

# The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain

By

Hannah More, 1795

Mr. Johnson, a very worthy charitable gentleman, was traveling some time ago across one of those vast plains which are well known in Wiltshire. It was a fine summer's evening, and he rode slowly that he might have leisure to admire God in the works of his creation. For this gentleman was of opinion, that a walk or a ride was as proper a time as any to think about good things: for which reason, on such occasions he seldom thought so much about his money or his trade, or public news, as at other times, that he might with more ease and satisfaction enjoy the pious thoughts which the wonderful works of the great Maker of Heaven and earth are intended to raise in the mind.

As this serene contemplation of the visible heavens insensibly lifted up his mind from the works of God in nature, to the same God as he is seen in Scripture revelation, it occurred to him that this very connection was clearly intimated by the royal prophet in the nineteenth Psalm — that most beautiful description of the greatness and power of God exhibited in the former part, plainly seeming intended to introduce, illustrate, and unfold the operations of the word and Spirit of God on the heart in the latter.

And he began to run a parallel in his own mind between the effects of that highly poetical and glowing picture of the material sun in searching and warming the earth, in the first six verses — and the spiritual operation attributed to the “law of God,” which fills up the remaining part of the Psalm. And he persuaded himself that the divine Spirit which dictated this fine hymn, had left it as a kind of general intimation to what use we were to convert our admiration of created things; namely, that we might be led by a sight of them, to raise our views from the kingdom of nature to that of grace, and that the contemplation of God in his works might draw us to contemplate him in his word.

In the midst of these reflections, Mr. Johnson's attention was all of a sudden called off by the barking of a shepherd's dog, and looking up, he spied one of those little huts which are here and there to be seen on those great downs; and near it was the shepherd himself busily employed with his dog in collecting together his vast flock of sheep. As he drew nearer, he perceived him to be a clean, well-looking, poor man, near fifty years of age. His coat, though at first it had probably been of one dark color, had been in a long course of years so often patched with different sorts of cloth, that it was now become hard to say which had been the original color. But this, while it gave a plain proof of the shepherd's poverty, equally proved the exceeding neatness, industry, and good management of his wife. His stockings no less proved her good housewifery, for they were entirely covered with darns of different colored worsteds, but had not a hole in them; and his shirt, though nearly as coarse as the sails of a ship, was as white as the drifted snow, and was neatly mended where time had either made a rent, or worn it thin.

This furnishes a rule of judging, by which one shall seldom be deceived. If I meet with a laborer, hedging, ditching, or mending the highways, with his stockings and shirt tight and whole, however mean and bad his other garments are, I have seldom failed, on visiting his cottage, to find that also clean and well ordered, and his wife notable, and worthy of encouragement. Whereas, a poor woman, who will be lying a-bed, or gossiping with her neighbors when she ought to be fitting out her husband in a cleanly manner, will seldom be found to be very good in other respects.

This was not the case with our shepherd — and Mr. Johnson was not more struck with the decency of his poor and frugal dress, than with his open honest countenance, which bore strong marks of health, cheerfulness, and spirit.

Mr. Johnson, who was on a journey, and somewhat fearful from the appearance of the sky, that rain was at no great distance, accosted the shepherd with asking what sort of weather he thought it would be on the morrow. “It will be such weather as pleases me,” answered the shepherd. Though the answer was delivered in the mildest and most civil tone that could be imagined, the gentleman thought the words themselves rather rude and surly, and asked him how that could be. “Because,” replied the shepherd, “it will be such weather as shall please God — and whatever pleases him always pleases me.”

Mr. Johnson, who delighted in good men and good things, was very well satisfied with his reply. For he justly thought that though a hypocrite may easily contrive to appear better than he really is to a stranger; and that no one should be too soon trusted, merely for having a few good words in his mouth; yet as he knew that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, he always accustomed himself to judge favorably of those who had a serious deportment and solid manner of speaking. It looks as if it proceeded from a good habit, said he, and though I may now and then be deceived by it — yet it has not often happened to me to be so. Whereas if a man accosts me with an idle, dissolute, vulgar, indecent, or profane expression — I have never been deceived in him, but have generally on inquiry, found his character to be as bad as his language gave me room to expect.

He entered into conversation with the shepherd in the following manner: "Yours is a troublesome life, honest friend," said he.

"To be sure, sir," replied the shepherd, "'tis not a very lazy life; but 'tis not near so toilsome as that which my Great Master led for my sake; and he had every state and condition of life at his choice, and *chose* a hard one; while I only submit to the lot that is *appointed* to me."

"You are exposed to great cold and heat," said the gentleman.

"True, sir," said the shepherd; "but then I am not exposed to great temptations; and so, throwing one thing against another, God is pleased to contrive to make things more equal than we poor, ignorant, short-sighted creatures, are apt to think. David was happier when he kept his father's sheep on such a plain as this, and employed in singing some of his own Psalms perhaps — than ever he was when he became king of Israel and Judah. And I dare say we would never have had some of the most beautiful texts in all those fine Psalms, if he had not been a shepherd, which enabled him to make so many fine comparisons and similitudes, as one may say, from country life, flocks of sheep, hills, and valleys, fields of corn, and fountains of water."

"You think, then," said the gentleman, "that a laborious life is a happy one." "I do, sir; and more so especially, as *it exposes a man to fewer sins*. If king Saul had continued a poor laborious man to the end of his days, he might have lived happy and honest, and died a natural death in his bed at last, which you know, sir, was more than he did. But I speak with reverence, for it was *divine Providence* overruled all that, you know, sir, and I do not presume to make comparisons. Besides, sir, my employment has been particularly honored. Moses was a shepherd on the plains of Midian. It was to 'shepherds keeping their flocks by night,' that the angels appeared in Bethlehem, to tell the best news, the gladdest tidings, that ever were revealed to poor sinful men. Often has the thought warmed my poor heart in the coldest night, and filled me with more joy and thankfulness than the best supper could have done."

Here the shepherd stopped, for he began to feel that he had talked too free, and too long. But Mr. Johnson was so well pleased with what he said, and with the cheerful contented manner in which he said it, that he desired him to go on freely, for it was a pleasure to him to meet with a plain man, who, without any kind of learning but what he had got from the Bible, was able to talk so well on a subject in which all men, high and low, rich and poor, are equally concerned.

