

**The Case of Hezekiah and the Messengers.  
Preached before his Excellency  
the Earl of Hertford.  
At Paris, 1763\***

**2 Kings xx. 15.**

***And he said, What have they seen in thine house?  
and Hezekiah answered, All the things that are in  
my house have they seen; there is nothing  
amongst all my treasures that I have not shewn  
them.***

--**A**nd where was the harm, you'll say, in all this?

“An eastern prince, the son of Baladine, had sent messengers with presents as far as from Babylon, to congratulate Hezekiah upon the recovery from his sickness; and Hezekiah, who was a good prince, acted consistently with himself : ***he received and entertained the men and hearkened unto them,*** and before he sent them away, he courteously shewed them all that was worth a stranger's curiosity in his house and in his kingdom, ---and in this, seemed only to have discharged himself of what urbanity or the *etiquette* of courts might require. Notwithstanding this, in the verse which immediately follows the text, we find he had done amiss; and as a punishment for it, that all his riches, which his forefathers had laid up in store unto that day, were threatened to be carried away in triumph to Babylon, ---the very place from whence the messengers had come.

A hard return! and what his behaviour does not

seem to have deserved. To set this matter in a clear light, it will be necessary to enlarge upon the whole story, ---the reflections which will arise out of it, as we go along, may help us ---at least, I hope they will be of use on their own account.

After the miraculous defeat of the Assyrians, we read in the beginning of this chapter, that Hezekiah was sick even unto death; and that GOD sends the prophet Isaiah, with the unwelcome message, ***That he should set his house in order, for that he should die, and not live.***

There are many instances of men, who have received such news with the greatest ease of mind, and even entertained the thoughts of it with smiles upon their countenances, --and this, either from strength of spirits and the natural cheerfulness of their temper, -- or that, they knew the world, --and cared not for it, -- or expected a better ---yet thousands of good men with all the helps of philosophy, and against all the reassurances of a well spent life, that the change must be to their account, --upon the approach of death have still lean'd towards this world, and wanted spirits and resolution to bear the shock of a separation from it for ever.

This in some measure seemed to have been Hezekiah's case; for tho' he had walked before GOD in truth, and with a perfect heart, and had done that which was good in his sight,---yet we find that the hasty summons afflicted him greatly; ---that upon the delivery of the message he wept sore; ---that he turned his face towards the wall, ---perhaps for the greater

secrecy of his devotion, and that, by withdrawing himself thus from all external objects, he might offer up his prayer unto his GOD, with greater and more fervent attention.

---And he pray'd, and said, O LORD! I beseech thee remember ---O Hezekiah! How couldst thou fear that GOD had forgotten thee? or, How couldst thou doubt of his remembrance of thy integrity, when he called thee to receive it's recompence?

But here it appears of what materials man is made: he pursues happiness -- and yet is so content with misery, that he would wander for ever in this dark vale of it, ---and say, ***"It is good, Lord! to be here, and to build tabernacles of rest:"*** and so long as we are cloathed with flesh, and nature has so great a share within us, it is no wonder if that part claims it's right, and pleads for the sweetness of life, notwithstanding all it's cares and disappointments.

This natural weakness, no doubt, had its weight in Hezekiah's earnest prayer for life : and yet from the success it met with, and the immediate change of GOD's purpose thereupon, it is hard to imagine, but that it must have been accompanied with some meritorious and more generous motive : and if we suppose, as some have done, that he turned his face towards the wall, because that part of his chamber looked towards the temple, the care of whose preservation lay next his heart, we may consistently enough give this sense to his prayer.

"O God! remember how I have walked before thee

in truth; ---how much I have done to rescue thy religion from error and falsehood; ---thou knowest that the eyes of the world are fixed upon me, as one that hath forsaken their idolatry, and restored thy worship; --that I stand in the midst of a crooked and corrupt generation, which looks thro' all my actions, and watches all events which happen to me: if now they shall see me snatched away in the midst of my days and service, How will thy great name suffer in my extinction? Will not the heathen say, This it is, to serve the God of Israel! ---How faithfully did Hezekiah walk before him? --What enemies did he bring upon himself, in too warmly promoting his worship? and now when the hour of sickness and distress came upon him, and he most wanted the aid of his GOD: -- behold how he was forsaken!"

It is not unreasonable, to ascribe some such pious and more disinterested motive to Hezekiah's desire of life, from the issue and success of his prayer: ---***for it came to pass before Isaiah had gone out into the middle court, that the word of the Lord came to him, saying, Turn again and tell Hezekiah I have heard his prayer, I have seen his tears, and behold I will heal him.***

It was upon this occasion, as we read in the 12<sup>th</sup> verse of this chapter, that Baradock-baladan, son of Baladine king of Babylon, sent letters and a present unto Hezekiah : he had heard the fame of his sickness and recovery; for as the Chaldeans were great searchers into the secrets of nature, especially into the motions of the celestial bodies, in all probability they

had taken notice at that distance, of the strange appearance of the shadow's returning ten degrees backwards upon their dials, and had enquired and learned upon what account, and in whose favour such a sign was given; so that this astronomical miracle, besides the political motive which it would suggest of courting such a favourite of heaven, had been sufficient by itself to have led a curious people as far as Jerusalem, that they might see the man for whose sake the sun had forsook his course.

