Expositions of Holy Scripture Isaiah and Jeremiah

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EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D., Litt. D.

ISAIAH AND JEREMIAH

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EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D., Litt. D.

ISAIAH

Chaps. I to XLVIII

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THE GREAT SUIT: JEHOVAH VERSUS JUDAH

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and

Jerusalem, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of

Judah. I Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath

spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have

rebelled against Me. 3. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his

master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider.

4. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers,

children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have

provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away

backward. 5. Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more

and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. 6. From

the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it;

but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been

closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. 7. Your

country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land,

strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown

by strangers. 8. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a

vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. 9.

Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we

should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah.

. . . 16. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings

from before Mine eyes; cease to do evil; 17. Learn to do well; seek

judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the

widow. 18. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though

your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow: though they be

red like crimson, they shall be as wool. 19. If ye be willing and

obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land. 20. But if ye refuse and

rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord

hath spoken it.'--ISAIAH i. 1-9; 16-20.

The first bars of the great overture to Isaiah's great oratorio are

here sounded. These first chapters give out the themes which run

through all the rest of his prophecies. Like most introductions, they

were probably written last, when the prophet collected and arranged his

life's labours. The text deals with the three great thoughts, the

leit-motifs that are sounded over and over again in the prophet's

message.

First comes the great indictment (vs. 2-4). A true prophet's words are

of universal application, even when they are most specially addressed

to a particular audience. Just because this indictment was so true of

Judah, is it true of all men, for it is not concerned with details

peculiar to a long-past period and state of society, but with the broad

generalities common to us all. As another great teacher in Old

Testament times said, I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices or thy

burnt-offerings, to have been continually before me.' Isaiah has

nothing to say about ritual or ceremonial omissions, which to him were

but surface matters after all, but he sets in blazing light the

foundation facts of Judah's (and every man's) distorted relation to

God. And how lovingly, as well as sternly, God speaks through him! That

divine lament which heralds the searching indictment is not unworthy to

be the very words of the Almighty Lover of all men, sorrowing over His

prodigal and fugitive sons. Nor is its deep truth less than its

tenderness. For is not man's sin blackest when seen against the bright

background of God's fatherly love? True, the fatherhood that Isaiah

knew referred to God's relation to the nation rather than to the

individual, but the great truth which is perfectly revealed by the

Perfect Son was in part shown to the prophet. The east was bright with

the unrisen sun, and the tinted clouds that hovered above the place of

its rising seemed as if yearning to open and let him through. Man's

neglect of God's benefits puts him below the animals that know' the

hand that feeds and governs them. Some men think it a token of superior

culture' and advanced views to throw off allegiance to God. It is a

token that they have less intelligence than their dog.

There is something very beautiful and pathetic in the fact that Judah

is not directly addressed, but that verses 2-4 are a divine soliloquy.

They might rather be called a father's lament than an indictment. The

forsaken father is, as it were, sadly brooding over his erring child's

sins, which are his father's sorrows and his own miseries. In verse 4

the black catalogue of the prodigal's doings begins on the surface with

what we call moral' delinquencies, and then digs deeper to disclose the

root of these in what we call religious' relations perverted. The two

are inseparably united, for no man who is wrong with God can be right

with duty or with men. Notice, too, how one word flashes into clearness

the sad truth of universal experience--that iniquity,' however it may

delude us into fancying that by it we throw off the burden of

conscience and duty, piles heavier weights on our backs. The doer of

iniquity is laden with iniquity.' Notice, too, how the awful entail of

evil from parents to children is adduced--shall we say as aggravating,

or as lessening, the guilt of each generation? Isaiah's contemporaries

are a seed of evil-doers,' spring from such, and in their turn are

children that are corrupters.' The fatal bias becomes stronger as it

passes down. Heredity is a fact, whether you call it original sin or

not.

But the bitter fountain of all evil lies in distorted relations to God.

They have forsaken the Lord'; that is why they do corruptly.' They have

despised the Holy One of Israel'; that is why they are laden with

iniquity.' Alienated hearts separate from Him. To forsake Him is to

despise Him. To go from Him is to go away backward.' Whatever may have

been our inheritance of evil, we each go further from Him. And this

fatherly lament over Judah is indeed a wail over every child of man.

Does it not echo in the pearl of parables,' and may we not suppose that

it suggested that supreme revelation of man's misery and God's love?

After the indictment comes the sentence (vs. 5-8). Perhaps sentence' is

not altogether accurate, for these verses do not so much decree a

future as describe a present, and the deep tone of pitying wonder

sounds through them as they tell of the bitter harvest sown by sin. The

penetrating question, Why will ye be still stricken, that ye revolt

more and more?' brings out the solemn truth that all which men gain by

rebellion against God is chastisement. The ox that kicks against the

pricks' only makes its own hocks bleed. We aim at some imagined good,

and we get--blows. No rational answer to that stern Why?' is possible.

Every sin is an act of unreason, essentially an absurdity. The

consequences of Judah's sin are first darkly drawn under the metaphor

of a man desperately wounded in some fight, and far away from

physicians or nurses, and then the metaphor is interpreted by the plain

facts of hostile invasion, flaming cities, devastated fields. It

destroys the coherence of the verses to take the gruesome picture of

the wounded man as a description of men's sins; it is plainly a

description of the consequences of their sins. In accordance with the

Old Testament point of view, Isaiah deals with national calamities as

the punishment of national sins. He does not touch on the far worse

results of individual sins on individual character. But while we are

not to ignore his doctrine that nations are individual entities, and

that righteousness exalteth a nation' in our days as well as in his,

the Christian form of his teaching is that men lay waste their own

lives and wound their own souls by every sin. The fugitive son comes

down to be a swine-herd, and cannot get enough even of the swine's food

to stay his hunger.

The note of pity sounds very clearly in the pathetic description of the

deserted daughter of Zion.' Jerusalem stands forlorn and defenceless,

like a frail booth in a vineyard, hastily run up with boughs, and open

to fierce sunshine or howling winds. Once beautiful for situation, the

joy of the whole earth, . . . the city of the great King'--and now!

Verse 9 breaks the solemn flow of the divine Voice, but breaks it as it

desires to be broken. For in it hearts made soft and penitent by the

Voice, breathe out lowly acknowledgment of widespread sin, and see

God's mercy in the continuance of a very small remnant' of still

faithful ones. There is a little island not yet submerged by the sea of

iniquity, and it is to Him, not to themselves, that the holy seed' owe

their being kept from following the multitude to do evil. What a

smiting comparison for the national pride that is--as Sodom,' like unto

Gomorrah'!

After the sentence comes pardon. Verses 16 and 17 properly belong to

the paragraph omitted from the text, and close the stern special word

to the rulers' which, in its severe tone, contrasts so strongly with

the wounded love and grieved pity of the preceding verses. Moral

amendment is demanded of these high-placed sinners and false guides. It

is John the Baptist's message in an earlier form, and it clears the way

for the evangelical message. Repentance and cleansing of life come

first.

But these stern requirements, if taken alone, kindle despair. Wash you,

make you clean'--easy to say, plainly necessary, and as plainly

hopelessly above my reach. If that is all that a prophet has to say to

me, he may as well say nothing. For what is the use of saying Arise and

walk' to the man who has been lame from his mother's womb? How can a

foul body be washed clean by filthy hands? Ancient or modern preachers

of a self-wrought-out morality exhort to impossibilities, and unless

they follow their preaching of an unattainable ideal as Isaiah followed

his, they are doomed to waste their words. He cried, Make you clean,'

but he immediately went on to point to One who could make clean, could

turn scarlet into snowy white, crimson into the lustrous purity of the

unstained fleeces of sheep in green pastures. The assurance of God's

forgiveness which deals with guilt, and of God's cleansing which deals

with inclination and habit, must be the foundation of our cleansing

ourselves from filthiness of flesh and spirit. The call to repentance

needs the promise of pardon and divine help to purifying in order to

become a gospel. And the call to repentance toward God, and faith

toward our Lord Jesus Christ,' is what we all, who are laden with

iniquity,' and have forsaken the Lord, need, if ever we are to cease to

do evil and learn to do well.

As with one thunder-clap the prophecy closes, pealing forth the eternal

alternative set before every soul of man. Willing obedience to our

Father God secures all good, the full satisfaction of our else hungry

and ravenous desires. To refuse and rebel is to condemn ourselves to

destruction. And no man can avert that consequence, or break the

necessary connection between goodness and blessedness, for the mouth of

the Lord hath spoken it,' and what He speaks stands fast for ever and

ever.

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THE STUPIDITY OF GODLESSNESS

The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel

doth not know, My people doth not consider.'--ISAIAH i. 3.

This is primarily an indictment against Israel, but it touches us all.

Doth not know' i.e. has no familiar acquaintance with; doth not

consider,' i.e. frivolously ignores, never meditates on.

I. This is a common attitude of mind towards God.

Blank indifference towards Him is far more frequent than conscious

hostility. Take a hundred men at random as they hurry through the

streets, and how many of them would have to acknowledge that no thought

of God had crossed their minds for days or months? So far as they are

concerned, either in regard to their thoughts or actions, He is a

superfluous hypothesis.' Most men are not conscious of rebellion

against Him, and to charge them with it does not rouse conscience, but

they cannot but plead guilty to this indictment, God is not in all

their thoughts.'

II. This attitude is strange and unnatural.

That a man should be able to forget God, and live as if there were no

such Being, is strange. It is one instance of that awful power of

ignoring the most important subjects, of which every life affords so

many and tragic instances. It seems as if we had above us an opium sky

which rains down soporifics, go that we are fast asleep to all that it

most concerns us to wake to. But still stranger is it that, having that

power of attending or not attending to subjects, we should so commonly

exercise it on this subject. For, as the ox that knows the hand that

feeds him, and the ass that makes for his master's crib' where he is

sure of fodder and straw, might teach us, the stupidest brute has sense

enough to recognise who is kind to him, or has authority over him, and

where he can find what he needs. The godless man descends below the

animals' level. And to ignore Him is intensely stupid. But it is worse

than foolish, for III. This attitude is voluntary and criminal.

Though there is not conscious hostility in it, the root of it is a

subconscious sense of discordance with God and of antagonism between

His will and the man's When we are quite sure that we love another, and

that hearts beat in accord and wills go out towards the same things, we

do not need to make efforts to think of that other, but our minds turn

towards him or her as to a home, whenever released from the

holding-back force of necessary occupations. If we love God, and have

our will set to do His will, our thoughts will fly to Him, as doves to

their windows.'

It is fed by preoccupation of thought with other things. We have but a

certain limited amount of energy of thought or attention, and if we

waste it, as much as most of us do, on things seen and temporal,' there

is none left for the unseen realities and the God who is eternal,

invisible.' It is often reinforced by theoretical uncertainty,

sometimes real, often largely unreal. But after all, the true basis of

it is, what Paul gives as its cause, they did not like to retain God in

their knowledge.'

The criminality of this indifference! It is heartlessly ungrateful.

Dogs lick the hand that feeds them; ox and ass in their dull way

recognise something almost like obligation arising from benefits and

care. No ingratitude is meaner and baser than that of which we are

guilty, if we do not requite Him in whose hands our breath is, and

whose are all our ways,' by even one thankful heart-throb or one word

shaped out of the breath that He gives.

IV. This attitude is fatal.

It separates us from God, and separation from Him is the very

definition of Death. A God of whom we never think is all the same to us

as a God who does not exist. Strike God out of a life, and you strike

the sun out of the system, and wrap all in darkness and weltering

chaos. This is life eternal, to know Thee'; but if Israel doth not

know,' Israel has slain itself.

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WHAT SIN DOES TO MEN

Ye shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth, and as a garden that hath no

water. 31. And the strong shall be as tow, and His work as a spark; and

they shall both burn together, and none shall quench them.'--ISAIAH i.

30-31.

The original reference of these words is to the threatened retribution

for national idolatry, of which oaks' and gardens' were both seats. The

nation was, as it were, dried up and made inflammable; the idol was as

the spark' or the occasion for destruction. But a wider application,

which comes home to us all, is to the fatal results of sin. These need

to be very plainly stated, because of the deceitfulness of sin, which

goes on slaying men by thousands in silence.

That grim wolf with privy paw

Daily devours apace.'

I. Sin withers.

We see the picture of a blasted tree in the woods, while all around are

in full leaf, with tiny leaves half developed and all brown at the

edges. The prophet draws another picture, that of a garden not

irrigated, and therefore, in the burning East, given over to

barrenness.

Sin makes men fruitless and withered.

It involves separation from God, the source of all fruitfulness (Ps.

i.).

Think of how many pure desires and innocent susceptibilities die out of

a sinful soul. Think of how many capacities for good disappear. Think

of how dry and seared the heart becomes. Think of how conscience is

stifled.

All sin--any sin--does this.

Not only gross, open transgressions, but any piece of godless living

will do it.

Whatever a man does against his conscience--neglect of duty, habitual

unveracity, idleness--in a word, his besetting sin withers him up.

And all the while the evil thing that is drawing his life-blood is

growing like a poisonous, blotched fungus in a wine-cask.

II. Sin makes men inflammable.

As tow' or tinder.

A subsidiary reference may be intended to the sinful man as easily

catching fire at temptation. But the main thought is that sin makes a

man ready for destruction, whose end is to be burned.'

The materials for retribution are laid up in a man's nature by

wrong-doing. The conspirators store the dynamite in a dark cellar.

Conscience and memory are charged with explosives.

If tendencies, habits, and desires become tyrannous by long indulgence

and cannot be indulged, what a fierce fire would rage then!

We have only to suppose a man made to know what is the real moral

character of his actions, and to be unable to give them up, to have

hell.

All this is confirmed by occasional glimpses which men get of

themselves. Our own characters are the true Medusa-head which turns a

man into stone when he sees it.

What, then, are we really doing by our sins? Piling together fuel for

burning.

III. Sin burns up.

Work as a spark.' The evil deeds brought into contact with the doer

work destruction. That is, if, in a future life or at any time, a man

is brought face to face with his acts, then retribution begins. We

shake off the burden of our actions by want of remembrance. But that

power of ignoring the past may be broken down at any time. Suppose it

happens that in another world it can no longer be exercised, what then?

Evil deeds are the occasion of the divine retribution. They are a

spark.' It is they who light the pyre, not God. The prophet here

protests in God's name against the notion that He is to be blamed for

punishing. Men are their own self-tormentors. The sinful man immolates

himself. Like Isaac, he carries the wood and lays the pile for his own

burning.

Christ severs the connection between us and our evil. He restores

beauty and freshness to the blighted tree, planting it as by the river

of water,' so that it bringeth forth its fruit in its season,' and its

leaf also doth not wither.'

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THE PERPETUAL PILLAR OF CLOUD AND FIRE

And the Lord will create over the whole habitation of Mount Zion, and

over her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a

flaming fire by night.'--ISAIAH iv. 5.

The pillar of cloud and fire in the Exodus was one: there are to be as

many pillars as there are assemblies' in the new era. Is it straining

the language too much to find significance in that difference? Instead

of the formal unity of the Old Covenant, there is a variety which yet

is a more vital unity. Is there not a hint here of the same lesson that

is taught by the change of the one golden lamp-stand into the seven,

which are a better unity because Jesus Christ walks among them?

The heart of this promise, thus cast into the form of ancient

experiences, but with significant variations, is that of true communion

with God.

That communion makes those who have it glorious.

That communion supplies unfailing guidance.

A man in close fellowship with God will have wonderful flashes of

sagacity, even about small practical matters. The gleam of the pillar

will illumine conscience, and shine on many difficult, dark places. The

simplicity' of a saintly soul will often see deeper into puzzling

contingencies than the vulpine craftiness of the prudent.' The darker

the night, the brighter the guidance.

That communion gives a defence.

The pillar came between Egypt and Israel, and kept the foe off the

timid crowd of slaves. Whatever forms our enemies take, fellowship with

God will invest us with a defence as protean as our perils. The same

cloud is represented in the context as being a pavilion for a shadow in

the heat, and for a refuge and for a covert from storm and from rain.'

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A PROPHET'S WOES

Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till

there be no place, that they may he placed alone in the midst of the

earth! 9. In mine ears said the Lord of hosts, Of a truth many houses

shall he desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant. 10. Yea,

ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer

shall yield an ephah. 11. Woe unto them that rise up early in the

morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night,

till wine inflame them! 12. And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and

pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of

the Lord, neither consider the operation of His hands. 13. Therefore my

people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge: and

their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with

thirst. 14. Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth

without measure: and their glory and their multitude, and their pomp,

and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it. 15. And the mean man

shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the

eyes of the lofty shall be humbled: 16. But the Lord of hosts shall be

exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in

righteousness. 17. Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and

the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat. 18. Woe unto them

that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart

rope: 19. That say, Let Him make speed, and hasten His work, that we

may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and

come, that we may know it! 20. Woe unto them that call evil good, and

good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that

put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! 21. Woe unto them that are

wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! 22. Woe unto

them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle

strong drink: 23. Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away

the righteousness of the righteous from him! 24. Therefore as the fire

devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root

shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because

they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word

of the Holy One of Israel. 25. Therefore is the anger of the Lord

kindled against His people, and He hath stretched forth His hand

against them, and hath smitten them: and the hills did tremble, and

their carcases were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this His

anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still. 26. And

He will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto

them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed

swiftly: 17. None shall be weary nor stumble among them; none shall

slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed,

nor the latchet of their shoes be broken: 28. Whose arrows are sharp,

and all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs shall be counted like

flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind: 29. Their roaring shall be

like a lion, they shall roar like young lions: yea, they shall roar,

and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall

deliver it. 30. And in that day they shall roar against them like the

roaring of the sea: and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and

sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof.'--ISAIAH v.

8-30.

Drunkenness is, in this text, one of a ring of plague-spots on the body

politic of Judah. The prophet six times proclaims woe' as the

inevitable end of these; such sickness' is unto death' unless

repentance and another course of conduct bring healing. But drunkenness

appears twice in this grim catalogue, and the longest paragraph of

denunciation (vv. 11-17) is devoted to it. Its connection with the

other vices attacked is loose, but it is worth noting that all these

have an inner kinship, and tend to appear together. They are all in a

string,' and where a community is cursed with one, the others will not

be far away. They are a knot of serpents intertwined. We touch but

slightly on the other vices denounced by the prophet's burning words,

but we must premise the general observation that the same

uncompromising plainness and boldness in speaking out as to social sins

ought to characterise Christian teachers to-day. The prophet's office

is not extinct in the church.

The first plague-spot is the accumulation of wealth in few hands, and

the selfish withdrawal of its possessors from the life of the

community. In an agricultural society like that of Judah, that clotting

of wealth took the shape of land-grabbing,' and of evicting the small

proprietors. We see it in more virulent forms in our great commercial

centres, where the big men often become big by crushing out the little

ones, and denude themselves of responsibility to the community in

proportion as they clothe themselves with wealth. Wherever wealth is

thus congested, and its obligations ignored by selfish indulgence, the

seeds are sown which will spring up one day in anarchism.' A man need

not be a prophet to have it whispered in his ear, as Isaiah had, that

the end of selfish capitalism is a convulsion in which many houses

shall be desolate,' and many fields barren. England needs the warning

as much as Isaiah's Judah did.

Such selfish wealth leads, among other curses, to indolence and

drunkenness, as the next woe shows. The people described make drinking

the business of their lives, beginning early and sitting late. They

have a varnish of art over their swinishness, and must have music as

well as wine. So, in many a drink-shop in England, a piano or a band

adds to the attractions, and gives a false air of aestheticism to pure

animalism. Isaiah feels the incongruity that music should be so

prostituted, and expresses it by adding to his list of musical

instruments and wine' as if he would underscore the degradation of the

great art to be the cupbearer of sots. Such revellers are blind to the

manifest tokens of God's working, and the operation of His hands'

excites only the tipsy gaze which sees nothing. That is one of the

curses which dog the drunkard--that he takes no warning from the plain

results of his vice as seen in others. He knows that it means shattered

health, ruined prospects, broken hearts, but nothing rouses him from

his fancy of impunity. High, serious thoughts of God and His government

of the world and of each life are strange to him. His sin compels him

to be godless, if he is not to go mad. But sometimes he wakes to a

moment's sight of realities, and then he is miserable till his next

bout buys fatal forgetfulness.

The prophet forces the end of a drunken nation on the unwilling

attention of the roisterers, in verses 13-17, which throb with

vehemence of warning and gloomy eloquence. What can such a people come

to but destruction? Knowledge must languish, hunger and thirst must

follow. Like some monster's gaping mouth, the pit yawns for them; and,

drawn as by irresistible attraction, the pomp and the wicked, senseless

jollity elide down into it. In the universal catastrophe, one thing

alone stands upright, and is lifted higher, because all else has sunk

so far,--the righteous judgment of the forgotten God. The grim picture

is as true for individuals and their deaths as for a nation and its

decay. And modern nations cannot afford to have this ulcer of

drunkenness draining away their strength any more than Judah could. By

the soul only are the nations great and free,' and a people can be

neither where the drink fiend has his way.

Three woes follow which are closely connected. That pronounced on

daring evil-doers, who not only let sin draw them to itself, but go

more than halfway to meet it, needing no temptation, but drawing it to

them eagerly, and scoffing at the merciful warnings of fatal

consequences, comes first. Next is a woe on those who play fast and

loose with plain morality, sophisticating conscience, and sapping the

foundations of law. Such juggling follows sensual indulgence such as

drunkenness, when it becomes habitual and audacious, as in the

preceding woe. Loose or perverted codes of morality generally spring

from bad living, seeking to shelter itself. Vicious principles are an

afterthought to screen vicious practices. The last subject of the

triple woes is self-conceit and pretence to superior illumination. Such

very superior persons are emancipated from the rules which bind the

common herd. They are so very clever that they have far outgrown the

creeping moralities, which may do for old women and children. Do we not

know the sort of people? Have we none of them surviving to-day?

Then Isaiah comes back to his theme of drunkenness, but in a new

connection. It poisons the fountain of justice. There is a world of

indignant contempt in the prophet's scathing picture of those who are

mighty' and men of strength,'--but how is their strength shown? They

can stand any quantity of wine, and can mix their drinks,' and yet look

sober! What a noble use to put a good constitution to! These valiant

topers are in authority as judges, and they sell their judgments to get

money for their debauches. We do not see much of such scandals among

us, but yet we have heard of leagues between liquor-sellers and

municipal authorities, which certainly do not make for righteousness.'

When shall we learn and practise the lesson that Isaiah was reading his

countrymen,--that it is fatal to a nation when the private character of

public men is regarded as of no account in political and civic life?

The prophet had no doubt as to what must be the end of a state of

things in which the very courts of law were honeycombed with

corruption, and demoralised by the power of drink. His tremendous image

of a fierce fire raging across a dry prairie, and burning the grass to

its very roots, while the air is stifling with the thick dust' of the

conflagration, proclaims the sure fate, sooner or later, of every

community and individual that rejects the law of the Lord of Hosts, and

despises the word of the Holy One of Israel.' Change the name, and the

tale is told of us; for it is righteousness that exalteth a nation,'

and no single vice drags after it more infallibly such a multitude of

attendant demons as the vice of drunkenness, which is a crying sin of

England to-day.

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VISION AND SERVICE

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a

throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple. 2. Above

it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered

his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did

fly. 3. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the

Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory. 4. And the posts

of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was

filled with smoke. 5. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because

I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of

unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. 6.

Then flew one of the seraphims onto me, having a live coal in his hand,

which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: 7. And he laid it

upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine

iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. 8. Also I heard the voice

of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then

said I, Here am I; send me. 9. And he said, Go, and tell this people,

Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive

not. 10. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy,

and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their

ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. 11.

Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be

wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be

utterly desolate, 12. And the Lord have removed men far away, and there

be a great forsaking in the midst of the land. 13. But yet in it shall

be a tenth, and it shall return, and shall be eaten: as a tell tree,

and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their leaves:

so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof.'--ISAIAH vi. 1-13.

WE may deal with this text as falling into three parts: the vision, its

effect on the prophet, and his commission.

I. The Vision.--In the year that King Uzziah died' is more than a date

for chronological accuracy. It tells not only when, but why, the vision

was given. The throne of David was empty.

God never empties places in our homes and hearts, or in the nation or

the Church, without being ready to fill them. He sometimes empties them

that He may fill them. Sorrow and loss are meant to prepare us for the

vision of God, and their effect should be to purge the inward eye, that

it may see Him. When the leaves drop from the forest trees we can see

the blue sky which their dense abundance hid. Well for us if the

passing of all that can pass drives us to Him who cannot pass, if the

unchanging God stands out more clear, more near, more dear, because of

change.

As to the substance of this vision, we need not discuss whether, if we

had been there, we should have seen anything. It was doubtless related

to Isaiah's thoughts, for God does not send visions which have no point

of contact in the recipient. However communicated, it was a divine

communication, and a temporary unveiling of an eternal reality. The

form was transient, but Isaiah then saw for a moment the things which

are' and always are.

The essential point of the vision is the revelation of Jehovah as king

of Judah. That relation guaranteed defence and demanded obedience. It

was a sure basis of hope, but also a stringent motive to loyalty, and

it had its side of terror as well as of joyfulness. You only have I

known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for

all your iniquities.' The place of vision is the heavenly sanctuary of

which the temple was a prophecy. Eminently significant and

characteristic of the whole genius of the Old Testament is the absence

of any description of the divine appearance. The prophet saw things

which it is not lawful for a man to utter,' and his silence is not only

reverent, but more eloquent than any attempt to put the Ineffable into

words. Even in this act of manifestation God was veiled, and there was

the hiding of His power.' The train of His robe can be spoken of, but

not the form which it concealed even in revealing it. Nature is the

robe of God. It hides while it discloses, and discloses while it hides.

The hovering seraphim were in the attitude of service. They are

probably represented as fiery forms, but are spoken of nowhere else in

Scripture. The significance of their attitude has been well given by

Jewish commentators, who say, with two he covered his face that he

might not see, and with two he covered his body that he might not be

seen' and we may add, with two he stood ready for service, by flight

whithersoever the King would send.' Such awe-stricken reverence, such

humble hiding of self, such alacrity for swift obedience, such flaming

ardours of love and devotion, should be ours. Their song celebrated the

holiness and the glory of Jehovah of hosts. We must ever remember that

the root-meaning of holiness' is separation, and that the popular

meaning of moral purity is secondary and derivative. What is

rapturously sung in the threefold invocation of the seraphs is the

infinite exaltation of Jehovah above all creatural conditions,

limitations, and, we may add, conceptions. That separation, of course,

includes purity, as may be seen from the immediate effect of the vision

on the prophet, but the conception is much wider than that. Very

beautifully does the second line of the song re-knit the connection

between Jehovah and this world, so far beneath Him, which the burst of

praise of His holiness seems to sever. The high heaven is a bending

arch; its inaccessible heights ray down sunshine and drop down rain,

and, as in the physical world, every plant grows by Heaven's gift, so

in the world of humanity all wisdom, goodness, and joy are from the

Father of lights. God's glory' is the flashing lustre of His manifested

holiness, which fills the earth as the train of the robe filled the

temple. The vibrations of that mighty hymn shook the foundations of the

threshold' (Rev. Ver.) with its thunderous harmonies. The house was

filled with smoke' which, since it was an effect of the seraph's

praise, is best explained as referring to the fragrant smoke of incense

which, as we know, symbolised the prayers of saints.'

II. The effect of the vision on the prophet.--The vision kindled as

with a flash Isaiah's consciousness of sin. He expressed it in regard

to his words rather than his works, partly because in one aspect speech

is even more accurately than act a cast, as it were, of character, and

partly because he could not but feel the difference between the mighty

music that burst from these pure and burning lips and the words that

flowed from and soiled his own. Not only the consciousness of sin, but

the dread of personal evil consequences from the vision of the holy

God, oppressed his heart. We see ourselves when we see God. Once flash

on a heart the thought of God's holiness, and, like an electric

searchlight, it discloses flaws which pass unnoticed in dimmer light.

The easy-going Christianity, which is the apology for religion with so

many of us, has no deep sense of sin, because it has no clear vision of

God. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye

seeth Thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'

The next stage in Isaiah's experience is that sin recognised and

confessed is burned away. Cleansing rather than forgiveness is here

emphasised. The latter is, of course, included, but the main point is

the removal of impurity. It is mediated by one of the seraphim, who is

the messenger of God, which is just a symbolical way of saying that God

makes penitents partakers of His holiness,' and that nothing less than

a divine communication will make cleansing possible. It is effected by

a live coal. Fire is purifying, and the New Testament has taught us

that the true cleansing fire is that of the Holy Spirit. But that live

coal was taken from the altar. The atoning sacrifice has been offered

there, and our cleansing depends on the efficacy of that sacrifice

being applied to us.

The third stage in the prophet's experience is the readiness for

service which springs up in his purged heart. God seeks for volunteers.

There are no pressed men in His army. The previous experiences made

Isaiah quick to hear God's call, and willing to respond to it by

personal consecration. Take the motive-power of redemption from sin out

of Christianity, and you break its mainspring, so that the clock will

only tick when it is shaken. It is the Christ who died for our sins to

whom men say, Command what Thou wilt, and I obey.'

III. The prophet's commission.--He was not sent on his work with any

illusions as to its success, but, on the contrary, he had a clear

premonition that its effect would be to deepen the spiritual deafness

and blindness of the nation. We must remember that in Scripture the

certain effect of divine acts is uniformly regarded as a divine design.

Israel was so sunk in spiritual deadness that the issue of the

prophet's work would only be to immerse the mass of this people'

farther in it. To some more susceptible souls his message would be a

true divine voice, rousing them like a trumpet, and that effect was

what God desired; but to the greater number it would deepen their

torpor and increase their condemnation. If men love darkness rather

than light, the coming of the light works only judgment.

Isaiah recoils from the dreary prospect, and feels that this dreadful

hardening cannot be God's ultimate purpose for the nation. So he humbly

and wistfully asks how long it is to last. The answer is twofold, heavy

with a weight of apparently utter ruin in its first part, but

disclosing a faint, far-off gleam of hope on its second. Complete

destruction, and the casting of Israel out from the land, are to come.

But as, though a goodly tree is felled, a stump remains which has vital

force (or substance) in it, so, even in the utmost apparent

desperateness of Israel's state, there will be in it the holy seed,'

the remnant,' the true Israel, from which again the life shall spring,

and stem and branches and waving foliage once more grow up.

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THE EMPTY THRONE FILLED

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a

throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple.'--ISAIAH

vi. 1.

Uzziah had reigned for fifty-two years, during the greater part of

which he and his people had been brilliantly prosperous. Victorious in

war, he was also successful in the arts of peaceful industry. The later

years of his life were clouded, but on the whole the reign had been a

time of great well-being. His son and successor was a young man of

five-and-twenty; and when he came to the throne ominous war-clouds were

gathering in the North, and threatening to drift to Judah. No wonder

that the prophet, like other thoughtful patriots, was asking himself

what was to come in these anxious days, when the helm was in new hands,

which, perhaps, were not strong enough to hold it. Like a wise man, he

took his thoughts into the sanctuary; and there he understood. As he

brooded, this great vision was disclosed to his inward eye. In the year

that King Uzziah died' is a great deal more than a date for

chronological purposes. It tells us not only the when, but the why, of

the vision. The earthly king was laid in the grave; but the prophet saw

that the true King of Israel was neither the dead Uzziah nor the young

Jotham, but the Lord of hosts. And, seeing that, fears and forebodings

and anxieties and the sense of loss, all vanished; and new strength

came to Isaiah. He went into the temple laden with anxious thoughts; he

came out of it with a springy step and a lightened heart, and the

resolve Here am I; send me.' There are some lessons that seem to me of

great importance for the conduct of our daily life which may be

gathered from this remarkable vision, with the remarkable note of time

that is appended to it.

Now, before I pass on, let me remind you, in a word, of that apparently

audacious commentary upon this great vision, which the Evangelist John

gives us: These things said Esaias, when he had beheld His glory and

spake of Him.' Then the Christ is the manifest Jehovah; is the King of

Glory. Then the vision which was but a transitory revelation is the

revelation of an eternal reality, and the vision splendid' does not

fade but brightens, into the light of common day'; when instead of

being flashed only on the inward eye of a prophet, it is made flesh and

walks amongst us, and lives our life, and dies our death. Our eyes have

seen the King in as true a reality, and in better fashion, than ever

Isaiah did amid the sanctities of the Temple. And the eyes that have

seen only the near foreground, the cultivated valleys, and the homes of

men, are raised, and lo! the long line of glittering peaks, calm,

silent, pure. Who will look at the valleys when the Himalayas stand

out, and the veil is drawn aside?

I. Let me say a word or two about the ministration of loss and sorrow

in preparing for the vision.

It was when King Uzziah died' that the prophet saw the Lord sitting

upon the throne.' If the Throne of Israel had not been empty, he would

not have seen the throned God in the heavens. And so it is with all our

losses, with all our sorrows, with all our disappointments, with all

our pains; they have a mission to reveal to us the throned God. The

possession of the things that are taken away from us, the joys which

our sorrows smite into dust, have the same mission, and the highest

purpose of every good, of every blessing, of every possession, of every

gladness, of all love--the highest mission is to lead us to Him. But,

just as men will frost a window, so that the light may come in but the

sight cannot go out, so by our own fault and misuse of the good things

which are meant to lead us up to, and to show us, God, we frost and

darken the window so that we cannot see what it is meant to show us.

And then a mighty and merciful hand shivers the painted glass into

fragments, because it has been dimming the white radiance of Eternity.'

And though the casement may look gaunt, and the edges of the broken

glass may cut and wound, yet the view is unimpeded. When the gifts that

we have misused are withdrawn, we can see the heaven that they too

often hide from us. When the leaves drop there is a wider prospect.

When the great tree is fallen there is opened a view of the blue above.

When the night falls the stars sparkle. When other props are struck

away we can lean our whole weight upon God. When Uzziah dies the King

becomes visible.

Is that what our sorrows, our pains, losses, disappointments do for us?

Well for those to whom loss is gain, because it puts them in possession

of the enduring riches! Well for those to whom the passing of all that

can pass is a means of revealing Him who is the same yesterday, and

to-day, and for ever'! The message to us of all these our pains and

griefs is Come up hither.' In them all our Father is saying to us, Seek

ye My face.' Well for those who answer, Thy face, Lord, will I seek.

Hide not Thy face far from me.'

Let us take care that we do not waste our griefs and sorrows. They

absorb us sometimes with vain regrets. They jaundice and embitter us

sometimes with rebellious thoughts. They often break the springs of

activity and of interest in others, and of sympathy with others. But

their true intention is to draw back the thin curtain, and to show us

the things that are,' the realities of the throned God, the skirts that

fill the Temple, the hovering seraphim, and the coal from the altar

that purges.

II. Let me suggest how our text shows us the compensation that is given

for all losses.

As I have pointed out already, the thought conveyed to the prophet by

this vision was not only the general one, of God's sovereign rule, but

the special one of His rule over and for, and His protection of, the

orphan kingdom which had lost its king. The vision took the special

shape that the moment required. It was because the earthly king was

dead that the living, heavenly King was revealed.

So there is just suggested by it this general thought, that the

consciousness of God's presence and work for us takes in each heart the

precise shape that its momentary necessities and circumstances require.

That infinite fulness is of such a nature as that it will assume any

form for which the weakness and the need of the dependent creature

call. Like the one force which scientists now are beginning to think

underlies all the various manifestations of energy in nature, whether

they be named light, heat, motion, electricity, chemical action, or

gravitation, the one same vision of the throned God, manifest in Jesus

Christ, is protean. Here it flames as light, there burns as heat, there

flashes as electricity; here as gravitation holds the atoms together,

there as chemical energy separated and decomposes them; here results in

motion, there in rest; but is the one force. And so the one God will

become everything and anything that every man, and each man, requires.

He shapes himself according to our need. The water of life does not

disdain to take the form imposed upon it by the vessel into which it is

poured. The Jews used to say that the manna in the wilderness tasted to

each man as each man desired. And the God, who comes to us all, comes

to us each in the shape that we need; just as He came to Isaiah in the

manifestation of His kingly power, because the throne of Judah was

vacated.

So when our hearts are sore with loss, the New Testament Manifestation

of the King, even Jesus Christ, comes to us and says, The same is my

mother and sister and brother,' and His sweet love compensates for the

love that can die, and that has died. When losses come to us He draws

near, as durable riches and righteousness. In all our pains He is our

anodyne, and in all our griefs He brings the comfort; He is all in all,

and each withdrawn gift is compensated, or will be compensated, to each

in Him.

So, dear friends, let us learn God's purpose in emptying hearts and

chairs and homes. He empties them that He may fill them with Himself.

He takes us, if I might so say, into the darkness, as travellers to the

south are to-day passing through Alpine tunnels, in order that He may

bring us out into the land where God Himself is sun and moon,' and

where there are ampler ether and brighter constellations than in these

lands where we dwell. He means that, when Uzziah dies, our hearts shall

see the King. And for all mourners, for all tortured hearts, for all

from whom stays have been stricken and resources withdrawn, the old

word is true: Lord shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us.'

Let me recall to you what I have already insisted on more than once,

that the perfecting of this vision is in the historical fact of the

Incarnate Son. Jesus Christ shows us God. Jesus Christ is the King of

Glory. If we will go to Him, and fix our eyes and hearts on Him, then

losses may come, and we shall be none the poorer; death may unclasp our

hands from dear hands, but He will close a dearer one round the hand

that is groping for a stay; and nothing can betaken away but He will

more than fill the gap it leaves by His own sweet presence. If our eyes

behold the King, if we are like John the Seer in his rocky Patmos, and

see the Christ in His glory and royalty, then He will lay His hands on

us and say, Fear not! Weep not; I am the First and the Last,' and

forebodings, and fears, and sense of loss will all be changed into

trustfulness and patient submission. Seeing Him, who is invisible,' we

shall be able to endure and to toil, until the time when the vision of

earth is perfected by the beholding of heaven. Blessed are they who

with purged eyes see, and with yielding hearts obey, the heavenly

vision, and turn to the King and offer themselves for any service He

may require, saying, Here am I; send me.'

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A SERAPH'S WINGS

With twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and

with twain he did fly.'--ISAIAH vi. 2.

This is the only mention in Scripture of the seraphim. I do not need to

enter upon the much-debated, and in some respects interesting, question

as to whether these are to be taken as identical with the cherubim, or

as to whether they are altogether imaginary and symbolical beings, nor

as to whether they are identical with the angels, or part of their

hierarchy. All that may be left on one side. I would only notice,

before I deal with the specific words of my text, the significance of

the name. It means the flaming' or burning ones,' and so the attendants

of the divine glory in the heavens, whether they be real or imaginary

beings, are represented as flashing with splendour, as full of swift

energy, like a flame of fire, as glowing with fervid love, as blazing

with enthusiasm. That is the type of the highest creatural being, which

stands closest to God. There is no ice in His presence, and the nearer

we get to Him in truth, the more we shall glow and burn. Cold religion

is a contradiction in terms, though, alas, it is a reality in

professors.

And so with that explanation, and putting aside all these other

questions, let us gather up some, at least, of the lessons as to the

essentials of worship, and try to grasp the prophecy of the heavenly

state, given us in these words.

I. The Wings of Reverence.

He covered his face, or they covered their faces, lest they should see.

As a man brought suddenly into the sunlight, especially if out of a

darkened chamber, by an instinctive action shades his eyes with his

hand, so these burning creatures, confronted with the still more fervid

and fiery light of the divine nature, fold one pair of their great

white pinions over their shining faces, even whilst they cry Holy!

Holy! Holy! is the Lord God Almighty!'

And does not that teach us the incapacity of the highest creature, with

the purest vision, to gaze undazzled into the shining light of God? I,

for my part, do not believe that any conceivable extension of creatural

faculties, or any conceivable hallowing of creatural natures, can make

the creature able to gaze upon God. I know that it is often said that

the joy of the future life for men is what the theologians call the

beatific vision,' in which there shall be direct sight of God, using

that word in its highest sense, as applied to the perceptions of the

spirit, and not of the sense. But I do not think the Bible teaches us

that. It does teach us We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He

is.' But who is the Him'? Jesus Christ. And, in my belief, Jesus Christ

will, to all eternity, be the medium of manifesting God, and there will

remain, to all eternity, the incapacity which clogs creatures in time--

No man hath seen God at any time, nor can see Him.'

But my text, whilst it thus suggests solemn thoughts of a Light that

cannot be looked at with undazzled eyes, does also suggest to us by

contrast the possibility of far feebler-sighted and more sinful

creatures than these symbolical seraphs coming into a Presence in which

God shall be manifest to them; and they will need no veil drawn by

themselves across their eyes. God has veiled Himself, that we, with

unveiled faces, beholding His glory, may be changed into the same

image.' So the seraph, with his white wings folded before his eyes, may

at once stand to us as a parallel and a contrast to what the Christian

may expect. We, we can see Jesus, with no incapacity except such as may

be swept away by His grace and our will. And direct vision of the whole

Christ is the heaven of heaven, even as the partial vision of the

partially perceived Christ is the sweetest sweetness of a life on

earth.

There is no need for us to draw any screen between our happy eyes and

the Face in which we behold the glory as of the only Begotten of the

Father.' All the tempering that the divine lustre needed has been done

by Him who veils His glory with the veil of Christ's flesh, and therein

does away the need for any veil that we can draw.

But, beyond that, there is another consideration that I should like to

suggest, as taught us by the use of this first pair of the six wings,

and that is the absolute need for the lowliest reverence in our worship

of God. It is strange, but true, I am afraid, that the Christian danger

is to weaken the sense of the majesty and splendour and separation of

God from His creatures. And all that is good in the Christian

revelation may be so abused as that there shall come, what I am sure

does in effect sometimes come, a terrible lack of due reverence in our

so-called worship. What does that lofty chorus of Holy! Holy! Holy!'

that burst from those immortal lips mean but the declaration that God

is high above, and separate from, all limitations and imperfections of

creatures? And we Christians, who hear it re-echoed in the very last

Book of Scripture by the four-and-twenty elders who represent redeemed

humanity, have need to take heed that we do not lose our reverence in

our confidence, and that we do not part with godly fear in our filial

love. If one looks at a congregation of professing Christians engaged

in their worship, does not one feel and see that there is often a

carelessness and shallowness, a want of realisation of the majesty and

sanctity and tremendousness of that Father to whom we draw near?

Brethren, if a seraph hides his face, surely it becomes us to see to it

that, since we worship a God who is a consuming fire,' we serve Him

with far deeper reverence and godly fear' than ordinarily mark our

devotions.

II. The Wings of Humility.

With twain he covered his feet.' The less comely and inferior parts of

that fiery corporeity were veiled lest they should be seen by the Eyes

that see all things. The wings made no screen that hid the seraph's

feet from the eye of God, but it was the instinctive lowly sense of

unworthiness that folded them across the feet, even though they, too,

burned as a furnace. The nearer we get to God, the more we shall be

aware of our limitations and unworthiness, and it is because that

vision of the Lord sitting on His throne, high and lifted up,' with the

thrilling sense of His glory filling the holy temple of the universe,

does not burn before us that we can conceit ourselves to have anything

worth pluming ourselves upon. Once lift the curtain, once let my eye be

flooded with the sight of God, and away goes all my self-conceit, and

all my fancied superiority above others. One little molehill is pretty

nearly the same height as another, if you measure them both against the

top of the Himalayas, that lie in the background, with their glittering

peaks of snow. Star differeth from star in glory' in a winter's night,

but when the great sun swims into the sky, they all vanish together. If

you and I saw God burning before us, as Isaiah saw Him, we should veil

ourselves, and lose all that which so often veils Him from us--the

fancy that we are anything when we are nothing. And the nearer we get

to God, and the purer we are, the more shall we be keenly conscious of

our imperfections and our sins. If I say I am perfect,' said Job in his

wise way, this also should prove me perverse.' Consciousness of sin is

the continual accompaniment of growth in holiness. The heavens are not

pure in His sight, and He chargeth His angels with folly.' Everything

looks black beside that sovereign whiteness. Get God into your lives,

and you will see that the feet need to be washed, and you will cry,

Lord! not my feet only, but my hands and my head!'

III. Lastly--The Wings for Service.

With twain he did fly.' That is the emblem of joyous, buoyant,

unhindered motion. It is strongly, sadly contrary to the toilsome

limitations of us heavy creatures who have no wings, but can at best

run on His service, and often find it hard to walk with patience in the

way that is set before us.' But--service with wings, or service with

lame feet, it matters not. Whosoever, beholding God, has found need to

hide his face from that Light even whilst he comes into the Light, and

to veil his feet from the all-seeing Eye, will also feel impulses to go

forth in His service. For the perfection of worship is neither the

consciousness of my own insufficiency, nor the humble recognition of

His glory, nor the great voice of praise that thrilled from those

immortal lips, but it is the doing of His will in daily life. Some

people say the service of man is the service of God. Yes, when it is

service of man, done for God's sake, it is so, and only then. The old

motto, Work is worship,' may preach a great truth or a most dangerous

error. But there is no possibility of error or danger in maintaining

this: that the climax and crown of all worship, whether for us footsore

servants upon earth, or for these winged attendants on the throne of

the King in the heavens, is activity in obedience. And that is what is

set before us here.

