

## Five Sacramental Sermons

### Sermon I

#### **Being a Fast-Day's Sermon Before The Lord's Supper.—Of God's Withdrawings from His People, Fnd Their Exercise Under Them.**

#### [John Willison](#)

John Willison was born in the year 1680, in the neighborhood of Stirling, Scotland. Not much is know about his personal and private life, but soon after he completed his academic career, he received a unanimous call to serve as pastor from a parish in Brechin in 1703. About the year 1718 he was transferred to Dundee where he remained for the remainder of his life, serving a large congregation. He served as a faithful minister of the gospel for 47 years until his death on the 3rd of May, 1756. John Willison was a man of great piety and a staunch defender of the faith. We are indeed fortunate to have extant copies of his sermons and his polemical works, from which the above sermon is derived.

**O the Hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in time of trouble; why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a way-faring man, that turneth aside to tarry for a night? — Jer. xiv. 8.**

THIS chapter was penned in the time of a great dearth in the land of Judah, occasioned by a grievous drought and want of rain, which fell out about the latter end of king Josiah's reign: which calamity the prophet pathetically laments, and takes as a token of God's withdrawing his gracious presence from them; whereupon, ver. 7. he makes a most humble confession of sin, in the name of the church, disclaims anything of worth or merit in themselves, and pleads only the glory of God's name.

The prophet's scope, in the text and context is to deprecate God's judgments, and particularly that terrible one of his withdrawing his presence from his church and people. "Why," says he, ver. 8, "shouldest thou be as a. stranger in the land?" and ver. 9, "Leave us not." So that he seems to pass from the consideration of the stroke of drought to that of God's withdrawing his presence from them. Whence we may observe, that God's people dread and deprecate the withdrawing of his gracious presence, more than the removal all their creature-comforts, or any other judgment whatsoever.

More particularly, in the text we have, 1. The gracious titles he gives to God, as the grounds on which he pleads for his gracious favour and presence, "O the hope of Israel!" *i. e.* the object of Israel's hope, whose wont and promise is the only foundation

of their hope: “the Saviour of Israel in the time of trouble,” *i. e.* the helper and deliverer of Israel in former times of distress. And then, from these grounds he doth, in the second place, humbly plead and expostulate the matter with God in a twofold question: (1.) “Why shouldst thou be as a stranger in the land?” *i. e.* Why shouldst thou behave to us at this time as a stranger, in keeping at a distance from us, and inclining, as it were, to drop all acquaintance and correspondence with us? (2.) “Why shouldst thou be as a way-faring man, that turns aside to tarry for a night?” *i. e.* Why shouldst thou seem unconcerned about our interest and welfare, like a traveller that comes into an inn, and never inquires into, the affairs of it? Or why shouldst thou pay such short sad transient visits, as if thou wast weary of us, and ready to depart for good and all?

**Doctrine.** That as it sometimes pleaseth God to withdraw himself, and behave as a stranger to his church and people; so there is nothing in the world that will be such matter of exercise and trouble to the serious seekers of God, as such a dispensation.

As this is plainly founded on the text, so also it is evident, from many other places of scripture, and the practice of the saints therein recorded, Job xxiii. 3—9; Psal. xliii. 1, 2; Psal. xxvii. 7.

In handling this doctrine, I shall observe the following method: **I.** Premise some things for the better understanding of it. **II.** Show when it may be said that the Lord withdraws from, and behaves as a stranger to his people. **III.** For what reasons and grounds he useth to do so. **IV.** When it may be said, that people are duly exercised about this melancholy dispensation. **V.** Whence it is, that this dispensation is matter of such exercise and trouble to the serious seekers of God. **VI.** I shall make some improvement of the whole.

I begin with the first; *viz.* To premise some things for the better understanding of this doctrine, and for preventing mistakes.

1. However God doth at any time withdraw from his people, yet we must remember, he never takes away his loving-kindness from them, Isa liv. 10.

2. However God may withdraw the sensible and comforting influences of his Spirit from his people; yet he never withdraws his Spirit from them, as to his real presence and inhabitation for the preservation and support of their spiritual life, John xiv. 17.

