

The Oracles of God.

by Edward Payson

The Scriptures are the most valuable gift of God, containing the true and living oracles of God, and providing guidance and wisdom for humanity.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:47, Proverbs 3:27, Isaiah 60:5, Hebrews 4:12, James 1:22

Topics: "Scripture Authority", "Spiritual Guidance"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the immense value of the Scriptures as the oracles of God, highlighting the blessings bestowed upon the ancient Jewish nation through miracles and the possession of these sacred writings. He emphasizes the importance of reverently consulting the Scriptures, believing in their life-giving power, and approaching them with sincerity and prayer. Payson urges the audience to consider the neglect of seamen's moral and religious well-being, pointing out the dire consequences of such neglect and the duty to provide them with the Scriptures for guidance and salvation.

Transcript

"What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? much every way; chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God"

Romans 3:1, 2

the history of God's ancient people, of his gracious interpositions in their favor, and of the distinguished blessings which he conferred on them; this assembly are, it is presumed, familiarly acquainted. None who are thus acquainted with it need be informed, that the works which he wrought for this highly favored nation were, emphatically, great. They were even so in his estimation; for he frequently speaks of them as demanding and displaying, a mighty hand, and a stretched out arm.

In the performance of these works, most of the established laws of nature were repeatedly suspended or counteracted; and miracles became events of daily occurrence. Rocks poured out water, and waters were turned to blood; the clouds rained bread, and the winds brought flesh; rivers and seas divided, and the earth opened; the regular succession of day and night was, in a part of the world at least, interrupted, and the sun and the moon stood still in their habitations. Important changes, changes the consequences of which are still extensively felt, were also effected in the political world.

A powerful nation was nearly destroyed by an unexampled series of miraculous judgments; seven other nations were exterminated, or driven from their territories; and a new nation, of a peculiar character, was formed, and planted in their room. Nor was this all. Events of a far more extraordinary nature, and of incomparably deeper, and more awful interest than any which have yet been mentioned, occurred. Angels descended from their celestial abodes; disclosed themselves to the eyes, addressed themselves to the ears, and interposed, visibly, in the affairs of mortals: and even Jehovah Himself, coming forth from that unapproachable light which he inhabits, visited and dwelt among men in a manner cognizable by their senses; went before his favored people in a pillar of cloud and fire: conversed face to face with an individual of our species, As a man talketh with his friend; and on Sinai, displayed his presence, his perfections, and his supreme legislative authority, with such attending circumstances of grandeur and terror, as will never again be witnessed on earth, till the day of final retribution shall arrive.

Now why was all this done? The all-wise God who does nothing in vain, and who never acts without an adequate motive, must, surely, have designed to effect some most important object, by these unparalleled works of wonder and power: of condescension and love. He did so; and he has informed its what it was. He had set his love upon this favored nation; he had chosen them to be his own peculiar people; and he had promised, with an oath, to bestow on them distinguishing blessings.

To glorify himself, by displaying his power, his faithfulness, and the riches of his goodness in the fulfillment of this promise, was, as he repeatedly declared, the object which he had in view while performing these works. And what were these promised blessings; the bestowal of which demanded and justified such a profusion of miracles; such extraordinary interpositions and manifestations of Divinity? That they must have been great indeed, cannot be doubted. A brief enumeration of them will show that they were so.

They included, the deliverance of the nation from Egyptian bondage; their settlement in a land flowing with milk and honey; the formation of a national covenant between them and their God; and the establishment of his worship, and of the true religion among them, while all other nations were enslaved by the grossest ignorance, superstition, and idolatry. Such advantages had the Jew; such were the blessings connected with circumcision. We have not yet, however, enumerated them all.

The apostle informs us in our text, that the chief blessings enjoyed by his countrymen, consisted in their possession of the Sacred Scriptures; here styled, the oracles of God. It must be recollected, that in making this assertion, he expressed, not his own sentiments merely, but, the mind of the Spirit, by whom he was inspired. We are, therefore, to regard this passage, as containing the testimony of the Spirit of God, that is, of God himself, to the value of the Scriptures.

We learn from it, that he viewed them as the most valuable gift which he had bestowed upon the Jews; and their possession as constituting the principal advantage, enjoyed by them above other nations. Now consider a moment, my hearers, how much this implies. You have heard a brief statement, a statement which, you are sensible, falls far below the truth, of the wonderful works which God wrought for this people. You have heard that his design in performing these works was, to glorify himself, by bestowing on them corresponding blessings.

And now it appears, that of all the blessings thus bestowed; blessings, in conferring which God designed to make a grand exhibition of his perfections, and display the riches of his goodness to a favored people, the Scriptures were, in his estimation, the greatest; greater than their deliverance from the most cruel bondage; greater than the possession of the promised land; greater than all their civil and political

privileges; greater, even, than all their other religious advantages.

The passage before us, then, taken in connection with the facts which have been mentioned, evidently teaches that, in the judgment of God, the Scriptures are one of the most valuable gifts which he can bestow; one of the richest blessings which men can possess. It is scarcely necessary to add, that, if they are so in his judgment, they are so in reality; since his judgment is ever according to truth. And if they are really thus valuable, we ought thus to value them. If they held, the first place among the gifts, which God bestowed on his ancient chosen people, they certainly ought to hold the same place in our estimation, among the gifts which his Providence has bestowed on us.