Now, dear brethren, we, as Christians, have a far higher motive for

service than the seraphs had. We have been redeemed, and the spirit of

the old Psalm should animate all our obedience: O Lord, truly I am Thy

servant.' Why? The next clause tells us: Thou hast loosed my bonds.'

The seraphs could not say that, and therefore our obedience, our

activity in doing the will of the Father in heaven, should be more

buoyant, more joyful, more swift, more unrestricted than even theirs.

The seraphim were winged for service even while they stood above the

throne and pealed forth their thunderous praise which shook the Temple.

May we not discern in that a hint of the blessed blending of two modes

of worship which will be perfectly united in heaven, and which we

should aim at harmonising even on earth? His servants serve Him and see

His face.' There is possible, even on earth, some foretaste of the

perfection of that heavenly state in which no worship in service shall

interfere with the worship in contemplation. Mary, sitting at Christ's

feet, and Martha, busy in providing for His comfort, may be, to a large

extent, united in us even here, and will be perfectly so hereafter,

when the practical and the contemplative, the worship of noble

aspiration, of heart-filling gazing, and that of active service shall

be indissolubly blended.

The seraphs sang Holy! Holy! Holy!' but they, and all the hosts of

heaven, learn a new song from the experience of earth, and redeemed men

are the chorus-leaders of the perfected and eternal worship of the

heavens. For we read that it is the four-and-twenty elders who begin

the song and sing to the Lamb that redeemed them by His blood, and that

the living creatures and all the hosts of the angels to that song can

but say Amen!'

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THE MAKING OF A PROPHET

Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean

lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine

eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.'--ISAIAH vi. 5.

In previous pages we have seen how Isaiah's vision of Jehovah throned

in the Temple, high and lifted up,' derived significance from the time

of its occurrence. It was in the year that' the earthly King died' that

the heavenly King was revealed. The passing of the transient prepared

the way for the revelation of the Eternal, and the revelation of the

Eternal more than compensated for the passing of the transient. But

strengthening and calming as these thoughts are, they by no means

exhaust the purpose of the vision, nor do they describe all its effects

on the recipient. These were, first and immediately, the consciousness

of unworthiness and sin, expressed in the words that I have taken for

my text. Then came the touch of the live coal from the altar,' laid on

the unclean lips by the seraph; and on that followed willing surrender

for a perilous service.

These three stages flowing from the vision of God, recognition of sin,

experience of purging, abandonment to obedience and service, must be

repeated in us all, if we are to live worthy lives. There may be much

that is beautiful and elevating and noble without these; but unless in

some measure we pass through the prophet's experience, we shall fail to

reach the highest possibilities of beauty and of service that open

before us. So I wish to consider, very simply, these three stages in my

remarks now.

I. If we see God we shall see our sin.

There came on the prophet, as in a flash, the two convictions, one

which he learned from the song of the seraphs, ringing in music through

the Temple, and one which rose up, like an answering note from the

voice of conscience within. They sang Holy! holy! holy! Lord God

Almighty.' And what was the response to that, in the prophet's

heart?--I am unclean.' Each major note has a corresponding minor, and

the triumphant doxology of the seraph wakes in the hearer's conscience

the lowly confession of personal unlikeness to the holiness of God. It

was not joy that sprang in Isaiah's heart when he saw the throned King,

and heard the proclamation of His name. It was not reverence merely

that bowed his head in the dust, but it was the awakened consciousness,

Thou art holy; and now that I understand, in some measure, what Thy

holiness means, I look on myself and I say, "unclean! unclean!"'

The prophet's confession assumes a form which may strike us as somewhat

singular. Why is it that he speaks of unclean lips,' rather than of an

unclean heart? I suppose partly because, in a very deep sense, a man's

words are more accurately a cast, as it were, from a man's character

than even his actions, and partly because the immediate occasion of his

confession was the words of the seraphim, and he could not but contrast

what came burning from their pure lips with what had trickled from, and

soiled, his own.

But, however expressed, the consciousness of personal unlikeness to the

holiness of God is the first result, and the instantaneous result, of

any real apprehension of that holiness, and of any true vision of Him.

Like some search-light flung from a ship over the darkling waters,

revealing the dark doings of the enemy away out yonder in the night,

the thought of God and His holiness streaming in upon a man's soul, if

it does so in any adequate measure, is sure to disclose the heaving

waters and the skulking foes that are busy in the dark.

But it was not only the consciousness of sinfulness and antagonism that

woke up instantaneously in response to that vision of the holy God. It

was likewise a shrinking apprehension of personal evil from contact of

God's light with Isaiah's darkness. Who shall ascend into the hill of

the Lord? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.' What is to

become, then, of the man that has neither the one nor the other? The

experience of all the world witnesses that whenever there comes, in

reality, or in a man's conceptions or fancy, the contact of the

supernatural, as it is called, with the natural, there is a shrinking,

a sense of eerieness, an apprehension of vague possibilities of evil.

The sleeping snake that is coiled in every soul stirs and begins to

heave in its bulk, and wake, when the thought of a holy God comes into

the heart. Now, I do not suppose that consciousness of sin is the whole

explanation of that universal human feeling, but I am very sure it is

an element in it, and I suspect that if there were no sin, there would

be no shrinking.

At all events, be that as it may, these are the two thoughts that,

involuntarily and spontaneously and immediately, sprang in this man's

heart when his purged eyes saw the King on His throne. He did not leap

up with gladness at the vision. Its consolatory and its strengthening

aspects were not the first that impinged upon his eye, or upon his

consciousness, but the first thing was an instinctive recoil, Woe is

me; I am undone.' Now, brethren, I venture to think that one main

difference between shallow religion and real is to be found here, that

the dim, far-off vision, if we may venture to call it so, which serves

the most of us for a sight of God, leaves us quite complacent, and with

very slight and superficial conceptions of our own evil, and that if

once we saw, in so far as it is possible for humanity to-day to see,

God as He is, and heard in the depths of our hearts that Holy! holy!

holy!' from the burning seraphim, the easy-going, self-satisfied

judgment of ourselves which too many of us cherish would be utterly

impossible; and would disappear, shrivelled up utterly in the light of

God. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear,' said Job, but now

mine eye seeth Thee; therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and

ashes.' A hearsay God and a self-complacent beholder--a God really

seen, and a man down in the dust before Him! Has that vision ever

blazed in on you? And if it has, has not the light shown you the

seaminess of much in which a dimmer light detects no flaws or stains?

Thank God if, having seen Him, you see yourselves. If you have not

felt, I am unclean and undone,' depend upon it, your knowledge of God

is faint and dim, and He is rather One heard of from the lips of others

than realised in your own experience.

II. Again, note the second stage here, in the education of a soul for

service--the sin, recognised and repented, is burned away.

Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand,

which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar; and he laid it

upon my mouth, and said, Lo! this hath touched thy lips; and thine

iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.'

Now, I would notice as to this stage of the process, first, that Isaiah

singularly passes beyond all the old ritual in which he had been

brought up, and recognises another kind of cleansing than that which it

embodied. He had got beyond the ritual to what the ritual meant. We

have passed beyond the ritual, too, by another process; and, though I

would by no means read full, plain, articulate Christian thought into

the vision of Isaiah--which would be an anachronism, and unfaithful to

the gradual historical development of the idea and means of

redemption--yet I cannot help pointing to the fact that, even although

this vision is located as seen in the Temple, there is not a single

reference (except that passing allusion to the altar) to the ritual of

the Temple, but the cleansing comes in another fashion altogether.

But far more important than that thought is the human condition that is

required ere this cleansing can be realised. I am a man of unclean

lips.' I am undone!' It was because that conviction and confession

sprang in the prophet's consciousness that the seraph winged his way

with the purifying fire in his hands. Which being translated is just

this: faith alone will not bring cleansing. There must go with it what

we call, in our Christian phraseology, repentance, which is but the

recognition of my own antagonism to the holiness of God, and the

resolve to turn my back on my own past self. Now, it seems to me that a

great deal of what is called, and in a sense is, Evangelical teaching,

fails to represent the full counsel of God, in the matter of man's

redemption, because it puts a one-sided emphasis on faith, and slurs

over the accompanying idea of repentance. And I am here to say that a

trust in Jesus Christ, which is unaccompanied by a profound penitent

consciousness and abhorrence of one's own sins, and a resolve to turn

away from them for the time to come, is not a faith which will bring

either pardon or cleansing. We do not need to have less said about

trust; we need to have a great deal more said about repentance. You

have to learn what it is to say, I abhor myself'; you have to learn

what it is to say, I will turn right round, and leave all that past

behind me; and go in the opposite direction'; or the faith which you

say you are exercising will neither save nor cleanse your souls nor

your lives.

Again, note that we have here set forth most strikingly the other great

truth that, side by side, and as closely synchronous as the flash and

the peal, as soon as the consciousness of sin and the aversion from it

spring in a man's heart, the seraph's wings are set in motion. Remember

that beautiful old story in the historical books, of how the erring

king, brought to sanity and repentance by Nathan's apologue, put all

his acknowledgments in these words, I have sinned against the Lord';

and how the confession was not out of his lips, nor had died in its

vibration in the atmosphere, before the prophet, with divine authority,

replied with equal brevity and completeness, and as if the two sayings

were parts of one sentence, And the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity

of thy sin.' That is all. Simultaneous are the two things. To confess

is to be forgiven, and the moment that the consciousness of sin rises

in the heart, that moment does the heavenly messenger come to still and

soothe.

Still further, notice how the cleansing comes as a divine gift. It is

purifying, much more than pardon, that is set forth in the symbolical

incident before us. The seraph is the divine messenger, and he brings a

coal from the altar, and lays that upon the prophet's lips, which is

but the symbolical way of saying that the man who is conscious of his

own evil will find in himself a blessed despair of being his own

healer, and that he has to turn to the divine source, the vision of

which has kindled the consciousness, to find there that which will take

away the evil. The Lord is He that healeth us.'

But, further, the cleansing is by fire. By which, as I suppose, in the

present context, and at Isaiah's stage of religious knowledge and

experience, we are to understand that great thought that God burns away

our sins, as you put a piece of foul clay into the fire, and the stain

melts from the surface like a dissipating cloud as the heat finds its

way into the substance. He will baptize with the Holy Ghost and with

fire'--a fire that quickens. A new impulse will be granted, which will

become the life of the sinful man's life, and will emancipate him from

the power of his own darkness and evil.

Now, let us remember that we have the fulness of all that was shadowed

to the prophet in this vision, and that the reality of every one of

these emblems is gathered together--if I may so say--not with

confusion, but with abundance and opulence in Jesus Christ Himself. Is

He not the seraph? Is He not Himself the burning coal? Is He not the

altar from which it is taken? All that is needed to make the foulest

clean is given in Christ's great work. Brethren, we shall never

understand the deepest secret of Christ and of Christianity until we

learn and hold fast by the conviction that the central work of Jesus is

to deal with man's sin; and that whatever else Christianity is, it is

first and foremost God's way of redeeming the world, and making it

possible for the unholy to dwell with His holy self.

III. Lastly, and only a word, the third stage here is--the purged

spirit is ready for service.

God did not bid the prophet go on His mission till the prophet had

voluntarily accepted the mission. He said, Who will go for us?' He

wants no pressed men in His army. He does not work with reluctant

servants. There is, first, the yielding of the will, and then there is

the enduement with the privilege of service. The prophet, having passed

through the preceding experiences, had thereby received a quick ear to

hear God's calling for volunteers. And we shall not hear Him asking Who

will go?' unless we have, in our measure, passed through similar

experiences. It will be a test of having done so, of our having been

purged from our evil, if, when other people think that it is only Eli

speaking, we know that it is the Lord that has called us, and say, Here

am I.'

For such experiences as I have been describing do influence the will,

and mould the heart, and make it a delight to do God's commandments,

and to execute His purpose, and to be the ministers of His great Word.

Some of us are willing to say that we have learned God's holiness; that

we have seen and confessed our sins; that we have received pardon and

cleansing. Have these experiences made you ready for any service? Have

they made your will flexible--made you dethrone yourself, and enthrone

the King whom the prophet saw? If they have, they are genuine; if they

have not, they are not. Submission of will; glorying in being the

instrument of the divine purpose; ears sharpened to catch His lowest

whisper; eyes that, like those of a dog fixed on his master, watch for

the faintest indication from his guiding eye--these are the infallible

tests and signs of having had lips and heart touched with the live coal

that burns away our uncleanness.

So, friends, would that I could flash upon every conscience that

vision! But you can do so for yourselves. Let me beseech you to bring

yourselves honestly into that solemn light of the character of God, and

to ask yourselves, How can two walk together except they be agreed?' Do

not put away such thoughts with any shallow, easy-going talk about how

God is good and will not be hard upon a poor fellow that has tried to

do his best. God is good; God is love. But divine goodness and love

cannot find a way by which the unclean shall dwell with the clean. What

then? This then--Jesus Christ has come. We may be made clean if we

trust in Him, and forsake our sins. He will touch the heart and lips

with the fire of His own Spirit, and then it will be possible to dwell

with the everlasting burnings of that flaming fire which is a holy God.

Blessed are they that have seen the vision; blessed they that have felt

it disclosing their own sins; blessed they whose hearts have been

purged. Blessed most of all they who, educated and trained through

these experiences, have taken this as the motto of their lives, Here am

I; send me.'

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SHILOAH AND EUPHRATES

Forasmuch as this people refuseth the waters of Shiloah that go softly

. . . the Lord bringeth up upon them the waters of the river, strong

and many.'--ISAIAH viii. 6, 7.

The kingdom of Judah was threatened with a great danger in an alliance

between Israel and Damascus. The cowardly King Ahaz, instead of

listening to Isaiah's strong assurances and relying on the help of God,

made what he thought a master-stroke of policy in invoking the help of

the formidable Assyrian power. That ambitious military monarchy was

eager to find an excuse for meddling in the politics of Syria, and

nothing loath, marched an army down on the backs of the invaders, which

very soon compelled them to hasten to Judah in order to defend their

own land. But, as is always the case, the help invoked was his ruin.

Like all conquering powers, once having got its foot inside the door,

Assyria soon followed bodily. First Damascus and Israel were ravaged

and subdued, and then Judah. That kingdom only purchased the privilege

of being devoured last. Like the Spaniards in Mexico, the Saxons in

England, the English in a hundred Indian territories, the allies that

came to help remained to conquer, and Judah fell, as we all know.

This is the simple original application of these words. They are a

declaration that in seeking for help from others Judah was forsaking

God, and that the helper would become ruler, and the ruler an

oppressive tyrant.

The waters of Shiloah that go softly stand as an emblem of the Davidic

monarchy as God meant it to be, and, since that monarchy was itself a

prophecy, they therefore represent the kingdom of God or the Messianic

King. The waters strong and many' are those of the Euphrates, which

swells and overflows and carries havoc, and are taken as the emblem of

the wasting sweep of the Assyrian king, whose capital stood on its

banks.

But while thus there is a plain piece of political history in the

words, they are also the statement of general principles which apply to

every individual soul and its relations to the kingdom, the gentle

kingdom, of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I. The Gentle Kingdom.

That little brooklet slipping quietly along; what a striking image of

the Kingdom of Jesus Christ!

It suggests the character of the King, the meek and lowly in heart.' It

suggests the manner of His rule as wielded in gentleness and exercising

no compulsion but that of love. It suggests the blessed results of His

reign under the image of the fertility, freshness, and beauty which

spring up wherever the river cometh.' That kingdom we are all summoned

to enter.

II. The Rejection of the Kingdom.

Strange and awful fact that men do turn away from it and Him.

In what does rejection consist?

In not trusting in His power to help and deliver.

In seeking help from other sources. This rejection is often unconscious

on the part of men who are guilty of it.

III. The Allies who are preferred to the gentle King.

The crowd of worldly things.

What is to be noticed is that at first the preference seems to answer

and be all right.

IV. The Allies becoming Tyrants.

The swift Euphrates in spate. That is what the rejecters have chosen

for themselves. Better to have lived by Shiloah than to have built

their houses by the side of such a raging stream. Mark how this is a

divine retribution indeed, but a natural process too.

(a) If Christ does not rule us, a mob of tyrants will.

Our own passions. Our own evil habits. The fascinating sins around us.

(b) They soon cease to seem helpers, and become tyrants.

How quickly the pleasure of sin disappears--like some bird that loses

its gay plumage as it grows old.

How stern becomes the necessity to obey; how great the difficulty of

breaking off evil habits! So a man becomes the slave of his own lusts,

of his indulged tastes, which rise above all restraints and carry away

all before them, like the Euphrates in flood. Fertility is turned to

barrenness; a foul deposit of mud overlays the soil; houses on the sand

are washed away; corpses float on the tawny wave. The soul that rejects

Christ's gentle sway is harried and laid waste by a mob of base-born

tyrants. We have to make our choice--either Christ or these; either a

service which is freedom, or an apparent freedom which is slavery;

either a worship which exalts, or a worship which embrutes. If the Son

make you free, ye shall be free indeed.'

There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God.' It is

peaceful to pitch our tents beside its calm flow, whereon shall go no

hostile fleets, and whence we shall but pass to the city above, in the

midst of the street whereof the river of water of life, clear as

crystal, proceeds out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.'

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THE KINGDOM AND THE KING

The people that walked in darkness hare seen a great light: they that

dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light

shined. 3. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy:

they joy before Thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men

rejoice when they divide the spoil. 4. For Thou hast broken the yoke of

His burden, and the staff of His shoulder, the rod of His oppressor, as

in the day of Midian. 5. For every battle of the warrior is with

confused noise, and garments rolled in blood: but this shall be with

burning and fuel of fire. 6. For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son

is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name

shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting

Father, The Prince of Peace. 7. Of the increase of His government and

peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon His

kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with

justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts

will perform this.'--ISAIAH ix. 2-7.

The darker the cloud, the brighter is the rainbow. This prophecy has

for its historical background the calamitous reign of the weak and

wicked Ahaz, during which the heart of the nation was bowed, like a

forest before the blast, by the dread of foreign invasion and conquest.

The prophet predicts a day of gloom and anguish, and then, out of the

midst of his threatenings, bursts this glorious vision, sudden as

sunrise. With consummate poetic art, the consequences of Messiah's rule

are set forth before He Himself is brought into view.

I. Image is heaped on image to tell the blessedness of that reign (vs.

2-5). Each trait of the glowing description is appropriate to the

condition of Israel under Ahaz; but each has a meaning far beyond that

limited application. Isaiah may, or may not, have been aware of what'

or what time' his words portrayed in their deepest, that is, their true

meaning, but if we believe in supernatural prediction which, though it

may have found its point of attachment in the circumstances of the

present, was none the less the voice of the Spirit of God, we shall not

make, as is often done now, the prophet's construction of his words the

rule for their interpretation. What the prophecy was discerned to point

to by its utterer or his contemporaries, is one thing; quite another is

what God meant by it.

First we have the picture of the nation groping in a darkness that

might be felt, the emblem of ignorance, sin, and sorrow, and inhabiting

a land over which, like a pall, death cast its shadow. On that dismal

gloom shines all at once a great light,' the emblem of knowledge,

purity, and joy. The daily mercy of the dawn has a gospel in it to a

heart that believes in God; for it proclaims the divine will that all

who sit in darkness shall be enlightened, and that every night but

prepares the way for the freshness and stir of a new morning. The great

prophecy of these verses in its indefiniteness goes far beyond its

immediate occasion in the state of Judah under Ahaz. As surely as the

dawn floods all lands, so surely shall all who walk in darkness see the

great light; and wherever is a land of the shadow of death,' there

shall the light shine. It is the light of the world.'

Verse 3 gives another phase of blessing. Israel is conceived of as

dwindled in number by deportation and war. But the process of

depopulation is arrested and reversed, and numerical increase, which is

always a prominent feature in Messianic predictions, is predicted. That

increase follows the dawning of the light, for men will flock to the

brightness of its rising.' We know that the increase comes from the

attractive power of the Cross, drawing men of many tongues to it; and

we have a right to bring the interpretation, which the world's history

gives, into our understanding of the prophecy. That enlarged nation is

to have abounding joy.

Undoubtedly, the rendering To it thou hast increased the joy' is

correct, as that of the Authorized Version (based upon the Hebrew text)

is clearly one of several cases in which the partial similarity in

spelling and identity in sound of the Hebrew words for not' and to it,'

have led to a mistaken reading. The joy is described in words which

dance and sing, like the gladness of which they tell. The mirth of the

harvest-field, when labour is crowned with success, and the sterner joy

of the victors as they part the booty, with which mingles the

consciousness of foes overcome and dangers averted, are blended in this

gladness. We have the joy of reaping a harvest of which we have not

sowed the seed. Christ has done that; we have but to enjoy the results

of His toil. We have to divide the spoil of a victory which we have not

won. He has bound the strong man, and we share the benefits of His

overcoming the world.

That last image of conquerors dividing the spoil leads naturally to the

picture in verse 4 of emancipation from bondage, as the result of a

victory like Gideon's with his handful. Who the Gideon of this new

triumph is, the prophet will not yet say. The yoke of his burden' and

the rod of his oppressor' recall Egypt and the taskmasters.

Verse 5 gives the reason for the deliverance of the slaves; namely, the

utter destruction of the armour and weapons of their enemy. The Revised

Version is right in its rendering, though it may be doubtful whether

its margin is not better than its text, since not only are boot' and

booted' as probable renderings of the doubtful words as armour' and

armed man,' but the picture of the warrior striding into battle with

his heavy boots is more graphic than the more generalised description

in the Revised Version's text. In any case, the whole accoutrements of

the oppressor are heaped into a pile and set on fire; and, as they

blaze up, the freed slaves exult in their liberty. The blood-drenched

cloaks have been stripped from the corpses and tossed on the heap, and,

saturated as they are, they burn. So complete is the victory that even

the weapons of the conquered are destroyed. Our conquering King has

been manifested, that He might annihilate the powers by which evil

holds us bound. His victory is not by halves. He taketh from him all

his armour wherein he trusted.'

II. Now we are ready to ask, And who is to do all this? The guarantee

for its accomplishment is the person of the conquering Messiah. The

hopes of Israel did not, and those of the world do not, rest on

tendencies, principles, laws of progress, advance of civilisation, or

the like abstractions or impersonalities, but on a living Person, in

whom all principles which make for righteousness and blessedness for

individuals and communities are incarnated, and whose vital action

works perpetually in mankind.

In this prophecy the prophet is plainly speaking greater things than he

knew. We do not get to the meaning if we only ask ourselves what did he

understand by his words, or what did his hearers gather from them? They

and he would gather the certainty of the coming of Messiah with

wondrous attributes of power and divine gifts, by whose reign light,

gladness, liberty would belong to the oppressed nation. But the depth

of the prophecy needed the history of the Incarnation for its

disclosure. If this is not a God-given prediction of the entrance into

human form of the divine, it is something very like miraculous that,

somehow or other, words should have been spoken, without any such

reference, which fit so closely to the supernatural fact of Christ's

incarnation.

The many attempts to translate verse 6 so as to get rid of the

application of Mighty God,' Everlasting Father,' to Messiah, cannot

here be enumerated or adequately discussed. I must be content with

pointing out the significance of the august fourfold name of the victor

King. It seems best to take the two first titles as a compound name,

and so to recognise four such compounds.

There is a certain connection between the first and second of these

which respectively lay stress on wisdom of plan and victorious energy

of accomplishment, while the third and fourth are also connected, in

that the former gathers into one great and tender name what Messiah is

to His people, and the latter points to the character of His dominion

throughout the whole earth. A wonder of a counsellor,' as the words may

be rendered, not only suggests His giving wholesome direction to His

people, but, still more, the mystery of the wisdom which guides His

plans. Truly, Jesus purposes wonders in the depth of His redeeming

design. He intends to do great things, and to reach them by a road

which none would have imagined. The counsel to save a world, and that

by dying for it, is the miracle of miracles. Who hath been His

counsellor in that overwhelming wonder?' He needs no teacher; He is

Himself the teacher of all truth. All may have His direction, and they

who follow it will not walk in darkness.

The mighty God.' Chapter x. 21 absolutely forbids taking this as

anything lower than the divine name. The prophet conceives of Messiah

as the earthly representative of divinity, as having God with and in

Him as no other man has. We are not to force upon the prophet the full

new Testament doctrine of the oneness of the incarnate Word with the

Father, which would be an anachronism. But we are not to fall into the

opposite error, and refuse to see in these words, so startling from the

lips of a rigid monotheist, a real prophecy of a divine Messiah, dimly

as the utterer may have perceived the figure which he painted. Note,

too, that the word mighty' implies victorious energy in battle. It is

often applied to human heroes, and here carries warlike connotations,

kindred with the previous picture of conflict and victory. Thus

strength as of God, and, in some profound way, strength which is

divine, will be the hand obeying the brain that counsels wonder, and

all His plans shall be effected by it.

But these are not all His qualities. He is the Father of Eternity'--a

name in which tender care and immortal life are marvellously blended.

This King will be in reality what, in old days, monarchs often called

themselves and seldom were,--the Father of His people, with all the

attributes of that sacred name, such as guidance, love, providing for

His children's wants. Nor can Christians forget that Jesus is the

source of life to them, and that the name has thus a deeper meaning.

Further, He is possessed of eternity. If He is so closely related to

God as the former name implies, that predicate is not wonderful. Dying

men need and have an undying Christ. He is the same yesterday, and

to-day, and for ever.'

The whole series of names culminates in the Prince of Peace,' which He

is by virtue of the characteristics expressed in the foregoing names.

The name pierces to the heart of Christ's work. For the individual He

brings peace with God, peace in the else discordant inner nature, peace

amid storms of calamity--the peace of submission, of fellowship with

God, of self-control, of received forgiveness and sanctifying. For

nations and civic communities He brings peace which will one day hush

the tumult of war, and burn chariots and all warlike implements in the

fire. The vision tarries, because Christ's followers have not been true

to their Master's mission, but it comes, though its march is slow. We

can hasten its arrival.

Verses 7 and 8 declare the perpetuity of Messiah's kingdom, His Davidic

descent, and those characteristics of His reign, which guarantee its

perpetuity. Judgment' which He exercises, and righteousness' which He

both exercises and bestows, are the pillars on which His throne stands;

and these are eternal, and it never will totter nor sink, as earthly

thrones must do. The very life-blood of prophecy, as of religion, is

the conviction that righteousness outlasts sin, and will survive the

wreck of matter and the crash of worlds.'

The great guarantee for these glowing anticipations is that the zeal of

the Lord of hosts' will accomplish them. Zeal, or rather jealousy, is

love stirred to action by opposition. It tolerates no unfaithfulness in

the object of its love, and flames up against all antagonism to the

object. He that toucheth you, toucheth the apple of Mine eye.' So the

subjects of that Messiah may be sure that a wall of fire is round about

them, which to foes without is terror and destruction, and to dwellers

within its circuit glows with lambent light, and rays out beneficent

warmth.

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LIGHT OR FIRE?

And the Light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One for a

flame: and it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one

day.'--ISAIAH x. 17.

With grand poetry the prophet pictures the Assyrian power as a forest

consumed like thistles and briers by the fire of God. The text suggests

solemn truths about the divine Nature and its manifestations.

I. The Essential Character of God.

Light and Holiness are substantially parallel. Light symbolises purity,

but also knowledge and joy. Holiness is Separation from Creatures, but

chiefly from their Evils.

II. The Different Attitudes which Men assume to that Character.

Light of Israel': His Holy One.'

God becomes ours, and we have an interest in that radiant Personality

if we choose to claim it by faith, love, and obedience. We are free to

accept God as ours or to reject Him.

III. The Opposite Aspects which that Character accordingly assumes.

(a) The self-same divine Character has two effects according to the

character of the beholder.

To those who respond to God's love it is--heaven. To those who are

indifferent or alienated it may be pain, and will harm them if they see

it and do not yield to it.

God's holiness is not retributive justice but moral perfectness, which

to a good man will be joy, and to a bad man, intolerable.

The light which is gladsome to a healthy eye is agony to a diseased

one.

(b) All the manifestations and operations of that divine Character have

a twofold aspect. Christ is either a stone of stumbling or a sure

foundation. Men are either the better or the worse for Him. The Gospel

is the savour of life unto life or of death unto death. The tremendous

either--or.' The Cross rejected harms the moral nature, hardens

conscience, deepens condemnation.

All divine operations are necessarily on the side of God's lovers and

against those who love Him not. They are contrary to Him, therefore He

is so to them. With the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward.'

The final Judgment will be either rapture or despair, like the coming

of a bridegroom, or the fiery rain that burnt up Sodom.

The very dew of Heavenly Bliss would be corroding poison to a godless

spirit.

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THE SUCKER FROM THE FELLED OAK

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch

shall grow out of his roots: 2. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest

upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel

and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord; 3. And

shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord: and he

shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the

hearing of his ears: 4. But with righteousness shall he judge the poor,

and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite

the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips

shall he slay the wicked. 5. And righteousness shall be the girdle of

his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. 6. The wolf also

shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;

and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little

child shall lead them. 7. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their

young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like

the ox. 8. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and

the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den. 9. They

shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall

be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. 10.

And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for

an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest

shall be glorious.'--ISAIAH xi. 1-10.

The hopeless fall of Assyria is magnificently pictured in the close of

chapter x., as the felling of the cedars of Lebanon by the axe swung by

Jehovah's own hand. A cedar once cut down puts out no new shoots; and

so the Assyrian power, when it falls, will fall for ever. The metaphor

is carried on with surpassing beauty in the first part of this

prophecy, which contrasts the indestructible vitality of the Davidic

monarchy with the irremediable destruction fated for its formidable

antagonist. The one is a cedar, the stump of which rots slowly, but

never recovers. The other is an oak, which, every woodman knows, will

put out new growth from the stool.' But instead of a crowd of little

suckers, the prophet sees but one shoot, and that rising to more than

the original height and fruitfulness of the tree. The prophecy is

distinctly that of One Person, in whom the Davidic monarchy is

concentrated, and all its decadence more than recovered.

Isaiah does not bring the rise of the Messiah into chronological

connection with the fall of Assyria; for he contemplates a period of

decay for the Israelitish monarchy, and it was the very burden of his

message as to Assyria that it should pass away without harming that

monarchy. The contrast is not intended to suggest continuity in time.

The period of fulfilment is entirely undetermined.

The first point in the prophecy is the descent of the Messiah from the

royal stock. That is more than Isaiah's previous Messianic prophecies

had told. He is to come at a time when the fortunes of David's house

were at their worst. There is to be nothing left but the stump of the

tree, and out of it is to come a shoot,' slender and insignificant, and

in strange contrast with the girth of the truncated bole, stately even

in its mutilation. We do not talk of a growth from the stump as being a

branch'; and sprout' would better convey Isaiah's meaning. From the top

of the stump, a shoot; from the roots half buried in the ground, an

outgrowth,--these two images mean but one person, a descendant of

David, coming at a time of humiliation and obscurity. But this lowly

shoot will bear fruit,' which presupposes its growth.

The King-Messiah thus brought on the scene is then described in regard

to His character (v. 2), the nature of His rule (vs. 3-5), the

universal harmony and peace which He will diffuse through nature (vs.

6-9), and the gathering of all mankind under His dominion. There is

much in the prophetic ideal of the Messiah which finds no place in this

prophecy. The gentler aspects of His reign are not here, nor the deeper

characteristics of His spirit,' nor the chiefest blessings in His gift.

The suffering Messiah is not yet the theme of the prophet.

The main point as to the character of the Messiah which this prophecy

sets forth is that, whatever He was to be, He was to be by reason of

the resting on Him of the Spirit of Jehovah. The directness, fulness,

and continuousness of His inspiration are emphatically proclaimed in

that word shall rest,' which can scarcely fail to recall John's

witness, I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven;

and it abode upon Him.' The humanity on which the Divine Spirit

uninterruptedly abides, ungrieved and unrestrained, must be free from

the stains which so often drive that heavenly visitant from our

breasts. The white-breasted Dove of God cannot brood over foulness.

There has never been but one manhood capable of receiving and retaining

the whole fulness of the Spirit of God.

The gifts of that Spirit, which become qualities of the Messiah in whom

He dwells, are arranged (if we may use so cold a word) in three pairs;

so that, if we include the introductory designation, we have a

sevenfold characterisation of the Spirit, recalling the seven lamps

before the throne and the seven eyes of the Lamb in the Apocalypse, and

symbolising by the number the completeness and sacredness of that

inspiration. The resulting character of the Messiah is a fair picture

of one who realises the very ideal of a strong and righteous ruler of

men. Wisdom and understanding' refer mainly to the clearness of

intellectual and moral insight; counsel and might,' to the qualities

which give sound practical direction and vigour to follow, and carry

through, the decisions of practical wisdom; while the knowledge and

fear of the Lord' define religion by its two parts of acquaintance with

God founded on love, and reverential awe which prompts to obedience.

The fulfilment, and far more than fulfilment, of this ideal is in

Jesus, in whom were hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,' to

whom no circumstances of difficulty ever brought the shadow of

perplexity, who always saw clearly before Him the path to tread, and

had always might' to tread it, however rough, who lived all His days in

unbroken fellowship with the Father and in lowly obedience.

The prophet saw not all the wonders of perfect human character which

that indwelling Spirit would bring to realisation in Him; but what he

saw was indispensable to a perfect King, and was, at all events, an arc

of the mighty circle of perfection, which has now been revealed in the

life of Jesus. The possibilities of humanity under the influence of the

Divine Spirit are revealed here no less than the actuality of the

Messiah's character. What Jesus is, He gives it to His subjects to

become by the dwelling in them of the spirit of life which was in Him.

The rule of the King is accordant with His character. It is described

in verses 3-5. The first characteristic named may be understood in

different ways. According to some commentators, who deserve respectful

consideration, it means, He shall draw His breath in the fear of

Jehovah'; that is, that that fear has become, as it were, His very

life-breath. But the meaning of breathing' is doubtful; and the phrase

seems rather to express, as the Revised Version puts it, His delight

shall be in the fear of the Lord.' That might mean that those who fear

Jehovah shall be His delight, and this would free the expression from

any shade of tautology, when compared with the previous clause, and

would afford a natural transition to the description of His rule. It

might, on the other hand, continue the description of His personal

character, and describe the inward cheerfulness of His obedience, like

I delight to do Thy will.' In any case, the fear of the Lord' is

represented as a sweet-smelling fragrance; and, if we adopt the former

explanation, then it is almost a divine characteristic which is here

attributed to the Messiah; for it is God to whom the fear of Him in

men's hearts is an odour of a sweet smell.'

Then follow the features of His rule. His unerring judgment pierces

through the seen and heard. That is the quality of a monarch after the

antique pattern, when kings were judges. It does not appear that the

prophet rose to the height of perceiving the divine nature of the

Messiah; but we cannot but remember how far the reality transcends the

prophecy, since He whose eyes are as a flame of fire' knows what is in

man, and the earliest prayers of the Church were addressed to Jesus as

Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men.'

The relation of Messiah to two classes is next set forth. The oppressed

and the meek shall have Him for their defender and avenger,--a striking

contrast to the oppressive monarchs whom Isaiah had seen. We remember

who said Blessed are the poor in spirit,' Blessed are the meek.' The

King Himself has taught us to deepen the meaning of the words of the

prophet, and to find in them the expression of the law of His kingdom

by which its blessings belong to those who know their need and come

with humble hearts. But the same acts which are for the poor are

against the oppressors. The emendation which reads tyrant' (arits) for

earth' (erets) brings the two clauses descriptive of the punitive acts

into parallelism, and is probably to be preferred. The same pillar was

light to Israel and darkness to the Egyptians. Christ is the savour of

life unto life and of death unto death. But what is His instrument of

destruction? The rod of His mouth' or the breath of His lips.' And who

is He whose bare word thus has power to kill and make alive? Is not

this a divine prerogative? and does it not belong in the fullest sense

to Him whose voice rebuked fevers, storms, and demons, and pierced the

dull, cold ear of death? Further, righteousness, the absolute

conformity of character and act to the standard in the will of God, and

faithfulness, the inflexible constancy, which makes a character

consistent with itself, and so reliable, are represented by a striking

figure as being twined together to make the girdle, which holds the

vestments in place, and girds up the whole frame for effort. This

righteous King shall not fail nor be discouraged.' He is to be reckoned

on to the uttermost, or, as the New Testament puts it, He is the

faithful and true witness.' This is the strong Son of God, who gathered

all His powers together to run with patience the race set before Him,

and to whom all may turn with the confidence that He is faithful as a

Son over His own house,' and will inviolably keep the promise of His

word and of His past acts.

We pass from the picture of the character and rule of the King over men

to that fair vision of Paradise regained, which celebrates the

universal restoration of peace between man and the animals. The picture

is not to be taken as a mere allegory, as if lions' and wolves' and

snakes' meant bad men; but it falls into line with other hints in

Scripture, which trace the hostility between man and the lower

creatures to sin, and shadow a future when the beasts of the field

shall be at peace with thee.' The psalm which sings of man's dominion

over the creatures is to be one day fulfilled; and the Epistle to the

Hebrews teaches that it is already fulfilled in Christ, who will raise

His brethren, for whom He tasted death, to partake in His dominion. The

present order of things is transient; and if earth is to be, as some

shadowy hints seem to suggest, the scene of the future glories of

redeemed humanity, it may be the theatre of a fulfilment of such

visions as this. But we cannot dogmatise on a subject of which we know

so little, nor be sure of the extent to which symbolism enters into

this sweet picture. Enough that there surely comes a time when the King

of men and Lord of nature shall bring back peace between both, and

restore the fair music that all creatures made To their great Lord.'

Verse 10 begins an entirely new section, which describes the relations

of Messiah's kingdom to the surrounding peoples. The picture preceding

closed with the vision of the earth filled with the knowledge of the

Lord, and this verse proclaims the universality of Messiah's kingdom.

By the root of Jesse' is meant, not the root from which Jesse sprang,

but, in accordance with verse 1, the sprout from the house of Jesse.

Just as in that verse the sprout was prophesied of as growing up to be

fruitbearing, so here the lowly sucker shoots to a height which makes

it conspicuous from afar, and becomes, like some tall mast, a sign for

the nations. The contrast between the obscure beginning and the

conspicuous destiny of Messiah is the point of the prophecy. I, if I be

lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.' Strange elevation

for a king is a cross! But it is because He has died for men that He

has the right to reign over them, and that they shall seek' to Him. His

resting-place shall be glorious.'

The seat of His dominion is also the seat of His repose. The beneficent

activity just described is wielded from a calm, central palace, and

does not break the King's tranquillity. That is a paradox, except to

those who know that Jesus Christ, sitting in undisturbed rest at the

right hand of God, thence works with and for His servants. His repose

is full of active energy; His active energy is full of repose. And that

place of calm abode is glorious' or, more emphatically and literally,

glory. He shall dwell in the blaze of the uncreated glory of God,--a

prediction which is only fulfilled in its true meaning by Christ's

ascension and session at the right hand of God, in the glory which He

had with the Father before the world was, and into which He has borne

that lowly manhood which He drew from the cut-down stem of Jesse.

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THE WELL-SPRING OF SALVATION

Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of

salvation.'--ISAIAH xii. 3.

There are two events separated from each other by more than fifteen

hundred years which have a bearing upon this prophecy: the one supplied

the occasion for its utterance, the other claimed to be its

interpretation and its fulfilment. The first of these is that scene

familiar to us all, where the Israelites in the wilderness murmured for

want of water, and the law-giver, being at his wits' end what to do

with his troublesome charges, took his anxieties to God, and got for an

answer the command to take with him the elders of Israel and his

miracle-working rod, and to go to the rock, and the Lord shall stand

upon the rock before thee and them, and the water shall flow forth.' It

was not the rock, nor the rod, nor Moses and the elders, but the

presence of God that brought the refreshing draught. And that that

incident was in Isaiah's mind when he wrote our text is very clear to

anybody who will observe that it occurs in the middle of a song of

praise, which corresponds to the Israelites' song at the Red Sea after

the destruction of Pharaoh, and is part of a great prophecy in which he

describes God's future blessings and mercies under images constantly

drawn from the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus in the desert. Now, that

interpretation, or rather that application, of the words of my text,

was very familiar to the Jews long, long before the New Testament was

thought about. For, as many of you will know, there came in the course

of time a number of ceremonies to be added to a feast established by

Moses himself--the Feast of Tabernacles. That was a feast in which the

whole body of the Israelitish people dwelt for a week in leafy booths,

in order to remind them of the time when they were wanderers in the

wilderness; and as is usually the case, the ritual of the celebration

developed a number of additional symbolical observances which were

tacked on to it in the course of centuries. Amongst these there was

this very memorable one: that on each of the days of the Feast of

Tabernacles, at a given point in the ceremonial, the priests went from

the temple, winding down the rocky path on the temple mountain, to the

Pool of Siloam in the valley below, and there in their golden vases

they drew the cool sparkling water, which they bore up, and amidst the

blare of trumpets and the clash of cymbals poured it on the altar,

whilst the people chanted the words of my text, With joy shall ye draw

water out of the wells of salvation.'

That ceremonial had been going on for eight hundred years from Isaiah's

time; and once more the period came round when it was to be performed;

and on the seven days of the feast, punctually at the appointed time,

the procession wound down the rocky slopes, drew the water in the

golden vases, bore it up to the temple, and poured it upon the altar;

and on the last great day of the feast, the same ceremonial went on up

to a given point; and just as the last rites of the chant of our text

were dying on the ears, there was a little stir amidst the crowd, which

parted to make way for him, and a youngish man, of mean appearance and

rustic dress, stepped forward, and there, before all the gathered

multitudes and the priests standing with their empty urns, symbol of

the impotence of their system, on the last day, that great day of the

feast, Jesus stood and cried, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me

and drink.' Brethren, such a commentary, at such a time, from such a

commentator, may well absolve me from the necessity of enforcing the

evangelistic bearing of the words of my text. And so, then, with that

understanding of the deepest meaning of these words that we have to

look at, I ask you to take them in the simplest possible way, and to

consider three points: the Well of Salvation, the Act of Drawing the

Water, the Gladness of those that draw. With joy shall ye draw water

out of the fountains of salvation.'

Now, with regard to the first point, let me remind you to begin with,

that the idea of the word here is not that which we attach to a well,

but that which we attach to a spring. It does not describe the source

of salvation as being a mere reservoir, still less as being a created

or manufactured thing; but there lies in it the deep idea of a source

from which the water wells up by its own inward energy. Then, when we

have got that explanation, and the deep, full, pregnant meaning of the

word salvation as a thing past, a thing present, a thing future, a

thing which negatively delivers a man from all sin and sorrow, and a

thing which positively endows a man with beauty, happiness, and

holiness--when we have got that, then the question next cries aloud for

answer--this well-spring of salvation, is--what? Who? And the first

answer and the last answer is GOD--GOD HIMSELF. It is no mere bit of

drapery of the prophet's imagery, this well-spring of salvation; it is

something much more substantial, much deeper than that. You remember

the old psalm, With Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy light shall we

see light'; and what David and John after him called life, Isaiah and

Paul after him calls salvation. And you remember too, no doubt, the

indictment of another of the prophets, laying hold of the same metaphor

in order to point to the folly and the suicide of all godless living:

My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain

of living waters, and they have hewn out for themselves broken

cisterns.' They were manufactured articles, and because they were made

they could be cracked, but the fountain, because it rises by its own

inherent energy, springing up into everlasting life, is all-sufficient.

God Himself is the well-spring of salvation.

If I had time to enlarge upon this idea, I might remind you how nobly

and blessedly that principle is confirmed when we think of this great

salvation, past, present, and future, negative and positive,

all-sufficient and complete, as having its origin in His deep nature,

as having its process in His own finished work, and as being in its

essence the communication of Himself. That last thing I should like to

say a word or two about. If there is a man or a woman that thinks of

salvation as if it were merely a shutting up of some material hell, or

the dodging round a corner so as to escape some external consequence of

transgression, let him and her hear this: the possession of God is

salvation, that and nothing else. To have Him within me, that is to be

saved; to have His life in His dear Son made the foundation of my life,

to have my whole being penetrated and filled with God, that is the

essence of the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. And because it comes

unmotived, uncaused, self-originated, springing up from the depths of

His own heart; because it is all effected by His own mighty work who

has trodden the winepress alone, and, single-handed, has wrought the

salvation of the race; and because its essence and heart is the

communication of God Himself, and the bestowing upon us the

participation in a divine nature, therefore the depth of the thought,

God Himself is the well-fountain of salvation.

But there is still another step to take. If these things which I have

only just been able to glance at in the most superficial, and perhaps,

therefore, confused manner, in any measure commend themselves to your

judgments and your consciences, let me ask you to go with me one step

further, and to figure to yourselves the significance and the

strangeness of that moment to which I have already referred, when a man

stood up in the temple court, and, with distinct allusion to the whole

of the multitude of Old Testament sayings, in which God and the

communication of God's own energy were represented as being the

fountain of salvation and the salvation from the fountain, and said, If

any man thirst, let him come unto Me.' Why, what a thing--let us put it

into plain, vulgar English--what a thing for a man to say--If any man

thirst.' Who art Thou that dost thus plant Thyself opposite the race,

sure that Thou hast no needs like them, but, contrariwise, canst

refresh and satiate the thirsty lips of them all? Who art Thou that

dost proclaim Thyself as sufficient for the fruition of the mind that

yearns for truth and thirsts for certitude, of the parched heart that

wearies and cracks for want of love, of the will that longs to be

rightly and lovingly commanded? Oh, dear brethren, not only the Titanic

presumption of proposing oneself as enough for a single soul, but the

inconceivable madness of proposing oneself as enough for all the race

in all generations to the end of time, except on one hypothesis, marks

this utterance of Him who has also said, I am meek and lowly of heart.'

