
**Contemplations On the Historical Passages of the Old
and New Testament**

Hall Joseph

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CONTEMPLATIONS
ON THE
HISTORICAL PASSAGES
OF THE
OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT.

BY THE LATE
RIGHT REV. JOSEPH HALL, D.D.
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CONTEMPLATIONS
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BOOK I.

CONTEMPLATION I.

THE ANGEL AND ZACHARY.

WHEN things are at the worst, then God begins a change: the state of the Jewish church was extremely corrupted immediately before the news of the Gospel: yet, as bad as it was, not only the priesthood, but the courses of attendance, continued, even from David's time, till Christ's. It is a desperately depraved condition of a church where no good orders are left. Judea passed many troubles, many alterations, yet this orderly combination endured about eleven hundred years. A settled good will not easily be defeated, but, in the change of persons, will remain unchanged, and, if it be forced to give way, leaves memorable footsteps behind it. If David foresaw the perpetuation of this holy ordinance, how much did he rejoice in the knowledge of it! Who would not be glad to do good, on condition that it may so long out-live him?

The successive turns of the legal ministration held on in a line never interrupted: even in a forlorn and miserable church, there may be a personal succession.

How little were the Jews better for this when they had lost the Urim and Thummim, sincerity of doctrine and manners! This stayed with them, even while they and their sons crucified Christ. What is more ordinary than wicked sons of holy parents? It is the succession of truth and holiness that makes or institutes a church, whatever become of the persons. Never times were so barren as not to yield some good. The greatest dearth affords some few good ears to the gleaners. Christ would not have come into the world, but he would have some faithful to entertain him. He that had the disposing of all times and men, would cast some holy ones into his own times. There had been no equality, that all should either over-run or follow him, and none attend him. Zachary and Elizabeth are just, both of Aaron's blood, and John Baptist of theirs: whence should a holy seed spring, if not of the loins of Levi? It is not in the power of parents to traduce holiness to their children: it is the blessing of God that feoffs them in the virtues of their parents, as they feoff them in their sins. There is no certainty, but there is likelihood of a holy generation, when the parents are such. Elizabeth was

just, as well as Zachary, that the forerunner of a Saviour might be holy on both sides. If the stock and the graff be not both good, there is much danger of the fruit. It is a happy match when the husband and wife are one, not only in themselves but in God, not more in flesh than in the spirit. Grace makes no difference of sexes; rather the weaker carries away the more honour, because it hath had less helps. It is easy to observe that the New Testament affordeth more store of good women than the Old: Elizabeth led the ring of this mercy, whose barrenness ended in a miraculous fruit, both of her body, and of her time.

This religious pair made no less progress in virtue than in age, and yet their virtue could not make their best age fruitful: "Elizabeth was barren." A just soul and a barren womb may well agree together.

Amongst the Jews barrenness was not a defect only, but a reproach, yet while this good woman was fruitful of holy obedience, she was barren of children: as John, which was miraculously conceived by man, was a fit forerunner of him that was conceived by the Holy Ghost, so a barren matron was meet to make way for a virgin.

None, but a son of Aaron, might offer incense to God in the temple; and not every son of Aaron, and not any one at all seasons. God is a God of order, and hates confusion no less than irreligion. Albeit he hath not so straitened himself under the Gospel, as to tie his service to persons or places; yet his choice is now no less curious because it is more large; he allows none but the authorized, he authorizeth none but the worthy. The incense doth ever smell of the hand that offers it; I doubt not but that perfume was sweeter which ascended up from the hand of a just Zachary. "The sacrifice of the wicked is abomination to God." There were courses of ministration in the legal services. God never purposed to burden any of his creatures with devotion. How vain is the ambition of any soul that would load itself with the universal charge of all men! How thankless is their labour that do wilfully overspend themselves in their ordinary vocations! As Zachary had a course in God's house, so he carefully observed it: the favour of these respites doubled his diligence. The more high and sacred our calling is, the more dangerous is neglect. It is our honour that we may be allowed to wait upon the God of heaven in these immediate services. Woe be to us if we slacken those duties wherein God honours us more than we can honour him!

Many sons of Aaron, yea of the same family, served at once in the temple, according to the variety of employments. To avoid all difference, they agreed by lot to assign themselves to the several offices of each day. The lot of this day called Zachary to offer incense in the outer temple. I do not find any pre-

scription they had from God of this particular manner of designment. Matters of good order in holy affairs may be ruled by the wise institution of men, according to reason and expediency.

It fell out well that Zachary was chosen by lot to this ministration, that God's immediate hand might be seen in all the passages that concerned his great Prophet; that as the person, so the occasion, might be of God's own choosing. In lots, and their seeming casual disposition, God can give a reason, though we can give none. Morning and evening, twice a day, their Law called them to offer incense to God, that both parts of the day might be consecrated to the Maker of time. The outer temple was the figure of the whole church upon earth, like as the holy of holies represented heaven. Nothing can better resemble our faithful prayers than sweet perfume: these God looks that we should (all his church over) send up unto him morning and evening. The elevations of our hearts should be perpetual; but if, twice in the day, we do not present God with our solemn invocations, we make the Gospel less officious than the Law.

That the resemblance of prayers and incense might be apparent, while the priest sends up his incense within the temple, the people must send up their prayers without: their breath and that incense, though remote in the first rising, meet ere they went up to heaven. The people might no more go into the holy place to offer up the incense of prayers unto God, than Zachary might go into the holy of holies. While the partition-wall stood betwixt Jews and Gentiles, there were also partitions betwixt the Jews and themselves. Now every man is a priest unto God; every man, since the vail was rent, prays within the temple. What are we the better for our greater freedom of access to God, under the Gospel, if we do not make use of our privilege?

While they were praying to God, he sees an angel

of God ; as Gideon's angel went up in the smoke of the sacrifice, so did Zachary's angel, as it were, come down in the fragrant smoke of his incense. It was ever great news to see an angel of God, but now more, because God had long withdrawn from them all the means of his supernatural revelations. As this wicked people were strangers to their God in their conversation, so was God grown a stranger to them in his apparitions ; yet now, that the season of the Gospel approached, he visited them with his angels before he visited them by his Son. He sends his angel to men in form of man, before he sends his Son to take human form. The presence of angels is no novelty, but their apparition ; they are always with us, but rarely seen, that we may awfully respect their messages when they are seen ; in the mean time our faith may see them, though our senses do not : their assumed shapes do not make them more present, but visible.

There is an order in that heavenly Hierarchy, though we know it not. This angel that appeared to Zachary, was not with him in the ordinary course of his attendances, but was purposely sent from God with this message. Why was an angel sent ? and why this angel ? It had been easy for him to have raised up the prophetic spirit of some Simeon to this prediction ; the same Holy Ghost which revealed to that just man that he should not see death ere he had seen the Messiah, might have as easily revealed unto him the birth of the forerunner of Christ, and by him to Zachary : but God would have this voice, which should go before his Son, come with a noise ; he would have it appear to the world, that the harbinger of the Messiah should be conceived by the marvellous power of that God whose coming he proclaimed. It was fit the first herald of the Gospel should begin in wonder. The same angel that came to the blessed Virgin with the news of Christ's conception, came to Zachary with the news of John's, for the honour of him that was the greatest of them which were born of women, and