We ought to prize them above our temporal possessions, our liberties, our civil and literary privileges; and to regard their extensive dissemination among us as the richest blessing, which is enjoyed by this highly favored land. To the truth of the preceding remarks and conclusions, many of my hearers will, I doubt not, yield a ready and cordial assent. Some, however, may feel disposed to ask, why does God, and why should we, value the Scriptures less highly? To this question an answer may be found in the title, by which the Scriptures are here designated.

They are styled, The Oracles of God. That we may perceive the full import of this title as used by the apostle, and understand what a volume of meaning it conveyed to the minds of his Gentile converts, we must turn our attention for a moment to the heathen oracles; so frequently mentioned, and so highly extolled, by the historians and poets of pagan antiquity. In their writings, the word here rendered, oracles, is used to denote the answers, given, or supposed to be given, by their gods, to those who consulted them according to a prescribed form.

By a common figure of speech, the word, oracle, was afterwards applied to the temples or shrines where such answers were given. Whether, as is now generally supposed, these answers were forged by the priests, or whether, as some have contended, they were the results of diabolical agency, it is not necessary to inquire. Suffice it for our present purpose to remark, that though proverbially ambiguous and obscure, they were regarded with the most profound veneration, and relied upon with the fullest confidence, by a very large proportion of the heathen world.

No enterprise of importance was undertaken without consulting the oracles; splendid embassies, with magnificent presents, were sent from far distant states and monarchs for this purpose; the most costly sacrifices were offered, with a view to obtain a propitious answer; and, in more than one instance, contending nations submitted to them the decision of their respective claims. With these facts the Gentile converts to Christianity were well acquainted: in these opinions and feelings of their countrymen, they had, previously to their conversion, participated.

From their earliest years they had been taught, not only by precept, but by the far more impressive lessons of example; to venerate the oracles; to rely upon them as infallible guides; and to consider them as a tribunal, from whose decisions there was no appeal. The effects of these prejudices and feelings, thus early imbibed, thus deeply rooted, thus wrought as it were into the very texture of their minds, could not be wholly and at once obliterated, by their subsequent conversion to Christianity.

The word, oracles, could scarcely fail to excite in them some of the ideas and emotions, with which it had been so long, and so intimately associated. It must still have retained, in their ears, a venerable and sacred sound. No title, then, could be better adapted to inspire them with veneration for the Scriptures, than that which is here employed by the apostle. It probably appeared to them, far more impressive and

full of meaning, than it does to us. Nor would it appear less sacred, or less full of important meaning to the Jew.

In their minds this title would be associated with their once venerated Urim and Thummim; and with those responses which Jehovah gave to their fathers by an audible voice, from the inner sanctuary, where he had formerly dwelt, or manifested his presence, in a peculiar and sensible manner. In our version of the Scriptures, this place is frequently styled The Oracle; and it was the only place which ever really deserved the name. The answers which God there gave to the inquiries of his worshippers, were full, explicit, and definite; forming, in all respects, a perfect contrast, to the ambiguous and delusive oracles of Paganism.

These remarks will assist in ascertaining the ideas, which the apostle's language was suited to convey, and which we may, therefore, presume he intended it should convey, to the minds of his contemporary readers. By employing this language, he did in effect say to the Gentile converts, All that you once supposed the oracles of your countrymen to be, the Scriptures really are. They are the true and living oracles, of the only living and true God. With at least equal force and clearness did his language say to the Jews, The scriptures are no less the word of God, and no less entitled to veneration and confidence, than were the answers which he formerly gave to your fathers, by an audible voice from the mercy seat.

It can scarcely be necessary to add, that, though the apostle here refers to the Old Testament only, his expressions are equally applicable to the New; for the same God, who in the former spake by the prophets, has in the latter spoken by his Son: and by apostles, whom His Son commissioned, and His Spirit inspired. The New Testament is, therefore, no less than the Old, an oracle. Both united now compose, The Oracles of God. That this title is given to the Scriptures with perfect truth and propriety, no one who acknowledges their divine inspiration will, it is presumed, deny.

They do not indeed, and it is one of their chief excellences that they do not, resemble in all respects the heathen oracles. They neither answer, nor profess to answer, such questions, as were usually proposed to them. They inform no man what will be the duration of his life, nor by what means it will be terminated. They will not predict to us the result of any particular private, or public enterprise. They will not aid the politician in devising, nor the soldier in executing schemes for the subjugation of his fellow creatures.

They were never designed to gratify a vain curiosity; much less to subserve the purposes of ambition or avarice, and this is, probably, one reason why many persons never consult them. But though they give no answers to such questions as these passions suggest, they answer questions incomparably more important, and communicate information infinitely more valuable. If they inform no man when or how his life will be terminated. they inform every man who rightly consults them, how both its progress, and its termination, may be rendered happy.