Strange lowliness! singular meekness! Who was He? Who is this that

steps into the place that only a God can fill, and says, I can do it

all. If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink'?

Dear brethren, some of us can, thank God, answer that question as I

pray that every one of you may be able to answer it, Thou art the King

of Glory, O Christ; Thou art the everlasting son of the Father. With

Thee is the fountain of life; Thou Thyself art the living water.'

But I think there is a still further step to be taken. It is not only

that our Lord Jesus Christ, in His nature, in His person, is the

communicator of the divine life to man, just as--if you will let me

take such a metaphor--just as up in the hills sometimes you will find

some little tarn or loch all shut in; but having trickling from it a

thread of limpid life, and, wherever it flows, the water of the loch

goes; only, the one is lake and the other is river, and the latter is

the medium of communication of the former to the thirsty pastures of

the wilderness. And not only so, but--if I might venture to build upon

a word of the context--there seems to be another consideration there.

The words which precede my text are a quotation from a song of the

Israelites in their former Exodus: The Lord Jehovah is my strength and

my song; He also is become my salvation.' Now, if our Bible has been

correct--and I do not enter upon that question--in emphasising the

difference between is and is become, mark where it takes us. It takes

us to this, that there was some single, definite, historical act

wherein God became in an eminent manner and in reality what He had

always been in purpose, intent, and idea. Then that to which my text

originally alludes, to which it looks back, is the great deliverance

wrought by the banks of the Red Sea. It was because Pharaoh and his

hosts were drowned in it that Miriam and her musical sisters, with

their timbrel and dance, not only said, The Lord is my strength,' but

He has become my strength'--there where the corpses are floating yet.

What answers to that in the matter with which we are concerned?

Brethren, it is not enough to say that God is the fountain of

salvation, it is not enough to say that the Incarnate Christ is the

medium of salvation. Will you take the other step with us, and say that

the Cross of Christ is the realisation of the divine intention of

salvation? Then He, who from everlasting was the strength and song of

all the strong and the songful, is become the salvation of all the

lost, and the fountain is opened for sin and for uncleanness.' A

definite, historical act, the manifestation of Jesus Christ, is the

bringing to man of the salvation of God. So much, then, for that first

point to which I desired to ask your attention.

And now let me say a word or two as to the second. I wish to speak

about this process of drawing from the fountain. That metaphor, without

any further explanation, might very naturally suggest more idea of

human effort than in reality belongs to it. Men have said: Yes; no

doubt God is the fountain of salvation; no doubt Christ is the river of

salvation; no doubt His death is the opening of the fountain for sin

and for uncleanness; but how am I to bring myself into contact and

connection with it?' And there have been all sorts of answers. Every

kind of pump has been resorted to. Go up to the Agricultural Hall and

you will see no end of contrivances for bringing water to the surface.

There are not so many there as men have found out for themselves to

bring the water of salvation to their lips, and the effect has always

been the same. There has been something wrong with the valves; the pump

has not worked properly; there has been something wrong with the crank;

the pipe has not gone down to the water; and there has been nothing but

a great jingling of empty buckets, and aching and wearied elbows, and

what the woman said to Christ has been true all round, Sir, thou hast

nothing to draw with, and the well is deep.' Ay! thank God, it is deep;

and if we let our Lord be His own interpreter, we have only to put

together three sayings of His in order to come to the true meaning of

this metaphor. My text says, With joy ye shall draw water'; and Christ,

sitting at the well of Samaria--what a strange combination of the

weakness and the weariness of manhood and the strength and

self-consciousness of Divinity was there!--wearied with His journey,

said, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to

thee, Give Me to drink, thou wouldest have asked of Him and He would

have given thee living water.' So, then, drawing is asking. That is

step number one.

Take another word of the Master's that I have already quoted for other

purposes, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' So, then,

drawing, or asking, or coming are all equivalent. That is step number

two.

And, then, take another word. He that cometh unto Me shall never

hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst.' So, then,

drawing, asking, coming, all melt into the one simple word--believing.

Trust in Him, and thou hast come, thou hast asked, thou hast drawn,

thou dost possess.

But whilst I would lay the foundation thus broad, thus simple, do not

forget, dear brethren, what I was saying about a definite historical

act. You will hear people say, Oh, I trust in Christ!' What do you

trust in Christ? You will hear people say, Oh, I look to the goodness

of God.' Be it so. God forbid I should say a word to prevent that; but

what I would insist upon is that a mere vague regard to a vague Christ

is not the faith that is equivalent to drawing from the fountain of

salvation. There must be a further object in a faith that saves. It

must lay hold of the definite historical act in which Christ has become

the salvation of the world.

Do not take it upon my words, take it upon His own. He once said to His

fellow-countrymen in His lifetime, I am the living bread'; and many of

our modern teachers would go that length heartily. Was that where

Christ stopped? By no means. Was His Gospel a gospel of incarnation

only? Certainly not. I am the living bread that came down from heaven.'

Anything more? Yes; this more, and the bread which I will give is My

flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. He that eateth Me

he shall live by Me.' Well,' say some people, that means following His

example, accepting His teaching, being loyal to His Person, absorbing

His Spirit.' Yes, it means all that; but is that all it means? Take His

own commentary: He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood, hath

eternal life.' Yes, brethren, a Christ incarnate, blessed be God! A

Christ crucified, blessed be God! And not the one but both must be the

basis of our faith and our hope.

Now, will you let me say one thing about this matter of drawing the

water? It is an act of faith in a whole Jesus, and eminently in the

mighty act and sacrifice of His Cross. But to go back again to the

context: He also is become my salvation. That is what I desire, God

helping me, to lay on the hearts of all my hearers--that a definite act

of faith in Christ crucified is not enough unless it is a personal act,

unless it is what our old Puritan forefathers used to call

appropriating faith.' Never mind about the somewhat dry and technical

phraseology; the thing is what I insist upon--my salvation.' O brother!

what does it matter though all Niagara were roaring past your door; you

might die of thirst all the same unless you put your own lips to it.

Down on your knees like Gideon's men; it is safest there; that is the

only attitude in which a man can drink of this fountain. Down on your

knees and put your lips to it--your very own lips--and drink for your

own soul's salvation. Christ died for the world. Yes; but the world for

which Christ died is made up of individuals who were in His heart. It

is Paul's words that I would beseech you to make your own: The Son of

God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.' Every one of you is

entitled to say that, if you will. You remember that verse filled with

adoring contemplation that we sometimes sing, one word in which seems

to me to be coloured by the too sombre doctrine of the epoch from which

it came:--

My soul looks back to see

The burden Thou didst bear,

When hanging on the accursed tree,

And knows her guilt was there.'

He also is my strength and my song. He is become my salvation;

therefore, in joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.'

Now, I have left myself no time to do more than say one word about that

last point, the gladness of the water-drawers. It is a pretty picture

in our text, full of the atmosphere and spirit of Eastern life: the

cheery talk and the ringing laughter round the village well, where the

shepherds with their flocks linger all day long, and the maidens from

their tents come--a kind of rude Exchange in the antique world; and,

says our prophet, As the dwellers in the land at their village springs,

so ye, the weary travellers at "the eye of the desert," will draw with

gladness.' So we have this joy.

Dear brethren, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is meant for something better

than to make us glad, but it is meant to make us glad too, and he is

but a very poor Christian who has not found that it is the joy and

rejoicing of his heart. We need not put too much emphasis and stress

upon that side of the truth; but we need not either suppress it or

disregard it in our modern high-flown disinterestedness. There are joys

worth calling so which only come from possessing this fountain of

salvation. How shall I enumerate them? The best way, I think, will be

to quote passages.

There is the gladness of forgiven sin and a quieted conscience: Make me

to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may

rejoice.' There is the joy of a conscious possession of God: Blessed

are the people that know the joyful sound; they shall walk, O Lord, in

the light of Thy countenance. In Thy name shall they rejoice all the

day.' There is the joy of fellowship and communion with Jesus Christ

and His full presence: I will see you again; and your hearts shall

rejoice, and your joy no man taketh away from you.' There is the joy of

willing obedience: I delight to do Thy will.' It is joy to the just to

do judgment.' There is the joy of a bright hope of an inheritance

incorruptible,' wherein ye greatly rejoice,' and there is a joy which,

like that Greek fire they talk about, burns brighter under water, and

glows as the darkness deepens--a joy which is independent of

circumstances, and can say, Although the fig-tree shall not blossom,

neither shall fruit be in the vines, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.'

And all that, brother and friend, may be yours and mine; and then what

this same prophet says may also be true: The ransomed of the Lord shall

return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their

heads'--that is for the pilgrimage; They shall obtain joy and gladness,

and sorrow and sighing shall flee away'--that is for the home. There is

another prophecy in this same book of Isaiah: Ho, every one that

thirsteth, come ye to the waters'; that was the voice of the Christ in

prophecy. There is a saying spoken in the temple courts: If any man

thirst, let him come unto Me and drink'; that was the voice of the

Christ upon earth. There is a saying at the end of Scripture--almost

the last words that the Seer in Patmos heard: Whosoever will, let him

take of the water of life freely'; that was the voice of the Christ

from the throne. And the triple invitation comes to every soul of man

in the world, and to thee, and thee, and thee, my brother. Answer,

answer as the Samaritan woman did: Sir, give me this water that I

thirst not, neither come hither' any more to draw of the broken

cisterns.

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THE HARVEST OF A GODLESS LIFE

Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been

mindful of the Rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant

pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips: In the day shalt

thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy

seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief

and of desperate sorrow.'--ISAIAH xvii. 10, 11.

The original application of these words is to Judah's alliance with

Damascus, which Isaiah was dead against. He saw that it would only

precipitate the Assyrian invasion, as in fact it did. Judah had

forsaken God, and because they had done so, they had gone to seek for

themselves delights--alliance with Damascus. The image of planting a

garden of pleasures, and vine slips of a stranger' refers to sensuous

idolatry as well as to the entangling alliance. Then follows a

contemptuous description of the rapid growth of this alliance and of

the care with which Israel cultivated it. In a day thou makest thy

plant to grow' (or fencest it), and next morning it was in blossom, so

sedulously had they nursed and fostered it. Then comes the smiting

contrast of what it was all for--A harvest heap in the day of sickness

and incurable pain.'

Now we may take this in a more general way as containing large truths

which affect the life of every one of us.

I. The Sin of a Godless Life.

(a) Notice the Sin charged. It is merely negative--forgettest. There is

no charge of positive hostility or of any overt act. This forgetfulness

is most natural and easy to be fallen into. The constant pressure of

the world. It indicates alienation of heart from God.

It is most common among us, far more so than active infidelity, far

more so than gross sin, far more so than conscious hostility.

(b) The implied Criminality of it. He is the Rock of thy strength' and

the God of thy salvation.' Rock is the grand Old Testament name of God,

expressing in a pregnant metaphor both what He is in Himself and what

in relation to those who trust Him. It speaks of stability, elevation,

massiveness, and of defence and security. The parallel title sets Him

forth as the Giver of salvation; and both names set in clear light the

sinful ingratitude of forgetting God, and force home the question: Do

ye thus requite the Lord, oh foolish people and unwise?'

(c) The implied Absurdity of it. What a contrast between the safe

munitions of rocks' and the unsheltered security of these Damascene

gardens! What fools to leave the heights and come down into the plain!

Think of the contrast between the sufficiency of God and the emptiness

of the substitutes. Forgetfulness of Him and preference of creatures

cannot be put into language which does not convict it of absurdity.

II. The Busy Effort and Apparent Success of a Godless Life.

(a) If a man loses his hold on God and has not Him to stay himself on,

he is driven to painful efforts to make up the loss. God is needed by

every soul. If the soul is not satisfied in Him, then there are hungry

desires. This is the explanation of the feverish activity of much of

our life.

(b) Such work is far harder than the work of serving God. It takes a

great deal of toil to make that garden grow. The world is a hard

taskmaster. God's service is easy. He sets us in Eden to till and dress

it, but when we forget Him, the ground is cursed, and bears thorns and

thistles, and sweat drips from our brows.

Men take more pains to damn themselves than to save themselves. There

is nothing more wearying than the pursuit of pleasure. Pleasant

plants'--that is a hopeless kind of gardening. There is nothing more

degrading.

Ye lust and desire to have,'--what a contrast is in, Ask and have! We

might live even as the lilies or the ravens, or with only this

difference, that we laboured, but were as uncaring and as peaceful as

they.

God is given. The world has to be bought. Its terms are Nothing for

nothing.'

(c) Such work has sometimes quick, present success.

In the day.' It is hard for men to labour towards far-off unseen good.

We like to have what will grow up in a night, like Jonah's gourd. So

these present satisfactions in a worldly life appeal to worldly,

sensuous natures. And it is hard to set over against these a plant

which grows slowly, and only bears fruit in the next world.

III. The End of it all.

A harvest heap in the day of grief.' This clearly points on to a solemn

ending--the day of judgment.

(a) How poor the fruit will he that a God-forgetting man will take out

of life! There is but one heap from all the long struggle. He has sowed

much and brought home little.' What shall we take with us out of our

busy years as their net result? A very small sack will be large enough

to hold the harvest that many of us have reaped.

(b) All this God-forgetting life of pleasure-seeking and idolatry is

bringing on a terrible, inevitable consummation.

Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.'

No doubt there is often a harvest of grief and desperate sorrow

springing, even in this life, from forgetting God. For it is only they

who set their hopes on Him that are never disappointed, and only they

who have chosen Him for their portion who can always say, I have a

goodly heritage.' But the real harvest is not reaped till death has

separated the time of sowing from that of ingathering. The sower shall

reap; i.e. every man shall inherit the consequences of his deeds. They

that have planted it shall eat it.'

(c) That harvest home will be a day of sadness to some. These are

terrible words--grief and desperate sorrow,' or pain and incurable

sickness.' We dare not dilate on this. But if we trust in Christ and

sow to the Spirit, we shall then rejoice before God as with the joy of

harvest,' and return with joy, bringing our sheaves with us.'

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IN THIS MOUNTAIN'

In this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast

of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of

marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. 7. And He will destroy in

this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the

veil that is spread over all nations. 8. He will swallow up death in

victory.'--ISAIAH xxv. 6-8.

A poet's imagination and a prophet's clear vision of the goal to which

God will lead humanity are both at their highest in this great song of

the future, whose winged words make music even in a translation. No

doubt it starts from the comparatively small fact of the restoration of

the exiled nation to its own land. But it soars far beyond that. It

sees all mankind associated with them in sharing their blessings. It is

the vision of God's ideal for humanity. That makes it the more

remarkable that the prophet, with this wide outlook, should insist with

such emphasis on the fact that it has a local centre. That phrase in

this mountain' is three times repeated in the hymn; two of the

instances occurring in the verses of my text have lying side by side

with them the expressions all people' and all nations,' as if to bring

together the local origin, and the universal extent, of the blessings

promised.

The sweet waters that are to pour through the world well up from a

spring opened in this mountain.' The beams that are to lighten every

land stream out from a light blazing there. The world's hopes for that

golden age which poets have sung, and towards which earnest social

reformers have worked, and of the coming of which this prophet was

sure, rest on a definite fact, done in a definite place, at a definite

time. Isaiah knew the place, but what was to be done, or when it was to

be done, he knew not. You and I ought to be wiser. History has taught

us that Jesus Christ fulfils the visioned good that inspired the

prophet's brilliant words. We might say, with allowable licence, that

this mountain,' in which the Lord does the great things that this song

magnifies, is not so much Zion as Calvary.

Brethren, in these days, when so many voices are proclaiming so many

short cuts to the Millennium, this clear declaration of the source of

the world's hope is worth pondering. For us all, individually, this

localisation of the origin of the universal good of mankind is an offer

of blessings to us if we will go thither, where the provision for the

world's good is stored--In this mountain'; therefore, to seek it

anywhere else is to seek it in vain.

Now, I wish, under the impression of that conviction, to put before you

just these three thoughts: where the world's food comes from; where the

unveiling which gives light to the world comes from; and where the life

which destroys death for the world comes from--In this mountain.'

I. Where does the world's food come from?

Physiologists can tell, by studying the dentition--the system of the

teeth--and the digestive apparatus of an animal, what it is meant to

live upon, whether vegetables or flesh, or a mingled diet of both. And

you can tell, if you will, by studying yourself, what, or whom, you are

meant to live upon. The poet said, We live by admiration, hope, and

love.' But he did not say on what these faculties, which truly nourish

man's spirit, are to fix and fasten. He tells of the appetites; he does

not tell of their food. My text does: In this mountain shall the Lord

make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the

less well refined.' Friends, look at these hearts of yours with their

yearnings, with their passionate desires, with their clamant needs.

Will any human love--the purest, the sweetest, the most unselfish, the

most utter in its surrender--satisfy the heart-hunger of the poorest of

us? No! Look at the capacities of grasping thought and truth in our

spirits, which are ever seek, seek, seeking for absolutely certain

foundations on which we may build the whole structure of our beliefs.

You have to go deeper down than the sand of man's thinkings and

teachings before you can reach what will bear without shifting the

foundations of a life's credence and confidence. Look at these

tumultuous wills of ours that fancy they crave to be independent, and

really crave an absolute master whom it is blessedness to obey. You

will find none such beneath the stars. The very elements of our being,

our heart, will, mind, desires, passions, longings, all with one voice

proclaim that the only food for a man is God.

Jesus Christ brings the food that we need. Remember His own adaptation

of this great vision of my text in more than one parable; such as the

supper that was provided, and to which all men were invited, and, with

one consent,' declined the invitation. Remember His own utterance,' I

am the Bread of God which came down from heaven to give life to the

world.' Remembering such words, let me plead with you to listen to the

voice of warning as well as of invitation, which sounds from Cradle and

Cross and Throne. Why will ye spend your money for that which is not

bread'--you know it is not--and your labour for that which satisfieth

not?'--you know it does not. Turn to Him, eat, and your souls shall

live.' In this mountain is prepared a feast. . . for all nations.'

Notice that although it does not appear on the surface, and to English

readers, this world's festival, in which every want is met, and every

appetite satisfied, is a feast on a sacrifice. That touches the deepest

need, about which I shall have a word or two to say presently. But in

the meantime let me just press this upon you, that the Christ who died

on the Cross is to be lived on by us; and that it is His sacrifice that

is to be the nourishment of our spirits.

Would that the earnest men, who are trying to cure the world's evils

and to still the world's wants, and are leaving Jesus Christ and His

religion out of their programme, would take thought and ask themselves

whether there is not something more in the hunger of humanity than

their ovens can ever bake bread for! They are spinning ropes of sand,

if they are trying to lift the world clear of its miseries and of its

hunger, and are not presenting Jesus Christ. I hope I am no bigot; I

know that I sympathise earnestly with all these other schemes for

helping mankind, but this I am bound to say here--all of them put

together will not reach the need of the case, unless they start from,

and are subsidiary to, and develop out of, the presenting of the primal

supply for the universal want, Christ, who alone is able to still the

hunger of men's hearts. Education will do much, but university degrees

and the highest culture will not satisfy a hungry heart. Fitting

environment, as it is fashionable to call it, will do a great deal, but

nothing outside of a man will staunch his evils or still the hunger

that coils and grips in his heart. Competent wealth is a good--there is

no need to say that in Manchester--but millionaires have been known to

be miserable. A heart at rest in the love of husband, wife, parent,

child, is a blessing earnestly to be sought and thankfully to be

treasured by us all; but there is more than that wanted. Put a man in

the most favourable circumstances; give him competent worldly means; do

all that modern philosophers who leave religion out of the question are

trying to do; put in practice your most advanced Socialistic schemes,

and you will still have a man with a hungry heart. He may not know what

he wants; very often he will entirely mistake what that is, but he will

be restless for want of an unknown good. Here is the only thing that

will still his heart: The bread which I give is My flesh, which I will

give for the life of the world.'

Brother and sister, this is not a matter only for social reformers, and

to be dealt with as bearing upon wide movements that influence

multitudes. It comes home to you and me. Some of you do not in the

least degree know what I am talking about when I speak of the hunger of

men's hearts; for you have lost your appetites, as children that eat

too many sweets have no desire for their wholesome meals. You have lost

your appetite by feeding upon garbage, and you say you are quite

content. Yes, at present; but deep down there lies in your hearts a

need which will awake and speak out some day; and you will find that

the husks which the swine did eat are scarcely wholesome nutriment for

a man. And there are some of you that turn away with disgust, and I am

glad of it, from these low, gross, sensuous delights; and are trying to

satisfy yourselves with education, culture, refinement, art, science,

domestic love, wealth, gratified ambition, or the like. There are

tribes of degraded Indians that in times of famine eat clay. There is a

little nourishment in it, and it distends their stomachs, and gives

them the feeling of having had a meal. And that is like what some of

you do. Dear friends, will you listen to this?--Why do ye spend your

money for that which is not bread?' Will you listen to this?--I am the

Bread of Life,' Will you listen to this?--In this mountain will the

Lord make unto all people a feast of fat things.'

II. Where does the unveiling that gives light to the world come from?

My text, as I have already remarked, emphatically repeats in this

mountain' in its next clause. He will destroy in this mountain the face

of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over

all nations.'

Now, of course, the pathetic picture that is implied here, of a dark

pall that lies over the whole world, suggests the idea of mourning, but

still more emphatically, I think, that of obscuration and gloom. The

veil prevents vision and shuts out light, and that is the picture of

humanity as it presents itself before this prophet--a world of men

entangled in the folds of a dark pall that lay over their heads, and

swathed them round about, and prevented them from seeing; shut them up

in darkness and entangled their feet, so that they stumbled in the

gloom. It is a pathetic picture, but it does not go beyond the

realities of the case. For, with all our light on other matters, with

all our freedom of action, with all our frequent forgetfulness of the

fact that we are thus encompassed, it remains true that, apart from the

emancipation and illumination that are effected by Jesus Christ, this

is the picture of mankind as they are. And you are beneath that veil,

and swathed, obstructively as regards light and liberty, by its heavy

folds, unless Christ has freed you.

But we must go a step further than that, I think; and although one does

not wish to force too much meaning on to a poetic metaphor, still I

cannot help supposing that that universal pall, as I called it, which

is cast over all nations, has a very definite and a very tragic

meaning. There is a universal fact of human experience which answers to

the figure, and that is sin. That is the black thing whose ebon folds

hamper us, and darken us, and shut out the visions of God and

blessedness, and all the glorious blue above us. The heavy, dark mist

settles down on the plains, though the sky above is undimmed by it, and

the sun is blazing in the zenith. Not one beam can penetrate through

the wet, chill obstruction, and men stumble about in the fog with lamps

and torches, and all the while a hundred feet up it is brightness and

day. Or, if at some points the obstruction is thinned and the sun does

come through, it is shorn of all its gracious beams and power to warm

and cheer, and looks but like a copper-coloured, livid, angry ball. So

the veil that is spread over all nations, that awful fact of universal

sinfulness, shuts out God--who is our light and our joy--from us, and

no other lights or joys are more than twinkling tapers in the mist. Or

it makes us see Him as men in a fog see the sun--shorn of His

graciousness, threatening, wrathful, unlovely.

Brethren, the fact of universal sinfulness is the outstanding fact of

humanity. Jesus Christ deals with it by His death, which is God's

sacrifice and the world's atonement. That Lamb of God has borne away

the world's sins, and my sins and thy sins are there. By the fact of

His death He has rent the veil from the top to the bottom, and the

light comes in, unhindered by the terrible solemn fact that all of us

have sinned and come short of the glory of God. By His life He

communicates to each of us, if we will trust our poor sinful souls to

Him, a new power of living which is triumphant over temptation, and

gives the victory over sin if we will be true to Him. And so the last

shreds of the veil, like the torn clouds of a spent thunderstorm, are

parted into filmy rags and float away below the horizon, leaving the

untarnished heavens and the flaming sunshine; and we with unveiled

faces' can lift them up to be irradiated by the light. In this mountain

will the Lord destroy the covering that is spread over all nations.'

The weak point of all these schemes and methods to which I have already

referred for helping humanity out of the slough, and making men

happier, is that they underestimate the fact of sin. If a man comes to

them and says, I have broken God's law. What am I to do? I have a power

within me that impels me now to evil. How am I to get rid of it?' they

have no adequate answer. There is only one remedy that deals radically

with the fact of human transgression; only one power that will deliver

each of us, if we will, from the penalty, the guilt, the power of sin;

and that is the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, and its result, the

inspiration of the spirit of life that was in Jesus Christ, breathed

into us from the Throne itself. Thus, and thus only, is the veil done

away in Christ.

III. Lastly, where does the life that destroys death come from?

He will swallow up death in victory,' or, as probably the word more

correctly means, He will swallow up death for ever.' None of the other

panaceas for the world's evils that I have been speaking of even

attempt to deal with that Shadow feared of Man' that sits at the end of

all our paths. Jesus Christ has dealt with it. Like the warrior of

Judah who went down into a pit and slew a lion, He has gone down into

the lair of the dreadful thing, and has come up leaving Death dead on

the threshold.

By His death Christ has so altered that grim fact, which awaits us all,

that to those who will trust their souls to Him it ceases to be death,

even though the physical fact remains unaltered. For what is death? Is

it simply the separation of soul from body, the cessation of corporeal

existence? Surely not. We have to add to that all the spiritual

tremors, all the dreads of passing into the unknown, and leaving this

familiar order of things, and all the other reluctances and

half-conscious feelings which make the difference between the death of

a man and the death of a dog. And all these are swept clean away, if we

believe that Jesus died, and died as our Redeemer and our Saviour. So,

unconsciously and instinctively, the New Testament writers will seldom

condescend to call the physical fact by the ugly old name. It has

changed its character; it is a sleep' now; it is an exodus,' a going

out' from the land of Egypt into a land of peace. It is a plucking up

of the tent-pegs, according to another of the words which the writers

employ for death, in preparation for entering, when the tabernacle is

dissolved,' into a house not made with hands,' a statelier edifice,

eternal in the heavens.' To die in Christ is not to die, but becomes a

mere change of condition and of place, to be with Him, which is far

better.' So an Apostle who was coming within measurable distance of his

own martyrdom, even whilst the headsman's block was all but in his

sight, said: He hath abolished death,' the physical fact remaining

still.

By His resurrection Jesus Christ has established immortality as a

certainty for men. I can understand a man, who has persuaded himself

that when he dies he is done with, dressing his limbs to die without

dread if without hope. But that is a poor victory over death, which,

even in the act of getting rid of the fear of it, invests it with

supreme and ultimate power over humanity. Surely, surely, to believe

that the grave is a blind alley, with no exit at the other end,--to

believe that, however it may minister to a quiet departure, is no

victory over the grave. But to die believing, on the other hand, that

it is only a short tunnel through which we pass, and come out into

fairer lands on the other side of the mountains, is to conquer that

last foe even while it seems to conquer us.

Jesus Christ, who died that we might never die, lives that we may

always live. For His immortal life will give to each of us, if we join

ourselves to Him by simple faith and lowly obedience, an immortal life

that shall persist through, and be increased by, the article of bodily

death. And when we pass into the higher realm of fulness of joy, then--

as Paul quotes the words of my text--shall be brought to pass the

saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.'

Dear brethren, gather all these thoughts together. Do they not plead

with you to cast yourselves on Jesus Christ, and to turn to Him alone?

He will give you the food of your souls; if you will not sit at His

table you will starve. He will strip you of the covering that is cast

over you, as over us all; if you will not let Him unwind its folds from

your limbs, then like the clothes of a drowning man, they will sink

you. He will give you immortal life, which laughs at death, and you

will be able to take up the great song, O Death, where is thy sting; O

grave, where is thy victory?. . . Thanks be to God which giveth us the

victory.' In this mountain' and in this mountain only, are the food,

the illumination, the life of the world. I beseech you, do not turn

away from them, lest you stumble on the dark mountains, where are

starvation and gloom and death, but rather join that happy company of

pilgrims who sing as they march, Come! let us go up to the mountain of

the Lord. He will teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths.'

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THE FEAST ON THE SACRIFICE

And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a

feast.'--ISAIAH xxv. 6.

There is here a reference to Sinai, where a feast followed the vision

of God. It was the sign of covenant, harmony, and relationship, and was

furnished by a sacrifice.

I. The General Ideas contained in this Image of a Feast.

We meet it all through Scripture; it culminates in Christ's parables

and in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.'

In the image are suggested:--

Free familiarity of access, fellowship, and communion with Him.

Abundant Supply of all wants and desires.

Festal Joy.

Family Intercommunion.

II. The Feast follows on Sacrifice. We find that usage of a feast

following a sacrifice existing in many races and religions. It seems to

witness to a widespread consciousness of sin as disturbing our

relations with God. These could be set right only by sacrifice, which

therefore must precede all joyful communion with Him.

The New Testament accepts that truth and clears it from the admixture

of heathenism.

God provides the Sacrifice.

It is not brought by man. There is no need for our efforts--no

atonement to be found by us. The sacrifice is not meant to turn aside

God's wrath.

Communion is possible through Christ.

In Him God is revealed.

Objective hindrances are taken away.

Subjective ones are removed.

Dark fears--indifference--dislike of fellowship--Sin--these make

communion with God impossible.

At Sinai the elders saw God, and did eat and drink' Here the end of the

preceding chapter shows the elders' gazing on the glory of Jehovah's

reign in Zion.

III. The Feast consists of a Sacrifice.

Christ is the food of our souls, He and His work are meant to nourish

our whole being. He is the object for all our nature.

The Sacrifice must be incorporated with us. It is not enough that it be

offered, it must also be partaken of.

Now the Sacrifice is eaten by faith, and by occupation with it of each

part of our being, according to its own proper action. Through love,

obedience, hope, desire, we may all feed on Jesus.

The Lord's Supper presents the same thoughts, under similar symbols, as

Isaiah expressed in his prophecy.

Symbolically we feast on the sacrifice when we eat the Bread which is

the Body broken for us. But the true eating of the true sacrifice is by

faith. Crede et manducasti--Believe, and thou hast eaten.

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THE VEIL OVER ALL NATIONS

He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all

people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.'--ISAIAH xxv. 7.

The previous chapter closes with a prediction of the reign of Jehovah

in Mount Zion before His elders' in Glory. The allusion apparently is

to the elders being summoned up to the Mount and seeing the Glory, as

the body of heaven in its clearness.' The veil in this verse is

probably a similar allusion to that which covered Moses' face. It will

then be an emblem of that which obscures for all nations the face of

God.' And what is that but sin?

I. Sin veils God from men's sight.

It is not the necessary inadequacy of the finite mind to conceive of

the Infinite that most tragically hides God from us. That inadequacy is

compatible with true and sufficient knowledge of Him. Nor is it the

veils of flesh and sense,' as we often hear it said, that hide Him. But

it is our sinful moral nature that darkens His face and dulls our eyes.

Knowledge' of God, being knowledge of a Person, is not merely an

intellectual process. It is much more truly acquaintance than

comprehension; and as such, requires, as all acquaintance does, some

foundation of sympathy and appreciation.

Every sin darkens the witness to God in ourselves, In a pure nature,

conscience would perfectly reveal God; but we all know too sadly and

intimately how it is gradually silenced, and fails to discriminate

between what pleases and what displeases God. In a pure nature, the

obedient Will would perfectly reveal God and the man's dependence on

Him. We all know how sin weakens that.

Every sin diminishes our power of seeing Him in His external

Revelation. Every sin ruffles the surface of the soul, which is a

mirror reflecting the light that streams from Creation, from

Providence, from History. A mass of black rock flung into a still lake

shatters the images of the girdling woods and the overarching sky.

Every sin bribes us to forget God. It becomes our interest, as we

fancy, to shut Him out of our thoughts. Adam's impulse is to carry his

guilty secret with him into hiding among the trees of the garden. We

cannot shake off His presence, but we can--and when we have sinned, we

have but too good reason to exercise the power--we can dismiss the

thought of Him. They did not like to retain God in their knowledge.'

Individual sins may seem of small moment, but an opaque veil can be

woven out of very fine thread.

II. To veil God from our sight is fatal.

We imagine that to forget Him leaves us undisturbed in following aims

disapproved by Him, and we spend effort to secure that false peace by

fierce absorption in other pursuits, and impatient shaking off of all

that might wake our sleeping consciousness of Him.

But what unconscious self-murder that is, which we take such pains to

achieve! To know God is life eternal; to lose Him from our sight is to

condemn all that is best in our nature, all that is most conducive to

blessedness, tranquillity, and strenuousness in our lives, to languish

and die. Every creature separated from God is cut off from the fountain

of life, and loses the life it drew from the fountain, of whatever kind

that life is. And that in man which is most of kin with God languishes

most when so cut off. And when we have blocked Him out from our field

of vision, all that remains for us to look at suffers degradation, and

becomes phantasmal, poor, unworthy to detain, and impotent to satisfy,

our hungry vision.

III. The Veil is done away in Christ.

He shows us God, instead of our own false conceptions of Him, which are

but distorted refractions of His true likeness. Only within the limits

of Christ's revelation is there knowledge of God, as distinguished from

guesses, doubtful inferences, partial glimpses. Elsewhere, the greatest

certitude as to Him is a peradventure'; Jesus alone says Verily,

verily.'

Jesus makes us able to see God.

Jesus makes us delight in seeing Him.

All dread of the steady whole of the Judge's face' is changed to the

loving heart's joy in seeing its Beloved.

IV. The Veil is wholly removed hereafter.

The prophecy from which the text is taken is obviously not yet

fulfilled. It waits for the perfect condition of redeemed manhood in

another life. But even then, the chief reason why the Christian is

warranted in cherishing an unpresumptuous hope that he will know even

as he is known is not that then he will have dropped the veil of flesh

and sense, but that he will have dropped the thicker, more stifling

covering of sin, and, being perfectly like God, will be able perfectly

to gaze on Him, and, perfectly gazing on Him, will grow ever more

perfectly like Him.

The choice for each of us is whether the veil will thicken till it

darkens the Face altogether, and that is death; or whether it will thin

away till the last filmy remnant is gone, and we shall be like Him, for

we shall see Him as He is.'

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THE SONG OF TWO CITIES

In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a

strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. 2. Open

ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may

enter in. 3. Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed

on Thee; because he trusteth in Thee. A. Trust ye in the Lord for ever:

for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength: 5. For He bringeth

down them that dwell on high; the lofty city, He layeth it low; He

layeth it low, even to the ground He bringeth it even to the dust. 6.

The foot shall tread it down, even the feet of the poor, and the steps

of the needy. 7. The way of the just is uprightness: Thou, most

upright, dost weigh the path of the Just. 8. Yea, in the way of Thy

judgments, O Lord, have we waited for Thee; the desire of our soul is

to Thy name, and to the remembrance of Thee. 9. With my soul have I

desired Thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek

Thee early: for when Thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of

the world will learn righteousness. 10. Let favour be shewed to the

wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness

will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the

Lord.'--ISAIAH xxvi. 1-10.

This song' is to be interpreted as a song, not with the cold-blooded

accuracy proper to a scientific treatise. The logic of emotion is as

sound as that of cool intellect, but it has its own laws and links of

connection. First, the song sets in sharp contrast the two cities,

describing, in verses 1-4, the city of God, its strength defences,

conditions of citizenship, and the peace which reigns within its walls;

and in verses 5 and 6 the fall and utter ruin of the robber city, its

antagonist Jerusalem, on its rocky peninsula, supplies the form of

Isaiah's thought; but it is only a symbol of the true city of God, the

stable, invisible, but most real, polity and order of things to which

men, even while wandering lonely and pilgrims, do come, if they will.

It is possible even here and now to have our citizenship in the

heavens, and to feel that we belong to a great community beyond the sea

of time, though our feet have never trodden its golden pavements, nor

our eyes seen its happy glories.

In one aspect, it is ideal, but in truth it is more real than the

intrusive and false things of this fleeting present, which call

themselves realities. The things which are' are the things above. The

things here are but shows and shadows.

The city's walls are salvation. There is no need to name the architect

of these fortifications. One hand only can pile their strength. God

appoints salvation in lieu of all visible defences. Whom He purposes to

save are saved. Whom He wills to keep safe are kept safe. They who can

shelter behind that strong defence need no other. Weak, sense-governed

hearts may crave something more palpable, but they do not really need

it. A parapet on an Alpine road gives no real security, but only

satisfies imagination. The sky needs no pillars to hold it up.

Then an unknown voice breaks in upon the song, calling on unnamed

attendants to fling wide the gates. The city is conceived of as empty;

its destined inhabitants must have certain qualifications. They must be

righteous, and must keep faithfulness' being true to the God who is

faithful and true' in all His relations. None but the righteous can

dwell in conscious citizenship with the Unseen while here, and none but

the righteous can enter through the gates into the city. That

requirement is founded in the very nature of the case, and is as

emphatically proclaimed by the gospel as by the prophet. But the gospel

tells more articulately than he was enlightened to do, how

righteousness is to be won. The last vision of the Apocalypse, which is

so like this song in its central idea, tells us of the fall of Babylon,

of the descent to earth of the New Jerusalem, and leaves as its last

message the great saying, Blessed are they that wash their robes that

they may . . . enter in through the gate into the city.'

Our song gives some hint of similar thoughts by passing from the

description of the qualifications for entrance to the celebration of

the security which comes from trust. The safety which is realised

within the walls of the strong city is akin to the perfect peace' in

which he who trusts is kept; and the juxtaposition of the two

representations is equivalent to the teaching that trust, which is

precisely the same as the New Testament faith, is the condition of

entrance. We know that faith makes righteous, because it opens the

heart to receive God's gift of righteousness; but that effect of faith

is implied rather than stated here, where security and peace are the

main ideas. As some fugitives from the storm of war sit in security

behind the battlements of a fortress, and scarcely hear the din of

conflict in the open field below, the heart, which has taken refuge by

trust in God, is kept in peace so deep that it passes description, and

the singer is fain to give a notion of its completeness by calling it

peace, peace.' The mind which trusts is steadied thereby, as light

things lashed to a firm stay are kept steadfast, however the ship toss.

The only way to get and keep fixedness of temper and spirit amid change

and earthquake is to hold on to God, and then we may be stable with

stability derived from the foundations of His throne to which we cling.

Therefore the song breaks into triumphant fervour of summons to all who

hear it, to trust in Jab Jehovah for ever,' Such settled, perpetual

trust is the only attitude corresponding to His mighty name, and to the

realities found in His character. He is the Rock of Ages' the grand

figure which Moses learned beneath the cliffs of Sinai and wove into

his last song, and which tells us of the unchanging strength that makes

a sure hiding-place for all generations, and the ample space which will

hold all the souls of men, and be for a shadow from the heat, a covert

from the tempest, a shelter from the foe, and a home for the homeless,

with many a springing fountain in its clefts.

The great act of judgment which the song celebrates is now (vs. 5, 6)

brought into contrast with the blessed picture of the city, and by the

introductory for' is stated as the reason for eternal trust. The

language, as it were, leaps and dances in jubilation, heaping together

brief emotional and synonymous clauses. So low is the once proud city

brought, that the feet of the poor tread it down. These poor' and

needy' are the true Israel, the suffering saints, who had known how

cruel the sway of the fallen robber city was; and now they march across

its site; and its broken columns and ruined palaces strew the ground

below their feet. The righteous nation' of the one picture are the poor

and needy' of the other. No doubt the prophecy has had partial

accomplishments more than once or twice, when the oppressed church has

triumphed, and some hoary iniquity been levelled at a blow, or toppled

over by slow decay. But the complete accomplishment is yet future, and

not to be realised till that last act, when all antagonism shall be

ended, and the net result of the weary history of the world be found to

be just these two pictures of Isaiah's--the strong city of God with its

happy inhabitants, and the everlasting desolations of the fallen city

of confusion.

The triumphant hurry of the song pauses for a moment to gaze upon the

crash, and in verse 7 gathers its lessons into a kind of proverbial

saying, which is perhaps best translated The path of the just is smooth

(or "plain"); Thou levellest smooth the path of the just.' To render

upright' instead of smooth' seems to make the statement almost an

identical proposition, and is tame. What is meant is, that, in the

light of the end, the path which often seemed rough is vindicated. The

judgment has showed that the righteous man's course had no unnecessary

difficulties. The goal explains the road. The good man's path is

smooth, not because of its own nature, but because God makes it so. We

are to look for the clearing of our road, not to ourselves, nor to

circumstances, but to Him; and even when it is engineered through rocks

and roughnesses, to believe that He will make the rough places plain,

or give us shoes of iron and brass to encounter them. Trust that when

the journey is over the road will be explained, and that this

reflection, which breaks the current of the swift song of the prophet,

will be the abiding, happy conviction of heaven.

Lastly, the song looks back and tells how the poor and needy, in whose

name the prophet speaks, had filled the dreary past, while the tyranny

of the fallen city lasted, with yearning for the judgment which has now

come at last. Verses 8 and 9 breathe the very spirit of patient longing

and meek hope. There is a certain tone of triumph in that Yea,' as if

the singer would point to the great judgment now accomplished, as

vindicating the long, weary hours of hope deferred. That for which the

poor and needy' wait is the coming in the path of Thy judgments.' The

attitude of expectance is as much the duty and support of Christians as

of Israel. We have a greater future clearer before us than they had.

The world needs God's coming in judgment more than ever; and it says

little for either the love to God or the benevolence towards man of

average Christians, that they should know so little of that yearning of

soul which breathes through so much of the Old Testament. For the glory

of God and the good of men, we should have the desire of our souls

turned to His manifestation of Himself in His righteous judgments. It

was no personal end which bred the prophet's yearning. True, the night'

round him was dreary enough, and sorrow lay black on his people and

himself; but it was God's name' and memorial' that was uppermost in his

desires. That is to say, the chief object of the devout soul's longings

should be the glory of God's revealed character. And the deepest reason

for wishing that He would flash forth from His hiding-place in

judgments, is because such an apocalypse is the only way by which

wilfully blind eyes can be made to see, and wilfully unrighteous hearts

can be made to practise righteousness.

Isaiah believed in the wholesome effect of terror. His confidence in

the power of judgments to teach the obstinate corresponds to the Old

Testament point of view, and contains a truth for all points of view;

but it is not the whole truth. We know only too well that sorrows and

judgments do not work infallibly, and that men being often reproved,

harden their necks.' We know, too, more clearly than any prophet of old

could know, that the last arrow in God's quiver is not some unheard-of

awfulness of judgment, but an unspeakable gift of love, and that if

that favour shown to the wicked' in the life and death of God's Son

does not lead him to learn righteousness,' nothing else will.

But while this is true, the prophet's aspirations are founded on the

facts of human nature too, and judgments do sometimes startle those

whom kindness had failed to touch. It is an awful thought that human

nature may so steel itself against the whole armoury of divine weapons

as that favour and severity are equally blunted, and the heart remains

unpierced by either. It is an awful thought that there may be induced

such truculent obstinacy of love of evil that, even when in a land of

uprightness,' a man shall choose evil, and forcibly shut his eyes, that

he may not see the majesty of the Lord, which he does not wish to see

because it condemns his choice, and threatens to burn up him and his

work together. A blasted tree when all the woods are green, a fleece

dry when all around is rejoicing in the dew, a window dark when the

whole city is illuminated, one black sheep amid the white flock, or

anything else anomalous and alone in its evil, is less tragic than the

sight, so common, of a man so sold to sin that the presence of good

only makes him angry and restless. It is possible to dwell amidst the

full light of Christian truth, and in a society moulded by its

precepts, and to be unblessed, unsoftened thereby. If not softened,

then hardened; and the wicked who in the land of uprightness deals

wrongfully is all the worse for the light which he hated because it

showed him the sinfulness of the sin which he obstinately loved and

would keep.

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OUR STRONG CITY

In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a

strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye

the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter

in.'--ISAIAH xxvi. 1-2.

What day is that day'? The answer carries us back a couple of chapters,

to the great picture drawn by the prophet of a world-wide judgment,

which is followed by a burst of song from the ransomed people of

Jehovah, like Miriam's chant by the shores of the Red Sea. The city of

confusion,' the centre of the power hostile to God and man, falls; and

its fall is welcomed by a chorus of praises. The words of my text are

the beginning of one of these songs. Whether or not there were any

historical event which floated before the prophet's mind is wholly

uncertain. If there were a smaller judgment upon some city of the

enemy, it passes in his view into a world-wide judgment; and my text is

purely ideal, imaginative, and apocalyptic. Its nearest ally is the

similar vision of the Book of the Revelation, where, when Babylon sank

with a splash like a millstone in the stream, the ransomed people

raised their praises.

So, then, whatever may have been the immediate horizon of the prophet,

and though, there may have stood on it some historical event, the city

which he sees falling is other than any material Babylon, and the

strong city in which he rejoices is other than the material Jerusalem,

though it may have suggested the metaphor of my text. The song fits our

lips quite as closely as it did the lips from which it first sprang,

thrilling with triumph: We have a strong city; salvation will God

appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous

nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.'

There are three things, then, here: the city, its defences, its

citizens.