And here we see how hard it is to stand the shock of prosperity; ---and how much truer a proof we give of our strength in that extreme of life, than in the other.

In all the trials of adversity, we find that Hezekiah behaved well, ---nothing unman'd him : when beseiged by the Assyrian host, which shut him up in Jerusalem, and threaten'd his destruction, --he stood unshaken and depended upon GOD's succour.---When cast down upon his bed of sickness, and threaten'd with death, he meekly turn'd his face towards the wall, ---wept and pray'd, and depended upon GOD's mercy : --but no sooner does prosperity return upon him, and the messengers from a far country come to pay the flattering homage due to his greatness, and the extraordinary felicity of his life, but he turns giddy, and sinks under the weight of his good fortune, and with a transport unbecoming a wise man upon it, --'tis said, he hearken'd unto the men, and shewed them all the house of his precious things, the silver and the gold, the spices and the precious ointments, and all the house of his armour, and all that was found in his treasures; that there was nothing in his house, nor in

his dominions, that Hezekiah shew'd them not: for tho' it is not expressly said here, (tho' it is in the parallel passage in Chronicles) -- nor is he charged by the prophet that, he did this out of vanity and a weak transport of ostentation; ---yet as we are sure, GOD could not be offended but where there was a real crime, we might reasonably conclude that this was his, and that he who searches into the heart of man, beheld that his was corrupted with the blessings he had given him; and that it was just to make what was the occasion of his pride, become the instrument of his punishment, by decreeing, that all the riches he had laid up in store until that day, should be carried away in triumph to Babylon, the very place from whence the messengers had come who had been eye-witnesses of his folly.

“O Hezekiah! How couldst thou provoke GOD to bring this judgment upon thee? How could thy spirit, all-meeek and gentle as it was, have ever fallen into this snare? Were thy treasures rich as the earth --What! was thy heart so vain as to be lifted up therewith? Was not all that was valuable in the world --nay, was not heaven itself almost at thy command whilst thou wast humble? and, How was it, that thou couldst barter away all this, for what was lighter than a bubble, and desecrate an action so full of courtesy and kindness as thine appeared to be, by suffering it to take it's rise from so polluted a fountain?”

There is scarce any thing which the heart more unwillingly bears, than an analysis of this kind.

We are a strange compound; and something foreign

from what charity would suspect, so eternally twists itself into what we do, that not only in momentous concerns, where interest lists under it all the powers of disguise, --but even in the most indifferent of our actions, --not worth a fallacy ---by force of habit, we continue it: so that whenever a man is about, --- observe him, ---he stands arm'd inside and out with two motives; an ostensible one for the world, ---and another which he reserves for his own private use; -- this, you may say, the world has no concern with : it might have been so; but by obtruding the wrong motive upon the world, and stealing from it a character, instead of winning one; --- we give it a right and a temptation along with it, to enquire into the affair.

The motives of the one for doing it, are often little better than the others for deserving it. Let us see if some social virtue may not be extracted from both the errors of both the one and the other.

VANITY bids all her sons to be generous and brave, ---and her daughters to be chaste and courteous. --- But why do we want her instructions? ---Ask the comedian who is taught a part he feels not---

Is it that the principles of religion want strength, or that the real passion for what is good and worthy will not carry us high enough?---GOD! thou knowest they carry us too high ---we want not *to be* --but *to seem*--

Look out of your door, --take notice of that man : see what disquieting, intriguing and shifting, he is content to go through, merely to be thought a man of plain

dealing: ---three grains of honesty would save him all  
this trouble: ---alas! he has them  
not.---

Behold a second, under a shew of piety hiding the  
impurities of a debauched life ---he is just entering the  
house of GOD : ---would he was more pure --or less  
pious : --but then he could not gain his point.

Observe a third going on almost in the same track,  
---with what an inflexible sanctity of deportment, he  
sustains himself as he  
advances: --every line in his face writes abstinence; ---  
every stride looks like a check upon his desires : see, I  
beseech you, how he is cloak'd up with sermons,  
prayers and sacraments; and so bemuffled with the  
externals of religion, that he has not a hand to spare  
for a worldly purpose; --he has armour at least --Why  
does he put it on? Is there no serving GOD without all  
this? Must the garb of religion be extended so wide to  
the danger of it's rending? – Yes truly, or it will not  
hide the secret ---and, What is that?

---That the saint has no religion at all.