If they inform no man how he may prolong his existence in this world, they will inform every man how he may secure everlasting life in the world to come. If they give no information respecting the result of any particular enterprise, they will teach us how to conduct all our enterprises in such a manner, that the final result shall be glory and honor, and immortality. And while they inform individuals how they may obtain endless felicity, they will teach nations how to secure national prosperity.

In fine, whatever a man's situation and circumstances may be, whatever offices or relations he may sustain; this oracle, if consulted in the manner in which God has prescribed, will satisfactorily answer every question, which it is proper for him to ask; every question, an answer to which is necessary either to his present, or future well being; for it contains all the information, which our most wise and benevolent

Creator sees it best that his human creatures should, at present, possess.

Indeed we have reason to believe, that should he now condescend to visit and converse with us in a visible form, he would answer all our inquiries by referring us to the Scriptures; for when our Saviour, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, resided on earth, he pursued this course with respect to such questions, as had been already answered in the Old Testament. To such as proposed any of those questions his usual answer was, What saith the scripture?

What is written in the law? How readest thou? And if he pursued this course while the Scriptures contained the Old Testament only, we may presume that he would now pursue it exclusively; since the revelation, which God designed for men, is completed by the addition of the New. In possessing the Scriptures, then, our country possesses every real advantage, that would result from the establishment of an oracle among us, where God should give answers to his worshippers by an audible voice, as he formerly did to the Jews.

Indeed we possess advantages, in some respects far greater than would result from such an establishment; for wherever the oracle might be placed, it would unavoidably be at a distance from a large proportion of those who wished for its advice; to consult it, a long and expensive journey would often be necessary; and, in many cases of frequent occurrence, an answer, thus obtained, would come too late. But in the Scriptures we possess an oracle, which may be brought home to every family, and every individual; which may be placed in our habitations, in our closets, and consulted daily or hourly, without fatigue, expense or delay; nay more which may be made the companion of the traveler on his journey, and of the mariner on his voyage.

In this oracle we possess all, and much more than all, that was possessed by the ancient church in its Urim and Thummin, its ephod, and its sanctuary. By placing it in our closets, and consulting it aright, we may make them to us, all that the Holy of Holies was to the pious Jew; a place where God will meet us, converse with us, answer our inquiries, and accept our offerings. In fine, we have in this oracle, the very mind and heart of our Creator. The thoughts and purposes of his mind, and the emotions of his heart, lie here in silence, waiting an opportunity to make themselves known.

Hence, whenever we open the Scriptures, we do in effect, open the lips of Jehovah, and the words of Eternal Truth burst at once upon our ears; the counsels of unerring wisdom address our understandings and our hearts. It is true, that, owing to various causes which we shall presently notice, many, who have the oracles of God in their hands, are by no means aware of these facts. God speaketh once, yea twice; but man perceiveth it not. It is also true, that in consequence of having been familiar from our childhood with much of the information which these oracles impart, we are generally far from being sensible, how deeply we are indebted to them, how great is their value; and how deplorable our situation would be rendered by their loss.

If we would form just conceptions of these several particulars; we must place ourselves, for a moment, in the situation of a serious, reflecting, inquirer after truth, who has reached the meridian of life, without any knowledge of the Scriptures. Let us suppose such a man to have diligently studied himself, his fellow creatures, and the world around him; and to have made use of all the assistance, which heathen philosophy can afford. Let us suppose, that he has pursued his inquiries as far as unassisted human intellect can go; and that he now finds himself bewildered in a maze of conflicting theories and enveloped by all that distracting uncertainty, perplexity, and anxiety, into which the researches of men unenlightened

by revelation, inevitably plunge them.

To such a man what would the Scriptures be worth? What would he give for a single hour's opportunity of consulting an oracle, which should return such answers to his inquiries as they contain? Would you rightly estimate the information which he might derive from such an oracle during that short period? See him, then, approach it, and listen while he consults it. Perplexed by the numberless questions which impatiently demand a solution, and agitated by an undefinable awe of the invisible, mysterious being whom he is about to address, he scarcely knows how, or where, to commence his inquiries.

At length he hesitatingly and tremblingly asks, "To whom are the heavens above me, the world which I inhabit, and the various objects with which it is filled, indebted for their existence?" A mild, but majestic voice replies from the oracle, In the beginning, God created the heavens, and the earth, and all that is therein. Startled by the scarcely expected answer, but soon recovering his self possession, the inquirer eagerly exclaims, "Who is God--what is his nature--his character--his attributes?"

God, replies the voice, is a Spirit: He is from everlasting to everlasting, without beginning of days, or end of years; and with him is no variableness, nor shadow of turning; He fills heaven and earth; He searches the hearts, and tries the reins of the children of men; He is the only Wise, the Almighty, the High, and Holy, and Just, One; He is Jehovah, Jehovah God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; but one who will by no means clear the guilty.