I. The City.

Now, no doubt the prophet was thinking of the literal Jerusalem; but

the city is ideal, as is shown by the bulwarks which defend, and by the

qualifications which permit entrance. And so we must pass beyond the

literalities of Palestine, and, as I think, must not apply the symbol

to any visible institution or organisation if we are to come to the

depth and greatness of the meaning of these words. No church which is

organised amongst men can be the New Testament representation of this

strong city. And if the explanation is to be looked for in that

direction at all, it can only be the invisible aggregate of ransomed

souls which is regarded as being the Zion of the prophecy.

But perhaps even that is too definite and hard. And we are rather to

think of the unseen but existent order of things or polity to which men

here on earth may belong, and which will one day, after shocks and

convulsions that shatter all which is merely institutional and human,

be manifested still more gloriously.

The central thought that was moving in the prophet's mind is that of

the indestructible vitality of the true Israel, and the order which it

represented, of which Jerusalem on its rock was but to him a symbol.

And thus for us the lesson is that, apart altogether from the existing

and visible order of things in which we dwell, there is a polity to

which we may belong, for ye are come unto Mount Zion, the city of the

living God,' and that that order is indestructible. Convulsions come,

every Babylon falls, all human institutions change and pass. The

kingdoms old' are cast into another mould.' But persistent through them

all, and at the last, high above them all, will stand the stable polity

of Heaven, the city which hath the foundations.'

There is a lesson for us, brethren, in times of fluctuation, of change

of opinion, of shaking of institutions, and of new social, economical,

and political questions, threatening day by day to reorganise society.

We have a strong city'; and whatever may come--and much destructive

will come, and much that is venerable and antique, rooted in men's

prejudices, and having survived through and oppressed the centuries,

will have to go; but God's polity, His form of human society of which

the perfect ideal and antitype, so to speak, lies concealed in the

heavens, is everlasting. Therefore, whatsoever changes, whatsoever

ancient and venerable things come to be regarded as of no account,

howsoever the nations, like clay in the hands of the potter, may have

to assume new forms, as certainly they will, yet the foundation of God

standeth sure. And for Christian men in revolutionary epochs, whether

these revolutions affect the forms in which truth is grasped, or

whether they affect the moulds into which society is run, the only

worthy temper is the calm, triumphant expectation that through all the

dust, contradiction, and distraction, the fair city of God will be

brought nearer and made more manifest to man. Isaiah, or whoever was

the writer of these great words of my text, stayed his own and his

people's hearts in a time of confusion and distress, by the thought

that it was only Babylon that could fall, and that Jerusalem was the

possessor of a charmed, immortal life.

This strong city, the order of human society which God has appointed,

and which exists, though it be hidden in the heavens, will be

manifested one day when, like the fair vision of the goddess rising

from amidst the ocean's foam, and shedding peace and beauty over the

charmed waves, there will emerge from all the wild confusion and

tossing billows of the sea of the peoples the fair form of the Bride,

the Lamb's wife.' There shall be an apocalypse of the city, and whether

the old words which catch up the spirit of my text, and speak of that

Holy City as descending from heaven' upon earth, at the close of the

history of the world, are to be taken, as perhaps they are, as

expressive of the truth that a renewed earth is to be the dwelling of

the ransomed or no, this at least is clear, that the city shall be

revealed, and when Babylon is swept away, Zion shall stand.

To this city--existent, immortal, and waiting to be revealed--you and I

may belong to-day. We have a strong city.' You may lay hold of life

either by the side of it which is transient and trivial and

contemptible, or by the side of it which goes down through all the

mutable and is rooted in eternity. As in some seaweed, far out in the

depths of the ocean, the tiny frond that floats upon the billow goes

down and down and down, by filaments that bind it to the basal rock, so

the most insignificant act of our fleeting days has a hold upon

eternity, and life in all its moments may be knit to the permanent. We

may unite our lives with the surface of time or with the centre of

eternity. Though we dwell in tabernacles, we may still be come to Mount

Zion,' and all life be awful, noble, solemn, religions, because it is

all connected with the unseen city across the seas. It is for us to

determine to which of these orders--the perishable, noisy and intrusive

and persistent in its appeals, or the calm, silent, most real, eternal

order beyond the stars--our petty lives shall attach themselves.

II. Now note, secondly, the defences.

Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.' This evangelical

prophet,' as he has been called, is distinguished, not only by the

clearness of his anticipations of Jesus Christ and His work, but by the

fulness and depth which he attaches to that word salvation.' He all but

anticipates the New Testament completeness and fulness of meaning, and

lifts it from all merely material associations of earthly or transitory

deliverance, into the sphere in which we are accustomed to regard it as

especially moving. By salvation' he means and we mean, not only

negative but positive blessings. Negatively it includes the removal of

every conceivable or endurable evil, all the ills that flesh is heir

to,' whether they be evils of sin or evils of sorrow; and, positively,

the investiture with every possible good that humanity is capable of,

whether it be good of goodness, or good of happiness. This is what the

prophet tells us is the wall and bulwark of his ideal-real city.

Mark the eloquent omission of the name of the builder of the wall. God'

is a supplement. Salvation will He appoint for walls and bulwarks.' No

need to say who it is that flings such a fortification around the city.

There is only one hand that can trace the lines of such walls; only one

hand that can pile their stones; only one that can lay them, as the

walls of Jericho were laid, in the blood of His first-born Son.

Salvation will He appoint for walls and bulwarks.' That is to say in a

highly imaginative and picturesque form, that the defense of the City

is God Himself; and it is substantially a parallel with other words

which speak about Him as being a wall of fire round about it and the

glory in the midst of it.' The fact of salvation is the wall and the

bulwark. And the consciousness of the fact and the sense of possessing

it, is for our poor hearts, one of our best defenses against both the

evil of sin and the evil of sorrow. For nothing so robs temptation of

its power, so lightens the pressure of calamities, and draws the poison

from the fangs of sin and sorrow, as the assurance that the loving

purpose of God to save grasps and keeps us. They who shelter behind

that wall, feel that between them and sin, and them and sorrow, there

rises the inexpugnable defense of an Almighty purpose and power to

save, lie safe whatever betides. There is no need of other defenses.

Zion

Needs no bulwarks,

No towers along the steep.'

God Himself is the shield and none other is required.

So, brethren, let us walk by the faith that is always confident, though

it depends on an unseen hand. It is a grand thing to be able to stand,

as it were, in the open, a mark for all the slings and arrows of

outrageous fortune' and yet to feel that around us there are walls most

real, though invisible, which permit no harm to come to us. Our feeble

sense-bound souls much prefer a visible wall. We, like a handrail on

the stair. Though it does not at all guard the descent, it keeps our

heads from getting dizzy. It is hard for us, as some travellers may

have to do, to walk with steady foot and unthrobbing heart along a

narrow ledge of rock with beetling precipice above us and black depths

beneath, and we would like a little bit of a wall of some sort, for

imagination if not for reality, between us and the sheer descent. But

it is blessed to learn that naked we are clothed, solitary we have a

Companion, and unarmed we have our defenceless heads covered with the

shadow of the great wing, which, though sense sees it not, faith knows

is there. A servant of God is never without a friend, and when most

unsheltered

From marge to blue marge

The whole sky grows his targe,

With sun's self for visible boss,'

beneath which he lies safe.

Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks,' and if we realise,

as we ought to do, His purpose to keep us safe, and His power to keep

us safe, and the actual operation of His hand keeping us safe at every

moment, we shall not ask that these defences shall be supplemented by

the poor feeble earthworks that sense can throw up.

III. Lastly, note the citizens.

Our text is part of a song,' and is not to be interpreted in the

cold-blooded fashion that might suit prose. A voice, coming from whom

we know not, breaks in upon the first strain with a command, addressed

to whom we know not--Open ye the gates'--the city thus far being

supposed to be empty--that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth

may enter in.' The central idea there is just this, Thy people shall be

all righteous.' The one qualification for entrance into the city is

absolute purity.

Now, brethren, that is true in regard to our present imperfect

denizenship within the city; and it is true in regard to men's passing

into it in its perfect and final form. As to the former, there is

nothing that you Christian people need more to have dinned into you

than this, that your continuance in the state of a redeemed man, with

all the security and blessing that attach thereto, depends upon your

continuing to be righteous. Every sin, every flaw, every dropping

beneath our own standard in conscience of what we ought to be, has for

its inevitable result that we are robbed for the time being of

consciousness of the walls of the city being about us and of our being

citizens thereof. Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who

shall stand in His holy place?' The New Testament, as emphatically as

the old psalm, answers,' He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.'

Let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is righteous.'

There is no way by which Christian men here on earth can pass into and

keep within the city of the living God, except they possess personal

purity, righteousness of life, and cleanness of heart.

They used to say that Venice glass was so made that any poison poured

into it shivered the vessel. Any drop of sin poured into your cup of

communion with God, shatters the cup and spills the wine. Whosoever

thinks himself a citizen of that great city, if he falls into

transgression, and soils the cleanness of his hands, and ruffles the

calm of his pure heart by self-willed sinfulness, will wake to find

himself not within the battlements, but lying wounded, robbed,

solitary, in the pitiless desert. My brother, it is the righteous

nation' that enters in,' even here on earth.

I do not need to remind you how, admittedly by us all, that is the case

in regard to the final form of the city of our God, into which nothing

shall enter that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination or

maketh a lie.' Heaven can only be entered into hereafter by, as here

and now it can only enter into, those who are pure of heart. All else

there would shrivel as foul things born In the darkness do in the

light, and be consumed in the fire. None but the pure can enter and see

God.

The nation which keepeth the truth'--that does not mean adherence to

any revelation, or true creed, or the like. The word which is employed

means, not truth of thought, but truth of character; and might,

perhaps, be better represented by the more familiar word in such a

connection, faithfulness.' A man who is true to God, keeping up a

faithful relation to Him who is faithful to us, he, and only he, will

pass into, and abide in, the city.

Now, brethren, so far our text carries us, but no further; unless,

perhaps, there may be a hint of something yet deeper in the next clause

of this song. If any one asks, How does the nation become righteous?

the answer may lie in the immediately following exhortation--Trust ye

in the Lord for ever.' But whether that be so or not, if we want an

answer to the questions, How can my stained feet be cleansed so as to

be fit to tread the crystal pavements? how can my foul garments be so

purged as not to be a blot and an eyesore, beside the white, lustrous

robes that sweep along them and gather no defilement there? the only

answer that I know of is to be found by turning to the final visions of

the New Testament, where the spirit of this whole section of our

prophet is reproduced. Again, Babylon falls amidst the songs of saints;

and then, down upon all the dust and confusion of the crash of ruin,

the seer beholds the Lamb's wife, the new Jerusalem, descending from

above. To his happy eyes its glories are unveiled, its golden streets,

its open gates, its walls of precious stones, its flashing river, its

peaceful inhabitants, its light streaming from the throne of God and of

the Lamb. And when that vision passes, his last message to us is,

Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may enter through the

gates into the city.' None but those who wash their garments, and make

them white in the blood of the Lamb, can, living, come unto the city of

the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; or, dying, can pass through the

iron gate that opens to them of its own accord, and find themselves as

day breaks in the street of the Jerusalem which is above.

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THE INHABITANT OF THE ROCK

Thou wilt keep him In perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee:

because he trusteth in Thee. Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the

Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength.'--ISAIAH xxvi. 3-4.

There is an obvious parallel between these verses and the two preceding

ones. The safety which was there set forth as the result of dwelling in

the strong city is here presented as the consequence of trust. The

emblem of the fortified place passes into that of the Rock of Ages.

There is the further resemblance in form, that, just as in the two

preceding verses we had the triumphant declaration of security followed

by a summons to some unknown persons to open the gates,' so here we

have the triumphant declaration of perfect peace, followed by a summons

to all to trust in the Lord for ever.' If we may suppose the invocation

of the preceding verses to be addressed to the watchers at the gate of

the strong city, it is perhaps not too fanciful to suppose that the

invitation in my text is the watcher's answer, pointing the way by

which men may pass into the city.

Whether that be so or no, at all events I take it as by no means

accidental that, immediately upon the statement of the Old Testament

law that righteousness alone admits to the presence of God, there

follows so clear and emphatic an anticipation of the great New

Testament Gospel that faith is the condition of righteousness, and that

immediately after hearing that only the righteous nation which keepeth

the truth' can enter there, we hear the merciful call, Trust ye in the

Lord for ever.' So, then, I think we have in the words before us,

though not formally yet really, very large teaching as to the nature,

the object, the blessed effects, and the universal duty of that trust

in the Lord which makes the very nexus between man and God, according

to the teaching of the New Testament.

I. First, then, I desire to notice in a sentence the insight into the

true nature of trust or faith given by the word employed here.

Now the literal meaning of the expression here rendered to trust' is to

lean upon anything. As we say, trust is reliance. As a weak man might

stay his faltering, tottering steps upon some strong staff, or might

lean upon the outstretched arm of a friend, so we, conscious of our

weakness, aware of our faltering feet, and realising the roughness of

the road, and the smallness of our strength, may lay the whole weight

of ourselves upon the loving strength of Jehovah.

And that is the trust of the Old Testament, the faith of the New--the

simple act of reliance, going out of myself to find the basis of my

being, forsaking myself to touch and rest upon the ground of my

security, passing from my own weakness and laying my trembling hand

into the strong hand of God, like some weak-handed youth on a coach-box

who turns to a stronger beside him and says: Take thou the reins, for I

am feeble to direct or to restrain.' Trust is reliance, and reliance is

always blessedness.

II. Notice, secondly, the steadfast peacefulness of trust.

Now there are difficulties about the rendering and precise significance

of the first verse of my text with which I do not need to trouble you.

The Authorised Version, and still more perhaps the Revised Version,

give substantially, as I take it, the prophet's meaning; and the margin

of the Revised Version is still more literal and accurate than the

text, A steadfast mind Thou keepest in perfect peace, because it

trusteth in Thee.' If this, then, be the true meaning of the words, you

observe that it is the steadfast mind, steadfast because it trusts,

which God keeps In the deep peace that is expressed by the

reduplication of the word.

And if we break up that complex thought into its elements, it just

comes to this, first, that trust makes steadfastness. Most men's lives

are blown about by winds of circumstance, directed by gusts of passion,

shaped by accidents, and are fragmentary and jerky, like some ship at

sea with nobody at the helm, heading here and there, as the force of

the wind or the flow of the current may carry them. If my life is to be

steadied, there must not only be a strong hand at the tiller, but some

outward object which shall be for me the point of aim and the point of

rest. No man can steady his life except by clinging to a holdfast

without himself. Some of us look for that stay in the fluctuations and

fleetingnesses of creatures; and some of us are wiser and saner, and

look for it in the steadfastness of the unchanging God. The men who do

the former are the sport of circumstances, and the slaves of their own

natures, and there is no consistency in noble aim and effort throughout

their lives, corresponding to their circumstances, relations, and

nature. Only they who stay themselves upon God, and get down through

all the superficial shifting strata of drift and gravel, to the

base-rock, are steadfast and solid.

My brother, if you desire to govern yourself, you must let God govern

you. If you desire to be firm, you must draw your firmness from the

unchangingness of that divine nature which you grasp. How can a willow

be stiffened into an iron pillar? Only--if I might use such a violent

metaphor--when it receives into its substance the iron particles that

it draws from the soil in which it is rooted. How can a bit of

thistledown be kept motionless amidst the tempest? Only by being glued

to something that is fixed. What do men do with light things on deck

when the ship is pitching? Lash them to a fixed point. Lash yourselves

to God by simple trust, and then you will partake of His serene

immutability in such fashion as it is possible for the creature to

participate in the attributes of the Creator.

And then, still further, the steadfast mind--steadfast because it

trusts--is rewarded in that it is kept by God. It is no mere mistake in

the order of his thought which leads this prophet to allege that it is

the steadfast mind which God keeps. For, though it is true, on the one

hand, that the real fixity and solidity of a human character come more

surely and fully through trust in God than by any other means, on the

other hand it is true that, in order to receive the full blessed

effects of trust into our characters and lives, we must persistently

and doggedly keep on in the attitude of confidence. If a man holds out

to God a tremulous hand with a shaking cup in it, which Le sometimes

presents and sometimes twitches back, it is not to be expected that God

will pour the treasure of His grace into such a vessel, with the risk

of most of it being spilt upon the ground. There must be a steadfast

waiting if there is to be a continual flow.

It is the mind that cleaves to God which God keeps. I suppose that

there was floating before Paul's thoughts some remembrance of this

great passage of the evangelical prophet when he uttered his words,

which ring so strikingly with so many echoes of them, when he said, The

peace of God which passeth understanding shall keep your hearts and

minds in Christ Jesus.' It is the steadfast mind that is kept in

perfect peace. If we keep ourselves,' by that divine help which is

always waiting to be given,' in the' faith and love of God,' He will

keep us in the hour of temptation, will keep us from falling, and will

garrison our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And then, still further, this faithful, steadfast heart and mind, kept

by God, is a mind filled with deepest peace. There is something very

beautiful in the prophet's abandoning the attempt to find any adjective

of quality which adequately characterises the peace of which he has

been speaking. He falls back upon the expedient which is the confession

of the impotence of human speech worthily to portray its subject when

he simply says, Thou shalt keep in peace, peace . . . because he

trusteth in Thee.' The reduplication expresses the depth, the

completeness of the tranquillity which flows into the heart, Such

continuity, wave after wave, or rather ripple after ripple, is possible

even for us. For, dear brethren, the possession of this deep, unbroken

peace does not depend on the absence of conflict, on distraction,

trouble, or sorrow, but on the presence of God. If we are in touch with

Him, then our troubled days may be calm, and beneath all the surface

tumult there may be a centre of rest. The garrison in some high

hill-fortress looks down upon the open where the enemy's ranks are

crawling like insects across the grass, and scarcely hears the noise of

the tumult, and no arrow can reach the lofty hold. So, up in God we may

dwell at rest whate'er betide. Strange that we should prefer to live

down amongst the unwalled villages, which every spoiler can harry and

burn, when we might climb, and by the might and the magic of trust in

the Lord bring round about ourselves a wall of fire which shall consume

the poison out of the evil, even whilst it permits the sorrow to do its

beneficent work upon us!

III. Note again the worthiness of the divine Name to evoke, and the

power of the divine character to reward, the trust.

We pass to the last words of my text:--In the Lord Jehovah is

everlasting strength.'

Now I suppose we all know that the words feebly rendered in the

Authorised Version everlasting strength' are literally the Rock of

Ages'; and that this verse is the source of that hallowed figure which,

by one of the greatest of our English hymns, is made familiar and

immortal to all English-speaking people.

But there is another peculiarity about the words on which I dwell for a

moment, and that is, that here we have, for one of the only two times

in which the expression occurs in Scripture, the great name of Jehovah

reduplicated. In Jab Jehovah is the Rock of Ages.' In the former verse

the prophet had given up in despair the attempt to characterise the

peace which God gave, and fallen back upon the expedient of naming it

twice over. In this verse, with similar eloquence of reticence, he

abandons the attempt to describe or characterise that great Name, and

in adoration, contents himself with twice taking it upon his lips, in

order to impress what he cannot express, the majesty and the

sufficiency of that name.

What, then, is the force of that name? We do not need, I suppose, to do

more than simply remind you that there are two great thoughts

communicated by that self-revelation of God which lies in it. Jehovah,

in its literal grammatical signification, puts emphasis upon the

absolute, underived, and therefore unlimited, unconditioned,

unchangeable, eternal being of God. I AM THAT I AM.' Men and creatures

are what they are made, are what they become, and some time or other

cease to be what they were. But God is what He is, and is because He

is. He is the Source, the Motive, the Law, the Sustenance of His own

Being; and changeless and eternal He is for ever. In that name is the

Rock of Ages.

That mighty name, by its place in the history of Revelation, conveys to

us still further thoughts, for it is the name of the God who entered

into covenant with His ancient people, and remains bound by His

covenant to bless us. That Is to say, He hath not left us in darkness

as to the methods and purpose of His dealings with us, or as to the

attitude of His heart towards us. He has bound Himself by solemn words,

and by deeds as revealing as words. So we can reckon on God. To use a

vulgarism which is stripped of its vulgarity if employed reverently, as

I would do it--we know where to have Him. He has given us the elements

to calculate His orbit; and we are sure that the calculation will come

right. So, because the name flashes upon men the thought of an absolute

Being, eternal, and all-sufficient, and self-modified, and changeless,

and because it reveals to us the very inmost heart of the mystery, and

makes it possible for us to forecast the movements of this great Sun of

our heavens, therefore in the name Jab Jehovah is the Bock of Ages.'

The metaphor needs no expansion. We understand that it conveys the idea

of unchangeable defence. As the cliffs tower above the river that

swirls at their base, and takes centuries to eat the faintest line upon

their shining surface, so the changeless God rises above the stream of

time, of which the brief breakers are human lives, sparkling, bursting,

borne away.' They who fasten themselves to that Rock are safe in its

unchangeable strength, God the Unchangeable is the amulet against any

change, that is not growth, in the lives of those who trust Him. Some

of us may recall some great precipice rising above the foliage, which

stands to-day as it did when we were boys, unwasted in its silent

strength, while generations of leaves have opened and withered at its

base, and we have passed from childhood to age. Thus, unaffected by the

transiency that changes all beneath, God rises, the Bock of Ages in

whom we may trust. The conies are a feeble folk, but they make their

houses in the rocks.' So our weakness may house itself there and be at

rest.

IV. Lastly, note the summons to trust.

We know not whose voice it is that is heard in the last words of my

text, but we know to whose ears it is addressed. It is to all. Trust ye

in the Lord for ever.'

Surely, surely the blessed effects of trust, of which we have been

speaking, have a voice of merciful invitation summoning us to exercise

it. The promise of peace appeals to the deepest, though often neglected

and misunderstood, longings of the human heart. Inly we sigh for that

repose.' O dear brethren, if it is true that into our agitated and

struggling lives there may steal, and in them there may abide, this

priceless blessing of a great tranquillity, surely nothing else should

be needed to woo us to accept the conditions and put forth the trust.

It is strange that we should turn away, as we are all tempted to do,

from that rest in God, and try to find repose in what was only meant

for stimulus, and is altogether incapable of imparting rest. Storms

live in the lower regions of the atmosphere; get up higher and there is

peace. Waves dash and break on the surface region of the ocean; get

down deeper, nearer the heart of things, and again there is peace.

Surely the name of the Bock of Ages is an invitation to us to put our

trust in Him. If a man knew God as He is, he could not choose but trust

Him. It is because we have blackened His face with our own doubts, and

darkened His character with the mists that rise from our own sinful

hearts, that we have made that bright Sun in the heavens, which ought

to fall upon our hearts with healing in its beams, into a lurid ball of

fire that shines threatening through the dim obscurity of our misty

hearts. But if we knew Him we should love Him, and if we would only

listen to His own self-revelation, we should find that He draws us to

Himself by the manifestation of Himself, as the sun binds all the

planets to his mass and his flame by the eradiation of his own mystic

energies.

The summons is a summons to a faith corresponding to that upon which it

is built. Trust ye in the Lora for ever, for in the Lord is the

strength that endures for ever.' Our continual faith is the only fit

response to His unchanging faithfulness. Build rock upon rock.

The summons is a summons addressed to us all. Trust ye'--whoever ye

are--in the Lord for ever.' You and I, dear friends, hear the summons

in a yet more beseeching and tender voice than was audible to the

prophet, for our faith has a nobler object, and may have a mightier

operation, seeing that its object is the Lamb of God that taketh away

the sin of the world'; and its operation, to bring to us peace with God

through our Lord Jesus Christ. When from the Cross there comes to all

our hearts the merciful invitation, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,

and thou shalt be saved,' why should not we each answer,

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,

Let me hide myself in Thee'?

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THE GRASP THAT BRINGS PEACE

Let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me; yea,

let him make peace with Me.'--ISAIAH xxvii. 5.

Lyrical emotion makes the prophet's language obscure by reason of its

swift transitions from one mood of feeling to another. But the main

drift here is discernible. God is guarding Israel, His vineyard, and

before Him its foes are weak as thorns and briers,' whose end is to be

burned. With daring anthropomorphism, the prophet puts into God's mouth

a longing for the enemies to measure their strength against His, a

warrior's eagerness for the fight. But at once this martial tone gives

place to the tender invitation of the text, and the infinite divine

willingness to be reconciled to the enemy speaks wooingly and offers

conditions of peace. All this has universal application to our

relations to God.

I. The Hostility.

That our relations with God are strained,' and that men are enemies of

God,' is often repelled as exaggeration, if not as directly false. And,

no doubt, the Scripture representation has often been so handled as to

become caricature rather than portraiture. Scripture does not deny the

lingering presence in men of goodness, partial and defective, nor does

it assert that conscious antagonism to God is active in godless men.

But it does assert that God is not in all their thoughts,' and that

their wills are not subject to the law of God.' And in such a case as

man's relations to God, indifference and forgetfulness cannot but rest

upon divergence of will and contrast of character. Why do men not like

to retain God in their knowledge, but because they feel that the

thought of Him would spoil the feast, like the skeleton in the

banqueting chamber? Beneath the apparent indifference lie opposition of

will, meeting God's Thou shalt' with man's I will not'; opposition of

moral nature, impurity shrinking from perfect purity; opposition of

affection, the warmth of human love being diverted to other objects

than God.

II. The entreating Love that is not turned aside by hostility.

The antagonism is wholly on man's part.

True, man's opposition necessarily turns certain sides of the divine

character to present a hostile front to him. Not only God's physical

attributes, if we may so call them, but the moral attributes which

guide the energies of these, namely, His holiness and His

righteousness, and the acts of His sovereignty which flow from these,

must be in opposition to the man who has set himself in opposition to

God. The face of the Lord is against them that do evil.' If it were

not, He would not be God.

But still, God's love enfolds all men in its close and tender clasp. As

the context says, in close connection with the threat to burn the

briers and thorns, Fury is not in Me.' Man's hostility does not rouse

God's. He wars against the sin because He still loves the sinner. His

love must come with a rod,' but, at the same time, it comes with the

spirit of meekness.' It gives its enemy all that it can; but it cannot

give all that it would.

He stoops to sue for our amity. It is the creditor who exhausts

beseechings on His debtor, so much does He wish to agree with His

adversary quickly.' The tender pleading of the Apostle was but a faint

echo of the marvellous condescension of God, when he, in God's stead,

besought: Be ye reconciled to God.'

III. The grasp which ends alienation.

The word for strength' here means a stronghold or fortified place,

which serves as an asylum or refuge. There may be some mingling of an

allusion to the fugitive's taking hold of the horns of the altar, and

so being safe from the vengeance of his pursuers. If we may take this

double metaphor as implied in the text, it vividly illustrates the

essence of the faith which brings us into peace with God. That faith is

the flight of the soul to God, and, in another aspect, it is the

clinging of the soul to Him. How much more these two metaphors tell of

the real nature of faith than many a theological treatise! They speak

of the urgency of the peril from which it seeks deliverance. A fugitive

with the hot breath of the avenger of blood panting behind him, and

almost feeling the spear-point in his back, would not let the grass

grow under his feet. They speak of the energetic clutch of faith, as

that of the man gripping the horns of the altar. They suggest that

faith is something much more vital than intellectual assent or

credence, namely, an act of the whole man realising his need and

casting himself on God.

And they set in clear light what is the connection between faith and

salvation. It is not the hand that grasps the altar that secures

safety, but the altar itself. It is not the flight to the fortress, but

the massive walls themselves, which keeps those who hunt after the

fugitive at bay. It is not my faith, but the God on whom my faith

fastens, that brings peace to my conscience.

IV. The peace that this grasp brings.

In Christ God has put away all His wrath, and turned Himself from the

fierceness of His anger.' And He was in Christ, reconciling the world

to Himself. It is a one-sided warfare that men wage with Him, and when

we abandon our opposition to Him, the war is ended. We might say that

God, clasped by faith and trusted in and loved, is the asylum from God

opposed and feared. His moral nature must be against evil, but faith

unites us to Jesus, and, by union with Him, we receive the germ of a

nature which has no affinity with evil, and which God wholly delights

in and loves. To those who live by the life, and growingly bear the

image of His Son, the divine Nature turns a face all bright and

favouring, and His moral and physical attributes are all enlisted on

their side. The fortress looks grim to outsiders gazing up at its

strong walls and frowning battlements, but to dwellers within, these

give security, and in its inmost centre is a garden, with flowers and a

springing fountain, whither the noise of fighting never penetrates. We

have but to cease to be against Him, and to grasp the facts of His love

as revealed in the Cross of Christ, the sacrifice who taketh away the

sin of the world, and we are at peace with God. Being at peace with

Him, the discords of our natures warring against themselves are attuned

into harmony, and we are at peace within. And when God and we are at

one, and we are at one with ourselves, then all things will be on our

side, and will work together for good. To such a man the ancient

promise will be fulfilled: Thou shalt be in league with the stones of

the field, and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.'

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THE JUDGMENT OF DRUNKARDS AND MOCKERS

Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious

beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of

them that are overcome with wine! 2. Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and

strong one, which, as a tempest of hail, and a destroying storm, as a

flood of mighty waters overflowing, shall cast down to the earth with

the hand. 3. The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be

trodden under feet: 4. And the glorious beauty, which is on the head of

the fat valley, shall be a fading flower, and as the hasty fruit before

the summer; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet

in his hand he eateth it up. 5. In that day shall the Lord of hosts be

for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of

His people. 6. And for a spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in

judgment, and for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate. 7.

But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out

of the way: the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink,

they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong

drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. 8. For all tables

are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean. 9.

Whom shall He teach knowledge? and whom shall He make to understand

doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the

breasts. 10. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept;

line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: 11.

For with stammering lips, and another tongue, will He speak to this

people. 12. To whom He said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause

the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear.

13. But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept,

precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little,

and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be

broken, and snared, and taken.'--ISAIAH xxviii. 1-13.

This prophecy probably falls in the first years of Hezekiah, when

Samaria still stood, and the storm of war was gathering black in the

north. The portion included in the text predicts the fall of Samaria

(verses 1-6) and then turns to Judah, which is guilty of the same sins

as the northern capital, and adds to them mockery of the prophet's

message. Isaiah speaks with fiery indignation and sharp sarcasm. His

words are aflame with loathing of the moral corruption of both

kingdoms, and he fastens on the one common vice of drunkenness--not as

if it were the only sin, but because it shows in the grossest form the

rottenness underlying the apparent beauty.

I. The woe on Samaria (verses 1-6). Travellers are unanimous in their

raptures over the fertility and beauty of the valley in which Samaria

stood, perched on its sunny, fruitful hill, amid its vineyards. The

situation of the city naturally suggests the figure which regards it as

a sparkling coronet or flowery wreath, twined round the brows of the

hill; and that poetical metaphor is the more natural, since revellers

were wont to twist garlands in their hair, when they reclined at their

orgies. The city is the crown of pride'--that is, the object of

boasting and foolish confidence--and is also the fading flower of his

sparkling ornament'; that is, the flower which is the ornament of

Ephraim, but is destined to fade.

The picture of the city passes into that of the drunken debauch, where

the chief men of Samaria sprawl, smitten down' by wine, and with the

innocent flowers on their hot temples drooping in the fumes of the

feast. But bright and sunny as the valley is, glittering in the light

as the city sits on her hill, careless and confident as the revellers

are, a black cloud lies on the horizon, and one of the terrible sudden

storms which such lands know comes driving up the valley. The Lord hath

a mighty and strong one'--the conqueror from the north, who is God's

instrument, though he knows it not.

The swift, sudden, irresistible onslaught of the Assyrian is described,

in harmony with the figure of the flowery coronal, as a tempest which

beats down the flowers and flings the sodden crown to the ground. The

word rendered tempest' is graphic, meaning literally a downpour.' First

comes hail, which batters the flowers to shreds; then the effect of the

storm is described as destruction,' and then the hurrying words turn

back to paint the downpour of rain, mighty' from its force in falling,

and overflowing' from its abundance, which soon sets all the fields

swimming with flood water. What chance has a poor twist of flowers in

such a storm? Its beauty will be marred, and all the petals beaten off,

and nothing remains but that it should be trampled into mud. The rush

of the prophet's denunciation is swift and irresistible as the assault

it describes, and it flashes from one metaphor to another without

pause. The fertility of the valley of Samaria shapes the figures. As

the picture of the flowery chaplet, so that which follows of the early

fig, is full of local colour. A fig in June is a delicacy, which is

sure to be plucked and eaten as soon as seen. Such a dainty, desirable

morsel will Samaria be, as sweet and as little satisfying to the

all-devouring hunger of the Assyrian.

But storms sweep the air clear, and everything will not go down before

this one. The flower fadeth, but there is a chaplet of beauty which men

may wreathe round their heads, which shall bloom for ever. All sensuous

enjoyment has its limits in time, as well as in nobleness and

exquisiteness; but when it is all done with, the beauty and festal

ornament which truly crowns humanity shall smell sweet and blossom. The

prophecy had regard simply to the issue of the historical disaster to

which it pointed, and it meant that, after the storm of Assyrian

conquest, there would still be, for the servants of God, the residue of

the people, both in Israel and in Judah, a fuller possession of the

blessings which descend on the men who make God their portion. But the

principle involved is for ever true. The sweeping away of the

perishable does draw true hearts nearer to God.

So the two halves of this prophecy give us eternal truths as to the

certain destruction awaiting the joys of sense, and the permanence of

the beauty and strength which belong to those who take God for their

portion.

Drunkenness seems to have been a national sin in Israel; for Micah

rebukes it as vehemently as Isaiah, and it is a clear bit of Christian

duty in England to-day to set the trumpet to thy mouth and show the

people' this sin. But the lessons of the prophecy are wider than the

specific form of evil denounced. All setting of affection and seeking

of satisfaction in that which, in all the pride of its beauty, is a

fading flower,' is madness and sin. Into every life thus turned to the

perishable will come the crash of the destroying storm, the mutterings

of which might reach the ears of the feasters, if they were not drunk

with the fumes of their deceiving delights. Only one kind of life has

its roots in that which abides, and is safe from tempest and change.

Amaranthine flowers bloom only in heaven, and must be brought thence,

if they are to garland earthly foreheads. If we take God for ours, then

whatever tempests may howl, and whatever fragile though fragrant joys

may be swept away, we shall find in Him all that the world fails to

give to its votaries. He is a crown of glory' and a diadem of beauty.'

Our humanity is never so fair as when it is made beautiful by the

possession of Him. All that sense vainly seeks in earth, faith finds in

God. Not only beauty, but a spirit of judgment,' in its narrower sense

and in its widest, is breathed into those to whom God is the master

light of all their seeing'; and, yet more, He is strength to all who

have to fight. Thus the close union of trustful souls with God, the

actual inspiration of these, and the perfecting of their nature from

communion with God, are taught us in the great words, which tell how

beauty, justice, and strength are all given in the gift of Jehovah

Himself to His people.

II. The prophet turns to Judah (vs. 7-13), and charges them with the

same disgusting debauchery. His language is vehement in its loathing,

and describes the filthy orgies of those who should have been the

guides of the people with almost painful realism. Note how the words

reel' and stagger' are repeated, and also the words wine' and strong

drink.' We see the priests' and prophets' unsteady gait, and then they

stumble' or fall. There they lie amid the filth, like hogs in a sty. It

is very coarse language, but fine words are the Devil's veils for

coarse sins; and it is needful sometimes to call spades spades, and not

to be ashamed to tell men plainly how ugly are the vices which they are

not ashamed to commit. No doubt some of the drunken priests and false

prophets in Jerusalem thought Isaiah extremely vulgar and indelicate,

in talking about staggering teachers and tables swimming in vomit.' But

he had to speak out. So deep was the corruption that the officials were

tipsy even when engaged in their official duties, the prophets reeled

while they were seeing visions; the judges could not sit upright even

when pronouncing judgment.

Verses 9 and 10 are generally taken as a sarcastic quotation of the

drunkards' scoffs at the prophet. They might be put in inverted commas.

Their meaning is, Does he take us grave and reverend seigniors, priests

and prophets, to be babies just weaned, that he pesters us with these

monotonous petty preachings, fit only for the nursery, which he calls

his "message"?' In verse 10, the original for precept upon precept,'

etc., is a series of short words, which may be taken as reproducing the

babbling tones of the drunken mockers.'

The loose livers of all generations talk in the same fashion about the

stern morality which rebukes their vice. They call it weak,

commonplace, fit for children, and they pretend that they despise it.

They are much too enlightened for such antiquated teaching. Old women

and children may take it in, but men of the world, who have seen life,

and know what is what, are not to be fooled so. What will this babbler

say?' was asked by the wise men of Athens, who were but repeating the

scoffs of the prophets and priests of Jerusalem, and the same jeers are

bitter in the mouth of many a profligate man to-day. It is the fate of

all strict morality to be accounted childish by the people whom it

inconveniently condemns.

In verse 11 and onwards the prophet speaks. He catches up the mockers'

words, and retorts them. They have scoffed at his message as if it were

stammering speech. They shall hear another kind of stammerers when the

fierce invaders' harsh and unintelligible language commands them. The

reason why these foreign voices would have authority, was the national

disregard of God's voice. Ye would not hear' Him when, by His prophet,

He spoke gracious invitations to rest, and to give the nation rest, in

obedience and trust. Therefore they shall hear the battle-cry of the

conqueror, and have to obey orders spoken in a barbarous tongue.

Of course, the language meant is the Assyrian, which, though cognate

with Hebrew, is so unlike as to be unintelligible to the people. But is

not the threat the statement of a great truth always being fulfilled

towards the disobedient? If we will not listen to that loving Voice

which calls us to rest, we shall be forced to listen to the harsh and

strident tones of conquering enemies who command us to slavish toil. If

we will not be guided by His eye and voice, we shall be governed by

whip and bridle. Our choice is either to hearken to the divine call,

which is loving and gentle, and invites to deep repose springing from

faith, or to have to hear the voice of the taskmasters. The monotony of

despised moral and religious teaching shall give place to a more

terrible monotony, even that of continuous judgments.

The mills of God grind slowly.' Bit by bit, with gradual steps, with

dismal persistence, like the slow drops on the rock, the judgments of

God trickle out on the mocking heart. It takes a long time for a child

to learn a pageful when he gets his lesson a sentence at a time. So

slowly do His chastisements fall on men who have despised the

continuous messages of His love. The word of the Lord, which was

laughed at when it clothed itself in a prophet's speech, will be heard

in more formidable shape, when it is wrapped in the long-drawn-out

miseries of years of bondage. The warning is as needful for us as for

these drunken priests and scornful rulers. The principle embodied is

true in this day as it was then, and we too have to choose between

serving God in gladness, hearkening to the voice of His word, and so

finding rest to our souls, and serving the world, the flesh, and the

devil, and so experiencing the perpetual dropping of the fiery rain of

His judgments.

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A CROWN OF PRIDE OR A CROWN OF GLORY

The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under

feet; 4. And the glorious beauty, which is on the head of the fat

valley, shall be a fading flower, and as the hasty fruit before the

summer; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in

his hand he eateth it up. 5. In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for

a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of his

people.'--ISAIAH xxviii. 3-5.

The reference is probably to Samaria as a chief city of Israel. The

image is suggested by the situation of Samaria, high on a hill-side,

crowning the valley, and by the rich vegetation and bright flowers

which makes it even now one of the few lovely scenes in Palestine; and

by the luxurious riot and sensual excess that were always

characteristic of the northern kingdom.

The destruction of Samaria and of the kingdom, then, is here

prophesied--the garland will fade, the hail will batter all its

drooping flowerets, and it shall be trodden under foot. Look at that

withered wreath that gleamed yesterday on some fair head, to-day flung

into the ashpit or kicked about the street. That is a modern rendering

of the prophet's imagery. But the reference goes further than merely to

the city: the whole state of the nation is expressed by the symbol, as

doomed to quick decay, fading in itself, and further smitten down by

divine judgments.

There is a contrasted picture, that of the residue of the people' to

whom there is an amaranthine crown, a festal diadem glorious and

beautiful, which can never fade, even God Himself. To them who love Him

He is an ornament, and His presence is the consecration of the true

joyful feast. They who are crowned by Him are crowned, not for idle

revelry, but for strenuous toil (sit in judgment') and for brave

purpose (turn the battle to the gate,') and their coronation day is

ever the day when earthly garlands are withered, whether it be the

crises and convulsions of nations and institutions, or times of

personal trial, or in the hour of death or in the day of judgment.'

Expanding then these thoughts, we have--

I. All godless joys are but fading chaplets.

Of course the first application of such words is to purely sensuous

delights.

Men who seek to make life a mere revel and banquet.

Nothing is so short-lived as gratification of appetite. It is not

merely that each act lasts but for a moment, but also that past

gratifications leave no sort of solace to the appetite behind them;

whereas past acquirements or deeds of goodness are a perpetual joy as

well as the foundation of the present. There is something essentially

isolated in each act of sensuous delight. No man can by so willing

recall the taste of eaten food, nor slake his thirst by remembrance of

former draughts, or cool himself by thinking of frosty Caucasus.' But

each such gratification is done when it is done, and there is an end of

its power to gratify.

Further, the power of enjoyment wanes, though the lust for it waxes.

Hence each act has less and less power of satisfying.

One sees blase young men of twenty-five. It was a man of under

thirty-five who wrote, Man delights not me, no, nor woman neither.' It

was a used-up roue that was represented as saying, Vanity of vanities,

all is vanity.' It was of sensuous pleasures' that poor Burns wrote,--

Like the snowfall in the river,

A moment white,--then melts for ever.'

When a people is given over to such excess, late or soon the fate of

Samaria comes upon them. Think of the French Revolution or of the fall

of Rome, and learn that the prophet was announcing a law for all

nations, in his fiery denunciation, and one which holds good to-day as

ever.

But we may generalise more widely. Every godless life is essentially

transitory; of course, all life is so in one view. But suppose two men,

working side by side at the same occupation, passing through the same

circumstances. So far as physical changes go, these men are the same.

Both lose much. Both leave behind much. Both cease to be interested in

much that was dear to them. Both die at last, and leave it all. Is

there any difference? The transitoriness is the same, and the eternal

consequences are eternal alike in both; and yet there is a very solemn

sense in which the one man's life has utterly perished, and the other's

abides. Suppose a man, educated to be a first-rate man of business,

dies. Which of his trained faculties will he have scope for in that new

order of things? Or a student, or a lawyer, or a statesman?

Oh, it is not our natural mortality that makes these thoughts so awful;

but it is the thought that the man who is doing these things is

immortal. The head which wears the fading wreath will live for ever.

What will ye do in the end?'

II. Godly life brings unfading joys.

Communion with God yields abiding joys. The law of change remains the

same. The law of death remains the same. But the motives which direct

and impel the godly man are beyond the reach of change.

The habits which he contracts are for heaven as well as for earth. The

treasures which he amasses will always be his.

His life in its essence and his work are one in all worlds. What a

grand continuity, then, knits into one a godly life whether it is lived

on earth or in heaven!

Communion with God gives beauty and ornament to the whole character. It

brings the true refining and perfecting of the soul. No doubt many

Christian men, as we see them, are but poor specimens of this effect of

godliness; still, it is an effect produced in proportion to the depth

and continuity of their communion. We might dwell on the effect on

Will, Affections, Understanding, produced by dwelling in God. It is

simple fact that the highest conceivable type of beauty is only reached

through communion with God.

Communion with God gives power as well as gladness. The life of abiding

with God is also one of strenuous effort and real warfare. In the

context it is promised that God will be for strength to them that turn

the battle to the gate.

The luxurious life of self-indulgence ends, as all selfish life must

do, in the vanishing of delights. The life of joy in God issues, as all

true joy does, in power for work and in power for conflict.

God doth anoint thee with His odorous oil, to wrestle, not to reign.'

III. There will be a coronation day.

In that day,' the day when the crown of pride shall be trodden under

foot,' the people of God are crowned with the diadem of beauty which is

God Himself. That twofold work of that one day suggests--

The double aspect of trials and sorrows.

The double aspect of death.

The double aspect of final Judgment.

Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the

Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day.'

To be crowned or discrowned in that day' is the alternative set before

each of us. Which of the two do we choose?

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MAN'S CROWN AND GOD'S

In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a

diadem of beauty.'--ISAIAH xxviii. 5.

Thou shall also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord.'--ISAIAH

lxii 3.

Connection of first prophecy--destruction of Samaria. Its situation,

crowning the hill with its walls and towers, its fertile fat valley,'

the flagrant immorality and drunkenness of its inhabitants, and its

final ruin, are all presented in the highly imaginative picture of its

fall as being like the trampling under foot of a garland on a

reveller's head, the roses of which fade and droop amid the fumes of

the banqueting hall, and are then flung out on the highway. The

contrast presented is very striking and beautiful. When all that gross

and tumultuous beauty has faded and died, then God Himself will be a

crown of beauty to His people.

The second text comes into remarkable line with this. The verbal

resemblance is not quite so strong in the original. The words for

diadem and crown are not the same; the word rendered glory in the

second text is rendered beauty in the first, but the two texts are

entirely one in meaning. The same metaphor, then, is used with

reference to what God is to the Church and what the Church is to God.

He is its crown, it is His.

I. The Possession of God is the Coronation of Man.

(a) Crowns were worn by guests at feasts. They who possess God sit at a

table perpetually spread with all which the soul can wish or want.

Contrast the perishable delights of sense and godless life with the

calm and immortal joys of communion with God; a crown that fadeth not

away' beside withered garlands.

(b) Crowns were worn by kings. They who serve God are thereby invested

with rule over selves, over circumstances, over all externals. He alone

gives completeness to self-control.