3. God’s withdrawals from his people are never either total or final, but only in part, for a time, Heb. xliii. 5; Isa. liv. 7, 8. God never leaves his people altogether, but is graciously present with them one way or another; if not in respect of comfort, yet he is with them in respect of grace; if not in a way of quickening yet still in a way of support; if not in enlivening their affections, yet it may be in enlightening their understandings; if not giving sensible enjoyments, yet in giving hungry desires: so that Lord is still with them some way or other.

4. There are various degrees of God’s withdrawing himself from his people; with some

of them the day is only dark and cloudy; with others it is twilight, neither dark nor light; with many it is night: with some, neither sun nor stars have for many days appeared; with others (according to their apprehensions) it is a total eclipse.

5. We should distinguish betwixt God's withdrawing from his people in point of comfort, his withdrawing in point of grace. These two do not still go together: for the first may be where the second is not. A believer may be deprived of the shinings of God's love and favour, yet faith may be lively, desires strong, the heart tender, and grace in a vigorous condition; but oftentimes God withdraws in point of grace, as well as in point of comfort: I do not mean in respect of the habit of grace, for this can never be rooted out, where it is once planted; but only in respect of the exercise and some particular degrees of grace: these may be lost, so as the soul becomes weak, and sometimes very feeble and languid in duty; the breath grows cold, the pulse beats low, "and the things that remain seem ready to die," Rev. iii. 2.

**II.** The second thing proposed, was to show when it may be said that the Lord withdraws, and behaves as a stranger to his people.,

1. When he withholds his wonted acts of kindness from them; sees them in trouble, and steps not in for their relief, as in former times. Of this the church complains, Isa. lxiii. 15, "Where is thy zeal and thy strength? The sounding of thy bowels, and thy mercies toward me, are they now restrained?" He suffered their enemies to gather strength, to rise up and oppress them, and bring them very low; and did not seem to regard their cry, nor show his mercy or power in helping them; but withdrew his hand, and behaved as a stranger that was not concerned about them. It was on this account that Gideon reckoned God to be withdrawn from Israel, when the angel of the Lord appeared to him, Judg. vi. 12, and said, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour" But Gideon was so much taken up with the distressed case of the church in general, that waves the consideration of his own particular case and says, verse 13, "O, my Lord; if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? And where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of?" *q. d.* If the Lord were not withdrawn, and become as a stranger to us, surely he would not have suffered the Midianites to oppress us so sore and so long, without appearing for our help. In like manner of times reasons a poor discouraged believer, if the Lord were not withdrawn, why should my old lusts (which I once thought were both killed and buried) rise up and trouble me? Alas! I am left to struggle against them alone, and "iniquities prevail against me;" I strive to stem the tide, but it grows the more: "How long shall the enemy be exalted over me?"

2. When the Lord threatens to remove the sign and symbols of his presence from his people, viz. pure ordinances and sacraments; when he lets enemies combine, and carry on their plots for this purpose; when our springs are in hazard of being stopped or poisoned, and we put to seek our "spiritual bread with the peril of our lives, because of sword of the wilderness," Lam. v. 9. This hath been the lot of God's people in this land; now indeed we get our bread at an easier rate, but alas! we do not prize it, nor grow by it. May not God be provoked then to withdraw it, or send us to the wilderness again to seek it?

3. When though the Lord continues pure ordinances and sacraments with his people, yet denies wonted blessing and benefit thereof to them, yea, blasts them; according to that sad word, Mal. ii. 2, "If ye will not hear and lay it to heart, I will even curse your blessings, yea, I have cursed them already." This we fear is the case of many; they have the word and sacraments in purity and plenty, but do not find them blest; God's Spirit doth not concur with them, and their souls do not thrive under them. Surely the Lord behaves as a stranger to our assemblies, when our ministers are straitened in preaching, and people are straitened in hearing; when we that are sent to you, feel much coldness on our own hearts, and have a number of cold hearts to deal with, and a live coal is not brought from the altar to kindle fire.