A solemn pause ensues. The inquirer's mind is overwhelmed. It labors, it sinks, it faints, while vainly attempting to grasp the illimitable, incomprehensible Being, now, for the first time, disclosed to its view. But a new, and more powerful motive now stimulates his inquiries, and, with augmented interest, he asks, "Does any relation or connexion subsist between this God and myself?" He is thy Maker, returns the oracle, the Father of thy spirit, and thy Preserver; He it is who giveth thee richly all things to enjoy; He is thy Sovereign, thy Lawgiver, and thy Judge; in Him thou dost live, and move, and exist, nor can any one deliver thee out of his hands; and when, at death, thy dust shall return to the earth as it was, thy spirit will return to God who gave it.

"How," resumes the inquirer, "will he then receive me?" He will reward thee according to thy works. "What are the works," the inquirer asks, "which this Sovereign requires of me?" Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. Every transgression of this law is a sin; and the soul that sinneth shall die. "Have I sinned?" the inquirer tremblingly asks. All, replies the oracle, have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

The God, in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, thou hast not glorified." A new sensation, the sensation of conscious guilt, now oppresses the inquirer, and with increased anxiety he asks, "Is there any way in which the pardon of sin may be obtained?" The blood of Jesus Christ, replies the oracle, cleanseth from all sin. He that confesseth and forsaketh his sins shall find mercy. "But to whom shall it confess them?" the inquirer resumes "where shall I find the God whom I have offended, that I may acknowledge my transgressions, and implore his mercy?"

He is a God at hand, returns the voice; He is not far from thee; I, who speak to thee, am he. "God be merciful to me a sinner," exclaims the inquirer, smiting upon his breast, and not daring to lift his eyes towards the oracle: "What, Lord, wilt thou have me to do?" Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, answers the voice, and thou shalt be saved. "Lord, who is Jesus Christ? that I may believe on him?" He is my beloved

Son, whom I have set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood; Hear thou him, for there is salvation in no other.

Such are, probably, some of the questions which would be asked by the supposed inquirer; and such are, in substance, the answers which he would receive from the oracles of God. That these answers contain but a small part of the information, which may be drawn from them, it is needless to remind you. Yet of this small part only, who can compute the value? Who can say what it would be worth, to one who should rightly improve it? To beings situated as we are, --to immortal, accountable, sinful creatures, hastening to eternity, to the tribunal of a justly offended God; what is wealth, what is liberty, what is life itself, compared with such information as this? compared with instructions, which make them wise unto salvation? compared with that knowledge of God, and of Jesus Christ, which is eternal life?

To these remarks it may, perhaps, be replied; that, though to a man who had never seen the Scriptures, they might serve, in some respects, as an oracle; and even prove a gift of inestimable value, yet to us, and to others, who have long been familiar with their contents, they can answer no such purpose, and must, therefore, be of far inferior worth. Why, it may be asked, should we consult them as an oracle, when we are already acquainted with the answers which they will return?

But has the man who asks this, or has any man that ever existed, drawn from the Scriptures all the information which they contain? He who asserts, or supposes that he has done it, proves only that he needs to be taught the first principles of the oracles of God; for they assert that, If any man thinketh he knoweth any thing, if he supposes himself to have acquired sufficient knowledge of any religious subject, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. It may reasonably be doubted whether any one present would have discovered that the declaration of Jehovah, I am the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, furnishes a conclusive proof of the existence of the human soul, during the period which elapses between death and the resurrection, had not our Saviour pointed it out to us.

And how many times might we have read the declaration; Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedec, before we should have suspected, that it involves all those important consequences, which St. Paul deduces from it in his epistle to the Hebrews? These instances render it reasonable to suppose, that many other passages contain proofs and illustrations of important truths, which have never been noticed; and which yet remain, to reward the researches of future inquirers.

However this may be, it is certain, that he who but seldom consults the oracles of God, he who does not habitually repair to them as his counselor and guide, will receive from them no satisfactory answers. He only, whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates therein day and night, will be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, which bringeth forth its fruit in season. It may further be remarked in reply to the objection before us, that many of the terms in which the oracles of God are expressed, contain a fullness, a depth, or rather an infinity of meaning, which no created mind can ever fully comprehend.

What finite mind, either human or angelic, ever fully comprehended, or ever will fully comprehend, all that is contained in the names assumed by Jehovah, in the titles given to Jesus Christ, or in the words, eternity, heaven, hell, everlasting punishment, everlasting life? Now he who most frequently consults the oracles of God, in the manner prescribed by their author, will penetrate most deeply into the unfathomable abyss of meaning, which these and other terms of a kindred nature, contain.

He may, indeed, receive the same answers to his inquiries, which he had received on former occasions; but these answers will convey to his mind, clearer and more enlarged conceptions of the truths which they

reveal. His views will resemble those of an astronomer, who is, from time to time, furnished with telescopes of greater power. Or, to vary the figure, what at first seemed only an indistinct shadow, will become a vivid picture, and the picture will, at length, stand out in bold relief.

In fine, he will know more and more of those subjects, which, to use the language of an apostle, pass knowledge; and will enjoy, in a corresponding degree, all the benefits which the Scriptures are designed and adapted to impart. These remarks may be elucidated by a familiar illustration. The lisping child, and the most profound astronomer, uses the word, sun, to denote the same object. The child, however, means by this word, nothing more than a round, luminous body, of a few inches in diameter.

