

Q U E R Y

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*How may a Person be assured that his Afflictions  
are sanctified? &c.*

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QUERY in the Gospel Magazine,

*How may a Person be assured that his Afflictions are sanctified? &c.*

THE afflictions of the Lord's people are undoubtedly always productive of spiritual advantage to their souls; for the inspired Paul expressly says, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, and are the called according to his purpose." There being no possibility for afflictions working in ordinary for the present good of the body, or of temporal circumstances, it must follow, that the good for which they are said to work is of a spiritual nature, and refers to the soul, though these effects which afflictions produce are not always apprehended on a sudden. On the contrary, the very good which they do the believing soul is commonly matter of exquisite distress for a time, till the muddy waters being somewhat settled, the child of sorrow begins to see the dust of the Redeemer's feet in the cloud which lately overspread his tabernacle; for it ought always to be remembered, that the bridegroom pays most of his visits to his betrothed in his cloudy chariot, so that we are seldom sensible of his presence till he is gone, and the savour of his good ointments convinceth us of the identity of his person; but let the cloud be ever so gloomy and black, the aspect of providence ever so threatening, it is morally impossible, that the visits of Jesus should do no good, let him assume what mode of appearance he will. His external appearances may vary, but his heart is still the same melting heart of mercy and compassion. But, as the Lord does visit with afflictions, and as afflictions duly sanctified are a great blessing, how may a person be assured

assured that his afflictions are sanctified? I might answer, when he finds more love to God, more submission to the divine will, more patience in tribulation, and more of a spirit of prayer and supplication than before, as is commonly answered in such a case. But I cannot persuade myself, that this is the happiest method of strengthening the weak hands, and confirming the feeble knees of God's poor afflicted children, seeing some people may examine very closely, and yet be able to apprehend nothing, but the very contrary of these feelings; and does our divine religion provide no ground of encouragement for them? yes verily; and afflictions are certainly sanctified, when,

1<sup>st</sup>, They draw forth our latent corruptions to view, which is frequently done, when, in reality, we cannot find more love to God, more humble submission to his will, more of a spirit of prayer, and more heart-inclination to spiritual duties: Instead of love, the enmity of the carnal heart may be discovered; instead of humble submission to his will, we may experience an impatient rebellious spirit, which we could hardly have believed ourselves the subjects of, without this disagreeable experience. There these corruptions dwelt before; but lay concealed in the deep recesses of the soul, till the harrow of affliction brought them to view; "whatsoever doth make manifest is light," and all light cometh from God the father of lights; hence some are afflicted, and see no more of their hearts than before, because the light of God's Spirit never shone at all into their hearts to bring them to view. But, in this case, the believer is apt to mistake the real effects of afflictions for evils instead of blessings; when unbelief, impatience, and carnal enmity, pride, and self, are manifested, he concludes that his heart

is got worse instead of better. By his afflictions, he may be terrified at the discovery he has of himself, and deem his awful feelings certain badges of alienation from God; whereas the truth is, the heart is just what it was before, enmity against God; but grace has brought it more to light, and therefore the advantage is greatly on the side of the patient, as an hidden enemy is by far more dangerous than an open one. Perhaps in the days of Job's first prosperity, it would have been difficult to persuade him, that he was capable of charging God with dealing cruelly by him; but his afflictions irritated the enmity of his heart, and drew it forth in its native opposition to God. Had not this enmity been native in his heart, it had not, on this occasion, been drawn forth: The pious man might have continued it's subject ignorantly, therefore it's manifestation was certainly to his advantage.

2dly, Afflictions are sanctified and for good, when they put our faith to the trial, that we may feel how weak it is, and how subject we are to doubt the mercy and goodness of a gracious God to us in the day of our calamity. It is not enough that we attain the knowledge of Christ, as the keeper of our persons; but God will make him known as the keeper of our faith also: Which knowledge is attainable only by faith being put to the trial, without communicated assistance for that present time, that, by feeling it's own infirmity and weakness, it may live upon its proper object, and not upon itself: Hence, in the beginning of any severe affliction, the soul is sometimes left to itself, in its own strength, to struggle at once against the streams of affliction, unbelief, and rising corruption, that the Lord may shew unto us all that is in our hearts. It was to little purpose Jesus told the zealous,