"Indeed I am afraid I make too bold, sir, for it better befits me to listen to such a gentleman as you seem to be, than to talk in my poor way. But as I was saying, sir, I wonder that all working men do not derive as great joy and delight as I do, from thinking how God has honored poverty! Oh! sir, what great, or rich, or mighty men have had such honor put on them, or their condition — as shepherds, tentmakers, fishermen, and carpenters have had! Besides, it seems as if God honored industry also. The way of *duty* is not only the way of *safety*, but it is remarkable how many, in the exercise of the common duties of their calling, humbly and rightly performed, as we may suppose — have found honors, preferment, and blessing — while it does not occur to me that the whole sacred volume presents a single instance of a like blessing conferred on *idleness*. Rebekah, Rachel, and Jethro's daughters, were diligently employed in the lowest occupations of a country life, when Providence, by means of those very occupations, raised them up husbands so famous in history, as Isaac, Jacob, and the prophet Moses. The shepherds were neither playing, nor sleeping, but 'watching their flocks,' when they received the news of a Savior's birth. And the woman of Samaria, by the laborious office of drawing water, was brought to the knowledge of him who gave her to drink of 'living water.'"

"My honest friend," said the gentleman, "I perceive you are well acquainted with Scripture."

"Yes, sir, pretty well, blessed be God! Through his mercy I learned to read when I was a little boy; though reading was not so common when I was a child, as, I am told, through the goodness of Providence and the generosity of the rich, it is likely to become now-a-days. I believe there is no day, for the last thirty years, that I have not peeped at my Bible. If we can't find time to read a chapter, I defy any man to say he can't find time to read a verse. A single text, sir, well followed, and put in practice every day, would make no bad figure at the year's end: three hundred and sixty-five texts, without the loss of a moment's time, would make a pretty stock, a little golden treasury, as one may say, from New Year's day to new-year's day. If children were brought up in this method, they would come to look for their text as naturally as they do for their breakfast. No laboring man, 'tis true, has so much leisure as a shepherd, for while the flock is feeding I am obliged to be still, and at such times I can now and then fix a shoe for my children or myself, which is a great saving to us, and while I am doing that I repeat a chapter or a Psalm, which makes the time pass pleasantly in this wild solitary place. I can say the best part of the New Testament by heart. I believe I should not say the *best* part, for every part is good, but I mean the *greatest* part. I have led but a lonely life, and have often had but little to eat, but my Bible has been food, drink, and company to me, as I may say. And when want and trouble have come upon me, I don't know what I should have done indeed, sir, if I had not had the *promises* of this book for my stay and support."

"You have had great difficulties then?" said Mr. Johnson.

“Why, as to that, sir, not more than neighbors’ fare; I have but little cause to complain, and much to be thankful; but I have had some little struggles, as I will leave you to judge. I have a wife and eight children, whom I bred up in that little cottage which you see under the hill, about half a mile off.”

“What, that with the smoke coming out of the chimney?” said the gentleman.

“Oh no, sir,” replied the shepherd, smiling, “we have seldom smoke in the evening, for we have little to cook. ‘Tis that cottage which you see on the left hand of the church, near that little tuft of hawthorns.”

“What, that hovel with only one room above and below, with scarcely any chimney? How is it possible that you can live there with such a family?”

“Oh, it is very possible, and very certain too,” cried the shepherd. “How many better men have been worse lodged! How many good Christians have perished in prisons and dungeons, in comparison of which my cottage is a palace! The house is very well, sir; and if the rain did not sometimes beat down upon us through the thatch when we are a-bed, I would not desire a better one; for I have health, peace, and liberty, and no man makes me afraid.”

“Well, I will certainly call on you before it be long; but how can you contrive to lodge so many children?”

“We do the best we can, sir. My poor wife is a very sickly woman, or we would always have done tolerably well. There are no rich folk in the parish, so that she has not met with any great assistance in her sickness. The good curate of the parish, who lives in that pretty parsonage in the valley, is very *willing*, but not very *able* to assist us on these trying occasions, for he has little enough for himself, and a large family into the bargain. Yet he does what he can, and more than many other men do, and more than he can well afford. Besides that, his *prayers* and *good advice* we are always sure of, and we are truly thankful for that, for a man must give, you know, sir, according to what he has, and not according to what he has not.”

“I am afraid,” said Mr. Johnson, “that your difficulties may sometimes lead you to *repine*.”

“No, sir,” replied the shepherd, “it pleases God to give me two ways of bearing up under my trials. I pray that they may be either *removed* or *sanctified* to me. Besides, if my road is right, I am contented, though it be rough and uneven. I do not so much stagger at *hardships in the right way* — as I dread a false security, and a hollow peace, while I may be walking in a more smooth, but less safe way. Besides, sir, I strengthen my faith by recollecting what the holiest men have suffered — and my hope, with the view of the *shortness* of all suffering. It is a good hint, sir, of the vanity of all earthly possessions, that though the whole Land of Promise was his — yet the first bit of ground which Abraham, the father of the faithful, got possession of, in the land of Canaan, was a *grave*.”

“Are you in any distress at present?” said Mr. Johnson. “No, sir, thank God,” replied the shepherd, “I get my shilling a day, and most of my children will soon be able to earn something; for we have only three under five years old.”

“Only!” said the gentleman, “that is a heavy burden.”

“Not at all; God *fits* the back to it. Though my wife is not able to do any out-of-door work — yet she breeds up our children to such habits of industry, that our little maids, before they are six years old, can first get a half-penny, and then a penny a day by knitting. The boys, who are too little to do hard work, get a trifle by keeping the birds off the corn — for this the farmers will give them a penny or two, and now and then a bit of bread and cheese into the bargain. When the season of crow-keeping is over, then they glean or pick stones. Anything is better than idleness, sir, and if they did not get a farthing by it, I would make them do it just the same, for the sake of giving them *early habits of labor*.”