4. When the Lord frowns on his people in the course of his providence, denies them outward mercies, and denounces temporal strokes and calamities, yea, actually brings them on, whereby his people are brought very low; they look to God for pity, but no relief comes; their distress is long continued, and their trials lengthened out. So when Zion's captivity was prolonged, she cried out, Isa. xlix. 14, "The Lord hath forsaken me, my Lord hath forgotten me.

5. The Lord behaves as a stranger to his people, when he trusts them with dumb and silent rods; trials whereof they understand not the language, and whereby they reap no benefit. This was the case of God's people, Isa. lvii. 17, "For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him: I hid me and was wroth, and he went on frowardly in the way of his heart." Though God's rod should have let him to see his sin, and lay to heart the cause of the controversy, yet he took no notice of it, but went on in his former course: many, though God's hand be lifted up, they will not see. They are not bettered by his dispensations.

6. When the Lord denies access to his people in duty, and breaks off his wonted correspondence with them: they come to God's ordinary meeting-places with his people, ordinances both public and private, but he is not there; they seek him, but still they miss him, so as they are put to cry with that holy man, Job xxiii. 3, "O that I knew where I might find him." O that I knew the place, the duty, the sermon, the sacrament where I might find him; there I would go and seek him; I try prayer, (saith the poor soul) but that brings me not to him; "for when I cry out and shout he shutteth out my prayer, as Lam. iii. 8. Alas! I got not access to God as formerly, he carries now to me as an alien; for when I come and knock, I find nothing but a shut door, and a silent God. In a word, the Lord withdraws, and behaves as a stranger to his people, when he withholdeth the manifestations of his countenance, the operations of his Spirit, and the special communications of light and life, which he useth to allow to them that love him.

**III.** The next thing was to inquire into the grounds and reasons, why the Lord deals so with his people. I grant, the Lord may thus withdraw from them out of his absolute sovereignty; but commonly he doth it for the correction of sin, Isa. lix. 2. As,

1. When they are guilty of gross sins and scandalous out-breakings, such as cast a

reproach upon religion, and the good ways of the Lord, Isa. i. 13, 14. This is plain in David's case; see 2 Sam. xii. 14, compared with Psal. li. 11.

2. When they turn earthly-minded and prefer the delights of sense to precious Christ, then he withdraws, Isa. lvii. 17. They that have a strong relish for the flesh-pots of Egypt, are not fit to taste the hidden manna. When the Gadarenes came that length as to prefer their swine to Christ's presence, he turned his back, and departed from their coasts, Mat. viii. 28.

3. When we turn slothful and formal in duty, and do not stir up ourselves to seek God's face, then he withdraws, as is plain from Isa. lxiv. 7; Cant. iii. 1. If you put God off with bodies exercise, he will put you off with empty ordinances and dry breasts : if you serve him not with your spirits, he will deprive you of his Spirit. Wherefore, if you would have the Lord be with you, ye must shake off sloth, "Arise and be doing:" according to 1 Chron. xxii. 16.

4. When we neglect or slight the Mediator; by whom we have access and nearness to God, we provoke the Lord to withdraw and turn a stranger to us. And this we do,— When we do not look to Christ for strength to perform duty, but trust to our own strength for doing it.— When we make a saviour of our duties, and put them in Christ's room: and this we are prone to, especially when we attain to any freedom or enlargement in duty. All is well now, think we, God is well pleased, this will render us acceptable to him, and atone for former guilt; and thus the glorious Mediator is forgot, and the idol self is exalted in his place; which is most displeasing to God.

5. When we miscarry under signal manifestations and pledges of God's loving-kindness; turn unthankful; remiss, and untender in our walk, after he hath taken us into his presence-chamber, and set us under the banner of his love. We are told how Solomon sadly miscarried, "even after the Lord had appeared to him twice;" for which the Lord was provoked to withdraw from him, 1 Kings xi. 9. And has not the Lord appeared to some of you, at communion-seasons, oftener than once or twice, and yet grievously have they miscarried after all? Great cause have ye to mourn on this account, and beg that the Lord may not plead a lasting controversy with you for it.

6. When we sin under, and after great afflictions or trials appointed to reclaim us, God is provoked to leave us, Isa. lvii. 17. Has not God smitten some of you, and brought you into the furnace, so that ye melted under his hand? But when in pity he delivered you again, ye soon forgot his dealings, and turned to your old ways. Is it any wonder that he frown and behave as a stranger to you?