lous, well-affected Peter, "that he had prayed  
 "for him, that his faith should not fail," whilst  
 he thought himself capable of cleaving to him, even  
 unto death. But when he found himself capable  
 of denying him, his sole consolation lay in the  
 prayer of his Redeemer, "that his faith should not  
 "fail." An untried professor is a very dubious  
 character, therefore God has very wisely joined  
 religion with the cross, and afflictions with faith;  
 for faith cannot live in it's exercise without it's fights  
 and conflicts. Now, where would be the trial, if  
 faith did always triumph over it's opponents? It  
 would blunt the edge of the enemy's sword, and  
 extract the bitterness from affliction; so that, in  
 very deed, the affliction sustained, would not answer  
 the end proposed, as to bring forth our unbelief to  
 open light. The foundation of all faith and  
 strength, victories and triumphs, lies in felt weak-  
 ness. Jacob threshes no mountains to powder, till  
 he feels himself a worm; and the moment he feels  
 himself reduced to that state of nothingness, he  
 commenceth a new threshing instrument, having  
 teeth. Samson can never overthrow the house of  
 Dagon, till he himself, in his own person, is entire-  
 ly in the power of the Philistines; but once totally  
 deprived of personal excellency, he lays hold on  
 the power of Omnipotence, and works the destruc-  
 tion of his enemies. Afflictions are the scissars,  
 which shear away personal strength, excellency,  
 and supposed capacity for doing good, or with-  
 standing the power of the Philistines in our own  
 persons. Whilst we can go out, and shake ourselves,  
 and break the withes with which our sins have  
 attempted to bind us, we shall smile at Delilah's  
 web, and ascribe the whole excellency to our own  
 graces, instead of that grace which is in Christ.

But,

But, when our hair, in which lies all our personal strength, is actually gone, and we feel ourselves, in reality, within the power of the enemy, without the light of comfort, and incapable of delivering ourselves, we shall then look to the Lord alone, from whom cometh our help; so that our very weakness is the foundation of all gospel strength and victory. But weakness can never be felt, unless we are called to sustain hardships; and the strength of our faith, hope, and charity, is tried to the utmost.

3dly, Whenever afflictions lead their subjects into a further knowledge of their own wretchedness, and total incapacity for either doing or bearing the will of God, without fresh communications from him, in whom it hath pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell, I must conclude that they are sanctified, and of real advantage. The leading design of the blessed gospel, is to bring us to live on the grace that is in Christ, not on that which is from him, and in ourselves: We shall never live upon the grace that is in Christ, till we are driven out of ourselves. There is nothing will drive us out of ourselves but soul-famine, a thorough sense of the plague and pollution of our nature, and a total helplessness in ourselves; nothing but afflictions in the hand of the Holy Ghost, will give these discoveries; and wherever these discoveries are made, and by what means soever they are made, it is clear that the means have been owned and sanctified; so that great good is frequently received by afflictions. When the soul, with respect to comfort, may be said to walk in darkness, and have no light, "Ephraim shall grow as the lily," the strength and fertility of which lie all in the root. In winter the lily loses all its beauty and fragrance, but nothing of its fertility and excellence, those are safe in the root.

The

The believer grows downward into his root, (Christ,) in the winter state of affliction, when his buds and blossoms seem to be all beaten off by the bleak winds and falling rains: Buried thus in the root in winter, he shall yet spring up in summer, and the good favour of the Redeemer's ointments shall breath ambrosial fragrance all around him; and when once he hath learned to glorify Christ, by living entirely upon him, Christ will glorify him with the beauteous and ornamental fruits of thus believing.

*4tly*, As I would fain reach the case of the most distressed of God's afflicted children, as their brother and fellow in tribulation, and the kingdom of patience, I would observe, that it hath been said afflictions are always sanctified, when they bring you nearer to a throne of grace. It is certainly true: But will it follow, that these afflictions, in which the soul is quite overwhelmed, the enemy comes in as a flood, and bears down all before him, the reasoning powers of the mind not excepted, and in which the tongue cleaves to the roof of the mouth for thirst, are not to be reckoned sanctified afflictions?

Some know, if my reader does not, that afflictions may be so complicated and so intense, as to incapacitate the soul, for a season, for both prayer and praise, and the party shall yet emerge out of them with renewed strength and lustre, like the morning sun; and shall those afflictions be deemed judgements, or un sanctified afflictions? I know no medium betwixt judgements and un sanctified afflictions; and am inclined, therefore, to number this most distressing of all cases among sanctified afflictions, which are to the believer's advantage.

“ When the poor and needy seek water, and find  
 “ none, and their tongues cleave to the roof of their  
 “ mouth



“ mouth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Jacob will not forsake them.” This evidently proves, that such afflictions are not to be understood as judgements; for, in case of judgements, God would not hear, and would certainly forsake, contrary to that gracious declaration, “ I the Lord will hear them, even when they cannot cry to me.” When the tongue of prayer cleaves to the roof of their mouths, the Lord will hear their wants and distresses. Those afflictions must need be salutary which stir up our beloved to come to our assistance. Moreover, there appears the same necessity of our being taught our incapacity for prayer as for believing, as the power and spirit of both are equally from God, and solely dependent on divine influences. But how shall a man know this experimentally, without being left in the greatest necessity, sometimes incapable of the exercise of prayer? for a man who never felt an absolute incapacity for prayer in the time of need, to confess, “ That we know not how to pray as we ought; that we are not sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God,” approaches too near to hypocrisy, for God to allow it in his own children. Although bastards and heathens may be suffered to go on with their vain unmeaning repetitions, it will not be so with the children; for the great Prophet will teach them their total incapacity for prayer and every thing that is good.