But it would require a volume, to contain all the interesting and sublime conceptions, of which this word stands for the sign, or with which it is associated, in the mind of the astronomer. So different individuals may employ the same scriptural terms and phrases; and they may employ them to denote the same objects. Yet wide, almost immeasurably wide, may be the difference between the ideas, which these terms convey to their minds, or which they employ them to express. One man may see little, or perhaps, no meaning, in an expression, which shall fill the mind of another even to overflowing, with the fullness of God.

It may, perhaps, be farther objected to the views which have now been given of the Scriptures, that, as they do not speak in an audible voice, their answers to our inquiries can never possess that life, that energy, that character of deep, impressive solemnity, which attend the responses of a living oracle, such as was formerly established among the Jews. An epithet which is applied to the Scriptures by another inspired writer will assist in obviating this objection. He styles them the lively or living oracles.

In perfect conformity with this language an apostle declares that, the word of God is alive and powerful. And another apostle asserts, not only that it is alive, but that it imparts life. Ye are born again, he says to believers, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible; even by the word of God, which liveth, and abideth forever. Now what do these assertions mean? They doubtless mean something, for inspired writers make no unmeaning assertions. What they mean we may, perhaps, learn from our Saviour's language, The words that I speak unto you, are spirit, and they are life.

They were so when he uttered them; they are so still. And they are life because they are spirit; because the Living Spirit of the Living God does, as it were, live in them, and employ their instrumentality in imparting life to all, who consult them in the manner which he has prescribed. Take away his accompanying influences, and the living oracles become, in the emphatic language of an apostle, "a dead letter." But he who consults them aright, does not find them a dead letter.

He finds no reason to complain, that they do not address him with all the force and vivacity of a living speaker. On the contrary he finds, that the living, life giving Spirit, by whom they were inspired, and who still lives and speaks in every line, carries home their words to his understanding, his conscience, and his heart, with an enlightening, vivifying energy, which no tongue of man, or angel, could ever impart to language. The voice of God himself; bursting in thunder from heaven, could scarcely speak in accents more powerful, commanding, and impressive.

Is this language too strong? What then means the interrogation of Jehovah? Is not my word like a fire, and like a hammer, which breaketh the rock in pieces? Indeed it is. It has been the instrument of breaking all tire flinty hearts that ever were broken; and every heart which it breaks, it heals again. Yes, The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes

of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

And what more can be expected of any oracle, what can man wish that any oracle should do more, than effect the illumination of his understanding, the conversion of his soul, the communication of wisdom to his mind, and of joy to his heart? It is, however, readily acknowledged that thousands, who possess and peruse the Scriptures, derive none of these benefits from their perusal, and receive from them no satisfactory answers. But the reason is obvious. They do not consult them in the manner which God has prescribed.

They do not consult them, as an oracle of God ever ought to be consulted. They do not, for instance, consult them with becoming reverence. They do not feel, when opening the sacred volume, that the mouth of God is about to open, and address them. They do not feel as they will acknowledge an Israelite ought to have felt, when approaching the Holy of Holies, to ask counsel of his Maker. On the contrary, they peruse the Scriptures with little more reverence, than the works of a human author.

They consult them, as they would consult a dictionary or an almanac. Indeed we are all, in this respect, criminally deficient. Permit me here to make a direct, but respectful and affectionate appeal to the consciences of my audience, and ask, had you seen an Israelite approach, and address the oracle of Jehovah, in the same manner, and with the same feelings, with which you have too often perused the Scriptures, would you not have expected to see him, instead of receiving a gracious answer, struck dead by a flash of that fire which consumed Nadab and Abihu, the irreverent sons of Aaron?

My hearers, if we would consult the oracles of God in a manner acceptable to him, and beneficial, or even safe, to ourselves, we must practically remember the declaration which he made on that awful occasion; I will be sanctified in all that approach me; and the language of our hearts, when opening the sacred volume, must be, I will now hear what the Lord my God shall say; speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth. Nor is sincerity less necessary than reverence to one, who would rightly consult the oracles of God.

By sincerity is meant a real desire to know our duty, with a full determination to believe and obey the answers we shall receive; however contrary they may be to our natural inclinations, our favorite pursuits, or our preconceived opinions. How useless, how much worse than useless, it is to consult these oracles without such a disposition, we may learn from a divine declaration, recorded in the book of Ezekiel. Some of the elders of Israel, it appears, visited the prophet, professedly with a view to inquire of the Lord.

But the only answer which they obtained was this; Are ye come to inquire of me; As I live, saith the Lord God, I will not be inquired of by you. He also informs us what were the reasons of this determination. These men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put the stumbling block of their iniquity before their face; and should I be at all inquired of by them? He then proceeds to declare, that if any man, of any nation, shall presume to consult him with idols in his heart, he will set his face against that man, and answer him according to the multitude of his idols.