“So you see, sir, I am not so badly off as many are. Nay, if it were not that it costs me so much in medicines for my poor wife, I would reckon myself well off. Nay I do reckon myself well off, for blessed be God, he has granted her life to my prayers, and I would work myself to the bone, and live on one meal a day — to add any comfort to her valuable life; indeed I have often done the last, and thought it no great matter either.”

While they were in this part of the discourse, a fine plump cherry-cheek little girl ran up out of breath, with a smile on her young happy face, and without taking any notice of the gentleman, cried out with great joy, “Look here, father, only see how much I have got!”

Mr. Johnson was much struck with her simplicity, but puzzled to know what was the occasion of this great joy. On looking at her, he perceived a small quantity of coarse wool, some of which had found its way through the holes of her clean, but scanty and ragged woollen apron.

The father said, “This has been a successful day indeed, Molly, but don’t you see the gentleman?”

Molly now made a courtesy down to the very ground, while Mr. Johnson inquired into the cause of mutual satisfaction which both father and daughter had expressed, at the unusual good fortune of the day.

“Sir,” said the shepherd, “poverty is a great sharpener of the wits. My wife and I can not endure to see our children (poor as they are) without shoes and stockings, not only on account of the pinching cold which cramps their poor little limbs, but because it degrades and debases them; and poor people who have but little regard to appearances, will seldom be found to have any great regard for honesty and goodness. I don’t say this is *always* the case; but I am sure it is too often. Now shoes and stockings being very dear, we could never afford to get them without a little contrivance. I must

show you how I manage about the shoes when you condescend to call at our cottage, sir. As to stockings, this is one way we take to help to get them. My young ones, who are too little to do much work, sometimes wander at odd hours over the hills for the chance of finding what little wool the sheep may drop when they rub themselves, as they are apt to do, against the bushes. These scattered bits of wool the children pick out of the brambles, which I see have torn sad holes in Molly's apron today; they carry this wool home, and when they have got a pretty parcel together, their mother cards it; for she can sit and card in the chimney corner, when she is not able to wash or work about the house. The biggest girl then spins it; it does very well for us without dyeing, for poor people must not be particular about the color of their stockings. After this our little boys knit it for themselves, while they are employed in keeping cows in the fields, and after they get home at night. As for the knitting which the girls and their mother do, that is chiefly for sale, which helps to pay our rent."

Mr. Johnson lifted up his eyes in silent astonishment at the shifts which *honest poverty* can make rather than beg or steal; and was surprised to think how many ways of existing there are, which those who live at their ease little suspect. He secretly resolved to be more attentive to his own petty expenses than he had hitherto been; and to be more watchful that nothing was wasted in his family.

But to return to the shepherd. Mr. Johnson told him that as he must needs be at his friend's house, who lived many miles off, that night, he could not, as he wished to do, make a visit to his cottage at present. "But I will certainly do it," said he, "on my return, for I long to see your wife and her nice little family, and to be an eye-witness of her neatness and good management."

The poor man's tears started into his eyes on hearing the commendation bestowed on his wife; and wiping them off with the sleeve of his coat, for he had not a handkerchief in the world, he said, "Oh, sir, you just now, I am afraid, called me a humble man, but indeed I am a very proud one."

"Proud!" exclaimed Mr. Johnson, "I hope not. Pride is a great sin, and as the poor are liable to it as well as the rich, so good a man as you seem to be ought to guard against it."

"Sir," said he, "you're right, but I am not proud of myself, God knows I have nothing to be proud of. I am a poor sinner; but indeed, sir, I am proud of my *wife* — she is not only the most tidy, notable woman on the plain, but she is the kindest wife and mother, and the most contented, thankful Christian that I know. Last year I thought I would have lost her in a violent fit of the rheumatism, caught by going to work too soon after childbearing, I fear; for 'tis but a bleak, coldish place, as you may see, sir, in winter, and sometimes the snow lies so long under the hill, that I can hardly make myself a path to get out and buy a few necessities in the village; and we are afraid to send out the children, for fear they should be lost when the snow is deep. So, as I was saying, the poor soul was very bad indeed, and for several weeks lost the use of all her limbs except her hands; a merciful Providence spared her the use of these, so that when she could not turn in her bed, she could contrive to patch a rag or two for her family. She was always saying, had it not been for the great goodness of God, she might have her hands lame as well as her feet, or the palsy instead of the rheumatism, and then she could have done nothing — but, nobody had so many mercies as she had.

"I will not tell you what we suffered during the bitter weather, sir, but my wife's faith and patience during that trying time, were as good a lesson to me as any sermon I could hear, and yet Mr. Jenkins gave us very comfortable ones too, that helped to keep up my spirits."

"I fear, shepherd," said Mr. Johnson, "you have found this to be but a bad world."

"Yes, sir," replied the shepherd, "but *it is governed by a good God*. And though my trials have now and then been sharp, why then, sir, as the saying is, if the pain is *violent*, it is seldom *lasting*; and if it is but moderate, why then we can bear it the longer; and when it is quite taken away, ease is the more precious, and gratitude is quickened by the remembrance. Thus every way, and in every case, I can always find out a reason for vindicating Providence."

"But," said Mr. Johnson, "how do you do to support yourself under the pressure of actual poverty. Is not hunger a great weakener of your faith?"

"Sir," replied the shepherd, "I endeavor to live upon the promises. You, who abound in the good things of this world, are apt to set too high a value on them. Suppose, sir, the king, seeing me at hard work, were to say to me, that if I would patiently work on until Christmas, a fine palace and a great estate would be the reward of my labors. Do you think, sir, that a little hunger, or a little sweat, would make me flinch, when I was sure that a few months would put me in possession! Would I not say to myself frequently — cheer up, shepherd, 'tis but until Christmas! Now is there not much less difference between this supposed day and Christmas, when I should take possession of the estate and palace — than there is between time and eternity, when I am sure of entering on a kingdom not made with hands?"

"There is some comparison between a moment and a thousand years, because a thousand years are made up of moments, all time being made up of the same sort of stuff, as I may say. While there is no sort of comparison between the longest portion of time and eternity. You know, sir, there is no way of measuring two things, one of which has length and breadth, which shows it must have an end somewhere, and another thing, which being eternal, is without end and without measure."

