but by others that behold them; for which reason our Lord directs unto them (Matt. 5:16); let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

They are necessary with respect to men; they are good and profitable unto them; it is setting them a good example, and may be a means of recommending religion to them, and of softening their minds to an attention to the truths of the gospel, and of winning such without the word, who are not won by it; and however, of putting to shame and silence such who are forward to accuse the good conversation of the saints. They ought to be done on account of the people of God themselves; to testify their subjection to God, and gratitude to him for mercies received from him; to adorn the doctrine of God their Savior, and to evidence the truth of their faith, and the sincerity of their profession.

And they should be done on account of the works themselves, because they are good, honestly good; they are things "honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report;" they are pleasantly good, there is a pleasure enjoyed in them; great peace have they which love the law of God and obey it; and they are profitably good, though not to God in the instances before mentioned, yet to men. But I proceed to show, Why Israel, the people of God, of all men, ought to do these things; and there are two reasons for it: (1.)

Because they are under the greatest obligations to do them. They are chosen of God unto them; though they are not chosen because they were holy, yet that they might be holy in heart and life; though the act of election passed before they had done either good or evil, and so is irrespective of their works; yet they are such which God hath fore-ordained that they should walk in them (Eph.1:4; 2:10); and it becomes them to make their calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10); which should be done, as it seems, by some third thing, that is, by good works; and so some copies read the text.

They are redeemed by Christ for this end, that they should be a peculiar people, zealous of good works (Tit. 2:14); and unless they are performed, this end is not answered; since they are redeemed from a vain conversation (1 Pet. 1:19), they ought not to follow one; and since they are not their own, but are bought with the price of Christ's precious blood, they should glorify him in their body and spirit, which are his. The "love of Christ should constrain them to live to him that died for them, and rose again (1 Cor. 6:19, 20; 2 Cor. 5:14):" they are effectually called by his grace, and though not according to their works, yet with an holy calling, and unto holiness: such who are called ought to be holy, as he that has called them is holy, and should by their lives and conversations shew forth the praises of him who "has called them out of darkness into marvelous light."

They have received many exceeding great and precious promises from the Lord, that he will be with them, and not leave them, or forsake them, in that he will help and strengthen them, and assist them in every duty, and work in them both to will and to do of his good pleasure; will carry on and perform his good work in them until the day of Christ, and will be their God and Father, and they shall be his sons and daughters, and ever continue in this relation: and having therefore these promises, says the apostle (2 Cor. 6:17; 7:1), let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord:

to which may be added, that they have received many mercies and favors from the Lord, both temporal and spiritual, which they are unworthy of; and these should influence and engage them to the performance of good works: this is an argument the apostle Paul uses to this purpose; I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service (Rom. 12:1). (2.)

Another reason why of all men the Israel of God, or his own special people, ought to do good works, is, because they are in the best capacity of doing them; nay, they are the only persons that can perform them aright. There is no good thing in unregenerate men, and therefore no good thing can come out of them, or be done by them; they have no true knowledge of that which is good, and much less to do it; they have no inclination or desire, nay, an aversion to it; they have no free-will thereunto, nor power to perform; it may as measurably be expected to gather grapes of thorns, and figs of thistles, as good works to be done by an evil man: a wicked man is to every good work reprobate and unfit: but Israelites indeed, they are good men, and so capable of doing good works: a man must first be a good man before he can do good works: men begin at the wrong end, when they purpose to do good works, in order to make themselves good men: the first concern should be to have a good work of grace upon the heart, which is the Lord's work; for unless there is a good work begun within, there will be no good works done without; the tree must first be made good ere the fruit will be good.

Moreover, such are made alive by the grace of God; the Spirit of life from Christ has entered into them; Christ himself has said to them whilst in their blood, line (Ezek. 16:6). Principles of grace, life, and holiness are wrought in their hearts, and so they are in a capacity, under the influence of divine grace, of producing acts of holiness, or of performing good works; whereas men dead in trespasses and sins are not able to do any thing spiritually good, and at most and best their works must be dead works.

Spiritual Israel are such as are regenerated and sanctified by the Spirit of God, and so are meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work (2 Tim. 2:21): the Spirit of God is put within them, to cause them to walk in the statutes of the Lord, and to keep his judgments and do them (Ezek. 36:27). They are strengthened by him with all might in their inward man for this purpose. Besides, they are created in Christ Jesus unto good works (Eph. 2:10); they are made new creatures in him, and by him for that end; they are branches in him the vine, and by virtue of union to him, and through abiding in him, bring forth fruit; without whom they can do nothing, though all things through him strengthening them: to add no more, they are believers in Christ and so, as they are under obligations as such to be careful to maintain good works (Tit. 3:8), they are the only persons that can perform them in faith, without which a man can do nothing that is pleasing to God.

