

The Lord Reigns

'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns!' Revelation 19:6

The book of the Revelation, being chiefly prophetical, will not perhaps be fully understood, until the final accomplishment of the events shall draw near, and throw a stronger light upon the whole book. But, while the learned commentators have been hitherto divided and perplexed in their attempts to illustrate many parts of it, there are other parts well adapted for the instruction and refreshment of plain Christians; particularly those passages in which the scenery and images seemed designed to give us some representation of the happiness and worship of the heavenly state. Thus a plain unlettered believer, when reading with attention the fourth and fifth chapters, though he cannot give a reason why there are 24 elders, why there are 4 living creatures, and why the number of their wings is neither more nor less than six; yet, from the whole description of the Lamb upon the throne, the songs of the redeemed, and the chorus of the angels, he receives such an impression of glory, as awakens his gratitude, desire, and joy, and excites him likewise to take up the same song of praise 'to him who has loved him, and washed him from his sins in his own blood.' He is content to leave the discussion of hard questions to learned men, while he feeds by faith upon those simple truths which can be relished only by a spiritual taste; and which, where there is such a taste, make their way to the heart, without the assistance of academic inquisition.

The subject of the preceding chapter, is the destruction of mystical Babylon, the head of the opposition against the kingdom of the Lord Christ. But Babylon sinks like a millstone in the mighty ocean, and is no more found. So must all his enemies perish. The catastrophe of Babylon, like that of Pharaoh at the Red Sea, is beheld by the saints and servants of the Lord with admiration, and furnishes them with a theme for a song of triumph to his praise. This may be properly styled sacred music indeed. It is commanded, inspired, and regulated by the Lord himself. The performers are all interested in the subject, 'they who fear God,' and are devoted to his service and glory. And though people of this character are comparatively few upon earth, hidden, and in a manner lost, among the crowd of mankind; they will be, when brought together at last, a very large company. Their united voices are here compared to the voice of many waters, and of mighty thunders, and this is the solemn close, the chorus of their song, 'Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigns!'

The impression which the performance of this passage in 'Handel's Messiah' usually makes upon the audience, is well known. But however great the power of music may be, should we even allow the flights of poetry to be truth, that it can 'soften rocks, and bend the knotted oak,' one thing we are sure it cannot do; it cannot soften and change the hard heart, it cannot bend the obdurate will of man. If all the people who hear 'Handel's Messiah', who are struck and astonished, for the moment, by this chorus in particular, were to bring away with them an abiding sense of the importance of the sentiment it contains, the nation would soon wear a new face. But do the professed lovers of sacred music, in this enlightened age, generally live as if they really believed that 'the Lord God omnipotent reigns?' Rather, do not the greater part of them live, as they might do if they were sure of the contrary? as if they were satisfied to a demonstration, that either there is no God, or that his providence is not concerned in human affairs? I appeal to conscience; I appeal to fact.

I apprehend that this passage, taken in the strictest sense, refers to a period not yet arrived. Babylon is not yet fallen. The servants of God in the present day, will most probably fulfill their appointed time upon earth, like those who have lived before them, in a state of conflict. They must endure the cross, and sustain opposition for his sake. The people who shall live when 'the kingdoms of the world become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ,' when the 'nations shall learn war no more,' are yet unborn. But even now we may rejoice that 'the Lord God omnipotent reigns,' and that Jesus is 'King of kings, and Lord of lords.' I must consider my text as referring to him.

The Christian doctrine is, that the Lord God omnipotent exercises his dominion and government, in the person of Christ. 'The Father loves the Son, and has committed all things into his hands.' (John 3:35) And thus our Lord, after his resurrection, assured his disciples, 'All power in heaven and in earth is committed unto me.' (Mat. 28:18) He has already 'taken to himself his great power, and reigns.' His right of reigning over all is essential to his divine nature; but the administration of government in the nature of man, is the effect and reward of his obedience unto death. But in the union of both natures, he is one person, Christ Jesus the Lord. All the riches and fullness of the Godhead, all the peculiar honors of the Mediator, center in him. They may be distinguished, but they are inseparable.

Happy are they who can, upon solid and Scriptural grounds, exult in the thought that the Lord reigns, and can make his government the subject of their hallelujahs and praises! Happy they, who see, acknowledge, and admire his management in the kingdom of providence, and are the willing subjects of his kingdom of grace. Let us take a brief survey of his reigning glory in these kingdoms.

I. Great and marvelous is the Lord God Almighty—in his kingdom of Universal Providence. His mighty arm sustains the vast fabric of the universe. He upholds the stars in their courses. If we attentively consider their multitude, their magnitudes, their distances from us and from each other, and the amazing swiftness, variety, and regularity of their motions—our minds are overwhelmed, our thoughts confounded, by the vastness and the wonders of the scene. But He spoke them into being, and they are preserved in their stations and revolutions by his power and agency.