“But,” said Mr. Johnson, “is not the *fear of death* sometimes too strong for your faith?”

“Blessed be God, sir,” replied the shepherd, “the dark passage through the valley of the shadow of death is made safe by the power of him who conquered death. I know, indeed, we shall go as naked out of this world as we came into it — but a humble penitent will not be found naked in the other world, sir. My Bible tells me of garments of praise and robes of righteousness. And is it not a support, sir, under any of the petty difficulties and distresses here, to be assured by the word of him who can not lie, that those who were in white robes, came out of tribulation? But, sir, I beg your pardon for being so talkative. Indeed you great folks can hardly imagine how it raises and cheers a poor man’s heart when such as you condescend to talk familiarly to him on religious subjects. It seems to be a practical comment on that text which says, the rich and the poor meet together, the Lord is the maker of them all.

“But to return to my wife. One Sunday afternoon when she was at the worst, as I was coming out of church, for I went one part of the day, and my eldest daughter the other, so my poor wife was never left alone; as I was coming out of church, Mr. Jenkins, the minister, called out to me and asked me how my wife did, saying he had been kept from coming to see her by the deep fall of snow, and indeed from the parsonage-house to my hovel it was quite impassable. I gave him all the particulars he asked, and I am afraid a good many more, for my heart was quite full. He kindly gave me a shilling, and said he would certainly try to pick out his way and come and see her in a day or two.

“While he was talking to me a plain farmer-looking gentleman in boots, who stood by listened to all I said, but seemed to take no notice. It was Mr. Jenkins’ wife’s father, who was come to pass the Christmas-holidays at the parsonage-house. I had always heard him spoken of as a plain frugal man, but was remarked to give away more than any of his showy neighbors.

“Well! I went home with great spirits at this seasonable and unexpected supply; for we had tapped our last sixpence, and there was little work to be had on account of the weather; I told my wife I had not come back empty-handed. ‘No, I dare say not,’ says she, ‘you have been serving a master who fills the hungry with good things, though he sends the rich empty away’ True, Mary, says I, we seldom fail to get good spiritual food from Mr. Jenkins, but today he has kindly supplied our bodily needs. She was more thankful when I showed her the shilling, than, I dare say, some of your great people are when they get a hundred pounds.”

Mr. Johnson’s heart smote him when he heard such a value set upon a shilling. Surely, said he to himself, I will never waste another; but he said nothing to the shepherd, who thus pursued his story:

“Next morning before I went out, I sent part of the money to buy a little brown sugar to put into her water-gruel; which you know, sir, made it nice and nourishing. I went out to cleave wood in a farm-yard, for there was no standing out on the plain, after such snow as had fallen in the night. I went with a lighter heart than usual, because I had left my poor wife a little better, and comfortably supplied for this day, and I now resolved more than ever to trust God for the supplies of the next day. When I came back at night, my wife fell a crying as soon as she saw me. This, I own, I thought but a bad return for the blessings she had so lately received, and so I told her. ‘Oh,’ said she, ‘it is too much, we are too rich. I am now frightened, not lest we should have no portion in this world, but for fear we should have our whole portion in it. Look here, John.’ So saying, she uncovered the bed whereon she lay, and showed me two warm, thick, new blankets. I could not believe my own eyes, sir, because when I went out in the morning, I had left her with no other covering than our little old thin blue rug. I was still more amazed when she put half a crown into my hand, telling me, she had had a visit from Mr. Jenkins, and Mr. Jones, the latter of whom had bestowed all these good things upon us.

“Thus, sir, have our lives been crowned with mercies. My wife got about again, and I do believe, under Providence, it was owing to these comforts; for the rheumatism, sir, without blankets by night, and flannel by day, is but a baddish job, especially to people who have little or no fire. She will always be a weakly *body*; but thank God her *soul* prospers and is in health. But I beg your pardon, sir, for talking on at this rate.”

“Not at all, not at all,” said Mr. Johnson; “I am much pleased with your story; you shall certainly see me in a few days. Good night.”

So saying, he slipped a crown into his hand and rode off. Surely, said the shepherd, “Goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life,” as he gave the money to his wife when he got home at night.

As to Mr. Johnson, he found abundant matter for his thoughts during the rest of his journey. On the whole, he was more disposed to envy than to pity the shepherd. I have seldom seen, said he, so happy a man. It is a sort of happiness which the world could not give, and which, I plainly see, it has not been able to take away. This must be the true spirit of religion. I see more and more, that true goodness is not merely a thing of words and opinions, but a *living principle* brought into every common action of a man’s life. What else could have supported this poor couple under every bitter trial of want and sickness? No, my honest shepherd, I do not pity, but I respect and even honor you; and I will visit your poor hovel on my return to Salisbury, with as much pleasure as I am now going to the house of my friend.

Mr. Johnson, after having passed some time with his friend, set out on his return to Salisbury, and on the Saturday evening reached a very small inn, a mile or two distant from the shepherd’s village; for he never traveled on a Sunday

without such a reason as he might be able to produce at the day of judgment. He went the next morning to the church nearest the house where he had passed the night, and after taking such refreshment as he could get at that house, he walked on to find out the shepherd's cottage. His reason for visiting him on a Sunday was chiefly because he supposed it to be the only day which the shepherd's employment allowed him to pass at home with his family; and as Mr. Johnson had been struck with his talk, he thought it would be neither unpleasant nor unprofitable to observe how a man who carried such an appearance of piety, spent his Sunday: for though he was so low in the world, this gentleman was not above entering very closely into his character, of which he thought he should be able to form a better judgment, by seeing whether *his practice at home* kept pace with his professions abroad. For it is not so much by observing how people *talk*, as how they *live*, that we ought to judge of their *characters*.

After a pleasant walk, Mr. Johnson got within sight of the cottage, to which he was directed by the clump of hawthorns and the broken chimney. He wished to take the family by surprise; and walking gently up to the house he stood awhile to listen. The door being half open, he saw the shepherd (who looked so respectable in his Sunday coat that he would hardly have known him), his wife, and their numerous young family, drawing round their little table, which was covered with a clean, though very coarse cloth.