Faith is an operative grace, it works by love, and is always attended with the fruits of righteousness and good works; for good works, as one calls them, are second acts necessarily flowing from a life of faith. Secondly, There are some things particularly, which are to be done according to the times in which the Israel of God live, or are in prospect of. In the annual discourse for the last year, and which has been published, I observed to you that the times in which we are, are those of the Sardian church, which represents the reformed churches; and the latter part of those times; in which that church, and those it is an emblem of, would have no more than the name of one, or the name of religion and Christianity, without the life and power of it; and but few whose garments would be undefiled; and when there would be a letting go, and departing from the doctrines of the Reformation, before heard and received and which exactly describe the times in which we live: and therefore what is recommended to that church, as what ought to be done by them, should be observed by us; be watchful, and strengthen the things which

remain, that are ready to die:--remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.

And, 1. We ought to be watchful. This concerns not only ministers of the word, whose special business it is to watch over themselves and others, to take heed to themselves, and to their doctrine, and to take care of the flock, over which they are placed as overseers, and see to it, that they are fed with wholesome food, and are not infected with false doctrine; but this is incumbent on members of churches also; what is here exhorted to belongs to them, as our Lord said to his disciples; what I say unto you, I say unto all, watch (Mark 13:37); against sin and the prevailing vices of the age, Satan and his temptations, false teachers and their pernicious doctrines; we live in ensnaring times, and therefore ought to be on our watch and guard.

Times of great profaneness and immorality, in which not only the men of the world, but professors of religion, give themselves great liberties, and indulge to a vain conversation; and the more wicked the times are, the more cautious should we be, that we are not drawn aside by ill examples: and the more so, as they are set by such that profess the same name we do. Satan is very busy in laying snares in the way of a professing people, in using all devices, and wiles, and stratagems, to decoy them from the paths of truth and righteousness wherefore we ought to watch and pray, that we enter not into temptation (Matt. 26:41): false teachers are every where lying in wait to deceive, and therefore we ought to guard against them, and be careful that our minds are not corrupted by them, from the simplicity that is in Christ (2 Cor. 11:3); and that we are not carried away with the error of the wicked (2 Pet. 3:17); and seeing the end of all things is at hand, not only of the world, and the things of it in general, but of that church-state in which we are in particular; let us therefore be sober, and watch unto prayer (1 Pet. 4:7).

The word here used in the exhortation to the church at Sardis, is by some rendered awake; which suggests it to be a time of night, and so of sleepiness, as indeed it is now with us; they that sleep, sleep in the night; night coming upon us, we are fallen asleep; we are like the virgins, wise and foolish, who while the bridegroom tarried, not coming so soon as expected, all slumbered and slept (Matt. 25:5); very little lively exercise of grace, or fervent discharge of duty; great coldness, lukewarmness, indifference, and backwardness to spiritual exercises; much sluggishness and slothfulness, and a general contentment at most in the outward form of religion; it is high time therefore to awake out of sleep (Rom. 13:11), lest the day of Christ should come upon us unawares.

The exhortation of the apostle is very suitable to us; awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light (Eph. 5:14); which words are not spoken to dead sinners, but to sleepy, drowsy professors, got into the company of carnal men, dead in sins, from whose conversation, which encourages a drowsy frame, they are called. And now being called to awake, and being awake, we ought to keep so, and not fail asleep again; and the rather, since the grand enemy of Christ and his Churches, is busy in sowing his tares of false doctrines, which to do is now his proper time and opportunity; while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares (Matt. 13:25).

2. Strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: meaning not so much good works, though these may be said to be dying in our day, as to the performance of them, and may be said to be strengthened, when men are diligent to do their first works; nor the graces of the spirit, for however these in appearance may seem expiring, when not in exercise, yet in reality they cannot die, being the immortal incorruptible seed of the Spirit of God; besides, it is the Lord's work to strengthen these; rather the truths of the gospel, preached at the beginning of the Reformation with great vigor and liveliness, but now almost lost, dead,

and buried; and therefore, should be restored, established, and confirmed: but it seems best of all to understand the words of the members of this church-state, the ta loipa, the rest of them, those that are left of the great number of them that have apostatized, and are yet in a sickly state, ready to give up their religion and profession; like those in the Corinthian church, of whom the apostle says, many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep (1 Cor. 11:30): some were wholly gone, had entirely apostatized, and others were weak and tottering, and ready to give up all; now means should be used, and attempts made to recover these persons, whilst there is any hope of them, to bring them back from whence they have partially departed, to invigorate them with zeal for Christ, and to establish them in the truths of the gospel; as our Lord said to Peter, when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren (Luke 22:32). 3.