(c) Crowns were worn by priests. The highest honour and dignity of

man's nature is thereby reached. To have God is like a beam of sunshine

on a garden, which brings out the colours of all the flowers; contrast

with the same garden in the grey monotony of a cloudy twilight.

II. The Coronation of Man in God is the Coronation of God in Man.

That includes the following thoughts.

The true glory of God is in the communication of Himself. What a

wonderful light that throws on divine character! It is equivalent to

God is Love.'

He who is glorified by God glorifies God, as showing the most wonderful

working of His power in making such a man out of such material, by an

alchemy that can convert base metal into fine gold; as showing the most

wonderful condescension of His love in taking to His heart man, into

whose flesh the rotting leprosy of sin has eaten.

Such a man will glorify God by becoming a conscious herald of His

praise. He who has God in his heart will magnify Him by lip and life.

Redeemed men are secretaries of His praise' to men, and to

principalities and powers in heavenly places is made known by the

Church the manifold wisdom of God.'

He who thus glorifies God is held in God's hand.

None shall pluck them out of My Father's hand.'

All this will be perfected in heaven. Redeemed men lead the universal

chorus that thunders forth glory to Him that sitteth on the throne.'

He shall come to be glorified in His saints.'

Glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son also may glorify Thee.'

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THE FOUNDATION OF GOD

Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a

foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure

foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.'--ISAIAH xxviii.

16.

Therefore thus saith the Lord.' Then these great words are God's answer

to something. And that something is the scornful defiance by the rulers

of Israel of the prophet's threatenings. By their deeds, whether by

their words or no, they said that they had made friends of their

enemies, and that so they were sure that, whatsoever came, they were

safe. To this contemptuous and false reliance God answers, not as we

might expect, first of all, by a repetition of the threatenings, but by

a majestic disclosure of the sure refuge which He has provided, set in

contrast to the flimsy and false ones, on which these men built their

truculent confidence; I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone.' And

then, after the exhibition of the great mercy which has been evoked by

the very blasphemy of the rulers, and not till then, does He reiterate

the threatenings of judgment, against which this foundation is laid,

that men may escape; God first declares the refuge, and then warns of

the tempest.

Without entering at all upon the question, which for all believing and

simple souls is settled by the New Testament, of the Messianic

application of the words before us, I take it for granted. There may no

doubt be an allusion here to the great solid blocks which travellers

tell us may still be seen at the base of the encircling walls of the

Temple hill. A stone so gigantic and so firm God has laid for man to

build upon.

I. Note, then, first, the foundation, which is Christ.

There are many aspects of the great thought on which I cannot touch

even for a moment. For instance, let me remind you how, in a very deep

sense, Jesus Christ is the foundation of the whole of the divine

dealings with us; and how, in another aspect, historically, since the

day on which He appeared on earth, He has more and more manifestly and

completely been the foundation of the whole history of the world. But

passing these aspects, let us rather fix upon those which are more

immediately in the prophet's mind.

Jesus Christ is the foundation laid for all men's security against

every tempest or assault. The context has portrayed the coming of a

tremendous storm and inundation, in view of which this foundation is

laid. The building reared on it then is, therefore, to be a refuge and

an asylum. Have not we all of us, like these scornful men in Jerusalem,

built our refuges on vain hopes, on creatural affections, on earthly

possessions, on this, that, and the other false thing, all of which are

to be swept away when the storm comes? And does there not come upon us

all the blast of the ordinary calamities to which flesh is heir, and

have we not all more or less consciousness of our own evil and

sinfulness; and does there not lie before every one of us at the end of

life that solemn last struggle, and beyond that, as we most of us

believe, a judgment for all that we have done in the body? I lay in

Zion for a foundation a stone.' Build upon that, and neither the

tempest of earthly calamities, changes, disappointments, sorrows,

losses, nor the scourge that is wielded because of our sins, nor the

last wild tempest that sweeps a man on the wings of its strong blast

from out of life into the dark region, nor the solemn final retribution

and judgment, shall ever touch us. And when the hail sweeps away the

refuge of lies, and the waters overflow the hiding-place, this

foundation stands sure--

And lo! from sin and grief and shame

I hide me, Jesus, in Thy name.

Brethren, the one foundation on which building, we can build secure,

and safe as well as secure, is that foundation which is laid in the

incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God. The

foundation of all our security is Jesus Christ.

We may look at the same thought under somewhat different aspects. He is

the foundation for all our thinking and opinions, for all our belief

and our knowledge. In Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and

knowledge,' and whatsoever of solid fact men can grasp in their

thinkings in regard to all the most important facts and truths with

which they come into relation, is to be found in the life and death of

Jesus Christ, and in the truths which these reveal. He is the

foundation of all our knowledge of God, and of all our true knowledge

of ourselves, of all our true knowledge of duty, and all our true

knowledge of the relations between the present and the future, between

man and God.

And in His life, in the history of His death and resurrection, is the

only foundation for any real knowledge of the awful mysteries that lie

beyond the grave. He is the Alpha from whom all truth must be deduced,

the Omega to which it all leads up. Certitude is in Him. Apart from Him

we are but groping amid peradventures. If we know anything about God it

is due to Jesus Christ. If we know anything about ourselves it is due

to Him. If we know anything about what men ought to do, it is because

He has done all human duty. And if, into the mist and darkness that

wraps the future, there has ever travelled one clear beam of insight,

it is because He has died and risen again. If we have Him, and ponder

upon the principles that are involved in, and flow from, the facts of

His life and death, then we know; and the truth as it is in Jesus' is

the truth indeed. To possess Him is to hold the key to all mysteries,

and knowledge without Him is but knowledge of the husk, the kernel

being all unreached. That Stone is the foundation on which the whole

stately fabric of man's knowledge of the highest things must ever be

reared.

He is the foundation of all restful love. A Czar of Russia, in the old

days, was mad enough to build a great palace upon the ice-blocks of the

Neva. And when the spring came, and the foundations melted, the house,

full of delights and luxury, sank beneath the river. We build upon

frozen water, and when the thaw comes, what we build sinks and is lost

to sight. Instead of love that twines round the creature and trails,

bleeding and bruised, along the ground when the prop is taken away, let

us turn our hearts to the warm, close, pure, perfect changeless love of

the undying Christ, and we shall build above the fear of change. The

dove's nest in the pine-tree falls in ruin when the axe is laid to the

root. Let us build our nests in the clefts of the rock and no hand will

ever reach them. Christ is the foundation on which we may build an

immortal love.

He is the foundation for all noble and pure living. He is the fixed

pattern to which it may be conformed. Otherwise man's notions of what

is virtuous and good are much at the mercy of conventional variations

of opinion. This class, that community, this generation, that school,

all differ in their notions of what is true nobleness and goodness of

life. And we are left at the mercy of fluctuating standards unless we

take Christ in His recorded life as the one realised ideal of manhood,

the pattern of what we ought to be. We cannot find a fixed and

available model for conduct anywhere so useful, so complete, so capable

of application to all varieties of human life and disposition as we

find in Him, who was not this man or that man, in whom the manly and

the feminine, the gentle and the strong, the public and the private

graces were equally developed. In Christ there is no limitation or

taint. In Christ there is nothing narrow or belonging to a school. This

water has no taste of any of the rocks through which it flowed. You

cannot say of Jesus Christ that He is a Jew or a Gentile, that He is

man or woman, that He is of the ancient age or the modern type, that He

is cut after this pattern or that. All beauty and all grace are in Him,

and every man finds there the example that he needs. So, as the perfect

pattern, He is the foundation for all noble character.

As the one sufficient motive for holy and beauteous living, He is the

foundation. If ye love Me, keep My commandments.' That is a new thing

in the world's morality, and that one motive, and that motive alone,

has power, as the spring sunshine has, to draw beauty from out the

little sheaths of green, and to tempt the radiance of the flowers to

unfold their lustre. They that find the reason and the motive for

goodness and purity in Christ's love to them, and their answering love

to Christ, will build a far fairer fabric of a life than any others,

let them toil at the building as they may. So, dear brethren, on this

foundation God has built His mercy to all generations, and on this

foundation you and I may build our safety, our love, our thinkings, our

obedience, and rest secure.

II. Note next the tried preciousness of the foundation.

The language of the text, a stone of proof,' as it reads in the

original, probably means a stone which has been tested and stood the

trial. And because it is thus a tested stone, it therefore is a

precious stone. There are two kinds of testing--the testing from the

assaults of enemies, and the testing by the building upon it of

friends. And both these methods of proof have been applied, and it has

stood the test.

Think of all the assaults that have been made from this side and the

other against Christ and His gospel, and what has become of them all?

Travellers tell us how they often see some wandering tribes of savage

Arabs trying to move the great stones, for instance, of Baalbec--those

wonders of unfinished architecture. But what can a crowd of such

people, with all their crowbars and levers, do to the great stone

bedded there, where it has been for centuries? They cannot stir it one

hair's-breadth. And so, against Jesus Christ and His gospel there has

stormed for eighteen hundred years an assaulting crowd, varying in its

individuals and in its methods of attack, but the same in its purpose,

and the same in the fruitlessness of its effort. Century after century

they have said, as they are saying to-day, Now the final assault is

going to be delivered; it can never stand this.' And when the smoke has

cleared away there may be a little blackening upon the edge, but there

is not a chip off its bulk, and it stands in its bed where it did; and

of all the grand preparations for a shattering explosion, nothing is

left but a sulphurous smell, and a wreath of smoke, and both are

floating away down into the distance. Generation after generation has

attacked the gospel; generation after generation has been foiled; and I

do not need to be a prophet, or the son of a prophet, to be quite sure

of this, that all who to-day are trying to destroy men's faith in the

Incarnate Son of God, who died for them and rose again, will meet the

same fate. I can see the ancient and discredited systems of unbelief,

that have gone down into oblivion, rising from their seats, as the

prophet in his great vision saw the kings of the earth, to greet the

last comer who had fought against God and failed, with Art thou also

become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?' The stone will stand,

whosoever tries to blow it up with his dynamite, or to pound it with

his hammers.

But there is the other kind of testing. One proves the foundation by

building upon it. If the stone be soft, if it be slender, if it be

imperfectly bedded, it will crumble, it will shift, it will sink. But

this stone has borne all the weight that the world has laid upon it,

and borne it up. Did any man ever come to Jesus Christ with a sorrow

that He could not comfort, with a sin that He could not forgive, with a

soul that He could not save? And we may trust Him to the end. He is a

tried stone.' This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved

him out of all his troubles,' has been the experience of nineteen

centuries.

So, being tried, it is precious,--precious to God who laid it there at

a great and real cost to Himself--having given up His only begotten

Son'; precious, inasmuch as building upon it is the one safety from the

raging tempest and flood that would else engulf and destroy us.

III. Note, next, the process of building.

The metaphor seems to be abandoned in the last words of our text, but

it is only apparently so. He that believeth shall not make haste.' So,

then, we build by believing. The act of building is simple faith in

Jesus Christ. We come to Him, as the Apostle Peter has it in his

quotation of this text--come to Him as unto a living stone, and the

coming and the building are both of them metaphors for the one simple

thing, trust in the Lord. The bond that unites men on earth with Christ

in Heaven, is the exercise of simple faith in Him. By it they come into

contact with Him, and receive from Him the security and the blessing

that He can bestow. Nothing else brings a man into living fellowship

with Him. When we trust in the Lord we, as it were, are bedded into

Him; and resting upon Him with all our weight, then we are safe. That

confidence involves the abandonment of all the refuges of lies.' There

must be utter self-distrust and forsaking and turning away from every

dependence upon anything else, if we are to trust ourselves to Jesus

Christ. But the figure of a foundation which gives security and

stability to the stones laid upon it, does not exhaust all the

blessedness of this building upon Christ. For when we really rest upon

Him, there comes from the foundation up through all the courses a vital

power. Thus Peter puts it: To whom, coming as unto a living stone, ye

also as living stones are built up.' We might illustrate this by the

supposition of some fortress perched upon a rock, and in the heart of

the rock a clear fountain, which is guided by some pipe or other into

the innermost rooms of the citadel. Thus, builded upon Christ, our

defence shall be the munitions of rocks, and our waters shall be sure.'

From Him, the foundation, there will rise into all the stones, built

upon Him, the power of His own endless life, and they, too, become

living stones.

IV. So note, lastly, the quiet confidence of the builders.

He that believeth shall not make haste.' The word is somewhat obscure,

and the LXX., which is followed by the New Testament, readers it, Shall

not be confounded or put to shame.' But the rendering of our text seems

to be accurate enough. He shall not make haste.' Remember the picture

of the context--a suddenly descending storm, a swiftly rising and

turbid flood, the lashing of the rain, the howling of the wind. The men

in the clay-built hovels on the flat have to take to flight to some

higher ground above the reach of the innundation, on some sheltered

rock out of the flashing of the rain and the force of the tempest. He

who is built upon the true foundation knows that his house is above the

water-level, and he does not need to be in a hurry. He can remain

quietly there till the flood subsides, knowing that it will not rise

high enough to drown or even disturb him. When all the other buildings

are gone, his stands. And he that thus dwells on high may look out over

the wild flood, washing and weltering to the horizon, and feel that he

is safe. So shall he not have to make haste, but may wait calm and

quiet, knowing that all is well.

Dear friends, there is only one refuge for any of us--only one from the

little annoyances and from the great ones; from to-day's petty

troubles, and from the day of judgment; from the slight stings, if I

may so say, of little sorrows, cares, burdens, and from the poisoned

dart of the great serpent. There is only one refuge for any of us, to

build upon Jesus Christ, as we can do by simple faith.

And oh! remember, He must either be the foundation on which we build,

or the stone of stumbling against which we stumble, and which one day

will fall upon us and grind us to powder. Do you make your choice; and

when God says, as He says to each of us: Behold! I lay in Zion a

foundation,' do you say, And, Lord, I build upon the foundation which

Thou hast laid.'

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GOD'S STRANGE WORK

That He may do His work, His strange work; and bring to pass His act,

His strange act.'--ISAIAH xxviii. 21.

How the great events of one generation fall dead to another! There is

something very pathetic in the oblivion that swallows up

world-resounding deeds. Here the prophet selects two instances which to

him are solemn and singular examples of divine judgment, and we have

difficulty in finding out to what he refers. To him they seemed the

most luminous illustrations he could find of the principle which he is

proclaiming, and to us all the light is burned out of them. They are

the darkest portion of the verse. Several different events have been

suggested. But most probably the historical references here are to

David's slaughter of the Philistines (2 Sam. v., and I Chron. xiv.).

This is probable, but by no means certain. If so, the words are made

still more threatening by asserting that He will treat the Israelites

as if they were Philistines. But the point on which we should

concentrate attention is this remarkable expression, according to which

judgment is God's strange work. And that is made more emphatic by the

use of a word translated act,' which means service, and is almost

always used for work that is hard and heavy--a toil or a task.

I. The work in which God delights.

It is here implied that the opposite kind of activity is congenial to

Him. The text declares judgment to be an anomaly, out of His ordinary

course of action and foreign to His nature.

We may pause for a moment on that great thought that God has a usual

course of action, which is usual because it is the spontaneous

expression and true mirror of His character. What He thus does shows

that character to His creatures, who cannot see Him but in the glass of

His works, and have to infer His nature, as they best may, from His

works. The Bible begins with His nature and thence interprets His work.

The work in which God delights is the utterance of His love in

blessing.

The very essence of love is self-manifestation.

The very being of God is love, and all being delights in its own

self-manifestation, in its own activity.

How great the thought is that He is glad when we let Him satisfy His

nature by making us glad!

The ordinary course of His government in the world is blessing.

II. The Task in which He does not delight, or His Strange Work.

The consequences of sin are God's work. The miseries consequent on sin

are self-inflicted, but they are also God's judgments on sin. We may

say that sin automatically works out its results, but its results

follow by the will of God on account of sin.

That work is a necessity arising from the nature of God. It is foreign

to His heart but not to His nature. God is both the light of Israel'

for blessing, and a consuming fire.' The two opposite effects are

equally the result of the contact of God and man. Light pains a

diseased eye and gladdens a sound one. The sun seen through a mist

becomes like a ball of red-hot iron. The whole revelation of God

becomes a pain to an unloving soul.

But God's very love compels Him to punish.

Some modern notions of the love of God seem to strike out righteousness

from His nature altogether, and substitute for it a mere good nature

which is weakness, not love, and is cruelty, not kindness.

There is nothing in the facts of the world or in the teachings of the

gospel which countenances the notion of a God whose fondness prevents

Him from scourging.

What do you call it when a father spares the rod and spoils the child?

Even this world is a very serious place for a man who sets himself

against its laws. Its punishments come down surely and not always

slowly. There is nothing in it to encourage the idea of impunity.

That work is to Him an Unwelcome Necessity. Bold words. I have no

pleasure in the death of a sinner.' He doth not willingly inflict.' The

awful power of sin to divert the current of blessing. Christ's tears

over Jerusalem. How unwelcome that work is to them is shown by the

slowness of His judgments, by multiplied warnings. Rising up early,' He

tells men that He will smite, in order that He may never need to smite.

That work is a certainty. However reluctantly He smites, the blow will

fall.

III. The Strange Work of Redemption.

The mightiest miracle. The revelation of God's deepest nature. The

wonder of the universe.

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THE HUSBANDMAN AND HIS OPERATIONS

Give ye ear, and hear my voice; hearken, and hear my speech. 24. Doth

the plowman plow all day to sow? doth he open and break the clods of

his ground! 25. When lie hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not

cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and cast in the

principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place?

26. For his God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him.

27. For the fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument,

neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin; but the fitches

are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod. 28. Bread corn

is bruised; because he will not ever be threshing it, nor break it with

the wheel of his cart, nor bruise it with his horsemen. 29. This also

cometh forth from the Lord of Hosts, which is wonderful in counsel, and

excellent in working.'--ISAIAH xxviii. 23-29.

The prophet has been foretelling a destruction which he calls God's

strange act. The Jews were incredulous, scornful men.' They did not

believe him; and the main reason for their incredulity was that a

divine destruction of the nation was so opposite to the divine

conservation of it as to amount to an impossibility. God had raised up

and watched over the people. He had planted it in the mountain of His

inheritance, and now was it going to be thrown down by the same hand

which had built it up? Impossible.

The prophet's answer to that question is this parable of the

husbandman, who has to perform a great variety of operations. He

ploughs, but that is not all. He lays aside the plough when it has done

its work, and takes up the seed-basket, and, in different ways, sows

different seeds, scattering some broadcast, and dropping others

carefully, grain by grain, into their place--dibbling' it in, as we

should say. But seedtime too, passes, and then he cuts down what he had

so carefully sown, and pulls up what he had so sedulously planted, and,

in different ways, breaks and bruises the grain. Is he inconsistent

because he ploughs in winter and reaps in harvest? Does his carrying

the seed-basket at one time make it impossible that he shall come with

flail and threshing-oxen at another? Are not all the various operations

co-operant to one end? Does not the end need them all? Is not one

purpose going steadily forward through ploughing, sowing, reaping,

threshing? Is not that like the work of the great Husbandman, who

changes His methods and preserves His plan through them all, who has

His time to sow' and His time to reap,' and who orders the affairs of

men and kingdoms, for the one purpose that He may gather His wheat into

His garner, and purge from it its chaff?

This parable sets forth a philosophy of the divine operations very

beautiful and true, and none the less impressive for the simple garb in

which it is clothed.

I. All things come from one steady, divine purpose.

We may notice in passing how reverentially the prophet believes that

agriculture is taught by God. He would have said the same of

cotton-spinning or coal-mining. Think how striking a figure that is, of

all the world as God's farm, where He practises His husbandry to grow

the crops which He desires.

What a picture the parable gives of sedulous and patient labour for a

far-off result!

It insists on the thought of one steady divine purpose ever directing

the movements of the divine hand.

That is the negation of the godless theory that the affairs of men are

merely the work of men, or are merely the result of impersonal causes.

The world is not a jungle where any or every plant springs of itself,

but it is cultivated ground which has an Owner who looks after it.

It is the affirmation that God's action is regulated by a purpose which

is intelligent, unchanging, all-embracing to us because revealed.

II. That steady purpose is man's highest good.

The end of all the farmer's care is the ripening of the seed. God's

purpose is our moral, intellectual, and spiritual perfecting.

Neither His own glory' nor man's happiness,' which are taken by

different schools of thought to be the divine aim in creation and

providence, is an object worthy of Him or adequate to explain the facts

of every man's experience, unless both are regarded as needing man's

perfecting, for their attainment. God's glory is to make men godlike.

Man's happiness cannot be secured without His holiness.

God has larger and nobler designs for us than merely to make us happy.

This is the will of God concerning you, even your sanctification.'

Nothing short of that end would be worthy of God, or would explain His

methods.

III. That purpose needs great variety of processes.

This is true about nations and about individuals.

Different stages of growth need different treatment.

The parable names three operations:--

Ploughing, which is preparation;

Sowing, or casting in germinating principles;

Threshing, which is effected by tribulation, a word which means driving

a tribulum' or threshing-sedge over ears of grain.

So sorrow is indispensable for our perfecting.

By it earthly affections are winnowed away, and our dependence on God

increased. A certain refinement of spirit results, like the pallor on

the face of a chronic invalid, which has a delicate beauty unattainted

by ruddy health. A capacity for sympathy, too, is often the result of

one's own trials. Rightly borne, they tend to bend or break the will,

and they teach how great it is to suffer and be strong.

But sorrow is not enough; joy is indispensable too. The crop is

threshed in tribulation, but is grown mostly in sunshine. Calm,

uneventful hours, continuous possession of blessings, have a ministry

not less than afflictions have. The corn in the furrow, waving in the

western wind, and with golden sunlight among its golden stems, is

preparing for the loaf no less than when bound in bundles and lying on

the threshing-floor, or cut and bruised by sharp teeth of dray or heavy

hoofs of oxen, or blows of swinging flails.

So do not suppose that sorrow is the only instrument for perfecting

character, and see that you do not miss the sanctifying and ripening

effect of your joyous hours.

Again, different types of character require different modes of

treatment. In the parable, the fitches' are sown in one fashion, and

the cummin' in another the wheat' and barley' in still another; and

similar variety marks the methods of separating the grain from the

husk, one kind of crop being threshed another having a wheel turned

upon it. Thus each of us gets the kind of joys and pains that will have

most effect on us. God knows where is the tenderest spot, and makes no

mistakes in His dealing. He sends us afflictions sorted, sorrows of all

sizes.'

Let us see that we trust to His loving and wise adaptation of our

trials to our temperaments and needs. Let us see that we never let

clouds obscure the clearness of our perception, or, failing perception,

the serenity of our trust, that all things work together, and all work

for our highest good--our being made like our Lord. We should less

often complain of the mysteries of Providence if we had learned the

meaning of Isaiah's parable.

IV. All the processes end in garnering the grain.

There is a barn or storehouse for the ripened and threshed crops. The

farmer's toil and careful processes would be absurd and unintelligible

if, after them all, the crop, so sedulously ripened and cultivated and

cleansed, was left to rot where it fell. And no less certainly does the

discipline of this life cry aloud for heaven and a conscious personal

future life, if it is not to be all set down as grim irony or utterly

absurd. There must be a heaven if we are not to be put to intellectual

bewilderment.

What was needed for growth here drops away there, as blossoms fall when

their work is done. Sunshine and rain are no more necessary when the

fields are cleared and the barn-yard is filled. Much in our nature, in

our earthly condition, in God's varying processes, will drop away. When

school-time is done the rod is burned. But nothing will perish that can

contribute to our perfecting.

So let us ask Him to purge us with His fan in His hand now, lest we

should be found at last fruitless cumberers of the ground or chaff

which is rootless, and fit only to be swept out of the threshing-floor.

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QUIETNESS AND CONFIDENCE'

In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence

shall be your strength.'--ISAIAH xxx. 15.

ISRAEL always felt the difficulty of sustaining itself on the height of

dependence on the unseen, spiritual power of God, and was ever

oscillating between alliances with the Northern and Southern powers,

linking itself with Assyria against Egypt, or with Egypt against

Assyria. The effect was that whichever was victorious it suffered; it

was the battleground for both, it was the prize of each in turn. The

prophet's warnings were political wisdom as truly as religious.

Here Judah is exhorted to forsake the entangling dependence on Egypt,

and to trust wholly to God. They had gone away from Him in their fears.

They must come back by their faith. To them the great lesson was trust

in God. Through them to us the same lesson is read. The principle is

far wider than this one case. It is the one rule of life for us all.

The two clauses of the text convey substantially the same idea. They

are in inverted parallelism. Returning and rest' correspond to

quietness and confidence,' so as that rest' answers to quietness' and

returning' to confidence.' In the former clause we have the action

towards God and then its consequence. In the latter we have the

consequence and then the action.

I. The returning.

Men depart from God by speculative thought or by anxious care, or by

sin.

To return' is just to trust.

The parallel helps us here--returning' is parallel with confidence.'

This confidence is to be exercised especially in relation to one's own

path in life and the outward trials and difficulties which we meet, but

its sphere extends far beyond these. It is a disposition of mind which

covers all things. The attitude of trust, the sense of dependence, the

assurance of God's help and love are in all life the secrets of peace

and power.

Am I sinful? then trust. Am I bewildered and ignorant? then trust. Am I

anxious and harassed? then trust.

Note the thought, that we come back to God by simple confidence, not by

preparing ourselves, not by our expiation, but only by trusting in Him.

Of course the temptations to the opposite attitude are many and great.

Note, too, that every want of confidence is a departure from God. We go

away from Him not only by open sin, not only by denial of Him, but by

forgetfulness, by want of faith.

The ground of this confidence is laid in our knowledge of Him,

especially in our knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The exercise of this confidence is treated as voluntary. Every man is

responsible for his faith.

The elements of this confidence are, as regards ourselves, our sense of

want in all its various aspects; and, as regards Him, our assurance of

His love, of His nearness to help.

II. Confiding nearness to God brings quiet rest.

Rest' and being quiet' are treated here partly as consequences of

faith, partly as duties which we are bound to strive to achieve.

1. See how confidence in God stills and quiets the soul.

The very exercise of communion with Him brings peace and rest, inasmuch

as all things are then possessed which we can desire. There is a still

fruition which nothing can equal and nothing destroy.

Trust in God brings rest from our own evil consciences.

It brings rest from our own plans and purposes.

Trust gives insight into the meaning of all this else unintelligible

world.

It brings the calming and subduing of desires, which in their eagerness

torture, in their fruition trouble, and in their disappointment madden.

It brings the gathering in of ourselves from all the disturbing

diffusion of ourselves through earthly trifles.

2. Notice what this rest is not.

It does not mean the absence of causes of disturbance.

It does not mean the abnegation of forethought.

It does not mean an indolent passiveness.

3. Notice the duty of being thus quiet and resting.

How much we fail in this respect.

We have faith, but there seems some obstruction which stops it from

flowing refreshingly through our lives.

We are bound to seek for its increased continuity and power in our

hearts and lives.

III. Confidence and rest in God bring safety and strength.

That is true in the lowest sense of saved,' and not less true in the

highest. The condition of all our salvation from temporal as well as

spiritual evils lies thus in the same thing--that we trust God.

No harm comes to us when we trust, because then God is with us, and

works for us, and cares for us. So all departments of life are bound

together by the one law. Trust is the condition of being saved.'

And not only so, but also trust is strength. God works for us; yes, but

better than that, God works in us and fits us to work.

What powers we might be in the world! Trust should make us strong. To

have confidence in God should bring us power to which all other power

is as nothing. He who can feel that his foot is on the rock, how firm

he should stand!

Best gives strength. The rest of faith doubles our forces. To be freed

from anxious care makes a man much more likely to act vigorously and to

judge wisely.

Stillness of soul, born of communion with God, makes us strong.

Stillness of soul, born of deliverance from our fears, makes us strong.

Here then is a golden chain--or shall we rather say a live wire?--

whereof one end is bound to the Throne and the other encircles our poor

hearts. Trust, so shall we be at rest and safe. Being at rest and safe,

we shall be strong. If we link ourselves with God by faith, God will

flash into us His mysterious energy, and His strength will be made

perfect in our weakness.

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GOD'S WAITING AND MAN'S

And therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you, and

therefore will He be exalted, that He may have mercy upon you: for the

Lord is a God of judgment: blessed are they that wait for Him.'--ISAIAH

xxx. 18.

God's waiting and man's--bold and beautiful, that He and we should be

represented as sharing the same attitude.

I. God's waiting,

1. The first thought is--why should He wait--why does He not act at

once? Because something in us hinders. We cannot enter into spiritual

blessings till we are made capable of them by faith. It would not be

for our good to receive some temporal blessings till sorrow has done

its work on us. The great thought here is that God has a right time for

help. He is a God of judgment,' i.e.. discerns our moral condition and

shapes His dealings thereby. He never gives the wrong medicine.

2. His waiting is full of work to fit us to receive His grace. It is

not a mere passive standing by, till the fit conditions are seen in us;

but He is exalted' while He waits, i.e.. lifted up in the manifestation

of His might, and by His energy in preparing us for the gifts that He

has prepared for us. He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is

God.' He who prepares a place for us is preparing us for the place. He

who has grace which He is ready to give us here, is making us ready for

His grace. The meaning of all God's work on us is to form a character

fit to possess His highest gifts.

3. His waiting is very patient. The divine husbandman waiteth for the

precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it.' How wonderful that

in a very real sense He attends on our pleasure, as it were, and lets

us determine His time to work.

4. That waiting is full of divine desire to help. It is not the waiting

of indifference, which says: If you will have it--well and good. If

not, it does not matter to Me.' But more than they that watch for the

morning,' God waits that He may be gracious unto you.'

II. Man's waiting.

Our attitude is to be in some real sense analogous to His.

Its main elements are firm anticipation, patient expectation, steadfast

desire, self-discipline to fit us for the influx of God's grace.

We are not to prescribe times and seasons which the Father hath put in

His own power.' The clock of Eternity ticks more slowly than our

short-pendulumed timepieces. If the vision tarry, wait for it.' We may

well wait for God when we know that He waits for us, and that, for the

most part, when He sees that we are waiting, He knows that His time is

come.

But it is to be noted that the waiting desire to which He responds is

directed to something better and greater than any gifts from Him, even

to Himself, for it is they who wait for Him,' not only for His benefits

apart from Himself, however precious these may be, who are blessed.

The blessedness of such waiting, how it calms the heart, brings into

constant touch with God, detaches from the fever and the fret which

kill, opens our eyes to mark the meanings of our life's history, and

makes the divine gifts infinitely more precious when they do come.

After all, the time of waiting is at the longest very short. And when

the perfect fruition is come, and we enter into the great spaces of

Eternity, it will seem as an handbreadth.

Take it on trust a little while,

Thou soon shalt read the mystery right

In the full sunshine of His smile.'

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THREE PICTURES OF ONE REALITY

As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem; defending

also He will deliver it; and passing over He will preserve it'--ISAIAH

xxxi. 5.

The immediate occasion of this very remarkable promise is, of course,

the peril in which Jerusalem was placed by Sennacherib's invasion; and

the fulfilment of the promise was the destruction of his army before

its gates. But the promise here, like all God's promises, is eternal in

substance, and applies to a community only because it applies to each

member of that community. Jerusalem was saved, and that meant that

every house in Jerusalem was saved, and every man in it the separate

object of the divine protection So that all the histories of Scripture,

and all the histories of men in the world, are but transitory

illustrations of perennial principles, and every atom of the

consolation and triumph of this verse comes to each of us, as truly as

it did to the men that with tremulous heart began to take cheer, as

they listened to Isaiah. There is a wonderful saying in one of the

other prophets which carries that lesson, where, bringing down the

story of Jacob's struggle with the angel of Peniel to the encouragement

of the existing generation, he says,' He spake to us.' They were

hundreds of years after the patriarch, and yet had fallen heirs to all

that God had ever said to him So, from that point of view, I am not

spiritualising, or forcing the meaning of these words, when I bring

them direct into the lives of each one of ourselves.

I. And, first, I would note the very striking and beautiful pictures

that are given in these verses.

There are three of them, on each of which I must touch briefly. As

birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem.' The form of

the words in the original shows that it is the mother-bird that is

thought about. And the picture rises at once of her fluttering over the

nest, where the callow chickens are, unable to fly and to help

themselves. It is a kind of echo of the grand metaphor in the song that

is attributed to Moses, which speaks of the eagle fluttering over her

nest, and taking care of her young. Jerusalem was as a nest on which,

for long centuries, that infinite divine love had brooded. It was but a

poor brood that had been hatched out, but yet as birds flying' He had

watched over the city. Can you not almost see the mother-bird, made

bold by maternal love, swooping down upon the intruder that sought to

rob the nest, and spreading her broad pinion over the callow fledglings

that lie below? That is what God does with us. As I said, it is a poor

brood that is hatched out. That does not matter; still the Love bends

down and helps. Nobody but a prophet could have ventured on such a

metaphor as that, and nobody but Jesus Christ would have ventured to

mend it and say, As a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings,' when

there are hawks in the sky. So He, in all the past ages, was the One

that as birds flying . . . defended' His people, and would have

gathered them under His wings, only they would not.

Now, beautiful as this metaphor is, as it stands, it seems to me, like

some brilliant piece of colouring, to derive additional beauty from its

connection with the background upon which it stands out. For just a

verse before the prophet has given another emblem of what God is and

does, and if you will carry with you all those thoughts of tenderness

and maternal care and solicitude, and then connect them with that

verse, I think the thought of His tenderness will start up into new

beauty. For here is what precedes the text: Like as a lion, and the

young lion roaring on his prey when a multitude of shepherds is called

forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor bow

himself for the noise of them. So shall the Lord of hosts come down to

fight for Mount Zion.' Look at these two pictures side by side, on the

one hand the lion, with his paw on his prey, and the angry growl that

answers when the shepherds vainly try to drag it away from him. That is

God. Ay! but that is only an aspect of God. As birds flying, so the

Lord will defend Jerusalem.' We have to take that into account too.

This generation is very fond of talking about God's love; does it

believe in God's wrath? It is very fond of speaking about the

gentleness of Jesus; has it pondered that tremendous phrase, the wrath

of the Lamb'? The lion that growls, and the mother-bird that

hovers--God is like them both. That is the first picture that is here.

The second one is not so obvious to English readers, but it is equally

striking, though I do not mean to dwell upon it. The word that is

translated in our text twice, defend' and defending'--So will the Lord

of hosts defend Jerusalem, and defending will deliver'--means,

literally, shielding.' Thus we have the same general idea as that in

the previous metaphor of the mother-bird hovering above the nest: God

is like a shield held over us, and so flinging off front the broad and

burnished surface of the Almighty buckler, all the darts that any foe

can launch against as. Our God is a Sun and Shield.' I need not enlarge

on this familiar metaphor.

But the third picture I wish to point to in more detail: Passing over,

He will deliver.' Now, the word that is there rendered passing over,'

is almost a technical word in the Old Testament, because it is that

employed in reference to the Passover. And so you see the swiftness of

genius with which the prophet changes his whole scene. We had the nest

and the mother-bird, we had the battlefield and the shield; now we are

swept away back to that night when the Destroying Angel stalked through

the land, and passed over' the doors on which the blood had been

sprinkled. And thus this God, who in one aspect may be likened to the

mother-bird hovering with her little breast full of tenderness, and

made brave by maternal love conquering natural timidity, and in another

aspect may be likened to the broad shield behind which a man stands

safe, may also be likened to that Destroying Angel that went through

Egypt, and smote wherever there were not the tokens of the blood on the

lintels, and passed over' wherever there were. Of course, the original

fulfilment of this third picture is the historical case of the army of

Sennacherib; outside the walls, widespread desolation; inside the

walls, an untroubled night of peace. That night in Egypt is paralleled,

in the old Jewish hymn that is still sung at the Passover, with the

other night when Sennacherib's men were slain; and the parallel is

based on our text. So, then, here is another illustration of what I

started with saying, that the past events of Scripture are transient

expressions of perennial principles and tendencies. For the Passover

night was not to be to the contemporaries of the prophet an event

receding ever further into the dim distance, but it was a present

event, and to be reproduced in that catastrophe when in the morning

when they arose, they were all dead corpses.' And the event is being

repeated to-day, and will be for each of us, if we will.

So, then, there are these three pictures--the Nest and the Mother-bird,

the Battlefield and the Shield, Egypt and the Destroying Angel.

II. We note the reality meant by these pictures.

They mean the absolute promise from God of protection for His people

from every evil. We are not to cut it down, not to say that it applies

absolutely in regard to the spiritual world, but that it does not apply

in regard to temporal things. Yes, it does entirely, only you have to

rise to the height of God's conception of what is good and what is evil

in regard to outward things, before you understand how completely, and

without qualification or deduction, this promise is fulfilled to every

man that puts his trust in Him. Of course, I do not need to remind you,

for your own lives will do so sufficiently, that this hovering

protector, this strong Shield, this Destroying Angel that passes by our

houses if the blood is on the threshold, does not guarantee us any

exemption from the common ills that flesh is heir to.' We all know that

well enough. But what does it guarantee? That all the poison shall be

wiped off the arrow, that all the evil shall be taken out of the evil,

that it will change its character, that if we observe the conditions,

the sharpest sorrow will come to us with this written on it by the

Father's hand, With My love to My child'; that pain will be discipline,

and discipline will be blessed. Ah! dear friends! I am sure there are

many of us that can set to our seals that God is true in this matter,

and that we have found that His rod does blossom, and that our sorest

sorrows have been our greatest mercies, drawing us nearer to Him;

Defending He will deliver, and passing over He will preserve.'

III. And now let me remind you of the way by which we can make the

reality of these pictures ours.

You know that all the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament are

conditional, and that there are many of them that were never fulfilled,

and were spoken in order that they might not be fulfilled, if only the

people took warning. I wish folk would carry a little more consciously

in their minds that principle in interpreting them all, and in asking

about their fulfilment. Not only in regard to these ancient events, but

in regard to our individual experience, God's promises and threatenings

are conditional.

Take that first metaphor of the hovering mother-bird. Listen to this

expansion of it in one of the psalms: He shall cover thee with His

feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust.' The word for trust

here means to fly into a refuge.' Can you not see the picture? A little

brood round the parent bird, frightened by some beast of prey, or

hovering hawk in the sky, and fluttering under its wings, and all safe

and huddled together there close against the warm breast, and in

amongst the downy feathers. Under His wings shalt thou trust.' Put thou

thy trust in God, and God is to thee the hovering bird, the broad

shield, the Angel that passes over.'

Take the other picture of the Passover night. Only by our individual

faith in Jesus Christ as our individual Saviour can we put the blood on

our door-posts so that the Destroying Angel shall pass by. So, if we

would have the sweetness of such words as these fulfilled in our daily

lives, however disturbed and troubled and sorrowful and solitary they

may be, the first condition is that under His wings shall we flee for

refuge, and we do so by trust in Him.

But having thus fled thither, we must continue there, if we would

continue under His protection. Such continuance of safety because of

continuous faith is possible only by continued communion. Remember our

Lord's expansion of the metaphor in His lament: How often would I have

gathered thy children together as a hen gathereth her chickens under

her wings, and ye would not.' We can resist the drawing. We can get

away from the shelter of the wing. We can lift up our wills against

Him. And what becomes of the chicken that does not run to the mother's

pinions when the hawk is hovering? That is what becomes of the man that

stops outside the refuge in Christ, or that by failure of his faith

departs from that refuge. Ye would not; therefore your house is left

unto you desolate.' That house, in the Jerusalem which God defends,' is

not defended.

Another condition of divine protection is obedience. We need not expect

that God will take care of us, and preserve us, when we did not ask His

leave to get into the dangerous place that we find ourselves in. Many

of us do the converse of what the Apostle condemns, we begin in the

flesh,' and think we shall end in the Spirit'; which being translated

is, we do not ask God's leave to do certain things, to enter into

certain engagements or arrangements with other people, and the like,

and then we expect God to come and help us in or out of them. That is

by no means an uncommon form of delusion. You remember what Jesus

Christ said when the Devil tried to entice Him to do a thing of that

sort, by quoting Scripture to Him--He shall give His angels charge

concerning Thee, to keep Thee in all Thy ways. Cast Thyself down. Trust

to the promise as a kind of parachute to keep Thee from falling bruised

on the stones of the Temple-court.' Christ's answer was: Thou shalt not

tempt the Lord thy God.' You will not get God's protection in ways of

your own choosing.

And so, brethren, all things work together for good to them that love,'

to them that trust, to them that keep close, to them that obey. And for

such the old faithful promise will be faithful and new once more,

Because He hath set His love upon Me, therefore will I deliver

Him'--that will be the summing up of our lives; and I will set Him on

high because He hath known My Name,' that will be the meaning of our

deaths.

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THE LORD'S FURNACE

The Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.'--ISAIAH

xxxi. 9.

This very remarkable characterisation of God stands here as a kind of

seal, set upon the preceding prophecy. It is the reason why that will

certainly be fulfilled. And what precedes is mainly a promise of a

deliverance for Israel, which was to be a destruction for Israel's

enemies. It is put in very graphic and remarkable metaphors: Like as a

lion roareth on his prey when a multitude of shepherds is called forth

against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor abase himself

for the noise of them: so shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight

for Mount Zion.' The enemies of Israel are picturesquely and poetically

represented as a crowd of shepherds vainly trying to scare a lion by

their shouts. He stands undaunted, with his strong paw on his prey, and

the boldest of them durst not venture to drag it from beneath his

claws. So, says Isaiah, with singularly daring imagery, God will put

all His strength into keeping fast hold of Israel, and no one can pluck

His people from His hands.

Then, with a sudden and striking change of metaphor, the prophet passes

from a picture of the extreme of fierceness to one of the extreme of

tenderness. As birds flying'--mother birds fluttering over their

nests--so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem,' hovering over it

and going from side to side to defend with His broad pinions, passing

over, He will preserve it.' These figures are next translated into the

plain promise of utter discomfiture and destruction, panic and flight

as the portion of the enemies of Israel, and the whole has this broad

seal set to it, that He who promises is the Lord, whose fire is in

Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.'

We shall not understand these great words if we regard them as only a

revelation of destructive and terrible power. They are that indeed, but

they are far more than that. It is the very beauty and completeness of

this emblem that has a double aspect, and is no less rich in joy and

blessing than pregnant with warning and terror. As Isaiah says in

another place, Jerusalem is Ariel,' which probably means the hearth of

God.' His presence in the city is as a fire for the comfort and defence

of the happy inhabitants, and at the same time for the destruction of

all evil and enemies. Far more truly than He dwelt in the city of David

does God dwell in the Church, and His presence is its security. What,

then, of instruction and hope may we gather from this wonderful emblem?

I. In the Church, God is present as a great reservoir of fervid love.

Every language has taken fire as the symbol of love and emotion. We

speak so naturally of warm love, fervent feeling, glowing earnestness,

ardent enthusiasm and the like, that we are scarcely aware of using

figurative language. We do not usually ascribe emotion to God, but

surely the deepest and most sacred of the senses in which it is true

that fire is His emblem, is that He is love. His fire is in Zion. He

dwells in His Church, a storehouse of blazing love, heated seventy

times seven hotter than any creatural love, and pouring out its ardours

for the quickening and gladdening of all who walk in the light of that

fire, and thaw their coldness at its blaze.

Then, if so, how comes it that so many Christian Churches are

ice-houses instead of furnaces? How comes it that they who profess to

live in the Zion where this fire flames are themselves so cold? If

God's blazing furnace is in Jerusalem, it should send the thermometer

up in all the houses of the city. But what a strange contradiction it

is for men to be in God's Church, the very focus and centre of His

burning love, and themselves to be almost down below zero in their

temperature! The Christian Church ought to be all aflame in all its

members, with the fire of love kindled and alight from God Himself.

Every community of Christian people ought to radiate warmth and light

which it has absorbed from its present God. Our love ought to answer

His, and, being caught and kindled from that mighty fire, should throw

back to its source some of the heat received, in fervours of reflected

love, and should pour the rest beneficently on all around. Love to God

and love to man are regarded in Christian morals as beams of the same

fire, only travelling in different directions. But what a miserable

contrast to such an ideal the reality in so many of our churches is! A

fiery furnace with its doors hung with icicles is no greater a

contradiction and anomaly than a Christian Church or a single soul,

which professes to have been touched by the infinite loving kindness of

God, and yet lives as cold and unmoved as we do. The Lord's fire is in

Zion.' Are there any tokens of that fire amongst us, in our own hearts

and in our collective temperature as Christian Churches?

There is no religion worth calling so which has not warmth in it. We

hear a great deal from people against whom I do not wish to say a word,

about the danger of an emotional Christianity.' Agreed, if by that they

mean a Christianity which has no foundation for its emotion in

principle and intelligence; but not agreed if they mean to recommend a

Christianity which professes to accept truths that might kindle a soul

beneath the ribs of death and make the dumb sing, and yet is never

moved one hair's-breadth from its quiet phlegmaticism. There is no

religion without emotion. Of course it must be intelligent emotion,

built upon the acceptance of divine truth, and regulated and guided by

that, and so consolidated into principle, and it must be emotion which

works for its living, and impels to Christian conduct. These two

provisoes being attended to, then we can safely say that warmth is the

test of life, and the readings of the thermometer, which measure the

fervour, measure also the reality of our religion. A cold Christian is

a contradiction in terms. If the adjective is certainly applicable, I

am afraid the applicability of the noun is extremely doubtful. If there

is no fire, what is there? Cold is death.