7. God is provoked to leave us, when we do not entertain the motions and kindly touches of his Spirit on our hearts; the spouse neglected these, so that her beloved withdrew, turned a stranger to her, and it cost her much travel and sorrow ere she got his countenance again, Cant. v. 2,3,6,7.

8. When we grow hardened and impenitent under provocations, so as we have neither a

due sense of our own sins, nor of the sins of the land we live in, Hos. v. 15, "I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offences, and seek my face." Ah! was there ever more guilt lying on a land, and less feeling of it, than amongst us at this day?

**IV.** The fourth thing was to show when it may be said that people are rightly exercised under such a dispensation, as this of the Lord's withdrawing, and behaving as a stranger to them.

1. We may be said to be rightly exercised under it, when we are truly sensible of our loss, and of our sins, as the procuring cause thereof; and hence are brought heartily to mourn and "lament after the Lord," as the prophet doth in the text and context, and as Israel did in the days of Samuel, 1 Sam. vii. 2.

2. When we place all our comfort and happiness in the favour and presence of God, and are unsatisfied with all other comforts without this; count all worldly things but loss and dung; look on sun, moon, health, wealth, honours, pleasures, houses, relations, yea, life and breath, as most empty and comfortless things without God; so did the prophet in the text, when he addresses himself with this title, "O the hope of Israel!" *q.d.* All our hope is in thee, and we are poor, miserable, and hopeless creatures without thee; and so did the Psalmist, when he saith, Psal. lxxiii. 25, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee."

3. When we are at pain to engage our whole hearts, and all the powers and faculties of our souls, to seek after a withdrawing God: "With my whole heart have I sought thee," saith David, Psal. cxix. 10. And because our hearts are deceitful, and ready to start aside from this work, we should be laying ties and engagements on them to be sincere and fervent about this work, for God takes special notice of such who do; Jer. xx. 21, "Who is this that engageth his heart to approach unto thee."

4. When we diligently lay hold on all opportunities, and use all appointed means for finding an absent God; like the spouse that sought her beloved about all the city, both in the streets and broad ways, Cant. iii. 2. In all duties and ordinances, both private and public, our souls should follow hard after him, and pursue him closely, as it were, from one ordinance to another, Psal. lxxiii. 8.

5. When we wrestle with him in prayer for his gracious return to us, and fill our mouths with arguments in pleading with him, as the prophet doth in the text and context :—He pleads the glory of his name, "Do it for thy name's sake."—He pleads their hopeless and helpless case without him, who was the fountain of all help and comfort: "O the hope of Israel and Saviour thereof."—He pleads the former experiences they had of his kindness to thorn in their helpless condition: "O Saviour of Israel in the time of trouble."—He pleads his power; 'it was very easy for him to relieve them, whatever straits they were in: "Why shouldst thou be as a man astonished, as a mighty man that cannot save?"—He pleads the outward symbols and pledges of his presence he had given them, his temple, his ark, and oracles: "Thou O Lord, art in the midst of us."—He pleads the covenant-relation they stood in to him "We are called by thy name." Upon all

which accounts, we beseech thee leave us not.

6. We are duly exercised under God's withdrawals, when we hold on in our close pursuits after him, notwithstanding of discouragements and disappointments, like Mary Magdalene, John xx. who would not leave the sepulchre when others left it, but searched it over and over again, and waited on with patience, still looking for him, till at length she found her beloved. Thus was the psalmist exercised, Psal. xxv. 15, 16, "Mine eyes are ever toward the Lord.—Turn thee unto me, and have mercy upon me, for I am desolate I and afflicted."

7. When we are unsatisfied with the best means and ordinances, unless we find God in them: David was not content with his enjoying the tabernacle, the ark, sacrifices, the passover, and other of God's pure ordinances: but in the midst of all, "his heart and flesh cried out for the living God," Psal. lxxxiv. 2. Hypocrites, if they have the outward means, are well satisfied; for God's presence and absence are all one to them: but sincere believers will not be put off so; if God be not in the ordinances, nothing can please them, not the most powerful sermons, though an angel were to preach them; nor the most lively communions, though a glorified apostle should come and dispense them. The absence of God is such a great want to them, that nothing in heaven or earth can fill up, but himself.