There stood on it a large dish of potatoes, a brown pitcher, and a piece of a coarse loaf of bread. The wife and children stood in silent attention, while the shepherd, with uplifted hands and eyes, devoutly begged the blessing of God on their homely fare. Mr. Johnson could not help sighing to reflect, that he had sometimes seen better dinners eaten with less appearance of thankfulness.

The shepherd and his wife sat down with great seeming cheerfulness, but the children stood; and while the mother was helping them, little fresh-colored Molly, who had picked the wool from the bushes with so much delight, cried out, "Father, I wish I was big enough to say grace, I am sure I would say it very heartily today, for I was thinking what must poor people do who have no salt to their potatoes; and do but look, our dish is quite full."

"That is the true way of thinking, Molly," said the father; "in whatever concerns bodily wants and bodily comforts, it is our duty to compare our own lot with the lot of those who are worse off — and it will keep us thankful. On the other hand, whenever we are tempted to set up our own wisdom or goodness, we must compare ourselves with those who are wiser and better — and that will keep us humble."

Molly was now so hungry, and found the potatoes so good, that she had no time to make any more remarks; but was devouring her dinner very heartily, when the barking of the great dog drew her attention to the door, and spying the stranger, she cried out, "Look, father, see here, if yonder is not the good gentleman!" Mr. Johnson finding himself discovered, immediately walked in, and was heartily welcomed by the honest shepherd, who told his wife that this was the gentleman to whom they were so much obliged.

The good woman began, as some very neat people are rather apt to do, with making many apologies that her house was not cleaner, and that things were not in a fitter order to receive such a gentleman. Mr. Johnson, however, on looking round, could discover nothing but the most perfect neatness. The trenchers on which they were eating were almost as white as their linen; and notwithstanding the number and smallness of the children, there was not the least appearance of dirt or litter. The furniture was very simple and poor, hardly indeed amounting to bare necessities. It consisted of four brown wooden chairs, which by constant rubbing, were become as bright as a looking-glass; an iron pot and kettle; a poor old grate, which scarcely held a handful of coal, and out of which the little fire that had been in it appeared to have been taken, as soon as it had answered the end for which it had been lighted — that of boiling their potatoes. Over the chimney stood an old-fashioned broad bright candlestick, and a still brighter spit; it was pretty clear that this last was kept rather for ornament than use. An old carved elbow chair, and a chest of the same date, which stood in the corner, were considered the most valuable part of the shepherd's goods, having been in his family for three generations. But all these were lightly esteemed by him in comparison of another possession, which, added to the above, made up the whole of what he had inherited from his father — and which last he would not have parted with, if no other could have been had, for the king's ransom: this was a large old Bible, which lay on the window-seat, neatly covered with brown cloth, variously patched. This sacred book was most reverently preserved from dog's ears, dirt, and every other injury but such as time and much use had made it suffer in spite of care. On the clean white walls were pasted a hymn on the Crucifixion of our Savior, a print of the Prodigal Son, and the Shepherd's hymn.

After the first salutations were over, Mr. Johnson said that if they would go on with their dinner he would sit down. Though a good deal ashamed, they thought it more respectful to obey the gentleman, who having cast his eye on their slender provisions, gently rebuked the shepherd for not having indulged himself, as it was Sunday, with a morsel of bacon to relish his potatoes.

The shepherd said nothing, but poor Mary colored and hung down her head, saying, "Indeed, sir, it is not my fault; I did beg my husband to allow himself a bit of meat today out of your honor's bounty; but he was too good to do it, and it is all for my sake."

The shepherd seemed unwilling to come to an explanation, but Mr. Johnson desired Mary to go on. So she continued: "You must know, sir, that both of us, next to a sin, dread a *debt*, and indeed in some cases a debt is a sin; but with all our care and pains, we have never been able quite to pay off the doctor's bill for that bad fit of rheumatism which I had last winter. Now when you were pleased to give my husband that kind present the other day, I heartily desired him to buy a bit of meat for Sunday, as I said before, that he might have a little refreshment for himself out of your kindness. 'But,' answered he, 'Mary, it is never out of my mind long together that we still owe a few shillings to the doctor (and thank God it is all we did owe in the world). Now if I carry him his money directly, it will not only show him our honesty and our good-will, but it will be an encouragement to him to come to you another time in case you should be taken once more in such a bad fit; for I must own,' added my poor husband, 'that the thought of your being so terribly ill without any help, is the only misfortune that I need courage to face.'"

Here the grateful woman's tears ran down so fast that she could not go on. She wiped them with the corner of her apron, and humbly begged pardon for talking so freely.

"Indeed, sir," said the shepherd, "though my wife is full as unwilling to be in debt as myself — yet I could hardly prevail on her to consent to my paying this money just then, because she said it was hard I should not have a taste of the gentleman's bounty myself. But for once, sir, I would have my own way. For you must know, as I pass the best part of my time alone, tending my sheep, 'tis a great point with me, sir, to get comfortable matter for my own thoughts; so that 'tis rather self-interest in me to allow myself in no pleasures and no practices that won't bear thinking on over and over. For when one is a good deal alone, you know, sir, all one's bad deeds do so rush in upon one, as I may say, and so torment one, that there is no true comfort to be had but in keeping clear of wrong doings and false pleasures; and that I suppose may be one reason why so many folks hate to stay a bit by themselves.

"But as I was saying — when I came to think the matter over on the hill yonder, said I to myself, a good dinner is a good thing, I grant, and yet it will be but *cold comfort* to me a week after, to be able to say — to be sure I had a nice shoulder of mutton last Sunday for dinner, thanks to the good gentleman! But then I am in debt. I had a rare dinner, that's certain, but the pleasure of that has long been over — and the debt still remains. I have spent the crown; and now if my poor wife should be taken in one of those fits again, die she must, unless God work a miracle to prevent it, for I can get no help for her. This thought settled all; and I set off directly and paid the crown to the doctor with as much cheerfulness as I would have felt on sitting down to the fattest shoulder of mutton that ever was roasted. And if I was contented at the time, think how much more happy I have been at the remembrance! O, sir, there are no pleasures worth the name, but such as bring no plague or penitence after them."