We want no flimsy, transitory, noisy, ignorant, hysterical agitation.

Smoke is not fire. If the temperature were higher, and the fire more

wisely fed, there would not be any. But we do want a more obvious and

powerful effect of their solemn, glorious, and heart-melting beliefs on

the affections and emotions of professing Christians, and that they may

be more mightily moved by love, to all heroisms and service and

enthusiasms and to consecration which shall in some measure answer to

the glowing heart of that fire of God which flames in Zion.

II. God's revelation of Himself, and presence in His Church, are an

instrument of cleansing.

Fire purifies. In our great cities now there are disinfecting ovens,'

where infected articles are taken, and exposed to a high temperature

which kills the germs of disease, so that tainted things come out sweet

and clean. That is what God's furnace in Zion is meant to do for us.

The true way of purifying is by fire. To purify by water, as John the

Baptist saw and said, is but a poor, cold way of getting outward

cleanliness. Water cleanses the surface, and becomes dirty in the

process. Fire cleanses within and throughout, and is not tainted

thereby. You plunge some foul thing into the flame, and, as you look,

the specks and spots melt out of it. Raise the temperature, and you

kill the poison germs. That is the way that God cleanses His people;

not by external application, but by getting up the heat. The fire of

His love, the fire of His spirit, is, as St. Bernard says, a blessed

fire, which consumes indeed, but does not hurt; which sweetly burns and

blessedly lays waste, and so puts forth the force and fire against our

vices, as to display the operation of the anointing oil upon our

souls.' The Hebrew captives were flung into the fiery furnace. What did

it burn? Only their bonds. They themselves lived and rejoiced in the

intense heat. So, if we have any real possession of the divine flame,

it will burn off our wrists the bands and chains of our old vices, and

we shall stand pure and clean, emancipated by the fire which will

consume only our sins, and be for our true selves as our native home,

where we walk at liberty and expatiate in the genial warmth. That is

the blessed and effectual way of purifying, which slays only the death

that we carry about with us in our sin, and makes us the more truly

living for its death. Cleansing is only possible if we are immersed in

the Holy Ghost and in fire, as some piece of foul clay, plunged into

the furnace, has all the stains melted out of it. For all sinful souls

seeking after cleansing, and finding that the damned spot' will not

out' for all their washing, it is surely good news and tidings of great

joy that the Lord has His fire in Zion, and that its purifying power

will burn out all their sin.

III. Further, there is suggested another thought: that God, in His

great revelation of Himself, by which He dwells in His Church, is a

power of transformation.

Fire turns all which it seizes into fire. Behold how much wood is

kindled by how small a fire' (R.V.). The heap of green wood with the

sap in it needs but a tiny light pushed into the middle, and soon it is

all ablaze, transformed into ruddy brightness, and leaping heavenwards.

However heavy, wet, and obstinate may be the fuel, the fire can change

it into aspiring and brilliant flame.

And so God, coming to us in His Spirit of burning,' turns us into His

own likeness, and makes us possessors of some spark of Himself.

Therefore it is a great promise, He shall baptize you in the Holy

Ghost, and in fire.' He shall plunge you into the life-giving furnace,

and so make His ministers like a flame of fire,' like the Lord whom

they serve. The seraphim who stand round the throne are burning'

spirits, and the purity which shines, the love which glows, the swift

life which flames in them, are all derived from that unkindled and

all-animating Fire who is their and our God. The transformation of all

the dwellers in Zion into miniature likenesses of this fire is the very

highest hope that springs from the solemn and blessed truth that the

Lord has His fire in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.

IV. But, further, this figure teaches that the same divine fire may

become destructive.

The emblem of fire suggests a double operation, and the very felicity

of it as an emblem is that it has these two sides, and with equal

naturalness may stand for a power which quickens, and for one which

destroys. The difference in the effects springs not from differences in

the cause, but in the objects with which the fire plays. The same God

is the fire of life, the fire of love, of purifying and transformation

and glad energy to whosoever will put his trust in Him, and a fire of

destruction and anger unto whosoever resists Him. The alternative

stands before every soul of man, to be quickened by fire or consumed by

it. We may make the furnace of God our blessedness and the reservoir of

a far more joyful and noble life than ever we could have lived in our

coldness; or we may make it terror and destruction. There lie the two

possibilities before every one of us. We cannot stand apart from Him;

we have relations with Him, whether we will or no; He is something to

us. He is, and must be for all, a flaming fire. We can settle whether

it shall be a fire which is life-giving unto life, or a fire which is

death-giving unto death.

Here are two buildings: the one the life of the man that lives apart

from God, and therefore has built only with wood, hay, and stubble; the

other the life of the man that lives with God and for Him, and so has

built with gold, silver, and precious stones. The day and the fire

come; and the fates of these two are opposite effects of the same

cause. The licking tongues surround the wretched hut, built of

combustibles, and up go wood and hay and stubble, in a smoking flare,

and disappear. The flames play round the gold and silver and precious

stones, and every leap of their light is answered by some facet of the

gems that flash in their brilliancy, and give back the radiance.

You can settle which of these two is to be your fate. The Lord's fire

is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.' To those who, by faith in

that dear Lord who came to cast fire on earth,' have opened their

hearts, to the entrance of that searching, cleansing flame, and who

therefore burn with kindred and answering fervours, it is joy to know

that their God is a consuming fire,' for therein lies their hope of

daily purifying and ultimate assimilation. To those, on the other hand,

who have closed their hearts to the warmth of His redeeming love in

Christ, and the quickening of His baptism by fire, what can the

knowledge be but terror, what can contact with God in judgment be but

destruction? The day cometh, it burneth as a furnace; and all the

proud, and all that work wickedness, shall be as stubble, and the day

that cometh shall burn them up.' What will that day do for you?

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THE HIDING-PLACE

And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from

the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a

great rock in a weary land.'--ISAIAH xxxii. 2.

We may well say, Of whom speaketh the prophet this? Here are distinctly

attributed to one of ourselves, if we take the words in their

simplicity and fulness, functions and powers which universal experience

has taught us not to look for in humanity. And there have been a great

many attempts--as it seems to me, altogether futile and baseless

ones--to break the force of these words as a distinct prophecy of Jesus

Christ. Surely the language is far too wide to have application to any

real or ideal Jewish monarch, except one whose kingdom is an

everlasting kingdom? Surely the experience of a hundred centuries might

teach men that there is one man, and one alone, who is the refuge from

all dangers, the fruition of all desires, the rest and refreshment in

all toils.

And I, for my part, have no hesitation in saying that the only

reference of these words which gives full value to their wealth of

blessing, is to regard them as a prophecy of the man--Christ Jesus;

hiding in whom we are safe, coming' to whom we never thirst,' guarded

and blest by whom no weariness can befall us, and dwelling in whom this

weary world shall be full of refreshment and peace!

I do not need to point out the exquisite beauty of the imagery or the

pathos and peace that breathe in the majestic rhythm of the words.

There is something more than poetical beauty or rhetorical

amplification of a single thought in those three clauses. The

hiding-place' and covert' refer to one class of wants; the rivers of

water in a dry place' to yet another; and the shadow of a great rock in

a weary land' to yet a third. And, though they are tinged and dyed in

Eastern imagery, the realities of life in Western lands, and in all

ages, give them a deeper beauty than that of lovely imagery, and are

the true keys to understanding their meaning. We shall, perhaps, best

grasp the whole depth of that meaning according to the Messianic

reference which we give to the text, if we consider the sad and solemn

conception of man's life that underlies it; the enigmatical and

obstinate hope which it holds out in the teeth of all experience--A man

shall be a refuge'; and the solution of the riddle in the man Christ

Jesus.

I. First, there underlies this prophecy a very sad but a very true

conception of human life.

The three classes of promises have correlative with them three phases

of man's condition, three diverse aspects of his need and misery. The

covert' and the hiding-place' imply tempest, storm, and danger; the

river of water' implies drought and thirst; the shadow of a great rock'

implies lassitude and languor, fatigue and weariness. The view of life

that arises from the combination of these three bears upon its front

the signature of truth in the very fact that it is a sad view.

For, I suppose, notwithstanding all that we may say concerning the

beauty and the blessedness scattered broadcast round about us;

notwithstanding that we believe, and hold as for our lives the happy

faith that all which we behold is full of blessing,' it needs but a

very short experience of this life, and but a superficial examination

of our own histories and our own hearts, in order to come to the

conclusion that the world is full of strange and terrible sadness, that

every life has dark tracts and long stretches of sombre tint, and that

no representation is true to fact which dips its pencil only in light

and flings no shadows on the canvas. There is no depth in a Chinese

picture, because there is no shade. It is the wrinkles and marks of

tear and wear that make the expression in a man's portrait. Life's

sternest painter "is" its best.' The gloomy thoughts which are charged

against Scripture are the true thoughts about man and the world as man

has made it. Not, indeed, that life needs to be so, but that by reason

of our own evil and departure from God there have come in as a

disturbing element the retributive consequences of our own godlessness,

and these have made danger where else were safety, thirst where else

were rivers of water, and weariness and lassitude where else were

strength and bounding hope.

So then, look for a moment at these three points that come out of my

text, in order to lay the foundation for subsequent considerations.

We live a life defenceless and exposed to many a storm and tempest. I

need but remind you of the adverse circumstances--the wild winds that

go sweeping across the flat level, the biting blasts that come down

from the snow-clad mountains of destiny that lie round the low plain

upon which we live. I need but remind you of the dangers that are

lodged for our spiritual life in the temptations to evil that are round

us. I need but remind you of that creeping and clinging consciousness

of being exposed to a divinely commissioned retribution and punishment,

which perverts the Name that ought to be the basis of all our

blessedness into a Name unwelcome and terrible, because threatening

judgment. I need but remind you how men's sins have made it needful

that when the mighty God, even the Lord, appears before them, it shall

be very tempestuous round about him.' Men fear and ought to fear the

blast of the breath of His nostrils,' which must burn up all that is

evil. And I need but remind you of that last wild wind of Death that

whirls the sin-faded leaves into dark corners where they lie and rot.

My brother, you have not lived thus long without learning how

defenceless you are against the storm of adverse circumstances. You

have not lived thus long without learning that though, blessed be God!

there do come in all our lives long periods of halcyon rest, when birds

of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave,' and the heavens above are

clear as sapphire, and the sea around is transparent as opal--yet the

little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, may rise on the horizon, and

may thicken and blacken and grow greater and nearer till all the sky is

dark, and burst in lightning and rain and fierceness of wind, till

through the torn sail the wild tempest is streaming,' and the white

crests of the waves are like the mane of Death's pale horse leaping

upon the broken ship. We have all learnt in how profound a sense, by

reason of outward adverse circumstances and inward temptations, by

reason of the fears of a Justice which we know is throned at the centre

of the creation, by reason of a death which to us is a terror, and by

reason of that universal fear of after death the judgment,' storm and

tempest swoop upon our paths. God made the sunshine, and we have made

it a storm. God made life blessed and full of safety and peace, and we

have wrenched ourselves from Him and stand defenceless amidst its

dangers.

Then, there is another aspect and conception of life which underlies

these words of my text. The image of the desert was before the

prophet's rapt vision. He saw the sand whirled into mad dancing columns

before the blast which swept across the unsheltered flat, with nothing,

for a day's march, to check its force. But the wilderness is not only

shelterless, it is waterless too--a place in which wild and ravening

thirst finds no refreshing draughts, and the tongue cleaves to the

blackening gums.

Rivers of water in a dry place'; and what is the prose fact of that?

That you and I live in the midst of a world which has no correspondence

with, nor power of satisfying, our truest and deepest selves--that we

bear about with us a whole set of longings and needs and weaknesses and

strengths and capacities, all of which, like the climbing tendrils of

some creeping plant, go feeling and putting out their green fingers to

lay hold of some prop and stay--that man is so made that for his rest

and blessedness he must have an external object round which his spirit

may cling, on which his desires may fasten and rest, by which his heart

may be blessed, which shall be authority for his will, peace for his

fears, sprinkling and cleansing for his conscience, light for his

understanding, shall be in complete correspondence with his inward

nature--be water for his thirst, and bread for his hunger.

And as thus, on the very nature which each of us carries, there is

stamped the signature of dependence, and the necessity of finding an

external object on which to rest; and as, further, men will not be

tutored even by their own miseries or by the voice of their own wants,

and ever confound their wishes with their wants and their whims with

their needs, therefore it comes to pass that the appetite which was

only meant to direct us to God, and to be as a wholesome hunger in

order to secure our partaking with relish and delight of the divine

food that is provided for it, becomes unsatisfied, a torture, and

unslaked, a ravening madness; and men's needs become men's misery; and

men's hunger becomes men's famine; and men's thirst becomes men's

death. We do dwell in a dry land where no water is.

All about us there are these creatures of God, bright and blessed and

beautiful, fit for their functions and meant to minister to our

gladness. They are meant to be held in subordination. It is not meant

that we should find in them the food for our souls. Wealth and honour

and wisdom and love and gratified ambition and successful purpose, and

whatsoever other good things a man may gather about him and achieve--he

may have them all, and yet in spite of them all there will be a great

aching, longing vacuity in his soul. His true and inmost being will be

groping through the darkness, like a plant growing in a cellar, for the

light which alone can tinge its pale petals and swell its shrivelling

blossoms to ripeness and fruit.

A dry place, as well as a dangerous place--have not you found it so? I

believe that every soul of man has, if he will be honest with himself,

and that there is not one among us who would not, if he were to look

into the deepest facts and real governing experience of his life,

confess--I thirst: my soul thirsteth.' And oh, brethren, why not go on

with the quotation, and make that which is else a pain, a condition of

blessedness? Why not recognise the meaning of all this restless

disquiet, and say My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God'?

And then there is the other idea also underlying these words, yet

another phase of this sad life of ours--not only danger and drought,

but also weariness and languor. The desert stretches before us again,

where there is no shelter from the blast and no trickling stream amid

the yellowing sand; where the fierce ball above beats down cruelly, and

its hot rays are flung up cruelly into our faces, and the glare blinds

us, and the stifling heat wearies us, and work is a torture and motion

is misery, and we long for nothing so much as to be quiet and to hide

our heads in some shade.

I was reading recently one of our last books of travel in the

wilderness of the Exodus, in which the writer told how, after toiling

for hours under a scorching sun, over the hot, white, marly flat,

seeing nothing but a beetle or two on the way, and finding no shelter

anywhere from the pitiless beating of the sunshine, the weary

travellers came at last to a little Retem bush only a few feet high,

and flung themselves down and tried to hide, at least, their heads,

from those sunbeams like swords,' even beneath its ragged shade. And my

text tells of a great rock, with blue dimness in its shadow, with haply

a fern or two in the moist places of its crevices, where there is rest,

and a man can lie down and be cool, while all outside is burning sun,

and burning sand, and dancing mirage.

Oh! the weariness felt by us all, of plod, plod, plodding across the

sand! That fatal monotony into which every man's life stiffens, as far

as outward circumstances, outward joys and pleasures go! the depressing

influence of custom which takes the edge off all gladness and adds a

burden to every duty! the weariness of all that tugging up the hill, of

all that collar-work which we have to do! Who is there that has not his

mood, and that by no means the least worthy and man-like of his moods,

wherein he feels not, perhaps, that all is vanity, but--how infinitely

wearisome it all is.'

And so every race of man that ever has lived has managed out of two

miseries to make a kind of shadowy gladness; and, knowing the weariness

of life and the blackness of death, has somewhat lightened the latter

by throwing upon it the thought of the former, and has said, Well, at

any rate, if the grave be narrow and dark, and if outside "the warm

precincts of the cheerful day" there be that ambiguous night, at least

it is the place for sleep; and, if we cannot be sure of anything more,

we shall rest then, at any rate.' So the hope of long disquiet merged

in rest' becomes almost bright, and man's weariness finds most pathetic

expression in his thinking of the grave as a bed where he can stretch

himself and be still. Life is hard, life is dry, life is dangerous.

II. But another thought suggested by these words is--The Mysterious

Hope which shines through them.

One of ourselves shall deliver us from all this evil in life. A man

shall be a refuge, rivers of water, the shadow of a great rock.' Such

an expectation seems to be right in the teeth of all experience and far

too high-pitched ever to be fulfilled. It appears to demand in him who

should bring it to pass powers which are more than human, and which

must in some inexplicable way be wide as the range of humanity and

enduring as the succession of the ages.

It is worth while to realise to ourselves these two points which seem

to make such words as these of our text a blank impossibility.

Experience contradicts them, and common-sense demands for their

fulfilment an apparently impossible human character.

All experience seems to teach--does it not?--that no human arm or heart

can be to another soul what these words promise, and what we need. And

yet the men who have been disappointed and disenchanted a thousand

times do still look among their fellows for what their fellows, too,

are looking for, and none have ever found. Have we found what we seek

among men? Have we ever known amongst the dearest that we have clung

to, one arm that was strong enough to keep us in all danger? Has there

ever been a human love to which we can run with the security that there

is a strong tower where no evil can touch us? There have been many

delights in all our lives mediated and ministered to us by those that

we loved. They have taught us, and helped us, and strengthened us in a

thousand ways. We have received from them draughts of wisdom, of love,

of joy, of guidance, of impulse, of comfort, which have been, as water

in the desert is, more precious than gold. Our fellow-travellers have

shared their store with us, letting down their pitchers upon their

hand,' and giving us drink; but has the draught ever slaked the thirst?

They carry but a pitcher, and a pitcher is not a fountain. Have there

been any in all the round of those that we have loved and trusted, to

whom we have trusted absolutely, without having been disappointed?

They, like us, are hemmed in by human limitations. They each bear a

burdened and thirsty spirit, itself needing such supplies. And to the

truest, happiest, most soul-sufficing companionship, there comes at

last that dread hour which ends all sweet commerce of giving and

receiving, and makes the rest of life, for some of us, one monotonous

ashen-grey wilderness where no water is. These things make it

impossible for us to find anywhere amongst men our refuge and our

fruition.

And yet how strange, how pathetic, is the fact that after all

disappointments, men still obstinately continue to look among their

fellows for guidance and for light, for consolation, for defence, and

for strength! After a thousand failures they still hope. Does not the

search at once confess that hitherto they have not found, else why be

seeking still?--and that they yet believe they will yet find, else why

not cease the vain quest? And surely He who made us, made us not in

vain, nor cursed us with immortal hopes which are only persistent lies.

Surely there is some living Person who will vindicate these

unquenchable hopes of humanity, and receive and requite our love and

trust, and satisfy our longings, and explain the riddle of our lives.

If there be not, nor ever has been, nor ever can be a man who shall

satisfy us with his love, and defend us with his power, and be our

all-sufficient satisfaction and our rest in weariness, then much of

man's noblest nature is a mistake, and many of his purest and

profoundest hopes are an illusion, a mockery, and a snare. The

obstinate hope that, within the limits of humanity, we shall find what

we need is a mystery, except on one hypothesis, that it, too, belongs

to the unconscious prophecies' that God has lodged in all men's hearts.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, how such functions as those of which

my text speaks not only seem to be contradicted by all experience, but

manifestly and obviously to transcend the possibilities of human

nature. A man to defend me; and he himself--does he need no defence? A

man to supply my wants; and is his spirit, then, other than mine, that

it can become the all-sufficient fulness for my emptiness? He that can

do this for one spirit must be greater than the spirit for which he

doeth it. He that can do it for the whole race of man, through all

ages, in all circumstances, down to the end of time, in every latitude,

under every condition of civilisation--who must he be who, for the

whole world, evermore and always, is their defence, their gladness,

their shelter, and their rest?

The function requires a divine power, and the application of the power

requires a human hand. It is not enough that I should be pointed to a

far-off heaven, where there dwells an infinite loving God--I believe

that we need more than that. We need both of the truths: God is my

refuge and my strength,' and A man shall be a hiding-place from the

wind, and a covert from the tempest.'

III. That brings me to the last point to be noticed, namely:--The

solution of the mystery in the person of Jesus Christ.

That which seemed impossible is real. The forebodings of humanity have

not fathomed the powers of Divine Love. There is a man, our brother,

bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, who can be to single souls

the adequate object of their perfect trust, the abiding home of their

deepest love, the unfailing supply for their profoundest wants. There

is one man to whom it is wise and blessed to look as the exclusive

source of all our peace, the absolute ruler of all our lives. There is

a man in whom we find all that we have vainly sought in men. There is a

man, who can be to all ages and to the whole race their refuge, their

satisfaction, their rest. It behoved Him to be made in all points like

unto His brethren,' that His succour might be ever near, and His

sympathy sure. The man Christ Jesus who, being man, is God manifest in

the flesh, exercises in one and the same act the offices of divine pity

and human compassion, of divine and human guardianship, of divine and

human love.

And so the Word had breath, and wrought

With human hands the creed of creeds

In loveliness of perfect deeds,

More strong than all poetic thought.'

The dreams of weary hearts that have longed for an impossible

perfection are all below the reality. The fact surpasses all

expectation. It is more than all prophecies, it is more than all hopes,

it is more than all praise. It is God's unspeakable gift. Well might an

angel voice proclaim the mystery of love, Unto you is born a Saviour,

which is Christ the Lord.' The ancient promise of our text is history

now. A man has been and is all these things for us.

A refuge and a hiding-place from every storm--adverse circumstances

sweep upon us, and His mighty hand is put down there as a buckler,

behind which we may hide and be safe. Temptations to evil storm upon

us, but if we are enclosed within Him they never touch us. The fears of

our own hearts swirl like a river in flood against the walls of our

fortress home, and we can laugh at them, for it is founded upon a rock!

The day of judgment rises before us solemn and certain, and we can

await it without fear, and approach it with calm joy. I call upon no

mountains and hills to cover me.

Rock of ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.'

Rivers of water in a dry place,'--hungry and thirsty, my soul fainted

within me. I longed for light, and behold darkness. I longed for help,

and there was none that could come close to my spirit to succour and to

give me drink in the desert. My conscience cried in all its wounds for

cleansing and stanching, and no comforter nor any balm was there. My

heart, weary of limited loves and mortal affections, howsoever sweet

and precious, yearned and bled for one to rest upon all-sufficient and

eternal. I thirsted with a thirst that was more than desire, that was

pain, and was coming to be death, and I heard a voice which said, If

any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.'

The shadow of a great rock in a weary land,'--and my heart was weary by

reason of the greatness of the way, and duties and tasks seemed toils

and burdens, and I was ready to say, Wherefore has Thou made me and all

men in vain? Surely all this is vanity and vexation of spirit,' and I

heard One that laid His hand upon me and said, Come unto Me, and I will

give thee rest.' I come to Thee, O Christ, faint and perishing,

defenceless and needy, with many a sin and many a fear; to Thee I turn

for Thou hast died for me, and for me thou dost live. Be Thou my

shelter and strong tower. Give me to drink of living water. Let me rest

in Thee while in this weary land, and let Thy sweet love, my Brother

and my Lord, be mine all on earth and the heaven of my heaven!

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HOW TO DWELL IN THE FIRE OF GOD

Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall

dwell with everlasting burnings? 15. He that walketh righteously, and

speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that

shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from

hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.'--ISAIAH

xxxiii. 14, 15.

He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God'--1 JOHN iv. 16.

I have put these two verses together because, striking as is at first

sight the contrast in their tone, they refer to the same subject, and

they substantially preach the same truth. A hasty reader, who is more

influenced by sound than by sense, is apt to suppose that the solemn

expressions in my first text, the devouring fire' and' everlasting

burnings,' mean hell. They mean God, as is quite obvious from the

context. The man who is to dwell in the devouring fire' is the good

man. He that is able to abide the everlasting burnings' is the man that

walketh righteously and speaketh uprightly,' that despiseth the gain of

oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that

stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from

seeing evil.' The prophet has been calling all men, far and near, to

behold a great act of divine judgment in which God has been manifested

in flaming glory, consuming evil; now he represents the sinners in

Zion,' the unworthy members of the nation, as seized with sudden

terror, and anxiously asking this question, which in effect means: Who

among us can abide peacefully, joyfully, fed and brightened, not

consumed and annihilated, by that flashing brightness and purity?' The

prophet's answer is the answer of common-sense--like draws to like. A

holy God must have holy companions.

But that is not all. The fire of God is the fire of love as well as the

fire of purity; a fire that blesses and quickens, as well as a fire

that destroys and consumes. So the Apostle John comes with his answer,

not contradicting the other one, but deepening it, expanding it,

letting us see the foundations of it, and proclaiming that as a holy

God must be surrounded by holy hearts, which will open themselves to

the flame as flowers to the sunshine, so a loving God must be clustered

about by loving hearts, who alone can enter into deep and true

friendship with Him.

The two answers, then, of these texts are one at bottom; and when

Isaiah asks, Who shall dwell with the everlasting fire?'--the perpetual

fire, burning and unconsumed, of that divine righteousness--the deepest

answer, which is no stern requirement but a merciful promise, is John's

answer, He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.'

The simplest way, I think, of bringing out the force of the words

before us will be just to take these three points which I have already

suggested: the world's question, the partial answer of the prophet, the

complete answer of the Apostle.

I. The World's Question.

I need only remind you how frequently in the Old Testament the emblem

of fire is employed to express the divine nature. In many places,

though by no means in all, the prominent idea in the emblem is that of

the purity of the divine nature, which flashes and flames as against

all which is evil and sinful. So we read in one grand passage in this

book of Isaiah, the Light of Israel shall become a fire'; as if the

lambent beauty of the highest manifestation of God gathered itself

together, intensified itself, was forced back upon itself, and from

merciful, illuminating light turned itself into destructive and

consuming fire. And we read, you may remember, too, in the description

of the symbolical manifestation of the divine nature which accompanied

the giving of the Law on Sinai, that the glory of the Lord was like

devouring fire on the top of the mountain,' and yet into that blaze and

brightness the Lawgiver went, and lived and moved in it.

There is, then, in the divine nature a side of antagonism and

opposition to evil, which flames against it, and labours to consume it.

I would speak with all respect for the motives of many men in this day

who dread to entertain the idea of the divine wrath against evil, lest

they should in any manner trench upon the purity and perfectness of the

divine love. I respect and sympathise with the motive altogether; and I

neither respect nor sympathise with the many ferocious pictures of that

which is called the wrath of God against sin, which much so-called

orthodox teaching has indulged in. But if you will only remove from

that word anger' the mere human associations which cleave to it, of

passion on the one hand, and of a wish to hurt its object on the other,

then you cannot, I think, deny to the divine nature the possession of

such passionless and unmalignant wrath, without striking a fatal blow

at the perfect purity of God. A God that does not hate evil, that does

not flame out against it, using all the energies of His being to

destroy it, is a God to whose character there cleaves a fatal suspicion

of indifference to good, of moral apathy. If I have not a God to trust

in that hates evil because He loveth righteousness, then the pillared

firmament itself were rottenness, and earth's base built on stubble';

nor were there any hope that this damnable thing that is killing and

sucking the life-blood out of our spirits should ever be destroyed and

cast aside. Oh! it is short-sighted wisdom, and it is cruel kindness,

to tamper with the thought of the wrath of God, the everlasting

burnings' of that eternally pure nature wherewith it wages war against

all sin.

But then, let us remember that, on the other side, the fire which is

the destructive fire of perfect purity is also the fire that quickens

and blesses. God is love, says John, and love is fire, too. We speak of

the flame of love,' of warm affections,' and the like. The symbol of

fire does not mean destructive energy only. And these two are one.

God's wrath is a form of God's love; God hates because He loves.

And the wrath' and the love' differ much more in the difference of the

eyes that look, than they do in themselves. Here are two bits of glass;

one of them sifts out and shows all the fiery-red rays, the other all

the yellow. It is the one same pure, white beam that passes through

them both, but one is only capable of receiving the fiery-red beams of

the wrath, and the other is capable of receiving the golden light of

the love. Let us take heed lest, by destroying the wrath, we maim the

love; and let us take heed lest, by exaggerating the wrath, we empty

the love of its sweetness and its preciousness; and let us accept the

teaching that these are one, and that the deepest of all the things

that the world can know about God lies in that double saying, which

does not contradict its second half by its first, but completes its

first by its second--God is Righteousness, God is Love.

Well, then, that being so, the question rises to every mind of ordinary

thoughtfulness: Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who

among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?' A God fighting against

evil; can you and I hope to hold familiar fellowship with Him? A God

fighting against evil; if He rises up to exercise His judging and His

punishing energies, can we meet Him? Can thy heart endure and thy hands

be strong, in the day that I shall deal with thee?' is the question

that comes to each of us if we are reasonable people. I do not dwell

upon it; but I ask you to take it, and answer it for yourselves.

To dwell with everlasting burnings' means two things. First, it means

to hold familiar intercourse and communion with God. The question which

presents itself to thoughtful minds is--What sort of man must I be if I

am to dwell near God? The lowliest bush may be lit by the divine fire

and not be consumed by it; and the poorest heart may be all aflame with

an indwelling God, if only it yield itself to Him, and long for His

likeness. Electricity only flames into consuming fire when its swift

passage is resisted. The question for us all is--How can I receive this

holy fire into my bosom, and not be burned? Is any communion possible,

and if it is, on what conditions? These are the questions which the

heart of man is really asking, though it knows not the meaning of its

own unrest.

To dwell with everlasting burnings' means, secondly, to bear the action

of the fire--the judgment of the present and the judgment of the

future. The question for each of us is--How can we face that judicial

and punitive action of that Divine Providence which works even here,

and how can we face the judicial and punitive action in the future?

I suppose you all believe, or at least say that you believe, that there

is such a future judgment. Have you ever asked yourselves the question,

and rested not until you got a reasonable answer to it, on which, like

a man leaning on a pillar, you can lean the whole weight of your

expectations--How am I to come into the presence of that devouring

fire? Have you any fireproof dress that will enable you to go into the

furnace like the Hebrew youths, and walk up and down in the midst of

it, well and at liberty? Have you? Who shall dwell amidst the

everlasting fires?'

That question has stirred sometimes, I know, in the consciences of

every man and woman that is listening to me. Some of you have tampered

with it and tried to throttle it, or laughed at it and shuffled it out

of your mind by the engrossments of business, and tried to get rid of

it in all sorts of ways: and here it has met you again to-day. Let us

have it settled, in the name of common-sense (to invoke nothing

higher), once for all, upon reasonable principles that will stand; and

do you see that you settle it to-day.

II. And now, look next at the prophet's answer.

It is simple. He says that if a man is to hold fellowship with, or to

face the judgment of, the pure and righteous God, the plainest dictate

of reason and common-sense is that he himself must be pure and

righteous to match. The details into which hid answer to the question

runs out are all very homely, prosaic, pedestrian kind of virtues,

nothing at all out of the way, nothing that people would call splendid

or heroic. Here they are:--He that walks righteously,'--a short

injunction, easily spoken, but how hard!--and speaketh uprightly, he

that despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from

holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, that

shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.' Righteous action, righteous

speech, inward hatred of possessions gotten at my neighbour's cost, and

a vehement resistance to all the seductions of sense, shutting one's

hands, stopping one's ears, fastening one's eyes up tight so that he

may not handle, nor hear, nor see the evil--there is the outline of a

trite, everyday sort of morality which is to mark the man who, as

Isaiah says, can dwell amongst the everlasting fires.'

Now, if at your leisure you will turn to Psalms xv. and xxiv., you will

find there two other versions of the same questions and the same

answer, both of which were obviously in our prophet's mind when he

spoke. In the one you have the question put: Who shall abide in Thy

tabernacle?' In the other you have the same question put: Who shall

ascend into the hill of the Lord?' And both these two psalms answer the

question and sketch the outline (and it is only an outline) of a

righteous man, from the Old Testament point of view, substantially in

the same fashion that Isaiah does here.

I do not need to remark upon the altogether unscientific and

non-exhaustive nature of the description of righteousness that is set

forth here. There are a great many virtues, plain and obvious, that are

left out of the picture. But I ask you to notice one very special

defect, as it might seem. There is not the slightest reference to

anything that we call religion. It is all purely pedestrian, worldly

morality; do righteous things; do not tell lies; do not cheat your

neighbour; stop your ears if people say foul things in your hearing;

shut your eyes if evil comes before you. These are the kind of duties

enjoined, and these only. The answer of my text moves altogether on the

surface, dealing only with conduct, not with character, and dealing

with conduct only in reference to this world. There is not a word about

the inner nature, not a word about the inner relation of a man to God.

It is the minimum of possible qualifications for dwelling with God.

Well, now, do you achieve that minimum? Suppose we waive for the moment

all reference to God; suppose we waive for the moment all reference to

motive and inward nature; suppose we keep ourselves only on the outside

of things, and ask what sort of conduct a man must have that is able to

walk with God? We have heard the answer.

Now, then, is that me? Is this sketch here, admittedly imperfect, a

mere black-and-white swift outline, not intended to be shaded or

coloured, or brought up to the round; is this mere outline of what a

good man ought to be, at all like me? Yes or no? I think we must all

say No to the question, and acknowledge our failure to attain to this

homely ideal of conduct. The requirement pared down to its lowest

possible degree, and kept as superficial as ever you can keep it, is

still miles above me, and all I have to say when I listen to such words

is, God be merciful to me a sinner.'

My dear friends, take this one thought away with you:--the requirements

of the most moderate conscience are such as no man among us is able to

comply with. And what then? Am I to be shut up to despair? am I to say:

Then nobody can dwell within that bright flame? Am I to say: Then when

God meets man, man must crumble away into nothing and disappear? Am I

to say, for myself: Then, alas for me! when I stand at His judgment

bar?

III. Let us take the Apostle's answer.

God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.' Now, to

begin with, let us distinctly understand that the New Testament answer,

represented by John's great words, entirely endorses Isaiah's; and that

the difference between the two is not that the Old Testament, as

represented by psalmist and prophet, said, You must be righteous in

order to dwell with God,' and that the New Testament says, You need not

be.' Not at all! John is just as vehement in saying that nothing but

purity can bind a man in thoroughly friendly and familiar conjunction

with God as David or Isaiah was. He insists as much as anybody can

insist upon this great principle, that if we are to dwell with God we

must be like God, and that we are like God when we are like Him in

righteousness and love.

He that saith he hath fellowship with Him, and walketh in darkness, is

a liar!' That is John's short way of gathering it all up. Righteousness

is as essential in the gospel scheme for all communion and fellowship

with God as ever it was declared to be by the most rigid of legalists;

and if any of you have the notion that Christianity has any other terms

to lay down than the old terms--that righteousness is essential to

communion--you do not understand Christianity. If any of you are

building upon the notion that a man can come into loving and familiar

friendship with God as long as he loves and cleaves to any sin, you

have got hold of a delusion that will wreck your souls yet,--is,

indeed, harming, wrecking them now, and will finally destroy them if

you do not got rid of it. Let us always remember that the declaration

of my first text lies at the very foundation of the declaration of my

second.

What, then, is the difference between them? Why, for one thing it is

this--ISAIAH tells us that we must he righteous, John tells us how we

may be. The one says, There are the conditions,' the other says, Here

are the means by which you can have the conditions.' Love is the

productive germ of all righteousness; it is the fulfilling of the law.

Get that into your hearts, and all these relative and personal duties

will come. If the deepest, inmost life is right, all the surface of

life will come right. Conduct will follow character, character will

follow love.

The efforts of men to make themselves pure, and so to come into the

position of holding fellowship with God, are like the wise efforts of

children in their gardens. They stick in their little bits of rootless

flowers, and they water them; but, being rootless, the flowers are all

withered to-morrow and flung over the hedge the day after. But if we

have the love of God in our hearts, we have not rootless flowers, but

the seed which will spring up and bear fruit of holiness.

But that is not all. Isaiah says Righteousness,' John says Love,' which

makes righteousness. And then he tells us how we may get love, having

first told us how we may get righteousness: We love Him because He

first loved us.' It is just as impossible for a man to work himself

into loving God as it is for a man to work himself into righteous

actions. There is no difference in the degree of impossibility in the

two cases. But what we can do is, we can go and gaze at the thing that

kindles the love; we can contemplate the Cross on which the great Lover

of our souls died, and thereby we can come to love Him. John's answer

goes down to the depths, for his notion of love is the response of the

believing soul to the love of God which was manifested on the Cross of

Calvary. To have righteousness we must have love; to have love we must

look to the love that God has to us; to look rightly to the love that

God has to us we must have faith. Now you have gone down to the very

bottom of the matter. Faith is the first step of the ladder, and the

second step is love and the third step is righteousness.

And so the New Testament, in its highest and most blessed declarations,

rests itself firmly upon these rigid requirements of the old law. You

and I, dear brethren, have but one way by which we can walk in the

midst of that fire, rejoicing and unconsumed, namely that we shall know

and believe the love which God hath to us, love Him back again with

pure hearts fervently,' and in the might of that receptive faith and

productive love, become like Him in holiness, and ourselves be baptized

with the Holy Ghost and with fire.' Thus, fire-born and fiery, we shall

dwell as in our native home, in God Himself.

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THE FORTRESS OF THE FAITHFUL

He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of

rocks; bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure.'--ISAIAH

xxxiii. 16.

This glowing promise becomes even more striking if we mark its

connection with the solemn question in the previous context. Who among

us shall dwell with the devouring fire?' is the prophet's question; who

among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?' That question really

means, Who is capable of communion with God'? The prophet sketches the

outline of the character in the subsequent verses, and then recurring

to his metaphor of a habitation, and yet with a most lovely and

significant modification, he says, he'--the man that he has been

sketching--shall dwell,' not with the everlasting burnings,' but on

high; his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks,' like some

little hill, fort, or city, perched upon a mountain, and having within

it ample provision and an unfailing spring of water. His bread shall,

be given him, his water shall be sure.' To dwell with the devouring

fire' is to dwell on high,' to be safe and satisfied. So then, whilst

the words before us have, of course, direct and immediate reference to

the Assyrian invasion, and promise, in a literal sense, security and

exemption from its evils to the righteous in Israel, they widen and

deepen into a picturesque, but not less real, statement of what comes

into the religious life, by communion with God. There are three things:

elevation, security, satisfaction.

He shall dwell on high.'

In the East, and in all unsettled countries, you will find that the

sites of the cities are on the hilltops, for a very plain reason, and

that is the fact that underlies the prophet's representation. To hold

fellowship with God, to live in union with Him, to have His thoughts

for my thoughts, and His love wrapping my heart, and His will enshrined

in my will; to carry Him about with me into all the pettinesses of

daily life, and, amidst the whirlpool of duties and changing

circumstances, to sit in the centre, as it were the eye of the

whirlpool where there is a dead calm, that lifts a man on high.

Communion with God secures elevation of spirit, raising us clean above

the flat that lies beneath. There are many ways by which men seek for

lofty thoughts, and a general elevation above the carking cares and

multiplied minutenesses of this poor, mortal, transient life; but while

books and great thoughts, and the converse of the wise, and art, and

music, and all these other elevating influences have a real place and a

blessed efficiency in ennobling life, there is not one of them, nor all

of them put together, that will give to the human spirit that strange

and beautiful elevation above the world and the flesh and the devil,

which simple communion with God will give. I have seen many a poor man

who knew nothing about the lofty visions that shape and lift humanity,

who had no side of him responsive to aesthetics or art or music, who

was no thinker, no student, who never had spoken to anybody above the

rank of a poor labouring man, and to whom all the wisdom of the nations

was a closed chamber, who yet in his life, ay! and on his face, bore

marks of a spirit elevated into a serene region where there was no

tumult, and where nothing unclean or vicious could live. A few of the

select spirits of the race may painfully climb on high by thought and

effort. Get God into your hearts, and it will be like filling the round

of a silken balloon with light air; you will soar instead of climbing,

and dwell on high.' When you are up there, the things below that look

largest will dwindle and show,' as Shakespeare has it, scarce so gross

as beetles,' looked at from the height, and the noises will sink to a

scarcely audible murmur, and you will be able to see the lie of the

country, and, as it says in the context, your eyes shall behold the

land that is very far off.' Yes! the hilltop is the place for wide

views, and for understanding the course of the serpentine river, and it

is the place to discover how small are the mightiest things at the

foot, and how little a way towards the sun the noises of human praise

or censure can ever travel. He shall dwell on high,' and he will see a

long way off, and understand the relative magnitude of things, and the

strife of tongues will have ceased for him.

And more than that is implied in the promise. If we dwell on high, we

shall come down with all the more force on what lies below. There is no

greater caricature and misconception of Christianity than that which

talks as if the spirit that lived in daily communion with God, high

above the world, was remote from the world. Why, how do they make

electricity nowadays? By the fall of water from a height, and the

higher the level from which it descends, the mightier the force which

it generates in the descent. So nobody will tell on the world like the

man who lives above it. The height from which a weight rushes down

measures the force of its dint where it falls, and of the energy with

which it comes. He shall dwell on high'; and only the man that stands

above the world is able to influence it.

Again, here is another blessing of the Christian life, put in a

picturesque form: His defence shall be munitions of rocks.' That is a

promise of security from assailants, which in its essence is true

always, though its truth may seem doubtful to the superficial estimate

of sense. The experience of the South African war showed how

impregnable the munitions of rocks' were. The Boers lay safe behind

them, and our soldiers might fire lyddite at them all day and never

touch them. So, the man who lives in communion with God has between him

and all evil the Rock of Ages, and he lies at the back of it, quiet and

safe, whatever foe may rage on the other side of it.

Now, of course, the prophet meant to tell his countrymen that, in the

theocracy of which they were parts, righteousness and nothing else was

the national security, and if a man or a nation lived in communion with

God, it bore a charmed life. That is a great deal more true, in regard

to externals, in the miraculous dispensation,' as it is called, of the

Old Testament than it is now, and we are not to take over these

promises in their gross literal form into the Christian era, as if they

were unconditional and absolutely to be fulfilled. But at the same

time, if you reflect how many of our troubles do come to us mainly

because we break our communion with God, I think we shall see that this

old word has still an application to our daily lives and outward

circumstances. Deduct from any man's life all the discomfort and

trouble and calamity which have come down upon him because he was not

in touch with God, and there will not be very much left. Yet there will

be some, and the deepest and sorest of all our sorrows are not to be

interpreted as occasioned by defects in our dwelling in God. Then has

my text no application to them? Yes, because what still remains of

earthly cares and sorrows and evils would, in communion with God,

change its character. The rind is the same; but all the interior

contents have been, as children will do with a fruit, scooped out, and

another kind of thing has been put inside, so that though the outward

appearance is the same, what is at the heart of it is utterly

different. It is no longer some coarse, palate-biting, common

vegetable, but a sweet confection, made by God's own hands, and put

into the gourd, which has been hollowed out and emptied of its evil.

That is, perhaps, a very violent figure, but take a plain case as

illustration. Suppose two men, each of them going to his wife's

funeral. The two hearses pass inside the cemetery gates, one after the

other. Outwardly the two afflictions are the same, but the one man

says, The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away'; the other man says,

They have taken away my gods, and what shall I do more?' Are the two

things the same? He shall dwell on high, his place of defence shall be

the munitions of rocks,' and if we do hide ourselves in the cleft, then

no evil shall befall us, nor any plague come nigh our dwelling.

But there is another truth contained in this great promise, viz., that

in regard to all the real evils which beset men, and these are all

summed up in the one, the temptation to do wrong, their arrows will be

blunted, and their force be broken, if we keep our minds in touch with

God through humble communion and lowly obedience. Dear brethren, the

way by which we can conquer temptations around, and silence

inclinations within which riotously seek to yield to the temptations

is, I believe, far more by cultivating a consciousness of communion

with God, than by specific efforts directed to the overcoming of a

given and particular temptation. Keep inside the fortress, and no

bullet will come near you. Array yourselves in the most elaborate

precautions and step out from its shadow, and every bullet will strike

and wound. Let me keep up my fellowship with God, and I may laugh at

temptation. Security depends on continual communion with God by faith,

love, aspiration, and obedience.

Now, I need not say more than a word about the last element in these

promises, the satisfaction of desires. His bread shall be given him,

and his water shall be sure.' In ancient warfare sieges were usually

blockades; and strong fortresses were reduced by famine much more

frequently than by assault. Mafeking and Ladysmith and Port Arthur were

in most danger from that cause. The promise here assures us that we

shall have all supplies in our abode, if God is our abode. Wherever he

who dwells in God goes, he carries with him his provisions, and he does

not need elaborate arrangements of pipes or reservoirs, because there

is a fountain in the courtyard that the enemy cannot get at. They may

stop the springs throughout the land, they may cut off all water

supplies, so that there shall be no fruit in the vine, and the labour

of the olive shall fail,' but they cannot touch the fountain. His water

shall be sure,' and he can say, In the days of famine I shall be

satisfied.'

God is and gives all that we need for sustenance, for growth, for

refreshment, for satisfaction of our desires. Keep near Him, and you

will find in the heart of the devouring fire a shelter, and you will

have all that you want for life here. My text will be true about us, in

the measure in which we do thus dwell, and if we thus dwell here, and

so dwell on high, with the munitions of rocks for our fortress, and the

bread of God that came down from heaven' for our food, and the water of

life for our refreshment, then, when there is no longer any need of

places for defence, the other saying will be true, They shall hunger no

more, neither thirst any more, for the Lamb which is in the midst of

the throne shall feed them . . . and shall lead them to living

fountains of waters, and God, the Lord, shall wipe away all tears from

their eyes.'

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THE RIVERS OF GOD

But there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and

streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant

ship pass thereby.'--ISAIAH xxxiii. 21.