If we fix our thoughts upon the earth, though in comparison of the immensity of his creation, it is but as a grain of sand—it is the object of his incessant care. All its various inhabitants derive their existence and their support from him. He provides for the young ravens when unable to fly, and for the young lions that traverse the woods. The instinct of animals, whereby they are unerringly instructed in whatever concerns the welfare and preservation of their species, so vastly exceeding the boasted wisdom of man, that he can neither imitate nor comprehend it, is communicated by him. He teaches the birds to build their nests, the spider to weave his web, and instructs the communities of bees, and insignificant emmets, to form their admirable policies and government among themselves.

If we speak of intelligent beings, 'He does what he pleases in the armies of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth.' He directs and overrules the counsels and purposes of men, so that, though they act freely, the outcome of all their different interfering schemes, is only the accomplishment of his purposes. When they are employed as his instruments, from small beginnings, and in defiance of difficulties apparently insuperable, they succeed beyond their own expectations. When unhappily engaged against his designs, in vain they rage and plot. He takes the wise in their own craftiness, pours contempt upon their power and policy, and all their great preparations melt like a mist, or like snow before the sun, and leave no trace behind.

Still more wonderful, to the eye of faith, is his control over Satan and the powers of darkness. Whatever, for wise reasons, though unknown to us, he may permit them to do—they cannot, with all their subtlety or strength, detain one soul in their bondage longer than until his appointed time of release; nor recover one soul back to their dominion, of which he is pleased to undertake the care. On the contrary, he breaks the heads of these Leviathan in pieces, turns their counsels against themselves, and makes them instrumental in purifying his people, and extending his church, by the means they employ for the destruction of both. Thus those who dwell under his shadow are safe; for all things are in his power, and he always cares for them, and keeps them, as the pupil of his eye. And therefore, though they are exercised with trials, and suffer many things for their good, his eye being always upon them, and his ear open to their prayer, they are supported, supplied, relieved, delivered, and, at last, made more than conquerors.

II. He has a peculiar kingdom, which he has established distinct from the kingdoms of this world, though diffused and extended among them, and which, in due time, like leaven, will pervade and assimilate them all to himself. This is the kingdom of the Gospel, his church. It is founded upon a rock, and though the gates of hell continually war against it, they cannot prevail. For he is 'a wall of fire round about it, and a glory in the midst of it.' (Zech. 2:5)

Here he reigns upon a throne of grace. He possesses and exercises unlimited authority as a sovereign, to save whom he pleases, to pardon all manner of sins and offences, and to admit rebels and enemies, when they submit themselves and bow to his gracious scepter, into the number of his children and his friends. Seldom do the kings of the earth publish an act of grace in the favor of those who have been guilty of rebellion, without clogging it with exceptions. Either they feel a resentment against some of the delinquents, which they have not magnanimity sufficient to conquer, or they dare not trust them. But God's mercy is infinite—and he knows how to change their hearts—when he pardons their sins.

Perhaps it may not be a digression wholly unuseful and impertinent, if I take this occasion to point out the several senses in which the word church may be understood agreeably to the Scripture.

1. It denotes, in the aggregate, the mystical church, the whole body of that spiritual kingdom, of which the Redeemer is the living and life-giving head. (Col. 1:18) A succession of these has appeared upon earth in every age, from the days of righteous Abel, whom Cain slew; and we have reason to believe, that the far greater part of them are yet unborn. They will all be assembled together before the throne, in the great day of his final appearance, and inherit the kingdom of glory prepared for them. This is the 'church which God has bought with his own blood.' (Acts 20:28) Happy are those who belong to this society of the redeemed, 'whose names are written in heaven.'

2. The visible church contains all those who bear and acknowledge the name of Christians, and who admit and enjoy the Gospel revelation. But it is a small thing to belong only to the visible church, for it is compared to a threshing-floor (Mat. 3:12) on which chaff is mingled with the wheat; to a field in which tares grow promiscuously with the good seed; to a fish-net enclosing a great multitude of fish, both good and bad. (Matt. 13:24-47) But a time of separation will come. The chaff and the tares, and whatever is evil, will be consumed. Alas! what will it avail at last to say, 'Lord, we have eaten and drank in your presence,' at your table with your true disciples, 'and you have taught in our streets,' (Luke 13:26-27) and we have heard in our own language of your wonderful works, if you say, 'Depart from Me, you evildoers!' My heart is pained with the apprehension, lest some of you who have joined in the same public worship with true believers, have sat in the same seat, and lived in the same families, should at last see them, with whom you have been very nearly connected in this world, received into the kingdom of heaven—

and you yourselves be shut out!