My hearers, if we consult the oracles of God with a view to draw from them an answer, which shall gratify our sinful inclinations, or justify our questionable pursuits and practices, or support our favorite prejudices, we do, in effect, come to inquire of the Lord with idols in our hearts, and can expect nothing but a corresponding answer. The same remark is applicable to every one, who consults the Scriptures, while he neglects known duties, or disobeys known commands. Such a man has idols in his heart; idols which he prefers to Jehovah; and why should he be favored with any further answers, while he disregards those which he has already received?

We may see these remarks exemplified in the history of Saul. He had been guilty, he was still guilty, of known disobedience; and therefore, when he inquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not. To a similar cause, the ill success of many, who now consult the Scriptures, without deriving from them any advantage, is, doubtless, to be ascribed. There are others whose want of success in consulting the oracles of God is owing to their unbelief. As no food can nourish those, who do not partake of it; as no medicines can prove salutary to those, who refuse to make use of them; so no oracles can be serviceable to those, by whom they are not believed with a cordial, practical, operative faith.

It must ever be remembered that though the Scriptures are able to make us wise unto salvation, it is only through faith in Christ Jesus. To those, in whom this faith does not exist, wisdom is not imparted. Finally, many persons derive no benefit from the oracles of God, because they attempt to consult them without prayer. But without prayer, though they may be read, they cannot, properly speaking, be consulted. Consulting an oracle is an act, which, in its very nature, implies an acknowledgment of ignorance, and a petition for guidance, for instruction.

It is the act of a blind man, extending his hand to an unseen guide, and requesting his assistance. He, then, who reads the Scriptures without prayer, does not really consult them; does not treat them as an oracle; and, therefore, shall not find them such. It is to him, who first humbly speaks to God, that God will condescend to speak. It is to him, who, with the temper of a little child, and with a heart which receives the truth in the love of it, consults the oracle upon his knees, and prays over every response, that God will unlock all his hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

He who, in this manner, daily consults it, shall he guided as safely, as an all-wise God can guide him; and conducted to heaven as certainly, as there is a heaven; for if he who walketh with wise men shall be wise, how much more shall he who walketh with God? Whatever else we neglect, then, let us not neglect the Scriptures. Whatever else we consult, let us not fail to consult the oracles of God. Should we be guilty of this negligence, the queen of the South will rise up in the judgment, and condemn us; for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; but wisdom, infinitely greater than that of Solomon, is here.

Nay, the heathen will rise up, and condemn us; for they spared no labor or expense in consulting their worthless oracles; but we have the living oracles of the living God in our hands, and may at all times consult them, without expense, and without fatigue. Who, then, will be so much his own enemy as to neglect them? When the Infinite, the All-wise, the Almighty God, stooping from his eternal throne in the heavens, condescends to address us as a father; to place before us a transcript of his mind and his heart; to converse with us familiarly, as a man talketh with his friend; to narrate the history of his past works, and of past ages; and to reveal to us future scenes, and events; and when the information thus communicated, involves the fate of the world which we inhabit, our own eternal destiny, and that of our fellow creatures; who can be so insensible, so sottish, so impious, as to refuse attention!

Whosoever hath ears to hear, let him hear. O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of Jehovah! Listen, O listen, when thy Maker speaks. But to consult the oracles of God is not the only duty imposed by their possession. Another duty, which we are no less sacredly bound to perform, is to place them, so far as we have ability and opportunity, in the hands of our destitute fellow creatures. An opportunity of performing this duty is now presented you. The object of the Society, at whose instance we are assembled, is, to furnish a numerous, valuable, and too long neglected class of our fellow citizens, with the sacred oracles; and to persuade them, if possible, to consult these oracles in such a manner, as shall insure their present

moral and religious improvement, and their final salvation.

In the prosecution of this object, the Society need, and request, your countenance, your aid; and they will not, we trust, request it in vain. By granting it, you may place in the hands of a fellow immortal, at once, all the truth, which the Father of Lights was employed, for many ages, in communicating to mankind. You may confer on him, at a very trifling expense, those sacred oracles, which, at the expense of numberless miracles, God conferred on his chosen, favored people, as the most valuable gift which his providential hand could bestow.

You may confer a blessing more valuable than wealth, than liberty, than life itself. All your other possessions, without the Bible, would be a gift, incomparably less precious than the Bible alone. By conferring this gift on mariners, we shall assist in discharging a debt of no trifling magnitude, which has already remained too long unpaid. To mariners we are indebted, under God, for a considerable portion of those very oracles, with which we are now requested to furnish mariners.

That several of the writers of the New Testament, and a still greater number of the apostles, belonged to this class of society, you need not be informed. We are, also, deeply indebted to them in a temporal view. They have long acted a humble, indeed, but a most important part, in extending the boundaries of human knowledge, in aiding the progress and diffusing the blessings, of civilization, and thus promoting the general interests of mankind. To them our country is indebted for its discovery, and its settlement.

To them this city, in common with all other commercial cities, is indebted for its prosperity. Their direct, or indirect agency has erected, decorated, and furnished your houses, replenished your stores, and increased your wealth and population to their present extent. Take away seamen, and where is commerce? Take away commerce, and where is the prosperity of this city? They are the hands which she extends to the east, and to the west, to grasp, and bring home to her bosom, the rich fruits of widely distant climes.