One great peculiarity of Jerusalem, which distinguishes it from almost

all other historical cities, is that it has no river. Babylon was on

the Euphrates, Nineveh on the Tigris, Thebes on the Nile, Rome on the

Tiber; but Jerusalem had nothing but a fountain or two, and a well or

two, and a little trickle and an intermittent stream. The water supply

to-day is, and always has been, a great difficulty, and an insuperable

barrier to the city's ever having a great population.

That deficiency throws a great deal of beautiful light on more than one

passage in the Old Testament. For instance, this same prophet contrasts

the living stream, the waters of Siloam, as an emblem of the gentle

sway of the divine King of Israel, with the river, strong and mighty,'

which was the symbol of Assyria; and a psalm that we all know well,

sings, There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of

God,'--a triumphant exclamation which is robbed of half its force,

unless we remember that the literal Jerusalem had no river at all. The

vision of living waters flowing from the Temple which Ezekiel saw is a

variation of the same theme, and suggests that in the Messianic days

the deficiency shall be made good, and a mysterious stream shall spring

up from behind, and flow out from beneath, the temple doors, and then

with rapid increase and depth and width, but with no tributaries coming

into it, shall run fertilising and life-giving everywhere, till it

pours itself into the noisome waters of the sullen sea of death and

heals even them.

The same general representation is contained in the words before us.

Isaiah's great vision is not, as I take it, of a future, but of what

the Jerusalem of his day might he to the Israelite if he would live by

faith. The mighty Lord, the glorious Lord,' shall Himself be a place of

broad rivers and streams.'

I. First, then, this remarkable promise suggests to me how in God there

is the supply of all deficiencies.

The city was perched on its barren, hot rock, with scarcely a drop of

water, and its inhabitants must often have been tempted to wish that

there had been running down the sun-bleached bed of the Kedron a

flashing stream, such as laved the rock-cut temples and tombs of

Thebes. Isaiah says, in effect, You cannot see it, but if you will

trust yourselves to God, there will be such a river.'

In like manner every defect in our circumstances, everything lacking in

our lives--and we all have something which does not correspond with, or

which falls beneath, our wishes and apparent needs--everything which

seems to hamper us in some aspects, and to sadden us in others, may be

compensated and made up if we will hold fast by God; and although to

outward sense we dwell in a dry and barren land where no water is,' the

eye of faith will see, flashing and flowing all around, the rejoicing

waters of the divine presence, and they will mirror the sky, and the

reflections will teach us that there is a heaven above us.

If there is in any life a gap, that is a prophecy that God will fill

it. If there is anything in your circumstances in regard to which you

often feel sadly, and are sometimes tempted to feel bitterly, how much

stronger and more fully equipped you would be, if it were otherwise, be

sure that in God there is that which can supply the want, and that the

consciousness of the want is a merciful summons to seek its supply from

and in Him. If there is a breach in the encircling wall of your

defences, God has made it in order that He Himself, and not an enemy,

may enter your lives and hearts. In the year that King Uzziah died, I

saw the Lord sitting on a throne,' and it did not matter though that

mortal king was dead, for the true King was thereby revealed as living

for ever, just as when the summer foliage, fluttering and green, drops

from the tree, the sturdy stem and the strong branches are made the

more visible. Our felt deficiencies are doors by which God may come in.

Do you sometimes feel as if you would be better if you had easier

worldly circumstances? Is your health precarious and feeble? Have you

to walk a solitary path through this world, and does your heart often

ache for companionship? You can have all your heart's desire fulfilled

in deepest reality in God, in the same way that that riverless city had

Jehovah for a place of broad rivers and streams.'

II. Take another side of the same thought. Here is a revelation of God

and His sweet presence as our true defence.

The river that lay between some strong city and the advancing enemy was

its strongest fortification when the bridge of boats was taken away.

One of the ancient cities to which I have referred is described by one

of the prophets as being held as within the coils of a serpent, by

which he means the various bendings and twistings of the Euphrates,

which encompassed Babylon, and made it so hard to be conquered. The

primitive city of Paris owed its safety in the wild old times when it

was founded, to its being on an island. Venice has lived through many

centuries, because it is girded about by its lagoons. England is what

it is, largely because of the streak of silver sea.' So God's city has

a broad moat all round it. The prophet goes on to explain the force of

his bold figure in regard to the safety promised by it, when he says:

Wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass

thereby.' Not a keel of the enemy shall dare to cut its waters, nor

break their surface with the wet plash of invading oars. And so, if we

will only knit ourselves with God by simple trust and continual

communion, it is the plainest prose fact that nothing will harm us, and

no foe will ever get near enough to us to shoot his arrows against us.

That is a truth for faith, and not for sense. Many a man, truly

compassed about by God, has to go through fiery trial and sorrow and

affliction. But I venture to appeal to every heart that has known grief

most acutely, protractedly, and frequently, and has borne it in the

faith of God, and with submission to Him; and I know that they who are

the experts,' and who alone have the right to speak with authority on

the subject, will confirm the statement that I make, that sorrows

recognised as sent from God are the truest blessings of our lives. No

real evil befalls us, because, according to the old superstition that

money bewitched was cleansed if it was handed across running water, our

sorrows only reach us across the river that defends.

Isaiah is full of symbols of various kinds for the impregnability of

Zion. Sometimes, as in my text, he falls back upon the thought of the

bright waters of the moat on which no enemy can venture to sail.

Sometimes he draws his metaphor from the element opposed to water, and

speaks of a wall of fire round about us. But the simple reality that

lies below all the poetry is, that trust in God brings His presence

around me, and that makes it impossible that any evil should befall me,

and certain that whatever does befall me is His messenger, His loving

messenger, for my good. If we believed that, and lived on the belief,

the whole world would be different.

III. Take, again, another aspect of this same thought, which suggests

to us God's presence as our true refreshment and satisfaction.

The waterless city depended on cisterns, and they were often broken,

and were always more or less foul, and sometimes the water fell very

low in them. Isaiah says to us: Even when you are living in external

circumstances like that:

When all created streams are dry,

Thy fulness is the same.'

The fountain of living waters--if we may slightly vary the metaphor of

my text--never sinks one hair's-breadth in its crystal basin, however

many thirsty lips may be glued to its edge, and however large may be

their draughts from it. This metaphor, turned to the purpose of

suggesting how in God every part of our nature finds its appropriate

nourishment and refreshment which it does not find anywhere besides,

has become one of the commonplaces of the pulpit. Would it were the

commonplace of our lives! It is easy to talk about Him as being the

fountain of living waters; it is easy to quote and to admire the words

which the Master spoke to the Samaritan woman when He said, I would

have given thee living water,' and the water which I give will be a

fountain springing up into everlasting life.' We repeat or learn such

sayings, and then what do we do? We go away and try to slake our thirst

at broken cisterns, and every draught which we take is like the salt

water from which a shipwrecked-boat's crew in its madness will

sometimes not be able to refrain, each drop increasing the raging

thirst and hastening the impending death.

If we believed that God was the broad river from which we could draw

and draw, and drink and drink, for ever and ever, should we be clinging

with such desperate tenacity, as most of us exhibit, to earthly goods?

Should we whimper with such childish regrets, as most of us nourish,

when these goods are diminished or withdrawn? Should we live as we

constantly do, day in and day out, seldom applying ourselves to the one

source of strength and peace and refreshment, and trying, like fools,

to find what apart from Him the world can never give? The rivers in

northern Tartary all lose themselves in the sand. Not one of them has

volume or force enough to get to the sea. And the rivers from which we

try to drink are sand-choked long before our thirst is slaked. So, if

we are wise, we shall take Isaiah's hint, and go where the water flows

abundantly, and flows for ever.

IV. There is a last point that I would also suggest, namely, the

manifold variety in the results of God's presence.

It shapes itself into many forms, according to our different needs. The

glorious Lord shall be a place of broad rivers.' Yes; but notice the

next words--and streams.' Now, the word which is there translated

streams' means little channels for irrigation and other purposes, by

which the water of some great river is led off into the melon patches,

and gardens, and plantations, and houses of the inhabitants. So we have

not only the picture of the broad river in its unity, but also that of

the thousand little rivulets in their multiplicity, and in their

direction to each man's plot of ground. It is the same idea that is in

the psalm which I have already quoted: There is a river, the streams

whereof make glad the city of our God.' You can divide the river up

into very tiny trickles, according to the moment's small wants. If you

make but a narrow channel, you will get but a shallow streamlet; and if

you make your channel broad and deep, you will get much of Him.

It is of no profit that we live on the river's bank if we let its

waters go rolling and flashing past our door, or our gardens, or our

lips. Unless you have a sluice, by which you can take them off into

your own territory, and keep the shining blessing to be the source of

fertility in your own garden, and of coolness and refreshment to your

own thirst, your garden will be parched, and your lips will crack.

There is a broad river,' and there are also streams'; which, being

brought down to its simplest expression, just comes to this--that we

may and must make God our very own property. It is useless to say our

God,' the God of Israel,' the God of the Church,' the Great Creator,'

the Universal Father,' and so on, unless we say my God and my Saviour,'

my Refuge and my Strength.' How much of the river have you dipped up in

your own vessel? How much of it have you taken with which to water your

own vineyard and refresh your own souls?

The time comes when Isaiah's prophecy shall be perfectly fulfilled,

according to the great words in the closing hook of Scripture, about

the river of the water of life proceeding out of the Throne of God and

of the Lamb. But, till that time comes, we do not need to wander

thirsty in a desert; but all round us we may hear the mighty waters

rolling everywhere, and drink deep draughts of delight and supply for

all our needs, from the very presence of God Himself.

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JUDGE, LAWGIVER, KING

For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our

King; He will save us.'--ISAIAH xxxiii. 22.

There is reference here to the three forms of government in Israel: by

Moses, by Judges, by Kings. In all, Israel was a Theocracy. Isaiah

looks beyond the human representative to the true divine Reality.

I. A truth for us, in both its more specific and its more general

forms.

(a) Specific. Christ is all these three for us--Authority; His will

law; Defender.

(b) More general. Everything that human beings are to us, they are by

derivation from Him--and He sums in Himself all forms of good and

blessing. Every name among men for any kind of helper belongs to Him.

All tender, helpful relationships are but broken lights of Thee.'

II. A lesson hard to learn and to remember.

One knows not whether it is harder for faith to look beyond the visible

helpers or delights to the Unseen Real One, or to look through tears,

when these are gone, and to see Him clearly filling an otherwise empty

field of vision. When we have a palpable prop to lean on, it is

difficult to be clearly aware that, unless the palpable support were

held up by the Unseen, it could not be a prop, and to lean on it would

be like resting one's weight on a staff stuck in yielding mud. But it

is no less difficult to tell our hearts that we have all that we ever

had, when what we had leaned on for many happy days and found to hold

us up is stricken from beneath us. Present, the seen lawgiver, judge,

or king stays the eyes that should travel past him to God Himself;

removed, his absence makes a great emptiness, in whose vacuity it is

difficult for faith to discern the real presence of Him who is all that

the departed seemed to be. The painted glass stays the eye; shattered,

it lets in only the sight of a void and far-off sky.

Israel could not breathe freely in the rarefied air on the heights of a

theocracy, and demanded a visible king. It had its desire, and as a

consequence, leanness in its soul.' Christendom has found it as

difficult to do without visible embodiments of authority, law, defence,

and hence many evils and corruptions in the institutions and practices

of organised Christianity.

III. A conviction which makes strong and blessed.

To have dominant in our minds, and operative through our lives, the

settled conviction that God in Christ is for us judge, lawgiver, and

king, and that the purpose of all these offices or relationships is

that He will save us' is the secret of tranquillity, the fountain of

courage, the talisman which makes life all different and us who live in

it different. Fear cannot survive where that conviction rules and

fortifies a heart. We shall not be slavish adherents of men if we are

accustomed to take our orders from our Lawgiver. Earthly prizes or

dignities will not dazzle eyes that have seen the King in His beauty.

We shall pay little heed to men's judgments if there flames ever before

conscience the thought, He that judgeth me is the Lord.' He will save

us'; who can destroy what His hand is stretched out to preserve? If God

is for us, who is against us? It is God that justifieth; who is He that

condemneth?'

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MIRACLES OF HEALING

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf

shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the

tongue of the dumb sing.'--ISAIAH xxxv. 5, 6.

Then'--when? The previous verse answers, Behold, your God will come, He

will come and save you.' And what or when is that coming'? A glance at

the place which this grand hymn occupies in the series of Isaiah's

prophecies answers that question. It stands at the close of the first

part of these, and is the limit of the prophet's vision. He has been

setting forth the Lord's judgments upon all heathen, and His

deliverance of Israel from its oppressors; and the coming' is His

manifestation for that double purpose. Before its flashing brightness,

barrenness is changed into verdure, diseases that lame men's powers

vanish, the dry and thirsty land gleams with the shining light of

sudden streams. Across the wilderness stretches a broad path, raised

high above the bewildering monotony of pathless sand, too plain to be

missed, too lofty for wild beasts' suppleness to spring upon it: along

it troop with song and gladness the returning exiles, with hope in

their hearts as they journey to Zion, where they find a joyful home

undimmed by sorrow, and in which sighing and sorrow are heard and felt

no more.

Now this is poetry, no doubt; the golden light of imagination suffuses

it all, but it is poetry with a solid meaning in it. It is not a mere

play of fancy exalting the coming of the Lord' by heaping together all

images that suggest the vanishing of evil and the coming of good. If

there is a basis of facts in it, what are they? What is the period of

that emphatic then' at the beginning of our text? The return of the

Jews from exile? Yes, certainly; but some greater event shines through

the words. Some future restoration of that undying race to their own

land? Yes, possibly, again we answer, but that does not exhaust the

prophecy. The great coming of God to save in the gift of His Son? Yes,

that in an eminent degree. The second coming of Christ? Yes, that too.

All the events in which God has come for men's deliverance are shadowed

here; for in them all, the same principles are at work, and in all,

similar effects have followed. But mainly the mission and work of Jesus

Christ is pointed at here--whether in its first stage of Incarnation

and Passion, or in its second stage of Coming in glory, the second time

without sin, unto salvation.'

And the bodily diseases here enumerated are symbols, just as Christ's

miracles were symbolical, just as every language has used the body as a

parable of the soul, and has felt that there is such a harmony between

them that the outward and visible does correspond to and shadow the

inward and spiritual.

I think, then, that we may fairly take these four promises as bringing

out very distinctly the main characteristics of the blessed effects of

Christ's work in the world. The great subject of these words is the

power of Christ in restoring to men the spiritual capacities which are

all but destroyed. We have here three classes of bodily infirmities

represented as cured at the date of that blessed Then.' Blindness and

deafness are defects in perception, and stand for incapacities

affecting the powers of knowledge. Lameness affects powers of motion,

and stands for incapacity of activity. Dumbness prevents speech, and

stands for incapacity of utterance.

I. Christ as the restorer of the powers of knowing.

Bodily diseases are taken to symbolise spiritual infirmities.

Mark the peculiarities of Scripture anthropology as brought out in this

view of humanity:--

Its gloomy views of man's actual condition.

Its emphatic declaration that that condition is abnormal.

Its confidence of effecting a cure.

Its transcendentally glorious conception of what man may become.

Men are blind and deaf; that is to say, their powers of perception are

destroyed by reason of disease. What a picture! The great spiritual

realities are all unseen, as Elisha's young servant was blind to the

fiery chariots that girdled the prophet. Men are blind to the starry

truths that shine as silver in the firmament. They are deaf to the

Voice which is gone out to the ends of the earth, and yet they have

eyes and ears, conscience, intuitions. They possess organs, but these

are powerless.

And while the blindness is primarily in regard to spiritual and

religious truths, it is not confined to these, but wherever spiritual

blindness has fallen, the whole of a man's knowledge will suffer. There

will be blindness to the highest philosophy, to the true basis and

motive of morals, to true psychology, to the noblest poetry. All will

be of the earth, earthy. You cannot strike religion out of men's

thoughts, as you might take a stone out of a wall and leave the wall

standing; you take out foundation and mortar, and make a ruinous heap.

I know, of course, that there may be much mental activity without any

perception of spiritual realities, but all knowledge which is not

purely mathematical or physical suffers by the absence of such

perception. All this blindness is caused by sin.

Christ is the giver of spiritual sight. He restores the faculty by

taking away the hindrance to its exercise. Further, He gives sight

because He gives light.

But turn to facts of experience, and consider the mental apathy of

heathenism as contrasted with the energy of mind within the limits of

Christendom. Greece, of course, is a brilliant exception, but even

there (1) what of the conceptions of God? (2) what of the effect of the

wise on the mass of the nation? Think of the languid intellectual life

of the East. Think of the energy of thought which has been working

within the limits of Christianity. Think of Christian theology compared

with the mythologies of idolatry. And the contrast holds not only in

the religious field but all over the field of thought.

There is no such sure way of diffusing a culture which will refine and

strengthen all the powers of mind as to diffuse the knowledge of Jesus,

and to make men love Him. In His light they will see light.

To know Him and to keep company with Him is a liberal education,' as is

seen in many a lowly life, all uninfluenced by what is called learning,

but enriched with the finest flowers of culture,' and having gathered

them all in Christ's garden.

Christ is the true light; in Him do we see. Without Him, what is all

other knowledge? He is central to all, like genial heat about the roots

of a plant. There is other knowledge than that of sense; and for the

highest of all our knowledge we depend on Him who is the Word. In that

region we can neither observe nor experiment. In that region facts must

be brought by some other means than we can command, and we can but draw

more or less accurate deductions from them. Logic without revelation is

like a spinning-machine without any cotton, busy drawing out nothing.

Here we have to listen. The entrance of Thy words giveth light.' Your

God shall come and save you; then, by that divine coming and saving,

the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall

be unstopped.'

II. Christ as the Restorer of the Powers of Action.

Again turn to heathenism, see the apathetic indolence, the

unprogressive torpor, Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of

Cathay.' Sin lames for service of God; it leaves the lower nature free

to act, and that freedom paralyses all noble activity.

Christianity brings the Energising of the Soul--

(a) By its reference of everything to God--our powers and our

circumstances and our activities.

(b) By its prominence given to Retribution. It speaks not merely of

vita brevis--but of vita brevis and an Eternity which grows out of it.

(c) By its great motive for work--love.

(d) By the freedom It brings from the weight that paralysed.

It takes away sin. Lifting that dreary load from our backs, it makes us

joyful, strong, and agile.

The true view of Christianity is not, as some of its friends, and some

of its foes, mistakenly concur in supposing, that it weakens interest

in, and energy on, the Present, but that it heightens the power of

action. A life plunged in that jar of oxygen will glow with redoubled

brilliance.

III. Christ as the Restorer of Powers of Utterance.

The silence that broods over the world. It is dumb for all holy,

thankful words; with no voice to sing, no utterance of joyful praise.

Think of the effect of Christianity on human speech, giving it new

themes, refining words and crowding them with new meanings. Translate

the Bible into any language, and that language is elevated and

enriched.

Think of the effect on human praise. That great treasure of Christian

poetry.

Think of the effect on human gladness. Christ fills the heart with such

reasons for praise, and makes life one song of joy.

Thus Christ is the Healer.

To men seeking for knowledge, He offers a higher gift--healing. And as

for true knowledge and culture, in Christ, and in Christ alone, will

you find it.

Let your culture be rooted in Him. Let your Religion influence all your

nature.

The effects of Christianity are its best evidence. What else does the

like of that which it does? Let Jannes and Jambres do the same with

their enchantments.' We may answer the question, Art Thou He that

should come?' as Christ did, The blind receive their sight, and the

lame walk; the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear.'

The perfect Restoration will be in heaven. Then, indeed, when our souls

are freed from mortal grossness, and the thin veils of sense are rent

and we behold Him as He is, then when they rest not day nor night, but

with ever renewed strength run to His commandments, then when He has

put into their lips a new song--then shall the eyes of the blind be

opened, and the ears of the deaf be unstopped; then shall the lame man

leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.'

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MIRAGE OR LAKE

For in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the

desert. And the glowing sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty

ground springs of water.'--ISAIAH xxxv. 6, 7.

What a picture is painted in these verses! The dreary wilderness

stretches before us, monotonous, treeless, in some parts bearing a

scanty vegetation which flourishes in early spring and dies before

fierce summer heats, but for the most part utterly desolate, the sand

blinding the eyes, the ground cracked and gaping as if athirst for the

rain that will not fall; over it the tantalising mirage dancing in

mockery, and amid the hot sand the yelp of the jackals. What does this

dead land want? One thing alone--water. Could that be poured upon it,

all would be changed; nothing else will do any good. And it comes.

Suddenly it bursts from the sand, and streams bring life along the

desert. It gathers into placid lakes, with their whispering reeds and

nodding rushes, and the thick cool grass round their margins. The foul

beasts that wandered through dry places seeking rest are drowned out.

So full of blessed change will be the coming of the Lord, of which all

this context speaks. Mark that this burst of waters is when the Lord

shall come,' and that it is the reason for the restoration of lost

powers in men, and especially for a chorus of praise from dumb lips.

This, then, is the central blessing. It is not merely a joyful

transformation, but it is the reason for a yet more joyful

transformation (chap. xliv. 3). Recall Christ's words to the Samaritan

woman and in the Temple on the great day of the Feast.

Then this is pre-eminently a description of the work of Christ.

I. Christ brings the Supernatural Communication of a New Life.

We may fairly regard this metaphor as setting forth the very deepest

characteristic of the gospel. Consider man's need, as typified in the

image of the desert. Mark that the supply for that need must come from

without; that coming from without, it must be lodged in the heart of

the race; that the supernatural communication of a new life and power

is the very essence of the work of Christ; that such a communication is

the only thing adequate to produce these wondrous effects.

II. This new life slakes men's thirst.

The pangs and tortures of the waterless wilderness. The thirst of human

souls; they long, whether they know it or not, for--

Truth for Understanding.

Love for Heart.

Basis and Guidance for Will and Effort.

Cleansing for Conscience.

Adequate objects for their powers.

They need that all these should be in One.

The gnawing pain of our thirst is not a myth; it is the secret of man's

restlessness. We are ever on the march, not only because change is the

law of the world, nor only because effort and progress are the law for

civilised men, but because, like caravans in the desert, we have to

search for water.

In Christ it is slaked; all is found there.

III. The Communication of this New Life turns Illusions into Realities.

The mirage shall become a pool.' Life without Christ is but a long

illusion. Sin makes a mock of fools.' How seldom are hopes fulfilled,

and how still less frequently are they, when fulfilled, as good as we

painted them! The prismatic splendours of the rain bow, which gleam

before us and which we toil to catch, are but grey rain-drops when

caught. Joys attract and, attained, have incompleteness and a tang of

bitterness. The fish is never so heavy when landed on the sward as it

felt when struggling on our hook. All is vanity'--yes, if creatures and

things temporal are pursued as our good. But nothing is vanity, if we

have the life in us which Jesus comes to give. His Gospel gives solid,

unmingled joys, sure promises which are greater when fulfilled than

when longed for, certain hopes whose most brilliant colours are duller

than those of the realities. The half has not been told of the things

which God hath prepared for them that love Him.'

Sure Promises.

A certain Hope.

IV. This New Life gives Fruitfulness. It stimulates all our nature. A

godless life is in a very tragic sense barren, and a wilderness. There

is in it nothing really worth doing, nor anything that will last.

Christ gives Power, Motive, Pattern, and makes a life of holy activity

possible. The works done by men apart from Him are, if measured by the

whole relations and capacities of the doers, unfruitful works, however

they may seem laden with ruddy clusters. It is only lives into which

that river of God which is full of water flows that bring forth fruit,

and whose fruit remains. The desert irrigated becomes a garden of the

Lord.

Note, too, how this river drowns out wild beasts. The true way of

conquering evil is to turn the river into it. Cultivate, and weeds die.

The expulsive power of a new affection is the most potent instrument

for perfecting character.

What is the use of water if we do not drink? We may perish with thirst

even on the river's bank. If any man thirst, let him come to Me and

drink.'

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THE KING'S HIGHWAY

And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called the

way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be

for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein. No

lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it

shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there.'--ISAIAH

xxxv. 8, 9.

We can fancy what it is to be lost in a forest where a traveller may

ride round in a circle, thinking he is advancing, till he dies. But it

is as easy to be lost in a wilderness, where there is nothing to see,

as in a wood where one can see nothing. And there is something even

more ghastly in being lost below the broad heavens in the open face of

day than in the close covert of innumerous boughs.' The monotonous

swells of the sand-heaps, the weary expanse stretching right away to

the horizon, no land-marks but the bleaching bones of former victims,

the gigantic sameness, the useless light streaming down, and in the

centre one tiny, black speck toiling vainly, rushing madly hither and

thither--a lost man--till he desperately flings himself down and lets

death bury him, that is the one picture suggested by the text. The

other is of that same wilderness, but across it a mighty king has flung

up a broad, lofty embankment, a highway raised above the sands, cutting

across them so conspicuously that even an idiot could not help seeing

it, so high above the land around that the lion's spring falls far

beneath it, and the supple tiger skulks baffled at its base. It is like

one of those roads which the terrible energy of conquering Rome carried

straight as an arrow from the milestone in the Forum over mountains,

across rivers and deserts, morasses and forests, to flash along them

the lightning of her legions, and over whose solid blocks we travel

to-day in many a land.

The prophet has seen in his vision the blind and deaf cured, the

capacities of human nature destroyed by sin restored. He has told us

that this miraculous change has come from the opening of a spring of

new life in the midst of man's thirsty desert, and now he gets before

us, in yet another image, another aspect of the glorious change which

is to follow that coming of the Lord to save, which filled the farthest

horizon of his vision. The desert shall have a plain path on which

those diseased men who have been healed journey. Life shall no longer

be trackless, but God will, by His coming, prepare paths that we should

walk in them; and as He has given the lame man power to walk, so will

he also provide the way by which His happy pilgrims will journey to

their home.

I. The pathless wandering of godless lives.

The old, old comparison of life to a journey is very natural and very

pathetic. It expresses life's ceaseless change; every day carries us

into a new scene, every day the bends of the road shut out some happy

valley where we fain would have rested, every day brings new faces, new

associations, new difficulties, and even if the same recur, yet it is

with such changes that they are substantially new, and of each day's

march it is true, even when life is most monotonous, that ye have not

passed this way heretofore.' It expresses life's ceaseless effort and

constant plodding. To-day's march does not secure to-morrow's rest,

but, however footsore and weary, we have to move on, like some child

dragged along by a careless nurse. It expresses the awful crumbling

away of life beneath us. The road has an end, and each step takes us

nearer to it. The numbers that face us on the milestones slowly and

surely decrease; we pass the last and on we go, tramp, tramp, and we

cannot stop till we reach the narrow chamber, cold and dark, where, at

any rate, we have got the long march over.

But to many men, the journey of life is one which has no definite

direction deliberately chosen, which has no all-inclusive aim, which

has no steady progress. There may be much running hither and thither,

but it is as aimless as the marchings of a fly upon a window, as busy

and yet as uncertain as that of the ants who bustle about on an

ant-hill.

Now that is the idea, which our text implies, of all the activity of a

godless life, that it is not a steady advance to a chosen goal, but a

rushing up and down in a trackless desert, with many immense exertions

all thrown away. Then, in contrast, it puts this great thought: that

God has come to us and made for us a path for our feet.

II. The highway that God casts up.

Of course that coming we take to be Christ's coming, and we have just

to consider the manner in which His coming fulfils this great promise,

and has made in the trackless wilderness a way for us to walk in.

1. Christ gives us a Definite Aim for Life. I know, of course, that men

may have this apart from Him, definite enough in all conscience. But

such aims are unworthy of men's whole capacities. Not one of them is

fit to be made the exclusive, all-embracing purpose of a life, and,

taken together, they are so multifarious that in their diversity they

come to be equal to none. How many we have all had! Most of us are like

men who zig-zag about, chasing after butterflies! Nor are any such aims

certain to be reached during life, and they all are certain to be lost

at death.

Godless men are enticed on like some dumb creature lured to

slaughter-house by a bunch of fodder--once inside, down comes the

pole-axe.

But Christ gives us a definite aim which is worthy of a man, which

includes all others; which binds this life and the next into one.

2. Christ gives us distinct knowledge of whither we should go. It is

not enough to give general directions; we need to know what our next

step is to be. It is of no avail that we see the shining turrets far

off on the hill, if all the valleys between are unknown and trackless.

Well: we have Him to point us our course. He is the exemplar--the true

ideal of human nature. Hour by hour His pattern fits to our lives.

True, we shall often be in perplexity, but that perplexity will clear

itself by patient thought, by holding our wills in suspense till He

speaks, and by an honest wish to go right. There will no longer be

doubt as to what is our law, though there may be as to the application

of it. We are not to be guided by men's maxims, nor by the standards

and patterns round us, but by Him.

3. Christ gives means by which we can reach the aim. He does so by

supplying a stimulus to our activity, in the motive of His love; by the

removal of the hindrances arising from sin, through His redeeming work;

by the gifts of new life from His Spirit.

The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he

knoweth not how to go to the city.' But he that follows Jesus treads

the right way to the city of habitation.

4. Christ goes with us. The obscure words, It shall be for those' are

by some rendered, He shall be with them,' and we may take them so, as

referring to the presence with His happy pilgrims of the Lord Himself.

Perhaps Isaiah may have been casting back a thought to the desert

march, where the pillar led the host. But at all events we have the

same companion to talk with us by the way,' and make our hearts burn

within us,' as had the two disconsolate pedestrians on the road to

Emmaus. It is Jesus who goes before us, whether He leads us to green

pastures and waters of quietness or through valleys of the shadow of

death, and we can be smitten by no evil, since He is with us.

III. The travellers upon God's highway.

Two conditions are laid down in the text. One is negative--the unclean

can find no footing there. It is the way of holiness,' not only because

holiness is in some sense the goal to which it leads, but still more,

because only holy feet can tread it, holy at least in the travellers'

aspiration and inward consecration, though still needing to be washed

daily. One is positive--it is the simple' who shall not err therein.

They who distrust themselves and their own skill to find or force a

path through life's jungle, and trust themselves to higher guidance,

are they whose feet will be kept in the way.

No lion or ravenous beast can spring or creep up thereon. Simple

keeping on Christ's highway elevates us above temptations and evils of

all sorts, whether nightly prowlers or daylight foes.

This generation is boasting or complaining that old landmarks are

blotted out, ancient paths broken, footmarks obliterated, stars hid,

and mist shrouding the desert. But Christ still guides, and His promise

still holds good: He that followeth Me shall not walk in the darkness,

but shall have the light of life.' The alternative for each traveller

between life and death' is to tread in His footsteps or to wander in

the wilderness in a solitary way, hungry and thirsty,' with fainting

soul. Let us make the ancient prayer ours: See if there be any wicked

way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'

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WHAT LIFE'S JOURNEY MAY BE

The redeemed shall walk there: And the ransomed of the Lord shall

return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their

heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall

flee away.'--ISAIAH xxxv. 9, 10.

We have here the closing words of Isaiah's prophecy. It has been

steadily rising, and now it has reached the summit. Men restored to all

their powers, a supernatural communication of a new life, a pathway for

our journey--these have been the visions of the preceding verses, and

now the prophet sees the happy pilgrims flocking along the raised way,

and hears some faint strains of their glad music, and he marks them,

rank after rank, entering the city of their solemnities, and through

the gates can behold them invested with joy and gladness, while sorrow

and sighing, like some night-loving birds shrinking from the blaze of

that better sun which lights the city, spread their black wings and

flee away.

The noble rhythm of our English version rises here to a strain of

pathetic music, the very cadence of which stirs thoughts that lie too

deep for tears, and one shrinks from taking these lofty words of

immortal hope--which life's sorrows have interpreted, I trust, for many

of us--as the text of a sermon. But I would fain try whether some of

their gracious sweetness and power may not survive even our rude

handling of them.

The prophet here is not only speaking of the literal return of his

brethren from captivity. The place which this prophecy holds at the

very close of the book, the noble loftiness of the language, the entire

absence of any details or specific allusions which compel reference to

the Captivity, would be sufficient of themselves to make us suspect

that there was very much more here. The structure of prophecy is

misunderstood unless it be recognised that all the history of Israel

was itself a prediction, a great supernatural system of types and

shadows, and that all the interventions of the divine hand are one in

principle, and all foretell the great intervention of redeeming love,

in the person of Jesus Christ. Nor need that be unlikely in the eyes of

any who believe that Christ's coming is the centre of the world's

history, and that there is in prophecy a supernatural element. We are

not reading our own fancies into Scripture; we are not using, in

allowable freedom, words which had another meaning altogether, to adorn

our own theology, but we are apprehending the innermost meaning of

prophecy, when we see in it Christ and His salvation (1 Peter i. 10).

We have then here a picture of what Christ does for us weary journeyers

on life's road,

I. Who are the travellers?

Redeemed,' ransomed of the Lord.' Israel had in its past history one

great act, under the imagery of which all future deliverances were

prophesied. The events of the Exodus were the great storehouse from

which prophets drew the clothing of their brightest hopes; and that is

a lesson for us of how to use the history of God's past deliverances.

They believed that each transitory act was a revelation of an

unchanging purpose and an unexhausted power, and that it would be

repeated over and over again. Experience supplied the material out of

which Hope wove its fairest webs, but Faith drove the shuttle. Here the

names which describe the pilgrims come from the old story. They are

slaves, purchased or otherwise set free from captivity by a divine act.

The epithets are transferred to the New Testament, and become the

standing designation for those who have been delivered by Christ.

That designation, ransomed of the Lord,' opens out into the great

evangelical thoughts which are the very life-blood of vital

Christianity.

Emancipation from bondage is the first thing that we all need. He that

committeth sin is the slave of sin.' An iron yoke presses on every

neck.

The needed emancipation can only be obtained by a ransom price. The

question of to whom the ransom is paid is not in the horizon of prophet

or apostle or of Jesus Himself, in using this metaphor. What is

strongly in their minds is that a great surrender must be greatly made

by the Emancipator.

Jesus conceived of Himself as giving His life a ransom for the many.'

The emancipation must be a divine act. It surpasses any created power.

There can be no happy pilgrims unless they are first set free.

II. The end of the journey.

They shall come to Zion.' It is one great distinctive characteristic

and blessedness of the Christian conception of the future that it takes

away from it all the chilling sense of strangeness, arising from

ignorance and lack of experience, and invests it with the attraction of

being the mother-city of us all. So the pilgrims are not travelling a

dreary road into the common darkness, but are like colonists who visit

England for the first time, and are full of happy anticipations of

going home,' though they have never seen its shores.

That conception of the future perfect state as a city' includes the

ideas of happy social life, of a settled polity, of stability and

security. The travellers who were often solitary on the march will all

be together there. The nomads, who had to leave their camping-place

each morning and let the fire that cheered them in the night die down

into a little ring of grey ashes, will go no more out,' but yet make

endless progress within the gates. The defenceless travellers, who were

fain to make the best laager' they could, and keep vigilant watch for

human and bestial enemies crouching beyond the ring of light from the

camp-fires, are safe at last, and they that swallowed them up shall be

far away.

Contrast the future outlook of the noblest minds in heathenism with the

calm certainty which the gospel has put within the reach of the

simplest! Blessed are your eyes, for they see.'

III. The joy of the road.

The pilgrims do not plod wearily in silence, but, like the tribes going

up to the feasts, burst out often, as they journey, into song. They are

like Jehoshaphat's soldiers, who marched to the fight with the singers

in the van chanting Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth

for ever.' The Christian life should be a joyful life, ever echoing

with the high praises of God.' However difficult the march, there is

good reason for song, and it helps to overcome the difficulties. A

merry heart goes all the day, a sad heart tires in a mile.' Why should

the ransomed pilgrims sing? For present blessings, for deliverance from

the burden of self and sin, for communion with God, for light shed on

the meaning of life, and for the sure anticipation of future bliss.

Everlasting joy on their heads.' Other joys are transitory. It is not

only we poets' who in our youth begin with gladness,' whereof cometh in

the end despondency and madness'; but, in a measure, these are the

outlines of the sequence in all godless lives. The world's festal

wreathes wilt and wither in the hot fumes of the banqueting house, and

the crown of pride shall be trodden under foot.' But joy of Christ's

giving shall remain,' and even before we sit at the feast, we may have

our brows wreathed with a garland that fadeth not away.'

IV. The perfecting of joy at last.

They shall obtain joy and gladness': but had they not had it on their

heads as they marched? Yes; but at last they have it in perfect measure

and manner. The flame that burned but dimly in the heavy air of earth

flashes up into new brightness in the purer atmosphere of the city.

And one part of its perfecting is the removal of all its opposites.

Sorrow ends when sin and the discipline that sin needs have ended. The

inhabitant shall not say: I am sick; the people that dwell therein

shall be forgiven their iniquity.' Sighing ends when weariness, loss,

physical pain, and all the other ills that flesh is heir to have ceased

to vex and weigh upon the spirit. Life purges the dross of imperfection

from character. Death purges the alloy of sorrow and sighing from joy,

and leaves the perfected spirit possessor of the pure gold of perfect

and eternal gladness.

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THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH

And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and

read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord, and spread it

before the Lord. 15. And Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord, saying, 16. O

Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, Thou

art the God, even Thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: Thou

hast made heaven and earth. 17. Incline Thine ear, O Lord, and hear;

open Thine eyes, O Lord, and see: and hear all the words of

Sennacherib, which hath sent to reproach the living God. 18. Of a

truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and

their countries, 19. And have cast their gods into the fire: for they

were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone: therefore

they have destroyed them. 20. Now therefore, O Lord our God, save us

from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou

art the Lord, even Thou only. 21. Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent unto

Hezekiah, saying. Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Whereas thou hast

prayed to Me against Sennacherib king of Assyria. . . . 33. Therefore

thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come

into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with

shields, nor cast a bank against it. 34. By the way that he came, by

the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the

Lord. 35. For I will defend this city to save it for mine own sake, and

for my servant David's sake. 36. Then the angel of the Lord went forth,

and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five

thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were

all dead corpses. 37. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went

and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. 38. And it came to pass, as he was

worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and

Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword; and they escaped into the

land of Armenia: and Esarhaddon his you reigned in his stead.'--ISAIAH

xxxvii. 14-21, 33-38.

Is trust in Jehovah folly or wisdom? That was the question raised by

Sennacherib's invasion. A glance at the preceding chapters will show

how the high military official, the rabshakeh,' or chief of the

officers, shaped all his insolent and yet skilful mixture of threats

and promises so as to demonstrate the vanity of trust in Egypt or in

Jehovah, or in any but the great king.' Isaiah had been labouring to

lift his countrymen to the height of reliance on Jehovah alone, and now

the crucial test of the truth of his contention had come. On the one

hand were Sennacherib and his host, flushed with victory, and sure of

crushing this puny kinglet Hezekiah and his obstinate little city,

perched on its rock. On the other was nothing but a prophet's word.

Where is the stronger force? And does political prudence dictate

reliance on the Unseen or on the visible? The moment is the crisis of

Isaiah's work, and this narrative has been placed, with true insight

into its importance, at the close of the first half of this book.

To grasp the significance of the text the preceding events have to be

remembered. Hezekiah's kingdom had been overrun, and tribute exacted

from him. The rabshakeh had been sent from the main body of the

Assyrian army, which was down at Lachish in the Philistine low country

on the road to Egypt, in order to try to secure Jerusalem by promises

and threats, since it was too important a post to leave in the rear, if

Egypt was to be invaded. That attempt having failed, and the Egyptian

forces being in motion, this new effort was made to induce Hezekiah to

surrender. A letter was sent, whether accompanied by any considerable

armed force or no does not appear. At this point the narrative begins.

It may be best studied as an illustration of the trial of faith, its

refuge, its pleading, and its deliverance.

I. Note the trial of faith. Rabshakeh had derided the obstinate

confidence in Jehovah, which kept these starving men on the walls

grimly silent in spite of his coaxing. The letter of Sennacherib harps

on the same string. It is written in a tone of assumed friendly

remonstrance, and lays out with speciousness the apparent grounds for

calling trust in Jehovah absurdity. There are no threats in it. It is

all an appeal to common sense and political prudence. It marshals

undeniable facts. Experience has shown the irresistible power of

Assyria. There have been plenty of other little nations which have

trusted in their local deities, and what has become of them? Barbarous

names are flourished in Hezekiah's face, and their wasted dominions are

pointed to as warnings against his committing a parallel folly. There

is nothing in the letter which might not have been said by a friend,

and nothing which was not said by the Jews who had lost their faith in

their God. It was but the putting into plain words of what

common-sense' and faint faith had often whispered to Hezekiah. The very

absence of temper or demand in the letter gives it an aspect of that

sweet reasonableness' so dear to sense-bound souls.

Mutatis mutandis, the letter may stand for a specimen of the arguments

which worldly prudence brings to shake faith, in all ages. We, too, are

assailed by much that sounds most forcible from the point of view of

mere earthly calculation. Sennacherib does not lie in boasting of his

victories. He and his shoals of soldiers are very real and potent. It

does seem madness for one little kingdom to stand out, and all the more

so because its king is cooped up in his city, as the cuneiform

inscription proudly tells, like a bird in a cage,' and all the rest of

his land is in the conqueror's grip. They who look only at the things

seen cannot but think the men of faith mad. They who look at the things

unseen cannot but know that the men of sense are fools. The latter

elaborately prove that the former are impotent, but they have left out

one factor in their calculations, and that is God. One man and God at

his back are stronger than Sennacherib and all his mercenaries.

II. Note the refuge of tempted faith. What was Hezekiah to do with the

crafty missive? It was hoped that he would listen to reason, and come

down from his perch. But he neither yielded nor took counsel with his

servants, but, like a devout man, went into the house of the Lord, and

spread the letter before the Lord. It would have gone hard with him if

he had not been to the house of the Lord many a time before. It is not

easy to find our way thither for the first time, when our eyes are

blinded by tears or our way darkened by calamities. But faith

instinctively turns to God when anything goes wrong, because it has

been accustomed to turn to Him when all was right, according to the

world's estimate of right and wrong. Whither should the burdened heart

betake itself but to Him who daily bears our burdens? The impulse to

tell God all troubles is as truly a mark of the faithful soul as the

impulse to tell everything to the beloved is the life-breath of love.

The act of spreading the letter before the Lord is an eloquent symbol,

which some prosaic and learned commentators have been dull enough to

call gross, and to compare to Buddhist praying-mills! Its meaning is

expressed in the prayer which follows. It is faith's appeal to His

knowledge. It is faith's casting of its burden on the Lord. Our faith

is of little power to bless, unless it impels us to take God into

confidence in regard to everything which troubles us. If the letter is

not grave enough to be spread before Him, it is too small to annoy us.

If we truly live in fellowship with God, we shall find ourselves in His

house, with the cause of our trouble in our hands, before we have time

to think. Instinct acts more quickly than reason, and, if our faith be

vital, it will not need to be argued into speaking to God of all that

weighs upon us.

III. Note the pleading of faith. Hezekiah's address to God is no mere

formal recapitulation of divine names, but is the effort of faith to

grasp firmly the truths which the enemy denies, and on which it builds.

So considered, the accumulation of titles in verse 16 is very

instructive, and shows how a trustful soul puts forth the energy of its

faith in summoning to mind the great aspects of the divine name as

bulwarks against suggested fears, and bases of supplication. Hezekiah

appeals to the God of Hosts,' the Ruler of all the embattled forces of

the universe, as well as of the armies of angels. What is Sennacherib's

array compared with these? He appeals to the God of Israel,' as

pleading the ancient relationship, which binds the unchangeable

Guardian of the people to be still what He has been, and casts the

responsibility of Israel's preservation upon Him. He appeals to Him who

sits between the cherubim,' as thence defending and filling the

threatened city. He grasps the thought that Jehovah is God alone' with

a vividness which is partly due no doubt to Isaiah's teaching, but is

also the indignant recoil of faith from the assumption of the letter,

that Jehovah was but as the beaten deities of Gozan and the rest. Faith

clings the more tenaciously to truths denied, as a dog will hold on to

the stick that one tries to pull from it.

Thus, having heartened himself and pled with God by all these names,

Hezekiah comes to his petition. It is but translating into words the

symbol of spreading the letter before God. He asks God to behold and to

hear the defiant words. Prayer tells God what it knows that He knows

already, for it relieves the burdened heart to tell Him. It asks Him to

see and hear what it knows that He does see and hear. But the prayer is

not for mere observance followed by no divine act, but for taking

knowledge as the precursor of the appropriate help. Of such seeing and

hearing by God, believing prayer is the appointed condition. Your

Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him'; but

that is not a reason for silence, but for supplication.

Hezekiah rightly regarded Sennacherib's words as meant to reproach the

living God, for the point of the letter was to dissuade from trust in

Him, as no more powerful than the petty deities of already conquered

cities. The prayer, therefore, pleads that God would take care of His

own honour, and by delivering Jerusalem, show His sole sovereignty. It

is a high and wonderful level for faith to reach, when it regards

personal deliverance mainly in its aspect as vindicating God and

warranting faith. We may too easily conclude that God's honour is

involved in our deliverance, and it is well to be on our guard against

that.