**V.** The fifth thing is to show, whence it is that the Lord's withdrawing and behaving as a stranger to his people, is such a matter of exercise and trouble to them.

1. Because of the incomparable sweetness and advantage they enjoy in his gracious presence, while they have it; for this is the sum and compend of all blessings, and hath all good things wrapt up in it. The divine presence brings light and life, health and strength, peace and comfort, yea, complete satisfaction to the precious soul that doth enjoy it; no wonder then, that the people of God should be so much concerned for the want of it; for then they may cry out with Micah, and with just ground too, "They have taken away my gods, and what have I more?" Judg. xviii. 24.

2. Because of the effects and consequences of God's withdrawing. from the soul; which being very sad and melancholy, are matter of great of exercise and trouble to God's people: as for instance,

(1.) There follows usually on it, a great darkness upon the spirit; as, when the sun goes down, darkness covers the face of the earth; so when God withdraws; thick clouds veil the face of the understanding, and the whole soul; so that the poor disconsolate soul is bewildered, knows not his way, nor what course to take, but is made to complain, as in Lam. iii. 2, "He hath brought me into darkness, and not into light." Alas! saith he, I know not where I am, nor how it is with me; I know not God's mind nor will towards me; I see not any comfortable sign, neither know I the time how long; I meet with many dark providences; dark ordinances, dark communions, all is dark to me.

(2.) Not only darkness, but much deadness and stupidity also seizes upon the deserted

soul. Why are our spirits so dead in prayer, in hearing, and so dead in communicating? Is it not because the Lord is withdrawn? What these two sisters said to Christ, John xi, "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died;" may be well said by such a poor soul, Lord, if thou hadst been here present in such a duty, in such a sermon or communion, my heart had not been so dead; for why, as Moses saith, Deut. xxx. 22, "He is thy life;" so when our life withdraws, we are dead, and all things are dead to us.

(3.) There follows also an unspiritedness and disability for duty: the soul hath neither heart nor hand for prayer, for reading, hearing, communicating, meditation, self-examination, or any duty. Deserted Heman saith, "I am as a man that hath no strength," Psal. lxxxviii. 4. David's complaint is much the same Psal. xl. 12, "Mine iniquities have taken hold on me, I am not able to look up." His spiritual strength was so wasted, that he was scarce able either to speak or look to God. Now, what is the cause of all our weakness or incapacity for duty? Oh! the Lord is withdrawn. It is a true word our Saviour saith, John xv. 5, "Without me ye can do nothing." It were happy for us, that we were most sensible of this truth, for we are most apt to trust to our own strength, and think still we can do well enough for ourselves: like Samson, when he had sinned away both his God and his strength, yet he went forth to shake himself as at other times, "but wist not that the Lord had departed from him." So many are insensible of the Lord's departure, they go to communions, and think to shake themselves, as at other times; but Oh! there is a benumbedness and weakness that has seized on their spirits, they cannot now lift up their souls at his table.

(4.) There usually follows, on God's withdrawing, great witheredness and barrenness on the souls of his people; their leaf fades, their fruit drops, and they quickly turn like the mountains of Gilboa, "on which there is neither dew nor rain," John xv. 6, "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered." It is his gracious presence only that can make us "fat and flourishing in the courts of our God."

(5.) We become exposed and liable to manifold dangers and enemies; for when God withdraws, our defence withdraws too. Hence Moses comforts Israel against their enemies, Num. xiv. 9, "Ye need not fear them," saith he, "for their defence is departed from them, the Lord is with us." The Lord's presence is his people's defence against all the assaults of their enemies, whether from within or from without, against the power of their lusts, the policy of the devil, and cruelty of the wicked: but if their fence be removed, they are exposed to them all.