---But here comes GENEROSITY; giving ---not to a  
decayed artist --but to the arts and sciences  
themselves. --See, --he ***builds not a chamber in the  
wall apart for the prophet;*** but whole schools and  
colleges for those who come after. LORD! how they will  
magnify his name! – 'tis in capitals already; the first --  
the highest, in the gilded rent-roll of every hospital and  
asylum---



---One honest tear shed in private over the unfortunate, is worth it all.

What a problematic set of creatures does simulation make us! Who would divine that all that anxiety and concern so visible in the airs of one half of that great assembly should arise from nothing else, but that the other half of it may think them to be men of consequence, penetration, parts and conduct? -- What a noise amongst the claimants about it? Behold *Humility* out of mere pride, ---and honesty almost out of knavery : ---*Chastity*, never once in harm's way, ---and courage, like a Spanish soldier upon an Italian stage --a bladder full of wind.--

---Hark! that, the sound of that trumpet, ---let not my soldier run, ---'tis some good Christian giving alms. O, PITY, thou gentlest of human passions! soft and tender are thy notes, and ill accord they with so loud an instrument.

Thus something jars, and will for ever jar in these cases: imposture is all dissonance, let what master so ever of it, undertake the part; let him harmonize and modulate it as he may, one tone will contradict another; and whilst we have ears to hear, we shall distinguish it : 'tis truth only which is consistent and ever in harmony with itself : it sits upon our lips, like the natural notes of some melodies, ready to drop out, whether we will or no; ---it racks no invention to let ourselves alone, --and needs fear no critick, to have the same excellency in the heart which appears in the action.

It is a pleasing allusion the scripture makes use of in calling us sometimes a house, and sometimes a temple, according to the more or less exalted qualities of the spiritual guest which is lodged within us : whether this is the precise ground of the distinction, I will not affirm; but thus much may be said, that, if we are to be temples, 'tis truth and singleness of heart which must make the dedication : 'tis this which must first distinguish them from the unhallowed pile, where dirty tricks and impositions are practised by the host upon the traveller, who tarries but for a moment and returns not again.

We all take notice, how close and reserved people are; but we do not take notice at the same time, that every one may have something to conceal, as well as ourselves; and that we are only marking the distances, and taking the measures of self-defence from each other, in the very instances we complain of : this is so true, that there is scarce any character so rare, as a man of a real open and generous integrity, ---who carries his heart in his hand, ---who says the thing he thinks; and does the thing he pretends. Tho' no one can dislike the character, --- yet, Discretion generally shakes her head, --and the world soon lets him into the reason.

*“O that I had in the wilderness a lodging of way-faring men! that I might leave such a people and go from them.”* Where is the man of a nice sense of truth and strong feelings, from whom the duplicity of the world, has not at one time or other wrung the same wish; and where lies the wilderness to which some one

has not fled, from the same melancholy impulse?

Thus much for those who give occasion to be thought ill of :---let us say a word or two unto those who take it.

But to avoid all common-place cant, as much as I can on this head, ---I will forbear to say, because I do not think it, ---that 'tis a breach of Christian charity to think or speak evil of our neighbour, &c.

---We cannot avoid it : our opinions must follow the evidence; and we are perpetually in such engagements and situations, that 'tis our duties to speak what our opinions are --but GOD forbid, that this ever should be done, but from its best motive --the sense of what is due to virtue, governed by discretion and the utmost fellow feeling : were we to go on otherwise, beginning with the great broad cloak of hypocrisy, and so down through all its little trimmings and facings, tearing away without mercy all that look'd seemly, ---we should leave but a tatter'd world of it.

But I confine what I have to say to a character less equivocal, and which takes up too much room in the world : it is that of those, who from a general distrust of all that looks disinterested, finding nothing to blame in an action, and perhaps much to admire in it, ---immediately fall foul upon its motives : *Does Job serve God for nought?* What a vile insinuation! besides, the question was not, whether Job was a rich or a poor man; --but, whether he was a man of integrity or no? and the appearances were strong on his side : indeed it might have been otherwise; it was

possible Job might be insincere, and the devil took the advantage of the die for it.

It is a bad picture, and done by a terrible master, and yet we are always copying it. Does a man from real conviction of heart forsake his vices? ---the position is not to be allowed, ---no; his vices have forsaken him.

Does a pure virgin fear GOD and say her prayers :---she is in her climacterik.

Does humanity cloath and educate the unknown orphan? ---Poverty! thou hast no genealogies : ---see! is he not the father of the child?

Thus do we rob heroes of the best part of their Glory --their virtue. Take away the motive of the act, you take away, all that is worth having in it; --wrest it to ungenerous ends, you load the virtuous man who did it, with infamy, --undo it all ---I beseech you : give him back his honour, ---restore the jewel you have taken from him, --replace him in the eye of the world—

---it is too late.

It is painful to utter the reproaches which should come in here. ---I will trust them with yourselves : in coming from that quarter, they will more naturally produce such fruits as will not set your teeth on edge ---for they will be the fruits of love and good will, to the praise of GOD and the happiness of the world, which I wish.

\*The date was actually 1764 – an error in dating by Sterne.