3. The universal church, in any one period, is that part of the visible church which is united to the Lord by living faith. It comprises all who agree in the profession of the fundamental truths of the Gospel, and whose conversation is regulated by its precepts, or, in the apostle's words, 'All who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.' (Ephesians 6:24) This universal church, through the policy of Satan and the deceitfulness of the heart, is too much divided against itself. Prejudice, bigotry, and remaining ignorance, greatly prevent that desirable union among true Christians, which would promote their peace, comfort, and increase, and would contribute more than a thousand arguments to put their adversaries to shame and to silence. That shameful contention for denominations, parties, and favorite preachers, for which the apostle reprov'd the Corinthians, (1 Corinthians 3:4) is still greatly to be lamented. But, though they are too backward in acknowledging and assisting each other, the Lord is merciful to their weakness, and bears with them all. And as they grow in grace, and drink more into his spirit—their hearts are enlarged, and they approach nearer to his pattern of love, patience, and tenderness.

4. The word church is applied to particular societies of Christians, who are connected by a participation in the same ordinances of the Gospel, and who maintain a scriptural separation from the sinful spirit and customs of the world. And though there may be pretenders among them, as there were among the apostolic churches, they are denominated by the better part. They belong to the universal church by their profession of the truth, and of course they are a part of the visible church: and those of them who are, in deed and in truth, what they profess to be, are living members of the mystical church, to which all the promises are made. By whatever name they are known or distinguished among men, they are 'branches of the true vine,' they 'have their fruit unto holiness, and their end everlasting life.' But to return:

In this his church, or spiritual kingdom, he rules by wise and gracious laws and ordinances. He releases his subjects from all human authority, in point of conscience—but his own; and enjoins them to call no one master—but himself. (Mat. 23:8-10) If they 'stand fast in the liberty with which he has made them free,' (Galatians 5:1) they will not give themselves up implicitly to the dictates of any man, nor follow him farther than he follows their Lord. And consequently, if they are influenced by his royal law of doing to others—as they would that others should do unto them, they will not attempt to exert an undue authority, or wish to be called masters themselves, so as to assume a dogmatic carriage, or to expect a universal and absolute submission. But it must be owned that, in our present state of infirmity, this privilege is not sufficiently prized, nor this command duly complied with, there being scarcely a man who does not either arrogate too much to himself, or allow too much to others. A fault in the one or the other of these respects, may be assigned as a principal cause of most of the evils which deform the appearance, or injure the peace of the church. But the design of his Gospel is to set his people at liberty from the yoke of men, from the fetters of custom and tradition, of superstition and will-worship, that they may enjoy, in his service, a state of perfect freedom.

For it is the principal glory of his kingdom, that Christ reigns in the hearts of all His people. There He writes His precepts, impresses His image, and erects His throne; ruling them, not merely by an outward law, but by an inward secret influence, breathing His own life and spirit into them; so that their obedience becomes, as it were, natural, pleasurable, and its own reward. By the discoveries He affords them of His love—He wins their affections, captivates their wills, and enlightens their understandings. They derive from Him the 'spirit of power, of love, and of a sound mind,' (2 Timothy 1:7) and run with alacrity in the way of His commandments

It is impossible, therefore, to make this song our own, and cordially to rejoice that 'the Lord God omnipotent reigns,' unless we are the willing subjects of his government; unless we are really

pleased with his appointed way of salvation, approve of his precepts, and, from a view of his wisdom and goodness, can cheerfully submit and resign ourselves to the disposal of his wise and gracious providence. In all these respects we are by nature at variance with him. We are too proud to be indebted to his grace, too wise in our own conceits to desire his instruction, too obstinately attached to the love and practice of sin, to be capable of relishing the beauty and spirituality of his commandments. And our love of the world, and the things of it, is too strong and grasping, to permit us to be satisfied with the lot and with the dispensations he appoints for us. We wish, if possible, and as far as possible we attempt, to be our own god. We are unthankful when he bestows, impatient if he withholds, and if he sees fit to take back the gifts of which we are unworthy, we repine and rebel against his will. This enmity must be subdued, before we can be pleased with his government: in other words, we must be changed, we must be made new creatures.

To produce this change, this new creation, the Gospel is the only expedient; and when revealed and applied to the heart by the power of the Holy Spirit, the miracle is wrought. The sinner who is first convinced of his guilt and misery, and then reconciled to God by faith in the great atonement, willingly yields to his administration. He owns and feels the propriety of his proceedings, is ready to acknowledge, in his sharpest afflictions, that the Lord is gracious, and has not dealt with him according to the desert of his iniquities. He considers himself as no longer his own, but bought with a price, and brought under the strongest obligations, 'to live no longer to himself, but to him who loved him, and gave himself for him.' And what was before his dread and dislike, becomes now the joy of his heart, the thought that the Lord reigns, and that all his concerns are in the hands of him who does all things well.

Are there any among us who say in their hearts, 'We will not have this' Savior 'to rule over us?' The thought is no less vain than wicked! He must, he will 'reign, until he has subdued all enemies under his feet.' You must either bend—or break before him!



John Newton

John Newton (1725 – 1807) was a sailor, preacher, and hymnwriter who was a leader of the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. He is known for his conversion to Christ after a career in the slave trade and the hymn 'Amazing Grace'.

Providence, Sovereignty, John Newton

Revelation