Mr. Johnson was satisfied with the shepherd's reasons; and agreed that though a *good dinner* was not to be despised — yet it was not worthy to be compared with a *contented mind*, which (as the Bible truly says) is a continual feast.

"But come," said the good gentleman, "what have we got in this brown mug?"

"As good water," said the shepherd, "as any in the king's dominions. I have heard of countries beyond sea, in which there is no wholesome water; nay, I have been myself in a great town not far off, where they are obliged to buy all the water which they get, while a good Providence sends to my very door a spring as clear and fine as Jacob's well. When I am tempted to repine that I have often no other drink, I call to mind that it was nothing better than a cup of cold water which the woman at the well of Sychar drew for the greatest guest that ever visited this world."

"Very well," replied Mr. Johnson; "but as your honesty has made you prefer a poor meal to being in debt, I will at least send and get something for you to drink. I saw a little public house just by the church, as I came along. Let that little rosy-faced fellow fetch a mug of beer." So saying, he looked full at the boy, who did not offer to stir; but cast an eye at his father to know what he was to do.

"Sir," said the shepherd, "I hope we shall not appear ungrateful if we seem to refuse your favor; my little boy would, I am sure, fly to serve you on any other occasion. But, good sir, it is Sunday; and should any of my family be seen at a public house on a Sabbath-day, it would be a much greater grief to me than to drink water all my life. If I would say one thing and do another, you can't think what an advantage it would give many of my neighbors over me, who would be glad enough to report that they had caught the shepherd's son at the alehouse without explaining how it happened. Christians, you know, sir, must be doubly watchful; or they will not only bring disgrace on themselves, but what is much worse, on that holy name by which they are called."

"Are you not a little too cautious, my honest friend?" said Mr. Johnson.

"I humbly ask your pardon, sir," replied the shepherd, "if I think that is impossible. In my poor notion, I no more understand how a man can be too cautious, than how he can be too strong, or too healthy."

"You are right indeed," said Mr. Johnson, "as a general principle, but this struck me as a very small thing."

"Sir," said the shepherd, "I am afraid you will think me very bold, but you encourage me to speak out."

"'Tis what I wish," said the gentleman.

“Then, sir,” resumed the shepherd, “I doubt if, where, there is a frequent temptation to do wrong, any fault can be called small; that is, in short, if there is any such thing as a small willful sin. A poor man like me is seldom called out to do great things, so that it is not by a few striking deeds his character can be judged by his neighbors, but by *the little round of daily customs he allows himself in.*”

“I would like,” said Mr. Johnson, “to know how you manage in this respect.”

“I am but a poor scholar, sir,” replied the shepherd, “but I have made myself a little sort of rule. I always avoid, as I am an ignorant man, picking out any one single difficult text to distress my mind about, or to go and build opinions upon, because I know that puzzles and injures poor unlearned Christians. But I endeavor to collect what is the general spirit or meaning of Scripture on any particular subject, by putting a few texts together, which though I find them dispersed up and down — yet all seem to look the same way, to prove the same truth, or hold out the same comfort. So when I am tried or tempted, or anything happens in which I am at a loss what to do, I apply to my rule — to the law and the testimony. To be sure I can’t always find a particular direction as to the very case, because then the Bible must have been bigger than all those great books I once saw in the library at Salisbury palace, which the butler told me were acts of Parliament. And had that been the case, a poor man would never have had money to buy, nor a working man time to read the Bible. And so Christianity could only have been a religion for the rich, for those who had money and leisure; which, blessed be God! is so far from being the truth, that in all that fine discourse of our Savior to John’s disciples, it is enough to reconcile any poor man in the world to his low condition, to observe, when Christ reckons up the things for which he came on earth, to observe, I say, what he keeps for last. ‘Go tell John,’ says he, ‘those things which you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up.’ Now, sir, all these are wonders to be sure, but they are nothing to what follows. They are but like the lower rounds of a ladder, as I may say, by which you mount to the top — ‘and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.’ I dare say, if John had any doubts before, this part of the message must have cleared them up at once. For it must have made him certain sure at once, that a religion which placed preaching salvation to the *poor* above healing the sick, which ranked the *soul* above the body, and set Heaven above health, must have come from God.”

“But,” said Mr. Johnson, “you say you can generally pick out your particular duty from the Bible, though that immediate duty is not fully explained.”

“Indeed, sir,” replied the shepherd, “I think I can find out the *principle* at least, if I bring but a willing mind. The want of that is the great hindrance. ‘Whoever does my will, he shall know of the doctrine.’ You know that text, sir. I believe a stubborn will makes the Bible harder to be understood than any lack of learning. ‘Tis corrupt affections which blind the understanding, sir. The more a man hates sin, the clearer he will see his way; and the more he loves holiness, the better he will understand his Bible — the more practical conviction will he get of that pleasant truth, that the secret of the Lord is with those who fear him.

“Now, sir, suppose I had time and learning, and possessed of all the books I saw at the bookstore — where could I find out a surer way to lay the axe to the root of all covetousness, selfishness, and injustice, than the plain and ready rule, to *do unto all men as I would they should do unto me*. If my neighbor does me an injury, can I be at any loss how to proceed with him, when I recollect the parable of the unforgiving steward, who refused to pardon a debt of a hundred pence, when his own ten thousand talents had been forgiven? I defy any man to retain habitual selfishness, hardness of heart, or any other allowed sin — who daily and conscientiously tries his own heart by this touchstone. The *straight rule* will show the *crooked practice* to everyone who honestly tries the one by the other.”

“Why you seem to make Scripture a thing of *general application*,” said Mr. Johnson, “in cases in which many, I fear, do not apply.”

“It applies to everything, sir,” replied the shepherd. “When those men who are now disturbing the peace of the world, and trying to destroy the confidence of God’s children in their Maker and their Savior; when those men, I say, came to my poor hovel with their new doctrines and their new books, I would never look into one of them; for I remember it was the first sin of the first pair to lose their innocence for the sake of a little wicked knowledge. Besides, my own book told me — To fear God and honor the king — To meddle not with them who are given to change — Not to speak evil of dignities — To render honor to whom honor is due. So that I was furnished with a little coat of armor, as I may say, which preserved me, while those who had no such armor fell into the snare.”