(6.) Another effect, which is matter of sad exercise, is, great trouble and anxiety of mind for former unkindness and ingratitude to God. Hence the psalmist saith, Psal. lxxvii. 3, "I remembered God, and was troubled." Formerly he had remembered God, and was comforted; his meditation of him was sweet, but now it was far otherwise: Oh! says he, I now remember my unkindness to him that was so good to me; my conscience upbraids me for my unsuitable carriage: "Is this thy kindness to thy friend?" Where are all thy former purposes and resolutions? Thy promises and vows made at sacraments? Are they all come to this? Oh! thou hast sinned thy God and friend away from thee! It was the thoughts thereof that broke Peter's heart, and made him weep so bitterly.

(7.) There follows on it very melancholy and unwelcome thoughts of death and judgment. When God is present with the believer, he can say as in Psal. xxiii. 4, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me." But O! it is melancholy to think of going through that valley without him, and of appearing before him while he frowns and behaves as a stranger or enemy to us.

(8.) Sometimes there follows a revived sense of wrath, old wounds begin to open and bleed afresh; the deserted soul is driven back to the foot of mount Sinai, and begins to bear its thunders and curses renewed, though he once thought they had been all silenced by the blood of Christ. Thus it was with Heman, Psal. lxxxviii. 7, "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me," &c.

*Lastly*, The fears of utter rejection is another consequence, that oft proves matter of sad exercise to the deserted soul. Alas! I fear my cause shall never be better, that my sky shall never break, nor my clouds dissipate; that I shall never recover God's presence again, but be banished eternally from it; so with the psalmist, Psal. lxxvii. 9, 10, "Has God forgotten to be gracious? Hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?" And Psal. cxix. 8, "O forsake me not utterly."

## **APPLICATION**

### **Use I. Of Information.**

1. Hence we may informed, that there are but few true seekers of God among us, seeing there are few to whom God's withdrawing is matter of much exercise or trouble; few mourning on this account, like the prophet, and crying, "Why art thou such a stranger to my soul?" Many are troubled for other trifling losses, but few that can say with David, Psal. xxx. 7, "Thou didst hide thy face and I was troubled."

2. We may see, the misery of those who are far from God now, and are like to be deprived of his presence for ever, Psal. lxxiii. 27. Unrenewed persons desire not God's presence here, but say to him, "Depart from us," John xxi. 14, and alas! their choice is their judgment, and shall be so for ever; for the judge's sentence against them will be, "Depart from me," &c. If the Ephesians sorrowed most of all for that parting word of Paul to them, "Ye shall see my face no more," Acts xx. 38, how much more will such a word from Christ's mouth at the last day be piercing and heart -breaking to the ungodly for ever?

3. How sad must the case of those be, from whom God withdraws, not to return again! The Spirit of God comes, and strives for a time many; but, when resisted and grieved, he goes away from an unconverted soul, he seldom returns to strive any more. When the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, he came not again, but, an evil spirit in his place, 1 Sam. xvi. 14.

4. Believers should not conclude that God has cast them off, because he is a stranger to them for a time; for this hath been the lot of the dearest of God's children, yea, even of his own beloved Son himself when in this world.

## **Use II. Of Reproof.**

1. To those who are so great strangers to religion, and the state of their own souls, that they know not what God's presence or absence is; and so indifferent are many about this matter, they never inquired to this day, whether God be a stranger or a friend to their souls.

2. To those believers, towards whom God may be behaving as a stranger; and yet they are insensible of it. They are become so unwatchful, and so much charmed with the delights of sense, and their spiritual senses so dull, that they are fallen into Samson's condition, Judg. xvi. 20, "He wist not that the Lord had departed from him."

3. To those who, though they be sensible of the Lord's withdrawals, yet are not duly affected therewith. It is not a matter of serious soul-exercise to them, as it was to Jeremiah in the text and to Job, Job xxiii. 3—9, and to the Israelites, 1 Sam. vii. 2, "Who lamented after the Lord."

4. To those who are so far from being suitably exercised and affected with the Lord's withdrawals from them, that they are still sinning him farther away; by their formality in duty, untenderness of walk, slighting of the Spirit's motions, and venturing on sins against light. O believer! "is this thy kindness to thy friend? Dost thou thus requite the Lord?" We do not marvel to see persecutors, and haters of God, driving him away, or to see Christ receiving wounds from his enemies: but O! it is sad, that precious Christ should get such wounds in the house of his friends.