Remember how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. Call to mind the doctrines of the Reformation, how they were received when first heard; with what attention and reverence they were listened to; with what affection and joy they were received, though now despised, discarded, lost and buried in forgetfulness; such as justification by the righteousness of Christ, pardon by his blood, and atonement by his sacrifice: and you that know the worth and value of those truths, and still have them in esteem, hold them fast, do not let them go, do not part with them at any rate, no not the least branch of truth; give up nothing; if you would keep the enemy from within, preserve your outworks, stand by them, quit not even such as may seem of the least importance; dispute every inch of ground; give not way in any thing, nor for any time, no not for an hour, that the truth of the gospel may continue with you (Gal. 2:5): it is this giving up of one thing after another that is the ruin of us; what is the reason that Deism has had such a spread among us of late years?

Among the rest, not only is it owing to the books wrote against Christianity, but to the weak answers to them, and feeble defenses of it; one truth of the Bible being given up after another, till at length there is scarce any thing left worth contending for. And so it is in other controversies among those that are called Christians; something is generally given up on the side of truth, for which the writer is complimented as an ingenuous man, and a man of good sense: this proves a snare to him, and whenever he writes again, he will give up something more to confirm his character; or another will start up, and take the same method, observing which way the stream of reputation runs; whilst those on the other side secretly laugh at them: and thus are we likely to be wheedled and cajoled out of truth, by artful and designing men, on one hand, and through the weakness of some, on the other: and we shall have more and more of this giving up of truth, as the night we are entered into grows darker and darker; what therefore we ought to do, is, to get what gospel-light and knowledge we can, and keep what we have, and part with none; but repent of our coldness and indifference to gospel-truths, our inattention to them, forgetfulness of them, and unfruitfulness by them, and do our first works of faith, love, and zeal: and to these things, we ought to do in the present times, may be added, what the apostle directs to, when he says; watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong (1 Cor. 16:13); the former of these exhortations is the same as before given, and the rest agree.

Wherefore, 4. Stand fast in the faith; in the grace of faith, and in the doctrine of it, and in the profession of both: do not depart from the faith of the gospel, though you live in times that others do; and have lived to see the times foretold, that some should depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits (1 Tim. 4:1); but in these departing times let it be your honour to stand fast without wavering; be not moved away from the hope of the gospel; from the gospel itself, and that hope which it gives of salvation by Jesus Christ, and eternal life through him; stand fast in one spirit (Col. 1:23): let your whole soul and spirit be in the gospel, and be zealously affected to it, and be united in your endeavors to promote it; striving together for

the faith of it against the common enemy; contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints (Phil. 1:27; Jude v.3); which is attempted to be wrested out of your hands, and is in great danger of being so.

Let none of those things move you from your close adherence to it, which are objected to it, or you meet with on account of your profession of it: Abide by it, though the greater number of men is against it, and those the rich, the wise, and learned and though it may be charged with novelty and licentiousness, and attended with reproach and persecution. 5. Quit ye like men; play the men; behave like men of courage and valor; be valiant for the truth upon the earth (Jer. 9:3); do as the guard about Solomon's bed did; let every man have his sword upon his thigh because of fear in the night (Cant. 3:8): it is a night-season with you already, and it will be darker still; you will hear the noise of the enemy, be not terrified at it; guard against the fears that may seize and surprise you; fight the Lord's battles manfully: if the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do (Ps. 11:3)?

What indeed will they have to work or build upon, or even stand on, when the foundation of all faith, hope, peace, and joy is removed? But then they should not look on as idle and unconcerned spectators of these things; what can the righteous do? They should build up as fast as the others pull down; do as Nehemiah and his people did, work with one hand, and hold a weapon with the other (Neh. 4:17). A trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. 6. Be strong; not in yourselves, but in the Lord, and in the power of his might, in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; go to him for strength under every trial and exercise, to carry you through every service and suffering for his name sake; and to oppose every enemy, and to maintain your ground against them.

Go not forth in your own strength, but depend on him, and his grace, which is sufficient for you; encourage yourselves in the Lord your God; let not your spirits sink, your hearts fail, and be discouraged; but take heart, be of good courage; consider you are engaged in a good cause, fight under the great captain of your salvation: you may be sure of victory in the end, and that the issue will be a crown of life and righteousness: wait on the Lord; in the way of his appointments, which is your duty, with patient submission to his will, until the time of your deliverance and salvation comes, and he will strengthen your heart (Ps. 27:14), fortify your minds and against fear and danger. 7.