While they were thus talking, the children who had stood very quietly behind, and had not stirred a foot, now began to scamper about all at once, and in a moment ran to the window-seat to pick up their little old hats. Mr. Johnson looked surprised at this disturbance; and the shepherd asked his pardon, telling him it was the sound of the church-bell which had been the cause of their rudeness; for their mother had brought them up with such a fear of being too late for church, that it was but who could catch the first stroke of the bell, and be first ready. He had always taught them to think that nothing was more indecent than to get into church after it was begun; for as the service opened with an exhortation to repentance, and a confession of sin, it looked very presumptuous not to feel ready to join it; it looked as if people did not feel



themselves to be sinners. And though such as lived at a great distance might plead difference of clocks as an excuse — yet those who lived within the sound of the bell, could pretend neither ignorance nor mistake.

Mary and her children set forward. Mr. Johnson and the shepherd followed, taking care to talk the whole way on such subjects as might fit them for the solemn duties of the place to which they were going.

“I have often been sorry to observe,” said Mr. Johnson, “that many who are reckoned decent, good kind of people, and who would on no account neglect going to church — yet seem to care but little in what frame or temper of mind they go thither. They will talk of their worldly concerns until they get within the door, and then take them up again the very minute the sermon is over, which makes me ready to fear they lay too much stress on the mere form of going to a place of worship. Now, for my part, I always find that it requires a little time to bring my mind into a state fit to do any common business well, much more this great and most necessary business of all.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the shepherd; “and then I think too how busy I should be in preparing my mind, if I were going into the presence of a great gentleman, or a lord, or the king — and shall the King of kings be treated with less respect? Besides, one likes to see people feel as if going to church was a thing of choice and pleasure, as well as a duty — and that they were as desirous not to be the last there, as they would be if they were going to a feast or a fair.”

After service, Mr. Jenkins, the clergyman, who was well acquainted with the character of Mr. Johnson, and had a great respect for him, greeted him with much civility; expressing his concern that he could not enjoy just now so much of his conversation as he wished, as he was obliged to visit a sick person at a distance, but hoped to have a little talk with him before he left the village. As they walked along together, Mr. Johnson made such inquiries about the shepherd, as served to confirm him in the high opinion he entertained of his piety, good sense, industry, and self-denial. They parted; the clergyman promising to call in at the cottage in his way home.

The shepherd, who took it for granted that Mr. Johnson was gone to the parsonage, walked home with his wife and children, and was beginning in his usual way to catechize and instruct his family, when Mr. Johnson came in, and insisted that the shepherd should go on with his instruction just as if he were not there. This gentleman, who was very desirous of being useful to his own servants and workmen in the way of instruction, was sometimes sorry to find that though he took a good deal of pains, they now and then did not quite understand him; for though his meaning was very good, his language was not always very plain; and though the things he said were not hard to be understood — yet the words were, especially to such as were very ignorant. And he now began to find out that if people were ever so wise and good — yet if they had not a simple, agreeable, and familiar way of expressing themselves, some of their plain hearers would not be much the better for them.

For this reason he was not above listening to the plain, humble way in which this honest man taught his family; for though he knew that he himself had many advantages over the shepherd, had more learning, and could teach him many things — yet he was not too proud to learn even of so poor a man, in any point where he thought the shepherd might have the advantage of him.

This gentleman was much pleased with the knowledge and piety which he discovered in the answers of the children, and desired the shepherd to tell him how he contrived to keep up a sense of divine things in his own mind, and in that of his family, with so little leisure, and so little reading.

“Oh! as to that, sir,” said the shepherd, “we do not read much except in one book, to be sure; but with my hearty prayer for God’s blessing on the use of that book, what little knowledge is needful seems to come of course, as it were. And my chief study has been to bring the fruits of the Sunday reading into the week’s business, and to keep up the same sense of God in the heart, when the Bible is in the cupboard, as when it is in the hand. In short, to *apply* what I read in the book — to what I meet with in the field.”

“I don’t quite understand you,” said Mr. Johnson.

“Sir,” replied the shepherd, “I have but a poor gift at conveying these things to others, though I have much comfort from them in my own mind. But I am sure that the most ignorant and hard-working people, who are in earnest about their salvation, may help to keep up devout thoughts and good affections during the week, though they have had hardly any time to look at a book; and it will help them to keep out bad thoughts too, which is no small matter. But then they must know the Bible; they must have read the word of God diligently, that is a kind of stock in trade for a Christian to set up with. It is this which makes me so careful in teaching it to my children; and even in storing their memories with Psalms and chapters. This is a great help to a poor hard-working man, who will scarcely meet with anything in them but what he may turn to some good account.

“If one lives in the fear and love of God, almost everything one sees abroad, will teach one to adore his power and goodness, and bring to mind some text of Scripture, which shall fill his heart with thankfulness, and his mouth with praise. When I look upward, the Heavens declare the glory of God — and shall *I* be silent and ungrateful? If I look around and see the valleys standing thick with corn — how can I help blessing that God who gives me all things richly to enjoy?

“I may learn gratitude from the beasts of the field, for the ox knows his master, and the donkey his master’s crib — and shall a Christian not know, shall a Christian not consider what great things God has done for him? I, who am a shepherd, endeavor to fill my soul with a constant remembrance of that good shepherd, who feeds me in green pastures and makes me to lie down beside the still waters, and whose rod and staff comfort me. A religion, sir, which has its *seat* in the heart, and its *fruits* in the life, takes up little time in the study — and yet in another sense, true religion, which from sound principles brings forth right practice, fills up the whole time and life too.”

“You are happy,” asked Mr. Johnson, “in this retired life, by which you escape the corruptions of the world?”

“Sir,” replied the shepherd, “I do not escape the corruptions of my own evil nature. Even there, on that wild solitary hill, I can find out that my heart is prone to evil thoughts. I suppose, sir, that different *states* have different temptations. You great folks that live in the world, perhaps, are exposed to some temptations of which such a poor man as I am, knows nothing. But to one who leads a lonely life like me, evil thoughts are a chief besetting sin; and I can no more withstand these without the grace of God, than a rich gentleman can withstand the snares of evil company, without the same grace. And I find that I stand in need of God’s help continually, and if he would give me up to my own evil heart, I should be lost.”