## **Use III. Of exhortation, to two sorts of persons.**

1. To those who are strangers to God, and know nothing of his presence. 2. To those who have known it, but he is become a stranger to them.

As to the first sort, I exhort you, in the name of the Lord, to bethink yourselves, and consider your misery in this state; for "lo, they that are far from God shall perish." It is the character of those who are in a lost state, to be "without God in the world." Now, your misery, while; such, is inexpressible.—You are utterly unfit to come to the Lord's table; for "what communion can there be between light and darkness!" Or, between those that have hitherto been strangers and enemies to one another. Remember, it is only a feast for friends: strangers to God are debarred.—Your state is most uncomfortable; the sun hath never risen upon you; God's face hath never shined upon you; it is still dark night with you, and you sit "in the region and shadow of death." — You are under the dominion of Satan, the prince and ruler of darkness.—You are under

the heavy clouds of God's wrath and indignation.—You sit constantly on the very borders of hell. —O sinner! consider what a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a dying hour will prove to thee. When thy soul is stepping forth into another world, how ready will it be to shrink back, and say, How shall I appear before that God, who has always been a stranger to me and with whom I never had the least acquaintance! Can I look for any thing but a frowning Judge, and a fearful sentence? O strangers, come and “acquaint yourselves with God now,” accept of his offers of mercy, and “be at peace” with him through Christ; and “thereby shall good come unto you.”

As to the second sort, viz, those who have had acquaintance with God, but he is become a stranger to them. O poor soul, be suitably affected with this dispensation; let it be [a] matter of exercise to thee on a fast-day before the communion: it will be a heartless and fruitless communion if God continue as a stranger to thee; therefore be not easy under his withdrawals.

*Consideration 1.* Your soul's grievances can never be removed while God keeps at a distance from you; but they will still be growing greater; as for instance, while he is a stranger, you cannot have light for your darkness, but darkness will be increasing; you cannot have life for your deadness, but you will still be growing deader in spiritual things; you cannot have appetite for your food, but you will always be turning the more indifferent about it; you cannot have protection from your enemies, but you will still be brought the more under their power. Things will still be growing worse, the longer God is a stranger to thy soul.

2. Ordinances can neither be pleasant nor profitable to thee, while God is a stranger to thy soul; you cannot see any beauty in them, while God is absent; for without the Lord's presence, ordinances are dead, and a dead thing can have no beauty. It is his presence that puts a lustre on ordinances, and makes them shine, so as to confirm the friends of the gospel, and make enemies ashamed of their opposition. It is his presence that puts life in communions, and life in communicants, and causes them to prefer a day in “God's courts to a thousand elsewhere.” It is his presence that makes ordinances fruitful, and his people's souls to thrive under them. O! why have you such lean souls and barren hearts under ordinances? It is because the Lord is a stranger to them. Would you have your food' blest, gospel-seasons fruitful, and your souls under the influence thereof, like watered gardens? Then seek the Lord's presence, 1Cor. lii. 7, “It is not he that planteth, nor he that watereth, but God that gives the increase.

*Quest.* Seeing God is setting a solemn appointment to meet with us at this occasion, and it highly concerneth us to make ready to meet with him: How shall we be exercised on this fast-day, so as to get distance removed, and breaches made up, that God may not be a stranger to us on the feast-day?.

ANS. I shall give you some advice; and draw to a close.

1. Make no harsh construction of God's dealings with your souls, whatever they be, but justify him; leave your complaints upon yourselves, and blame your sins, that separate betwixt you and your God, Isa. Lix. 2. We have a challenge from God that may soon silence all out murmuring, Jer. ii. 17, "Hast thou not procured this to thyself, in that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God?"

2. Be still restless, dissatisfied, and uneasy in your minds, till the distance and estrangement be removed: and be expressing your uneasiness by frequent sighs, complaints, and lamentations after God; sit as a widow in his absence and let none have your love but him alone; refuse all other comforters, till he himself return; imitate the church's practice, Lam. i. 16, "For these things I weep, mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water, because the comforter that should relieve my soul, is far from me."