Keep close to the word of God; make that the rule and standard of your faith and practice; believe not every spirit, or every man that pretends to be a spiritual man, and to have the Spirit of God; do not believe every thing he says under that pretence, but try the spirits whether they are of God (1 John 4:1); try the spiritual doctrines he professes to deliver by the word of God; do as the noble Bereans did, who searched the scriptures daily whether these things are so (Acts 17:11), as they were represented by the apostles; and the more reason there is for such care and caution, because many false prophets are gone out into the world, and deceive men, and destroy their souls by their false doctrine; to the law, and to the testimony, to the doctrine of the gospel testified in the sacred writings, bring every thing they say, and examine it by; if they speak not according to this word; if their doctrines do not agree with it, cannot be proved and confirmed by it, it is because there is no light in them (Isa. 8:20); though they may pretend to great light, and even revelations from the Lord, yet if what they deliver cannot be seen by the light of the divine word, their light is but darkness: the word of the Lord is a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path (Ps. 119:105); and you would do well to make use of it; and when is a lamp or a light more proper for use, than in a night season?

The night is coming on, therefore take your lamp and light in your hand, the word of God, and walk by it: this is the more sure word of prophecy, by which you may safely go; whereunto ye do well that ye take

heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts (2 Pet. 1:19); whilst the night you are in continues, and until the morning comes, and the day breaks by the glorious appearing of the Sun of righteousness; or in other words, until the spiritual reign of Christ begins.
8.

Abide with the churches of Christ, and ministers of the gospel, in the worship of God, and in the ordinances of his house: it is said, to the commendation of the tribe of Judah, Judah yet ruleth with God, and is faithful with the saints (Hos. 11:12); by no means forsake the assembling of yourselves together, but keep close one to another; and so much the more as you see the day approaching (Heb. 10:25), or time and hour of temptation coming that is to try them that dwell upon the earth; where the shepherds tents are, do you fix yours, and there abide; let nothing divert you, or cause you to turn aside from the churches of Christ to which you belong, nor from his faithful ministers; no, let not a cry concerning Christ himself move you from thence: our Lord has cautioned his followers against this; if any man shall say unto you, Lo here is Christ, or there, believe it not (Matt. 24:23); Christ is where you are: he is preached by his ministers, and in the churches you attend upon, and that is enough for you; this you are certain of; it may not be where the cry is: however, what separates you from the churches and ministers of Christ, can never be right; Christ and his ministers, and churches, are not to be divided: there were some in the Corinthian church for Paul, in opposition to Apollos; and others for Apollos, in opposition to Paul; and some for Cephas, in opposition to Paul and Apollos; and others were for Christ, in opposition to them all; they were for Christ without his ministers; is Christ divided (1 Cor. 1:12, 13)? from his ministers, and from his churches?

No, he is not; and such are they who are for Christ, and no order; Christ, and no ordinances; Christ, and no ministers. 9. Since there is a time of darkness, a night-season coming on, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel (Amos 4:12) with submission to his will, with dependence on him, and with expectation of support under the trying exercise and deliverance out of it. Remember it is thy God, thy covenant-God and Father, who will never leave thee, nor forsake thee; wherefore, 10.

Do not be discouraged, for though the affliction will be sharp, it will be short; the severity of it will be short; the severity of it will last but three days and a half, that is, three years and a half; and then a glorious time, and a glorious state of the church will follow: and Christ has promised, that such as keep the word of his patience, he will keep from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth (Rev. 3:10); and therefore when you perceive it coming on, and the signs of it, look up, and lift up your heads; do not be cast down; rather rejoice, for your redemption draweth nigh (Luke 21:28): the night of weeping will soon be over, and joy will come in the morning.

And now as to the morning that will follow after, this you should most firmly believe; though scoffers may mock at it, and carnal professors be unconcerned about it, and give no credit to it; yet assure yourselves, "a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry;" pray for his kingdom and coming; give him no rest day nor night, till he arise and has mercy on Zion, and make his Jerusalem, the praise of the whole earth; be hasting in your warm afflictions, and earnest desires, after those glorious times, which God will hasten in his own time; and in the darkest season look for this morning, for at evening-time it shall be light (Zech. 14:7); and a glorious one it will be, as a morning when the sun rises, a morning without clouds.

I shall close all with those words of our Lord, let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord. And now, as I have shewn you what Israel ought to do in

those times, blessed is that servant whom his Lord, when he cometh, shall find so doing (Luke 12:35, 36, 43).

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