Mr. Johnson approved of the shepherd’s sincerity, for he had always observed, that where there was no humility, and no watchfulness against sin — there was no true religion; and he said that the man who did not feel himself to be a sinner, in his opinion could not be a Christian.

Just as they were in this part of their discourse, Mr. Jenkins, the clergyman, came in. After the usual salutations, he said, “Well, shepherd, I wish you joy; I know you will be sorry to gain any advantage by the death of a neighbor — but old *Wilson*, my clerk, was so infirm, and I trust so well prepared, that there is no reason to be sorry for his death. I have always intended you should follow in his place — it is no great matter of profit, but *every little is something*.”

“No great matter, sir,” cried the shepherd; “indeed it is a great thing to me, it will more than pay my rent! Blessed be God for all his goodness.”

Mary said nothing, but lifted up her eyes full of tears in silent gratitude.

Mr. Johnson now inquired of the clergyman whether there were many children in the parish.

“More than you would expect,” replied he, “from the seeming smallness of it; but there are some little hamlets which you do not see.”

“I think,” returned Mr. Johnson, “I recollect that in the conversation I had with the shepherd on the hill yonder, he told me you had no Sunday School.”

“I am sorry to say we have none,” said the minister. “I do what I can to remedy this misfortune by public catechizing; but having two or three churches to serve, I can not give so much time as I wish to private instruction; and having a large family of my own, and no assistance from others, I have never been able to establish a school.”

“There is an excellent institution in London,” said Mr. Johnson, “called the Sunday School Society, which kindly gives books and other helps, on the application of such pious clergymen as stand in need of their aid, and which I am sure would have assisted you, but I think we shall be able to do something ourselves.”

“Shepherd,” continued Mr. Johnson, “if I were a king, and had it in my power to make you a rich and a great man, with a word speaking, I would *not* do it. Those who are raised by some sudden stroke, much above the station in which divine Providence had placed them, seldom turn out very good, or very happy. I have never had any great things in my power, but as far as I have been able, I have been always glad to assist the worthy. I have however, never attempted or desired to set any poor man much above his natural condition, but it is a pleasure to me to lend him such assistance as may make that condition more easy to himself, and put him in a way which shall call him to the performance of more duties than perhaps he could have performed without my help, and of performing them in a better manner to others, and with more comfort to himself. What *rent* do you pay for this cottage?”

“Fifty shillings a year, sir.”

“It is in a sad tattered condition; is there not a better to be had in the village?”

“That in which the poor clerk lived,” said the clergyman, “is not only more tight and whole, but has two decent chambers, and a very large light kitchen.”

“That will be very convenient,” replied Mr. Johnson; “What is the rent?”

“I think,” said the shepherd, “poor neighbor *Wilson* gave somewhat about four pounds a year.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Johnson, “and what will the clerk’s place be worth, do you think?”

“About three pounds,” was the answer.

“Now,” continued Mr. Johnson, “my plan is, that the shepherd should take that house immediately; for as the poor man is dead, there will be no need of waiting until quarter-day, if I make up the difference.”

“True, sir,” said Mr. Jenkins, “and the sooner they remove the better, for poor Mary caught that bad rheumatism by sleeping under a leaky thatch.”

The shepherd was too much moved to speak, and Mary could hardly sob out, "Oh, sir! you are too good; indeed this house will do very well."

"It may do very well for you and your children, Mary," said Mr. Johnson, gravely, "but it will not do for a *school* — the kitchen is neither large nor light enough. Shepherd," continued he, "with your good minister's permission and kind assistance, I propose to set up in this parish a *Sunday School*, and to make you the master. It will not at all interfere with your weekly calling, and it is the only lawful way in which you could turn the Sabbath into a day of some little profit to your family, by doing, as I hope, a great deal of good to the souls of others. The rest of the week you will work as usual. The difference of rent between this house and the clerk's, I shall pay myself, for to put you in a better house at your own expense would be no great act of kindness. As for honest Mary, who is not fit for hard labor, or any other out-of-door work, I propose to endow a small weekly school, of which she shall be the mistress, and employ her notable abilities to good account, by teaching ten or a dozen girls to knit, sew, spin, or any other useful way of getting their bread; for all this I shall only pay her the usual price, for I am not going to make you *rich*, but *useful*"

"Not rich, sir!" cried the shepherd; "How can I ever be thankful enough for such blessings? And will my poor Mary have a dry thatch over her head? and shall I be able to send for the doctor when I am like to lose her! Indeed my cup runs over with blessings; I hope God will grant me humility."

Here he and Mary looked at each other and burst into tears. The gentlemen saw their distress, and kindly walked out upon the little green in front of the door, that these honest people might give vent to their feelings. As soon as they were alone, they crept into one corner of the room, where they thought they could not be seen, and fell on their knees, devoutly blessing and praising God for his mercies. Never were more hearty prayers presented, than this grateful couple offered up for their benefactors. The warmth of their gratitude could only be equaled by the earnestness with which they besought the blessing of God on the work in which they were going to engage.

The two gentlemen now left this happy family, and walked to the parsonage, where the evening was spent in a manner very edifying to Mr. Johnson, who the next day took all proper measures for putting the shepherd in immediate possession of his now comfortable habitation. Mr. Jenkins's father-in-law, the worthy gentleman who gave the shepherd's wife the blankets in the first part of this history, arrived at the parsonage before Mr. Johnson left it, and assisted in fitting up the clerk's cottage.

Mr. Johnson took his leave, promising to call on the worthy minister and his new clerk once a year, in his summer's journey over the plain, as long as it should please God to spare his life. He had every reason to be satisfied with the objects of his bounty. The shepherd's zeal and piety made him a blessing to the rising generation. The old resorted to his school for the benefit of hearing the young instructed; and the clergyman had the pleasure of seeing that he was rewarded for the protection he gave the school by the great increase in his congregation. The shepherd not only exhorted both parents and children to the indispensable duty of a regular attendance at church, but by his pious counsels he drew them thither, and by his plain and prudent instructions enabled them to understand, and of course to delight in the public worship of God.