To them we are all indebted for the various foreign productions, which compose so large a part of the conveniences, and even necessities, of civilized life. You can visit no town, you can scarcely find a cottage, in our country, to the support and comfort of whose inhabitants, mariners have not contributed. It must not be forgotten that, in procuring for us these advantages, our seamen have placed at hazard, not only their lives, but their eternal interests. Of this fact, as well as of our obligations to this neglected part of the community, must of us have, probably, thought too little, and too lightly.

While enjoying, at our ease, the fruits of their perils and labors, we have too often failed to recollect, that the men who procured for us these enjoyments, did it at the expense, of cutting themselves off from most of the comforts of civilized, social, and domestic life; depriving themselves, in a great measure, of the religious institutions and privileges with which their countrymen are favored; throwing themselves into the midst of snares and temptations, and jeopardizing all that is valuable, all that ought to be dear, to an immortal, accountable being, advancing to meet the retributions of eternity.

We have not sufficiently adverted to the obvious fact, that the mariner, while pursuing the voyage of life, is almost inevitably exposed to rocks, whirlpools, and quicksands, incomparably more dangerous, and more difficult to shun, than any which he is called to encounter in navigating the deep. A very little reflection will convince us, that, while he continues to be exposed to these dangers without any safeguard, foreign productions must be obtained at an expense, infinitely transcending their value; an expense which no finite mind can estimate, and which no benevolent mind can contemplate but with horror.

Did we view this subject in the light of revelation, and feel in view of it as we ought; it may well be doubted, whether we could enjoy the productions thus obtained, or even consent to make use of them. When David thirsted for water from the well of Bethlehem, whence he had often drawn refreshment in his youthful days, and some of his soldiers, at the hazard of their lives, broke through an opposing army to procure for him a cup of this much desired water, he refused to drink of it, but poured it out before the Lord, exclaiming, Be it far from me that I should do this; is it not the blood of the men, who went in jeopardy of their lives!

He felt that water, thus obtained, was too precious for a mortal's lips: too precious for any other use, than that of being offered to the Lord of life. And who will deny, that this was the language, that these were the genuine feelings, of a noble, benevolent; pious mind? Yet how often do we forget to exercise similar feelings, in similar circumstances? How often do we, without reflection, eat, and drink, and wear, the price of blood, the blood of the soul! How deeply dyed with this blood are foreign productions, before they reach our hands!

How many of our fellow immortals have sunk, not in the ocean merely, but in the gulf of perdition, that we might be gratified with the fruits of other climes! My hearers, were there no other remedy for these tremendous evils, were they necessarily and inseparably connected with commerce, every one who possesses a particle of that spirit by which David was then animated, or of that concern for immortal beings which glowed in the bosom of the Son of David, would say, that commerce ought to be at once, and forever, abandoned.

Every one who has the feelings, I will not say of a Christian, but of a man, would exclaim, "Better, infinitely better, that we should be confined to the productions of our own soil, than that so many of our fellow creatures, our countrymen, should be exposed to such imminent danger of moral and eternal ruin!" But we are not reduced to this alternative. A remedy for the moral evils to which our mariners are exposed is already provided, and may easily be applied. Let them all be furnished with the oracles of God.

Let those by whom they are employed, whose advice they will, probably, respect, say something to them of the value of these oracles, and of the infinite importance of consulting them aright. Let measures be taken for enabling them to enjoy the full benefit of our religious institutions, during the short periods of their residence on shore. In a word, let them be convinced, that we regard them as immortal, accountable creatures; that we feel a deep solicitude for their present and future happiness; that we are willing to do all in our power to secure it; and that we believe it can be secured by no other means, than those which the Scriptures reveal.

Is this requiring too much? I will not offer such an insult to the understandings and the hearts of this assembly, as to indulge a suspicion that they are disposed to reply, "It is." Some of the largest commercial cities in our own, and in other countries, have already practically said, "It is not requiring too much." The members of this Marine Bible Society, and many others among your fellow citizens, have, in the same manner, made a similar reply. They have made the most laudable exertions to meliorate the moral condition of your seamen, and to furnish them with an antidote to those evils to which they are peculiarly exposed; and nothing, but a more extensive and efficient cooperation on the part of those who employ them, is wanting to render these exertions successful.

And is it possible that, in an age like the present, and in a city like this, such a cooperation should continue to be wanting? Is it considered as important that no vessel should be sent to sea, without some medicinal provision for the health of its crew? and is it not, at least, equally important, that every vessel should be

furnished with the remedy, which God has provided for the moral diseases, to which seamen are particularly exposed? Self-interest alone, were there no other motive, should prompt the careful performance of this duty; for these diseases, when suffered to become inveterate, prove, not only fatal to the subjects of them, but injurious to their employers.

It is impossible to estimate, with any approach to accuracy, the losses which commercial men have sustained, in consequence of the negligence, the unfaithfulness, and the intemperance of those, to whom their property, while on the ocean, was necessarily entrusted; but no one, who has attended at all to the subject, can doubt, that these losses have been great. Nor will any unprejudiced person doubt, that many of them would have been prevented, had proper attention been always paid to the moral and religious improvement of seamen.