Whatsoever, therefore, brings us to a sense of our own ignorance, folly, incapacity, sin, and wretchedness; whatsoever tends to break every bruised reed, upon which we are apt to lean, to pull down every lying refuge, in which we are prone to trust; whatsoever tends to raze every sandy

sandy foundation of creature-dependence; word, whatsoever ungrasps our hold of every creature-delight, empties us of all personal sufficiency, and lays the soul low, helpless, and hopeless, at the feet of the Redeemer, trusting alone in his free mercy, may, with the strictest propriety, be considered as sanctified, and to our advantage.

Ephraim had his dark and cloudy days of bemoaning himself amidst his reproach and shame, when God became a moth in his substance, and a lion in his family, rending and tearing away his dearest delights, shattering his idols, and casting down all his altars to sin. But were not these instances of the divine conduct towards him, most evidently the fruits of God's unalterable attachment to him, and the greatest blessings that could have possibly befallen backsliding Ephraim? Blessings, which operated in Ephraim's favour, even when he was, as yet, far from having the comfort of them. Blessings, all tending to bring him to that union of heart and affection with God described in the fourteenth chapter of Hosea.

Believers are apt to mistake in nothing more than the effects produced by their afflictions; and if I am not greatly mistaken, many divines have taken the wrong method in describing them. The ultimate issue of them most undoubtedly is, "the peaceable fruits of righteousness." But their first and immediate effect is, to harrow up the soul, and bring the weeds which grow there secretly, and unseen before, to the surface, to open view. The wise husbandman thus harrows up the skutch in spring, which would otherwise spoil his expected crop; and when he has so done, he burns it with fire. At first view, one would suppose, that the beauty of the field is entirely ruined by this operation, yet it effectually

effectually secures both it's beauty and fertility in the end.

There is a gracious promise made by Moses to Israel, which ought to be much regarded; "and the Lord thy God will put out before thee all these thine enemies by little and little." A promise which sets before us the whole work of God in our sanctification; the agency by which, and the manner how the work is carried on.

Much beauty lies in the promise, and this in particular, "thine enemies shall be put out before thee;" thou shalt see thine enemies before they are put out; and as sure as ever they are brought to thy view as enemies, the Lord thy God will put them out, though it may be by little and little.

God will bring all our inward enemies, every lurking Canaanite to light, before he puts them out, whatever pain the awful discovery may give us; for he studies our salvation and final possession of the promised land, rather than our present inclination and pleasure: We would gladly enter into the land at once to possess it, without so much as seeing war; but this is contrary to the purpose of God. It is the divine purpose, that the Canaanitish lusts of the human heart must all be led to execution first; in order to which, they must be drawn forth from their dark and deep recesses, and brought before us, that we may bear witness against them of the evils which we have suffered on their account, and by their means. If a man is robbed on the high way, in order to bring the villain who robbed him to public justice, he must confront him before the judge, and swear to the reality of the robbery, and identity of the person of the robber.

But when our gracious Redeemer, by means of affliction, or otherwise, brings forth the abominations

tions of the heart to our view, how shocking is the discovery, how dreadful our apprehensions, as if we were in danger of being left to their power and dominion, little knowing that they are so many prisoners in the hands of the officers of justice, and restrained from doing us any real harm. A certain lady being robbed, and barbarously treated on the high way, the ruffian, who perpetrated the villainy, being taken, was brought to his trial, and the lady obliged to appear against him in court. No sooner had she set her eyes upon him, when brought to the bar, but she scream'd out, as under the most alarming apprehensions of danger, and, with difficulty, could be brought to believe, that the villain was in fetters, and wholly in the power of the officers of the king; it is even frequently so with the poor believer upon any particular discovery of what is in his heart, or of what of considering that sin hated is sin pardoned, that abominations loathed are abominations cleansed, he is apprehensive of the most awful and tremendous consequences of the discovery of his heart.

These things duly attended to, I am inclined to think it will appear, that the Lord's people are frequently afraid, where there is no real ground for fear; and that we receive good very often under the disguise of evil. I shall add nothing more now; but earnestly pray, that a sympathizing Redeemer may bless these few remarks for the benefit of the afflicted reader.

F I N I S.