3. Search diligently for the cause of the Lord's estrangement from you, as the psalmist did, Psal. lxxvii. 6, "I communed with mine own heart, my spirit made diligent search." Oh! where is the idol? What is the sin that hath been the Achan in the camp, and provoked God to turn his back? And as soon as you find it out see that you cast out the accursed thing. Let not thine eye pity, neither do thou spare it; for it has taken thy Lord away from thee. If thou canst not find it, then go humbly to God, and cry with Job, "Show me wherefore thou contendedst with me," Job x. 2. Lord, what is the evil, the sin, or lust which thou rebukest, and for which thou pleadest the controversy? Have I quenched thy Spirit? Have I neglected duty? Was I formal in communicating, or unthankful for former intimations of thy love? "Lord, what I see not, teach thou me; make me to know my transgressions, and my sin."

4. Seek to be deeply humbled for every evil and sin that you are convinced of; particularly, for the heinous aggravations of them; say, O Lord! I am guilty in thy sight; I have sinned against more light, more mercies, more vows, and more proofs of thy loving-kindness, than others: I have gratified Satan, hardened the wicked, reproached religion, and dishonoured God more by my sins, than others do; so that thou mayest justly frown on me, and make the solemn day, which will be a day of feasting, rejoicing, and gladness to thy children, a day of darkness, gloominess, and distress to me.

5. Plead by faith the Redeemer's blood, for; removing the estrangement, and bringing thy soul nigh to God; for nothing else can do it, according to Eph. ii. 13. Say, Lord, though I deserve not to taste of thy supper, but to meet with a frown instead of a smile, a breach instead of a blessing, a cup of wrath instead of the cup of the New Testament; yet behold the blood of my Surety, and be merciful to me. Lord! I have broken all thy commands; but has not my Surety fulfilled them all? I have indeed affronted thy justice; but has not my Surety satisfied it? I have deserved thy wrath; but he has endured it. Remember not what I have done against thee, but what he hath done and suffered for me; and let rue be accepted in him who is thy beloved Son.

6. While God carries as a stranger to thee, be not thou a stranger to the throne of grace, but continue instant in prayer for the return of his gracious presence; plead the great

need you have of it, and the helpless case you are in without it. Beg, however he deal with you now, that he may not be a stranger to you on the feast-day. Say, Lord, if thy presence go not with me, carry me not hence." What will a communion feast avail me without communion with thyself in it? I go not there for bread and wine, but I go to see Jesus: and what wilt thou give me, if I go from thy table Christless? O let Christ appear be made known to me in the breaking of bread. Let me enjoy thy lightsome and reviving company in this state of pilgrimage and trouble. Descend into my heart by the influences of grace, and quickenings of thy Spirit, and let me ascend unto thee, by the breathings of faith, love and desire. Lord, grant the request of an importunate petitioner, and come over the mountains of my guilt. Lord, stand not at a distance behind the wall, but show thyself through the lattice of thy ordinance, and let me use the goings of my God and my King in the sanctuary. Oh! let me not go away empty from an inexhaustible treasure, cold from the sun, dry from the fountain, hungry, sad and comfortless from a feast of love. But Oh! let me meet with my Saviour there, see his face, and hear his voice; and let me come from his table with my pardon sealed, my corruptions subdued,, my graces quickened, my heart enlarged, and my soul refreshed and encouraged to run in the ways of thy commandments, and so inseparably united to thee, that no temptation maybe ever able to dissolve the union."

OBJECT. *Oh! saith some poor soul, I fear all my endeavours will be in vain; for I have communicated unworthily before; I have shed the blood of Christ, and sinned against light; so that I doubt and fear that my day of grace is past, and I am cast out of God's sight.*

ANS. However dark your case may be, yet surely it is no darker than Jonah's was in the whale's belly; who, though he never read or heard of any in such distress: yet when he is concluding, I am cast out of God's sight, he aims at a believing look to God in Christ, "Yet will I look again toward the holy temple," Jonah ii. 4. Mind also Abraham's case, though he was an hundred years old, and his body as good as dead, yet he believed in God that raised the dead; yea, he believed and hoped against hope. Lord, help us to imitate him. Amen.

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