There is, probably, no merchant, whatever his religious sentiments may be, who would not think his property more safe, in the care of such as revere and consult the oracles of God, than of those who do not possess, and, of course, cannot regard them. Permit me to proceed a step farther, and inquire, whether that God, who so often constrains men to read their sins in their punishment, and employs the vices, which their negligence has fostered, to scourge them, may not have permitted the numerous and shocking piracies which have been recently perpetrated, with a view to chastise commercial nations, and rouse them from their criminal insensibility to the religious interests of seamen?

What else could such nations expect, either from his justice, or from the manner in which they have long treated this neglected portion of the community? They commit the mariner to the ocean at an early age, before his character is formed, or his principles established. Inexperienced, unarmed, unprepared for the assault, he is there assailed by temptations, which it would require the full vigor of mature, and deeply rooted, virtuous principle to resist. Day after day, and year after year, the assault is continued, without intermission, and in almost every conceivable variety of form; while no friendly hand is extended to aid, no cheering voice is employed to encourage him in maintaining the arduous conflict.

Can we then wonder; that, sooner or later, he is overcome? And when he is once overcome, whence shall he derive any inducement, or encouragement, to resume the contest? He has, indeed, a conscience, and, for a time, it will speak. But though this monitor may reproach him for his fall, she cannot assist him to rise; she cannot even inform him where assistance may be obtained. The oracles of God would give him this information, but he has them not. Destitute of this guide, the reproaches of an accusing conscience serve only to torment him.

They become too painful to be endured; how shall he silence them? There is one way, a terrible, a desperate way indeed, but he knows no other. Example points it out to him, and urges him to follow it; and he obeys. He flies to the intoxicating bowl, drowns his reason and his conscience together, and by degrees, become a beast, nay, an incarnate fiend. What is now to restrain him from crime, from piracy, from murder? What is to prevent the remainder of his wretched life from being spent in the perpetration of every outrage, which excites the abhorrence of earth, and the indignation of heaven?

Suppose it, (the supposition is, alas! too often realized,) to be thus spent. Death, which comes to all, must at length come to him. It may come as the messenger of public justice; or it may come in the form of what we call a casualty, and hurry him to the bar of his offended God, in a fit of intoxication, or with a half-tittered curse upon his lips. My hearers, this is no fiction. It is the real history of hundreds, probably of thousands; of many, too, who commence the voyage of life, with prospects no less bright, with hopes no

less sanguine than your own.

And who, that has the feelings of a man, can contemplate unmoved, ruin like this? ruin so complete, so terrible, so hopeless! My hearers, it is from such ruin, that we now implore you to assist in saving your fellow creatures, your countrymen. We entreat you to furnish them with that volume, which a most wise and merciful God has given to lost, bewildered, guilty man, for his oracle, his solace, and his guide. Say not, the gift will avail them nothing. Facts do not warrant this assertion.

In proportion to the seed sown upon it, the ocean has yielded as rich a harvest as the land. It would be easy to enlarge on this fruitful topic to a much greater extent. It would be easy to suggest a multitude of considerations, suited to convince the understanding, and to affect the heart. But we purposely omit them. Why should we occupy your time, and weary your patience, with arguments and motives urged by mortal lips, when we have before us an oracle, which, in a few impressive words, will inform us, at once, what we ought to do?

To this oracle we refer the seaman's cause. To its unerring decisions we appeal; and in this appeal, we doubt not, you will cordially unite. It is presumed that the only question, relative to this subject, which any individual present can wish to propose, is this; Is it a duty incumbent on me, to aid in promoting the moral and religious improvement of seamen? We may consider this question as having been proposed in the silence of the heart, and He who reads the heart has given this answer: --If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain; if thou sayest, Behold, I knew it riot; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall he not render to every man according to his works?

Is not this answer sufficiently explicit? Is it not as perfectly applicable to the case before us, as if it had been originally uttered with an exclusive reference to seamen? Are they not "drawn" by powerful temptations, as by a thousand cords, to that second death from which there is no resurrection? Are not many of them "ready to be slain" by their vices? enemies which kill, not the body only, but the soul. And if we neglect to furnish them with the Scriptures, do we not "forbear" to attempt their deliverance?

Should any one still consider this answer as inapplicable, let him impute the error, not to the oracle, but to the erring lips which gave it utterance, and listen to another response: Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thy hand to do it, but, as thou hast opportunity, do good to all men. Can any thing more be necessary? Surely, no one will insult Jehovah by asking, whether it is doing good to seamen, to place his word in their hands. Surely, no one can doubt whether, should He address us from heaven, he would command us to furnish them with the Scriptures.

Some may; however, wish to inquire, whether the efforts, which are now making to promote the religious interests of seamen, will be crowned with ultimate success. To their inquiries this is the answer: The abundance of the seas shall be converted unto the church of God, the ships of Tarshish shall bring her sons from far, their silver and their gold with them, unto the name of the Lord, and the earth shall be full of the knowledge of Jehovah, even as the waters cover the seas. My hearers, we shall add no more. When God speaks, it becomes man to be silent.

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