

THE
DESIGN OF BAPTISM.

IN the history of our redemption, what event is it, my brethren, that holds the most prominent place? What is it that is the centre and soul of the system? It is the death of Christ. Remove this, and you tear from the heavens the sun of the new creation. It is this that was prefigured by sacrifices. It is this that prophecy foretold as the event on which nations should gaze with astonishment. It is this that has touched the hearts and awaked the songs of the redeemed on earth, and that will for ever fill heaven with admiration and praise. It is this that is the source of all our spiritual life. It associates with itself the most impressive truths; and it supplies us with the steadiest and the strongest motives to the performance of every Christian duty. Whatever, therefore,

the Holy Scriptures exhibit as adapted to impress this grand event upon our minds, cannot be a theme unworthy of our contemplation. May we all consider ourselves as standing near the cross and the grave of our Lord, and cherish those feelings only which we know that he will approve.

In the Epistle to the Romans, vi. 3, it is written: "KNOW YE NOT THAT SO MANY OF US AS WERE BAPTIZED INTO JESUS CHRIST, WERE BAPTIZED INTO HIS DEATH?"

The text manifestly alludes to the fact that BAPTISM IS AN EMBLEM OF THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST, AS CONNECTED WITH THE STATE AND PROSPECTS OF THE BELIEVER; and thus it reminds us of the OBLIGATIONS OF THE BAPTIZED.

This ordinance, as administered by John to such as repented, was a divine institution, having reference to Christ and the remission of sins.

We have the testimony of Mark: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; as it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one

crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." We have the testimony of Matthew: "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan," that is, many from all parts, "and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins." We have the testimony of Paul: "John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him who should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus."* We have the testimony of Josephus, the Jewish historian, which, so far as it goes, coincides remarkably with the Scriptural account. It reads thus: "Herod slew John that was called the Baptist, who was a good man; and who commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing with water would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away of some sins only, but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul

* Acts xix. 4.

was purified before by righteousness."* We have the words of our Saviour himself, by which he confounded the captious Pharisees: "The baptism of John,—was it from heaven, or of men?" John, an Evangelist assures us, "was a man sent from God"; and, manifestly referring to God, he himself begins a declaration with the words, "He that sent me to baptize."

From these testimonies, my brethren, it is evident that John was specially and divinely commissioned for his work; that he required of such as came to his baptism a previous change of character, a previous purification of soul; and that he directed them to the great object of Christian faith, "saying unto the people, that they should believe on him who should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus."

In all these respects there was something new and peculiar. It was not an ablution prescribed in the law of Moses.† It was not one of the divers washings, or immersions, or bathings, that had been suggested by personal convenience, or dictated by Jewish scrupulosity, and had been received by tradition from the fathers. It was not the ceremony which, in that age, when the

* Antiq. B. XVIII. c. 5, § 2.

† Lev. xi. 32; xv. 11, 13.

Jews as a people were sunk under the dominion of a foreign power, seldom occurred, — an ablution of a heathen and his family upon becoming incorporated with the Jewish nation, — an ablution which Pharisaical notions of uncleanness may have added to the circumcision which God had commanded.* Nor was it that ablution or bathing which made a part of the process in admitting candidates into the Essean sect, a sort of Pharisees, and which was daily practised by its members; for that, though a thousand times more frequent than the ablution just mentioned, of circumcised heathen proselytes, was, like this, a mere human device, and performed by the subjects of it themselves. It was accompanied with no confession of sins; it spake of no remission; it cast no look of faith towards the great Messiah.†

Baptism, however, as administered by John, was easily associated with one idea, which, in a greater or less degree, was common to all the other ablutions known among the Jews, — the idea of purification. But the purification which it indicated was a purification, not from ceremonial nor imaginary uncleanness, but from sin;

* Note A.

† Note B.

supposing still, says Josephus, *that the soul was purified before by righteousness.* And here let us never forget, that, while John preached the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, he associated this with believing on Christ, whom he denominates "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." *

It was an acknowledged principle among the Jews, that new laws were to be introduced in the time and by the hand of the Messiah; and well it might be. For numerous predictions in the Old Testament represent him as the supreme lawgiver of his people. It was also a well-known truth, that he was to "save his people from their sins." But how this was to be done was not distinctly perceived by most, even of his own disciples, till after his resurrection from the dead. And yet they had a saving faith in him. Yes; and at his command they partook of the emblems of his body broken and his blood shed as their spiritual sustenance; while, even amidst his explicit declarations, they had but a very indistinct idea of the matter, compared with that which was presented to their minds after his resurrection. Still the bread and

* John i. 29.

the wine were in fact, and in the view of Him who appointed them, emblems of all that the disciples afterwards, at the time of their greatest illumination, perceived them to indicate. In a manner somewhat similar, baptism was in fact, and in the view of Him who appointed it, an emblem of more than was clearly and distinctly perceived by all the baptized before the resurrection of Christ.

So, too, the import of that emblematical act which our Lord exhibited in washing the feet of his disciples, was not fully perceived at the time; and he said to Peter, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." *

Before the resurrection of Christ, baptism, whether administered by his own disciples under his own eye, or by John, who continued to testify of him, and, as a faithful messenger, to promote his cause, was received because it was divinely commanded. It was understood in part, but not entirely. It was readily perceived to indicate a purification, a purification that was somehow connected with the coming of the Messiah, to whom the baptized were to yield themselves as confiding and obedient sub-

* John xiii. 7.

jects of his kingdom. But how this purification — this remission of sins — was connected with the Messiah, was to be developed after he had borne our sins in his own body on the tree, and had risen from the dead. “Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures, and said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name, among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”* “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature: he that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved.” †

There is another and a nearer view, my brethren, which it becomes us to take of this subject.

John, in obedience to the divine command, appeared on the banks of the Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; for he knew that the Messiah was soon to be manifested. But who the individual was, he knew not. He had lived in retirement amidst

* Luke xxiv. 45-47.

† Mark xvi. 15, 16.