But it is possible to die to self so fully as to feel that our cause is

His, because His is so entirely ours; and then we may come to that

heroic faith which seeks even personal good more for God's sake than

for our own. It was noble that this man should have no word to say

about self but Save us, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know

that Thou art God alone.' Like him, we may each feel that our defence

is more God's affair than ours, in proportion as we feel we are His

rather than our own. That siege of Jerusalem was indeed as a duel

between faith and unbelief on the one hand, and between Jehovah and the

gods who were no gods' on the other. Sennacherib's letter was a defiant

challenge to Jehovah to do His best for this people, and when faith

repeated in prayer the insolence of unbelief only one result was

possible. It came.

IV. Note the deliverance of faith. Isaiah's grand prophecy tempts us to

linger over its many beauties and magnificent roll of triumphant scorn,

but it falls outside our purpose. As for the catastrophe, it should be

noted that its place and time are not definitely stated, and that

probably the notion that the Assyrian army was annihilated before

Jerusalem is a mistake. Sennacherib and his troops were at Libnah, on

their way to meet the Egyptian forces. If there were any of them before

Jerusalem, they would at most be a small detachment, sufficient to

invest it. Probably the course of events was that, at some time not

specified, soon after the dismissal of the messengers who brought the

letter, the awful destruction fell, and that, when the news of the

disaster reached the detachment at Jerusalem, as the psalm which throbs

with the echoes of the triumph says, They were troubled, and hasted

away.'

How complete was the crushing blow the lame record of this campaign in

the inscriptions shows, in which the failure of the attempt to capture

the city is covered up by vapouring about tribute and the like. If it

had not failed, however, the success would certainly have been told, as

all similar cases are told, with abundant boasting. The other fact is

also to be remembered, that Sennacherib tried no more conclusions with

Jerusalem and Jehovah, and though he lived for some twenty years

afterwards, never again ventured on to the soil where that mighty God

fought for His people.

The appended notice of Sennacherib's death has been added by some

narrator, since it probably occurred after Isaiah's martyrdom. All they

that take the sword shall perish with the sword.' Such a career as his

could not but give taste for violence and bloodshed, and dimmish regard

for human life. Retribution comes slowly, for twenty years intervened

between the catastrophe to the army and the murder of the king. Its

penalties increase as its fall delays; for first came the blotting out

of the army, and then, when that had no effect, at last the sword in

his own heart. He that being often reproved hardeneth his neck shall

suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.'

But the great lesson of that death is the same as that of the other

king's deliverance. Hezekiah went unto the house of the Lord,' and

found Him a very present help in trouble. Sennacherib was slain in the

house of his god. The two pictures of the worshippers and their fates

are symbolic of the meaning of the whole story. Sennacherib had dared

Jehovah to try His strength against him and his deities. The challenge

was accepted, and that bloody corpse before the idol that could not

help preaches a ghastly sermon on the text, They that make them are

like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them. O Israel, trust

thou in the Lord: He is their help and their shield.'

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WHERE TO CARRY TROUBLES

And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and

read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord, and spread it

before the Lord.'--ISAIAH xxxvii. 14.

When Hezekiah heard the threatenings of Sennacherib's servants, he rent

his clothes and went into the house of the Lord, and sent to Isaiah

entreating his prayers. When he received the menacing letter, his faith

was greater, having been heartened by Isaiah's assurances. So he then

himself appealed to Jehovah, spreading the letter before Him, and

himself prayed God to guard His own honour, and answer the challenge

flung down by the insolent Assyrian. It is noble when faith increases

as dangers increase.

I. We have here an example of what to do with troubles and

difficulties.

We are to lay them out before God, as we can do by praying about them.

Hezekiah's trouble was great. His kingdom could be crushed like an

eggshell by the grasp of Sennacherib's hand. But little troubles as

well as great ones are best dealt with by being spread before the

Lord.' Whatever is important enough to disturb me is important enough

for me to speak to God about it. Whether the poison inflaming our blood

be from a gnat's bite, or a cobra's sting, the best antidote is--pray

about it.

How much more real and fervid our prayers would be, if we habitually

turned all our affairs into materials for petition! That is a very

empty dispute as to whether we ought to pray for deliverance from

outward sorrows. If we are living in touch with God, we cannot but take

Him into our confidence, if we may so say, as to everything that

affects us. And we should as soon think of hiding any matter from our

dearest on earth as from our Friend in heaven. In everything, by prayer

and supplication' is the commandment, and will be the instinct of the

devout heart.

Note Hezekiah's assurance that God cares about him.

Note his clear perception that God is his only help.

Note his identification of his own deliverance with God's honour. We

cannot identify our welfare, or deliverance in small matters, with

God's fair fame, in such a fashion. But we ought to be quite sure that

He will not let us sink or perish, and will never desert us. And we can

be quite sure that, if we identify ourselves and our work with Him, He

will identify Himself with us and it. His treatment of His servants

will tell the world (and not one world only) what He is, how faithful,

how loving, how strong.

II. We have here an example of how God answers His servants' prayers.

It was by terrible things in righteousness' that Hezekiah's answer

came. His prayer was at one end of the chain, and at the other was a

camp full of corpses. One poor man's cry can set in motion tremendous

powers, as a low whisper can start an avalanche. That magnificent

theophany in Psalm xviii., with all its majesty and terror of flashing

lightnings and a rocking earth, was brought about by nothing more than

In my distress I called upon the Lord,' and its purpose was nothing

more than to draw the suppliant out of many waters and deliver him from

his strong enemy.

That army swept off the earth may teach us how much God will do for a

praying child of His. His people's deliverance is cheaply purchased at

such a price. He reproved kings for their sake.'

One man with God beside him is stronger than all the world. As the

psalmist learned in his hour of peril, Thou, Lord, makest me to dwell

in safety, thou alone!'

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GREAT VOICES FROM HEAVEN

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 2. Speak ye

comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is

accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of

the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3. The voice of him that

crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight

in the desert a highway for our God. 4. Every valley shall be exalted,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be

made straight, and the rough places plain: 5. And the glory of the Lord

shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth

of the Lord hath spoken it. 6. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What

shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as

the flower of the field: 7. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth:

because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is

grass. 8. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our

God shall stand for ever. 9. Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee

up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings,

lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid: say unto

the cities of Judah, Behold your God! 10. Behold, the Lord God will

come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him: behold, His

reward is with Him, and His work before Him.'--ISAIAH xl. 1-10.

How majestically this second part of the Book of Isaiah opens with

these mysterious voices! Other prophecies are wont to begin with

symbolic visions, but here the ear takes the place of the eye; and

instead of forms and flashing lights, which need to be translated, the

prophet hears words, the impressiveness of which is heightened by the

absence of any designation of the speakers. This much is clear, that

the first words are God's, addressed to the prophets. They are the

keynote of the whole. Israel is comforted in the assurance that her

trial is ended and her sin purged. Then there is silence, broken by a

voice to which no personality is attached, the herald and forerunner of

the coming King and God. When the echoes of it have died away, another

is heard, commanding yet another unnamed to cry,' and, in response to

the latter's asking what is to be the burden of his message, bidding

him peal out the frailty of man and the eternal vigour of the word of

the Lord, which assures its own fulfilment.

Then comes a longer pause. The way has been prepared, the coming God

has come; He has set up His throne in the restored Jerusalem, and His

glory is seen upon her. So there rings out from unnamed lips the

stirring command to the city, thus visited by the indwelling God, to

proclaim the glad tidings with a voice, the strength of which shall

correspond to their gladness and certainty. This rapid glance at the

structure of the whole naturally suggests the fourfold division to

which we shall adhere.

I. God speaks and bids His servants speak (vs. 1, 2), That is a

wonderfully tender word with which the silence and sadness of exile are

broken. The inmost meaning of God's voice is ever comfort. What a world

of yearning love there is, too, in the two little words my' and your'!

The exiles are still His; He who has hidden His face from them so long

is still theirs. And what was true of them is true of us; for sin may

separate us from God, but it does not separate Him from us, and He

still seeks to make us recognise the imperishable bond, which itself is

the ground of both our comfort and of His will that we should be

comforted.

As the very first words go deep into the meaning of all God's voices,

and unveil the permanence of His relation of love even to sinful and

punished men, so the next disclose the tender manner of His approach to

us, and prescribe the tone for all His true servants: Speak ye to the

heart of Jerusalem,' with loving words, which may win her love; for is

she not the bride of Jehovah, fallen though she be? And is not humanity

the beloved of Jesus, in whom God's heart is unveiled that our hearts

may be won? How shall human voices be softened to tenderness worthy of

the message which they carry? Only by dwelling near enough to Him to

catch the echoes, and copy the modulations, of His voice, as some birds

are taught sweeter notes than their own. The prophet's charge is laid

upon all who would speak of Christ to men. Speak to the heart, not only

to the head or to the conscience. God beseeches in the person of His

ambassadors.' The substance of the message may well find its way to the

heart; for it is the assurance that the long, hard service of the

appointed term of exile is past, that the sin which brought it about is

forgiven, and, more wonderful and gracious still, that God's mercy

reckons that the ills which followed on faithlessness have more than

expiated it. We need not seek for any other explanation of these

startling words than the exuberance of the divine pity, which doth not

willingly afflict.'

Of course, the captivity is in the foreground of the prophet's vision;

but the wider sense of the prophecy embraces the worse captivity of sin

under which we all groan, and the divine voice bids His prophets

proclaim that Jehovah comes, to set us all free, to end the weary

bondage, and to exact no more punishment for sins.

II. The forerunner speaks. There is something very impressive in the

abrupt bursting in of this second voice, all unnamed. It is the

reverberation, as it were, of the former, giving the preparation on the

side of man for the coming of Jehovah. Israel in bondage in Egypt had

been delivered by Jehovah marching through the wilderness, a wilderness

stretched between Babylon and Jerusalem; these supply the scenery, so

to speak; but the scenery is symbolic, and the call is really one to

prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness of human sin, by raising

up the cast-down by reason of transgressions or sorrows, to subdue

lofty thoughts and self-sufficiency by humble self-abnegation, to make

the crooked things' or rugged things' straight or smooth, and the rough

ground where heights were tumbled on heights a deep valley, by

forsaking evil.

The moral preparation, not the physical, is meant. It was fitting that

the road for such a coming should be prepared. But the coming was not

so contingent on the preparation that the glory of the Lord' would not

be revealed' unless men made a highway for Him. True, that the

revelation of His glory to the individual soul must be preceded by such

a preparation; but that raising of abjectness and levelling of

loftiness needs some perception of Him ere it can be done by man.

Christ must come to the heart before the heart can be prepared for His

coming. John the Baptist came crying in the wilderness, but his fiery

message did little to cast up a highway for the footsteps of the King.

John's immovable humility pierced to the very heart of the prophecy

when he answered the question Who art thou?' with I am a voice. The

voice was unnamed; why, what does it matter who I am?'

The substance and the range of the coming manifestation are next

defined. It is to be the revelation of the glory of the Lord,' and to

be for all mankind, not for Israel only. That lowly life and that

shameful death were a strange revelation of God's glory. If they

revealed it, then it cannot consist in power or any of the majestic

attributes,' but in love, pity, and long-suffering. Love is the

divinest thing in God. The guarantee for all lies simply here, that God

has spoken it. It is because the unnamed herald's ear has heard the

divine voice uttering the gracious assurances of verse 1, that his

voice is lifted up in the commands and assurances of verse 4. Absolute

faith in God's utterances, however they seem to transcend experience,

is wisdom and duty.

III. Yet another voice, whether sounding from heaven or earth is as

uncertain as is the person to whom it is addressed, authoritatively

commands a third to cry,' and, on being asked what is to be the burden

of the call, answers. This new herald is to proclaim man's frailty and

the immortal vigour of God's word, which secures the fulfilment of His

promises. Is it the questioning voice, or the commanding one, which

says, All flesh is grass, . . . the people is grass'? If the former, it

is the utterance of hopelessness, all but refusing the commission. But,

dramatic as that construction is, it seems better to regard the whole

as the answer to the question, What shall I cry?' The repetition of the

theme of man's frailty is not unnatural, and gives emphasis to the

contrast of the unchangeable stability of God's word. An hour of the

deadly hot wind will scorch the pastures, and all the petals of the

flowers among the herbage will fall. So everything lovely, bright, and

vigorous in humanity wilts and dies. One thing alone remains fresh from

age to age,--the uttered will of Jehovah. His breath kills and makes

alive. It withers the creatural, and it speaks the undying word.

This message is to follow those others which tell of God's merciful

promises, that trembling hearts may not falter when they see all

created stays sharing the common lot, but may rest assured that God's

promises are as good as God's facts, and so may hope when all things

visible would preach despair. It was given to hearten confidence in the

prophecy of a future revelation of the glory of God. It remains with us

to hearten confidence in a past revelation, which will stand unshaken,

whatever forces war against it. Its foes and its friends are alike

short-lived as the summer's grass. The defences of the one and the

attacks of the other are being antiquated while being spoken; but the

bare word of God, the record of the incarnate Word, who is the true

revelation of the glory of God, will stand for ever,--And this is the

Word which by the gospel is preached to you.'

IV. The prophet seems to be the speaker in verses 9-11, or perhaps the

same anonymous voice which already commanded the previous message

summons Jerusalem to become the ambassadress of her God. The coming of

the Lord is conceived as having taken place, and He is enthroned in

Zion. The construction which takes Jerusalem or Zion (the double name

so characteristic of the second part of Isaiah) to be the recipient of

the good tidings is much less natural than that which regards her as

their bearer.

The word rendered tellest good tidings' is a feminine form, and falls

in with the usual personification of a city as a woman. She, long laid

in ruins, the Niobe of nations, the sad and desolate widow, is bid to

bear to her daughter cities the glad tidings, that God is in her of a

truth. It is exactly the same thought as Cry out and shout, thou

inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of

thee.' The prophecy refers to the Church. It sets forth her highest

office as being the proclamation of her indwelling King. The possession

of Christ makes the Church the evangelist for the world; for it gives

the capacity and the impulse as well as the obligation to speak the

glad tidings. Every Christian has this command binding on him by the

fact of his having Christ.

The command sets forth the bold clearness which should mark the

herald's call. Naturally, any one with a message to peal out to a crowd

would seek some vantage-ground, from which his words might fly the

farther. If we have a message to deliver, let us seek the best place

from which to deliver it. Lift up thy voice with strength.' No whisper

will do. Bated breath is no fit vehicle for God's gospel. There are too

many of God's heralds who are always apologising for their message, and

seeking to reconcile it with popular opinions. We are all apt to speak

truth less confidently because it is denied; but, while it is needful

to speak with all gentleness and in meekness to them that oppose, it is

cowardly, as well as impolitic, to let one tremor be heard in our tones

though a world should deny our message.

The command tells the substance of the Church's message. Its essence is

the proclamation of the manifested God. To gaze on Jesus is to behold

God. That God is made known in the twin glories of power and

gentleness. He comes as a strong one.' His dominion rests on His own

power, and on no human allies. His reign is retributive, and that not

merely as penally recompensing evil, but as rewarding the faith and

hope of those who waited for Him.

But beyond the limits of our text, in verse 11, we have the necessary

completion of the manifestation, in the lovely figure of the Shepherd

carrying the lambs in His arms, and gently leading the flock of

returning exiles. The strength of Jesus is His lowliness; and His

mighty arm is used, not to wield an iron sceptre, but to gather us to

His bosom and guide us in His ways. The paradox of the gospel, which

points to a poor, weak man dying in the dark on a cross and says,

Behold the great Power of God!' is anticipated in this prophecy. The

triumphant paradox of the Apostle is shadowed here: We preach Christ

crucified, . . . the power of God, and the wisdom of God.'

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O THOU THAT BRINGEST GOOD TIDINGS

O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain:

O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with

strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah,

Behold your God!'--ISAIAH xl. 9.

There is something very grand in these august and mysterious voices

which call one to another in the opening verses of this chapter. First,

the purged ear of the prophet hears the divine command to him and to

his brethren--Comfort Jerusalem with the message of the God who comes

for her deliverance. Then afar off another voice is heard, the herald

and forerunner of the approaching Deity; and when thus the foundation

has been laid, yet another takes up the speech, and The voice said,

Cry,' and the anonymous recipient of the command asks with what message

he shall be entrusted, and the answer is the signature and pledge of

the divine fulfilment of the word thus spoken. And then there comes, as

I take it, a pause of silence, within which the great Epiphany and

manifestation takes place, and the coming God comes, enters into the

rebuilded city, and there shines in His beauty; and then breaks forth

the rapturous commandment of my text to the resuscitated city, to tell

to all her daughters of Judah the glad tidings of a present God.

I need not, I suppose, spend your time in vindicating the translation

of our Bible as against one which has been made very familiar by being

wedded to Handel's music, and has commended itself to many, according

to which Zion is rather the recipient than the herald of the tidings, O

thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with

strength,' and so on.

And I suppose I need not either spend any time in vindicating the

transference of the text to the Gentile Church, beyond the simple

remark that, whatever be the date of this second portion of Isaiah's

prophecy, its standpoint is the time of the Captivity, when Jerusalem

lay desolate, burned with fire, and all their pleasant things were laid

waste, so that the city here addressed is the new form of the ancient

Zion, which had risen from her ashes, and had a better tidings of glad

significance to impart to all the nations. And so, dear brethren,

looking at the words from that point of view, I think that they may

very fairly yield to us two or three very old-fashioned and well-worn

thoughts, which may yet be stimulating and encouraging to us. I take

them as simply as possible, just as they run here in this text, which

brings out very strikingly and beautifully, first, the function of the

Evangelist Zion; secondly, the manner of her message; and lastly, its

contents.

I. Look with me at the thoughts that cluster round the name, O Zion,

that bringest glad tidings.'

It is almost a definition of the Church; at any rate, it is a

description of her by her most characteristic office and function, that

which marks and separates her from all associations and societies of

men. This is her highest office; this is the reason of her being; this

is her noblest dignity. All mystical powers have been claimed for her,

men have been bidden to submit their judgment and manhood to her

authority; but her true dignity is that she bears a gospel in her hand,

and that grace is poured into her lips. Fond and sense-bound regrets

have been sighed forth that her miracle-working gifts have faded away;

but so long as her voice can quicken dead souls, and make the tongue of

the dumb to speak, her noblest energies remain unimpaired, and so we

may think of her as most exalted and dignified in that her Master

addresses her, O Zion, that bringest good tidings.'

Now, if I was right in my preliminary remark, to the effect that, prior

to my text, we are to suppose the manifestation and approach of the

Divine Deliverer, then I think it is quite clear that what constitutes

Zion the messenger of good tidings is the presence in her of the living

God. Translate that into New Testament language, and it just comes to

this: that what constitutes the Church the evangelist for the world is

the simple possession of Christ or of the Gospel. That thought branches

into some considerations on which we may touch.

The first of them is this: Whoever has Christ has the power to impart

Him. All believers are preachers, or meant to be so, by virtue of the

possession of that Divine Christ for your own. We Nonconformists are

ready enough to proclaim the universal priesthood of all believers when

we are opposing ecclesiastical assumption; are we as ready to take it

for the law of our own lives, and to say, Yes, priests by the

imposition of a mightier hand, and ministers of Christ by the

possession of Christ, and therefore bound and able to impart Him to all

around'? He has given us His love, and He thereby has made us fit to

impart Him. Zion only needed to receive its God, in order thereby to

possess the power to say unto all the cities of Judah, Behold your

God.' It does not take much genius, it does not take much culture, it

does not need any prolonged training, for a man who has Christ to say,

Behold, I have Him.' The very first Christian sermon that was ever

preached was a very short one, and a very effectual one, for it

converted the whole congregation, and it was this: We have found the

Messiah.' That was all--the utterance of individual possession and

personal experience--and it brought him to Jesus.'

Take another point. The possession of Christ for ourselves imposes upon

us the obligation to impart Him. All property in this world is trust

property, and everything that a man has that can help or bless the

moral or spiritual or intellectual condition of his fellows, he is

thereby under solemn obligation to impart. There is an obligation

arising from the bands that knit us to one another, so that no man can

possess his good alone without being untrue to what we call nowadays

the solidarity of humanity. You have, you say, the bread of life: very

well, what would you think of a man in a famine who, when women were

boiling their children, and men were fighting with the swine on the

dunghill for garbage, was content to eat his morsel alone, and leave

others to perish by starvation? You possess, you say, the healing for

all the diseases of humanity: very well, what would you think of a man

who, in a pestilence, was contented with swallowing his own specific,

and leaving others to die and to rot in the street? If you have the

Christ, you have Him that you may impart Him. He that withholdeth

bread, the people shall curse him'; of how much deeper malediction from

despairing lips will they be thought worthy who call themselves the

followers of Him that gave His life to be the bread of the world, and

yet withhold it from famishing souls?

And it is an obligation that arises, too, from the very purposes of our

calling. What are Christian men and women saved for? For their own

blessedness? Yes, and no. No creature in God's great universe but is

great enough to be a worthy end of the divine action; the happiness of

the humblest and most insignificant moves His mighty hand. Ay, but no

creature in God's universe so great as that he is a worthy end of the

divine action, if he is going to keep all the divine gifts in himself.

We are all brought into the light that we may impart light.

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do;

Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues

Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike

As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touch'd

But to fine issues.'

II. And now turn to the second thought which I desire to draw from

these words. We have here, in a very picturesque and vivid form, the

setting forth of the manner in which the Evangelist Zion is to proclaim

her message.

The fair-featured herald is bidden to get up into the high mountain--

perhaps a mere picturesque detail, perhaps some reference to the local

position of the city set upon a hill--like the priests on Ebal and

Gerizim, or Alpine shepherds, calling to each other across the valleys,

to secure some vantage-ground, and next, to let her voice roll out

across the glen. No faltering whisper will do, but a voice that compels

audience, that can be heard above the tumult and afar off, and

confident and loud and clear, because courageous and without dread.

Lift up thy voice with strength.' Yes, but a timid heart will make a

tremulous voice, and fear and doubt will whisper a message when courage

will ring it out. Be not afraid' is the foundation of the clearness and

the loudness with which the word is to be uttered.

That thought opens itself out into these two others, on each of which I

say a word or two. Our message is to be given with a courage and a

force that are worthy of it; Be not afraid.' That is a lesson for this

day, my brethren. There are plenty of causes of fear round about us if,

like poor Peter on the water, we look at the waves instead of at the

Master. There are the great forces of evil that are always arrayed

against Christ. There is the thoroughgoing and formidable rejection of

all that is dearest to us, which is creeping like poison through

cultivated society at home; there is the manifest disproportion between

our resources and the task that we have set ourselves to. They need not

depart; give ye them to eat,' said the Master. What! five thousand

people need not depart, and only this scanty provision of loaves and

fishes! Yes; the Master's hand can multiply it. There is the

consciousness of our own weakness; there is the apparent slow progress

of the Gospel in the world. All these things come surging in upon us

when our spirits are low and our faith weak; and yet the message comes

to us, Be not afraid.' I venture to break that injunction up into two

or three exhortations, which I cast into the shape of exhortations, not

from any assumption of superiority, but for the sake of point and

force.

First of all, I would say, let us cherish a firm, soul-absorbing

confidence in the power and truth of the message we have to carry. I do

not speak now of the intellectual discipline which may be required from

each of us to meet the difficulties of this day--that is outside of my

present subject; but there is a moral discipline quite as important as

the intellectual. There cannot be any question, I suppose, to any one

who looks round about, and notices the tendencies of his own mind, but

that all we Christian people, in our various circles and organisations,

are under a very great temptation to a very perceptible lowering of our

key in the presence of widespread doubt. We are tempted to fancy that a

truth is less certain because it is denied; that because a has attacked

this thing, and b's clever book has unsettled that thing, and c's

researches seem to cast a great deal of doubt upon that other thing,

therefore we are to surrender them all, and talk about them as if they

were doubtful problems or hypotheses rather than sure verities of our

faith. And there are some of us, I venture to say, who are in danger of

another temptation, and that is of getting a little ashamed and

becoming afraid to say Yes, I stand by that great truth, God in Christ

reconciling the world to Himself,' for fear of being thought to

be--well, narrow' is the favourite word, old-fashioned,' or holders of

a creed outworn,' in antagonism with the spirit of the age,' and so on,

and so on. Brethren, I am not the man, I hope, to preach an

unreasonable attitude of antagonism; I am not the man to ask anybody to

exaggerate his beliefs because somebody else denies them, but I do

believe that among us all, and especially among young men, there is the

temptation just to be a little bit afraid, and not to let the voice

ring out with that clear certitude which becomes the messenger of the

Cross. Try by mental discipline to find intellectual standing-ground

that will be firm below your feet, and then remember that that is not

all, but that moral discipline is wanted also that I may open my mouth

boldly, as I ought to speak.'

And then, if I might venture to dwell for a moment or two further upon

this class of consideration, I would say, Do not let us make too much

of the enemy. There is no need why we should take them at their own

appraisement. Men are always tempted to think that no generation ever

had such a fight as their own generation. They have said that ever

since there was a Christian Church. But the true, healthy way of

looking at the adversary--and by that I mean all the various forms of

difficulty which beset us in our evangelistic work, difficulties in the

mission-field, difficulties in the state of things here round us--the

true, healthy way of looking at them all, is to look at them as the

brave Apostle Paul did, when he said, I am going to stop at Ephesus

till Pentecost, for there is a great and effectual door opened to me.'

And how did he know that? He tells us in the next clause, There are

many adversaries.' Where there are many adversaries, there is an

effectual door, if you and I are bold and big enough to go in and

occupy.

And then I would venture to say, still further, let us remember the

victories of the past. Let us make personal experience of the

overcoming powers that are stored and hidden in Christ's Gospel. And,

above all, let us remember who fights with us. Jesus Christ and one man

are always the majority. There is an old story, which you may remember,

about the Conqueror of Rome, who dashed his sword into the scales when

the ransom was being weighed; and Christ flings His sharp sword with

the two edges into the scales when we are weighing resources, and the

other kicks the beam. There are enemies, plenty of them, all round

about. Yes, and the spreading forth of their wings fills the breadth of

the land. Be it so. But notwithstanding the irruption of the barbarous

and cruel hosts, it is Thy land, O Emanuel!' And in His time He will

sweep them before His presence, as the north wind drives the locusts

into the hindermost sea. I do not know if any of you remember an

ancient Christian legend, and I do not know whether it is a legend or a

truth--it does not matter, it will serve for our purpose all the same

either way--how when the Emperor Julian, surnamed the Apostate, once

taunted a humble Christian man with the question, What is the

carpenter's son doing now?' and the answer was, Hewing wood for the

emperor's funeral pile,' and not very long after there came the fatal

field on which, according to ancient tradition, he died with the words

on his lips, Thou hast conquered, Galilean. As in Carlyle's grand

translation of Luther's Hymn of the Reformation--

Of our own strength we nothing can,

Full soon were we downridden;

But for us fights the proper Man,

Whom God Himself hath bidden.

Ask ye, who is the same?

Christ Jesus is His name,

The Lord Sabaoth's Son.

He and none other one

Shall conquer in this battle.'

Lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid.'

III. I come to the last thought that emerges from these words, and that

is the substance and contents of the Evangelist Zion's message: Say

unto the cities of Judah, behold your God!'

They were to be pointed to a great historical act, in which God had

manifested and made Himself visible to men; and the words of my text

are, not only an exclamation, but they are an entreaty, and the message

was to be given to these little daughter cities of Judah as

representing all of those for whom the deliverance had been

wrought--all which things are paralleled in the message that is

committed to our hand.

For, first of all, we all have given to us the charge of pointing men

to the great historical fact wherein God is visible to men, and so

crying, Behold your God!' God cannot be revealed by word, God cannot be

revealed by thought. There is no way open to Him to make Himself known

to His creatures except the way by which men make themselves known to

one another; that is, by their deeds; and so, high above all

speculation, high above all abstraction, nearer to us than all thought

stands the historical fact in which God shows Himself to the world, and

that is the person and work of Jesus Christ, the brightness of His

glory and the express image of His person,' in whom the abysses of the

divine nature are opened, and through whom all the certitude of divine

light that human eyes can receive pours itself in genial and yet

intensest radiance upon the world. How beautiful in that connection the

verses following my text are I need only indicate in a word as I pass,

Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand,' and yet, behold, He

shall feed His flock like a shepherd.' And so in Christ is the power of

God, for I take it that He is the arm of the Lord; and in Christ is the

gentleness of God; and whilst men grope in the darkness, our business

is to point to the living, dying Son, and to say, There you have the

complete, the ultimate revelation of the unseen God.'

And do not let us forget that the burning centre of all that brightness

is the Cross, that ever-wondrous paradox; that the depth of humiliation

is the height of glorifying; that Christ's Cross is the throne of the

manifested divine power quite as much as it is the seat of the

manifested divine love, and that when He is hanging there in His

weakness and mortal agony, the words are yet true--strange,

paradoxical, blessedly true--He that hath seen Me hath seen the

Father.' And when we say, pointing to His Cross and Him there, His brow

paled with dying, and His soul faint with loss--when we say, Behold the

Lamb!' we are also and therein saying, Behold your God!'

And therefore, with what of gentleness, with what of tenderness, with

what of patient entreaty as well as strength and confidence, the word

that speaks of a strength manifested in weakness, and a God made

visible in Christ, should be spoken, it needs not here to enlarge

upon--only take that one last thought that I suggested, that this

message comes to all those for whom God has appeared, and for whom the

deliverance has been wrought. We each have the right, and we each have

the charge, to go to every man and say, Behold your God!' and the

hearts of men will leap up to meet the message. For, though overlaid by

sin, perverted often into its own opposite by fear, misinterpreted and

misunderstood by the very men that bear it, there yet lies deep in

every heart the aching thirst for the living God, and we have the word

that alone can meet that thirst. All around us men are saying--In all

the fields of science and of nature, in human history and in the spirit

of men, I find no God,' and are falling back into that dreary negation,

Behold, we know not anything!' And some of them, orphaned in their

agony, are crying, though it be often in contemptuous tones that almost

sound as if they meant the opposite, Oh, that I knew where I might find

Him!' We have a word that can meet that. For cultivated Europe it has

come to this--Christ or nothing; either He has shown us the Father, or

there is no knowledge of Him possible. We do not need to dread the

alternative; we can face it, and overcome it. And in far-off lands men

are groping in twilight uncertainty, worshipping, with a nameless

horror at their hearts, gods capricious, gods cruel, gods

terrible--tamely believing in gods far-off and mysterious, cowering

before gods careless and heartless, degrading their manhood by

imitating gods foul and bestial, and yet all the while dimly feeling,

Surely, surely there is somewhere a good and a fair Being, that has an

eye to see my sorrows, and a heart to pity them; an ear to hear my

prayer, and a hand to stretch out.' We have a word that can meet that.

Let that word ring out, brother, as far as your influence can reach.

Set the trumpet to thy mouth, and say, Behold your God!' and be sure

that from the uttermost parts of the earth we shall hear the choral

songs of many voices answering, Lo! this is our God, we have waited for

Him, and He will save us! This is our God; we will be glad and rejoice

in His salvation!'

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HAVE YE NOT? HAST THOU NOT?'

Have ye not known, have ye not heard? hath it not been told yon from

the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the

earth?. . . Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard?'--ISAIAH xl. 21

and 28.

The recurrence of the same form of interrogation in these two verses is

remarkable. In the first case the plural is used, in the second the

singular, and we may reasonably conclude that as Israel is addressed in

the latter, the nations outside the sphere illumined by Revelation are

appealed to in the former. The context of the two passages confirms

this reference, for the witness of Creation and History is summoned in

the former section, and that of God's inward dealings with trustful

souls is brought out in the latter.

I. What Nature and History tell men about God.

Observe that emphatic told you'; then the witness here appealed to is

truly a Revelation, though a silent one. There is no speech nor

language,' yet their line is gone out through all the earth, and their

words to the ends of the world.'

The general idea of the divine nature, as revealed from the beginning'

and from the foundation of the earth,' is that of Majesty transcending

all comparison.

The contrast is drawn between Him and men, in the magnificent image of

Him as throned above the circle of the earth,' and so far above that

all the busy tribes of men are as grasshoppers,' their restless

activity but aimless leaping, and the tumult of the peoples' only as a

meaningless chirping.

God's creative and sustaining power is further set forth by that great

image of His stretching out the heavens as a curtain, and spreading

them out as a tent to dwell in.' As easily as travellers set up their

tents when the day's march is done, did He stretch the great expanse

above the low earth; and all its depths and spaces are, in comparison

with Him, thin, transient, and as easily rolled up and put aside as the

stuff that makes a nomad's home for a night. Nor are the two implied

thoughts that the heavens' are a veil screening Him from men even while

they tell of Him to men, and that they are His lofty dwelling-place, to

be left out of view.

But in verse 26 we have a more specific and grander exhibition of God's

relation to the Universe. The stars, in number numberless, are

conceived of as a great army drilled and directed by Him. And that

metaphor, familiar to us as it is, and condensed into the divine title

so frequent in this prophetic book, is pregnant with great truths.

It speaks of God as the Imperator, the Commander, exercising supreme

authority by the word of His power,' and of creation as obedient

thereto. For ever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in the heavens.' The

Commander needs but to speak, and so mystic is the power of His uttered

will, that effects on the material universe follow that altogether

immaterial energy.

It speaks of the harmony and order of the whole Creation. By number'

and by name' He sways and ranks them. All things work together.' They

are an ordered whole--a kosmos, not a chaos. Modern science is slowly

establishing by experiment the truth which is enshrined in that old

name, the Lord of hosts,' that all things in the physical universe are

a unity.

It speaks of the perfectness of God's knowledge of each item in the

mighty whole. He calleth them all by name.' Thereby are expressed

authority, ownership, particular knowledge of, and relation to, each

individual of the overwhelming aggregate. God knows all, because He

knows each.

It speaks of the inexhaustible energy of His sustaining power, and the

consequent strength of His creatures. Preservation is a continued

creation.' The prophet saw much deeper than the mechanical view of the

creative act. To him God was, to use more modern language, immanent' as

well as transcendent.' True, He sits above the circle of the earth,'

but as truly He is working on His creatures, and it is by His

communicated strength that they are strong. If any being--star, or

insect--were separated utterly from Him, it would crumble into

nothingness.

But the appeal to Creation is singularly interrupted by an appeal to

History. The prophet drops from the serene expanse of the silent yet

eloquent heavens to the stormy scenes of changing dynasties and

revolutions of earth's kingdoms. How calm the one, how tumultuous the

other! How the one witnesses to Him by its apparently unchanging

continuance! how the other witnesses by its swift mutations! In the

one, He is revealed as Preserver; in the other, the most clear

demonstration of His power is given in His destroying of rebel

kingdoms. But in these acts by which ancient and firmly rooted

dynasties are rooted up or withered as by the simoom, He reveals a side

of His nature to which the calm heavens bore no witness. He is the

moral Governor of the world, The history of the world is the judgment

of the world,' and when hoary iniquities are smitten to death, the Holy

One' is revealed as the righteous Judge. And the conjoint witness of

creation and of history attests that none can be likened' to Him.

II. What Revelation tells Israel about God.

It is noteworthy that in the section of which our first text is the

centre, there is no mention of the divine Name, and even the well-known

title, the Holy One of Israel,' is truncated, so as to leave out

reference to the people of Revelation; whereas in this section He is

not only designated as God and Creator, but as Jehovah, the God who has

made a covenant with Israel, and made known His will and to some extent

His nature. The distinct climax in the divine Names itself implies a

nobler relation to men, and a clearer revelation than was declared in

the former part of this prophecy. It is the fitting preparation for the

loftier and infinitely more tender and touching aspect of the divine

nature which shines with lambent, inviting lustre within the sphere of

Revelation.

The distinctive glory of the long process of God's self-manifestation

to Israel is that, while it emphasises all that nature and history

affirm of Him, it sets Him forth as restoring the weak, as well as

sustaining the strong. The sad contrast between the untroubled and

unwearied strength of the calm heavens and the soon-exhausted strength

of struggling and often beaten men strikes the poet prophet's sensitive

soul. He did not know, what modern astronomy teaches us, that change,

convulsions, ruin, are not confined to earth, but that stars as well as

men faint and fail, dwindle and die. The scriptural view of Nature is

not that of the scientist, but that of the poet and of the devout man.

It lies quite apart from the scientific attitude, and has as good a

right to exist as it has. The contrast of heaven and earth is for the

prophet the contrast of strength with weakness, of joyful harmony with

moral disorder, of punctual, entire obedience with rebellion and the

clash of multitudes of anarchic self-willed men.

But there is a sadder contrast still--namely, that between God and the

wretched weaklings that men have made of themselves. He fainteth not,

neither is weary.' Strange anomaly that in His universe there should be

the faint and them that have no might'! The only explanation of such an

exception to the order of Creation is that men have broken loose from

Creation's dependence on God, and that therefore the inflow of

sustaining strength has been checked. In other words, man's weakness

comes from man's sin.

Hence to restore strength to those whose power has been drained away by

sin is God's divinest work. It is more to restore than to sustain. It

takes less energy to keep a weight stationary at a height than to roll

it up again if it falls to the bottom. Since sin is the cause of our

weakness, the first step to deliver from the weakness is to deliver

from the sin. If we are ever to be restored, hearts, consciences,

averted wills must be dealt with--and but One Hand can deal with these.

And not only does God outdo all His mightiest works in the work of

restoring strength to the faint, but He crowns that restoration by

making the restored weakling like Himself. He fainteth not, neither is

weary.' They, too, shall ran and not be weary, they shall walk and not

faint.' In the long drawn out grind of monotonous marching along the

common path of daily small duties and uneventful life, they shall not

faint; in the rare occasional spurts, occurring in every man's

experience, when extraordinary tax is laid on heart and limbs, they

shall not be weary. And they will be able both to walk and to run,

because they soar on wings as eagles. And they do all because they wait

on the Lord. Communion with Him buoys us above this low earth, and

bears us up into the heavenly places, and, living there, we shall be

fit for the slow hours of commonplace plodding and for the crowded

moments of great crises.

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UNFAILING STARS AND FAINTING MEN

. . . For that He is strong in power; not one faileth. . . . He giveth

power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth

strength.'--ISAIAH xl. 26 and 29.

These two verses set forth two widely different operations of the

divine power as exercised in two sadly different fields, the starry

heavens and this weary world. They are interlocked, as it were, by the

recurrence in the latter of the emphatic words of the former. The one

verse says, He is strong in power'; the other, He giveth power.' In the

former verse, the greatness of His might' sustains the stars; in the

latter verse, a still diviner operation is set forth in that to them

that have no might He increaseth strength.' Thus there are three

contrasts suggested: that between unfailing stars, and men that faint;

that between the unwearied God and wearied men; and that between the

sustaining power that is exercised in the heavens and the restoring

power that is manifested on earth.

There is another interlocking between the latter of these two texts and

its context, which is indicated by a similar recurrence of epithets. In

my second text we read of the faint,' and in the verse that follows it,

again we find the expressions faint' and weary,' while in the verse

before my text we read that the Lord fainteth not, neither is weary.'

So again the contrast between Him and us is set forth, but, in the

verse that closes the chapter, we read how that contrast merges into

likeness, inasmuch as the unfainting and unwearied God makes even the

men that wait upon Him unwearied and unfainting. Here, then, we have

lessons that we may well ponder.

Note, first--

I. That sad contrast.

The prophet in the former of these verses seems to be expanding the

thoughts that lie in the name, the Lord of hosts,' in so far as that

name expresses the divine relation to the starry universe. The image

that underlies both it and the words of the text is that of a captain

who commands his soldiers, and they obey. Discipline and plan array

them in their ranks; they are not a mob, but an army. The voice that

reads the roll-call summons one after another to his place, and,

punctually obedient, there they stand, ready for any evolution that may

be prescribed. The plain prose of which is, that night by night above

the horizon rise the bright orbs, and roll on their path obedient to

the Sovereign will; because He is strong in might not one' is lacking.

Astronomers have taught us, what the prophet did not know, that even in

the apparently serene spaces there are collisions and catastrophes, and

that stars may dwindle and dim, and finally go out. But while Scripture

deals with creation neither from the scientific nor from the aesthetic

point of view, it leaves room for both of these--for all that the

poet's imagination can see or say, for all that the scientist's

investigation can discover, it sees that beneath the beauty is the

Fountain of all loveliness, beneath and behind the number' of the

numberless stars works the infinite will of God. Surely an intelligible

creation must have an intelligent source. Surely a universe in which

Mind can apprehend order and number must have a Mind at the back of it.

Wordsworth has nobly said of Duty what we may more truly say of God:

Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong, And the most ancient heavens

through Thee are fresh and strong.' For that He is great in might, not

one faileth.' Scripture bids us think of God, not as a creative energy

that set the universe in motion, and leaves it to roll or spin, but as

of a Divine Presence--to use a word which can only be in a very

modified sense applied to that mysterious, intelligent

Entity--operating in, and being the sustaining Cause of, all that is.

This Divine Presence stamps its signature on the unfailing strength of

these bright creatures above.

But in our second text we drop from the illumination of the heavens to

the shadowed plain of this low earth. It is as if a man, looking up

into the violet sky, with all its shining orbs, should then turn to

some reeking alley, with its tumult and its squalor. Just because man

is greater than the stars, man fails,' whilst they shine on unwearied.

For what the prophet has in view as the clinging curse that cleaves to

our greatness, is not merely the bodily fatigue which is necessarily

involved in the very fact of bodily existence, since energy cannot be

put forth without waste and weariness, but it is far more the weary

heart, the heart that is weary of itself, the heart that is weary of

toil, the heart that is weary of the momentary crises that demand

effort, and wearier still of the effortless monotony of our daily

lives; the heart that all of us carry, and which to all of us sometimes

whispers, with a dark and gloomy voice which we cannot contradict,

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' I was going to say, happy are you

if you do not know that weariness, but I check myself and say, tenfold

more miserable are you if you have never been sober and wise enough to

have felt the weariness and weight of all this unintelligible world,

and of your own sorry selves.

For it is ever to be remembered that the faintness and the ebbing away

of might, which is the truly tragic thing in humanity, does not depend

upon physical constitution, but upon separation from the Source of all

strength, breaking the union between ourselves and God. If a star could

shake off its dependence, and shut out the influx of the sustaining

power that by continual creation preserves it, it would die into

darkness, or crumble into dust. It cannot, and we cannot, in so far as

our physical being is concerned, but we can shake ourselves free from

God, in so far as the life of the spirit is concerned, and the godless

spirit bears the Cain-curse of restlessness and weariness ever upon it.

So the contrast between the unfailing strengths that ever shine down

upon us from the heavens, and the weariness of body and of mind

afflicting the sleeping millions on whom they shine, is tragical

indeed. But far more tragical is the contrast, of which the other is

but an indication because it is a consequence, the contrast between the

punctual obedience with which these hosts, summoned by the great

Commander, appear and take their places, and the self-will which turns

a man into a wandering star unto whom is reserved the blackness of

darkness for ever.' Above is peace and order, because above is the

supremacy of an uncontested will. Below is tumult and weariness,

because when God says Thou shalt,' men respond, I will not.'

Secondly, my text suggests to us--

II. Another sad contrast, melting into a blessed likeness.

He fainteth not, neither is weary.' He giveth power to the faint.' Even

the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly

fail,' but waiting on God the curse removes, and faintness and

weariness cease, and the humble man becomes in some measure participant

of, and conformed to, that life which knows no exhausting, operates

unspent, burns with an undying flame, works and never wearies. We may

take to ourselves all the peace and strength that come from that

transcendent hope, whilst we are still subject, as of course we must

be, to the limitations imposed on spirits fettered, as well as housed,

in body. Whilst toil leaves as its consequence fatigue, and as our days

increase our strength wanes; whilst physical weariness remains

unaffected, there may pour into our spirits the influx of divine power,

by which they will remain fresh and strong through advancing years and

heavy tasks and stiff battles. Is it not something to believe it

possible that

In old age, when others fade,

We fruit still forth shall bring'

Is it not something to know it as a possibility that we may have that

within us which has no tendency to decay, which neither perishes with

the using nor is exhausted by exercise, which grows the more the longer

we live, which has in it the pledge of immortality, because it has in

it the impossibility of exhaustion? Thus to all of us who know how

weary life sometimes is, thus to those of us who in the flush of our

youth are deceived into thinking that the vigorous limbs will always be

vigorous, and the clear eyesight will always be keen, and to those of

us who, in the long weary levels of middle life, where there are few

changes, are worn out by the eventless recurrence, day after day, of

duties that have become burdensome, because they are so small, and to

those of us who are learning by experience how inevitably early

strength utterly fails; to us all surely it comes us a gospel, They

that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall run and

not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' It is true; and each of

us may set to our seals, if we will, that the promise is faithful and

sure.

Is that not a higher exercise of power than to preserve the stars from

wrong'? Is not the strength that restores mightier than the strength

that sustains? Is not the hand that, put beneath the falling body,

stops its plunge, and lifts it whence it fell, displaying a greater

manifestation of strength, than the hand that held it unfailing at the

height? The mighty miracle of the calm, steadfast heavens, with no

vacant spaces where yesterday a star blazed, is less than the miracle

of that restoring energy which, coming to men separated from the

Fountain of power, re-establishes the connection between them, and out

of the fainting creature makes one that is neither faint nor weary for

ever. God is greater, in the miracle that He works upon you and me,

poor strengthless souls, than when He rolls the stars along. Redemption

is more than Creation, and to the hosts of the principalities and

powers in heavenly places, is made known,' by the Church, of restored

and redeemed souls, the manifold wisdom of God.'

What are the consequences that the prophet traces to this restoring

power? They shall mount up with wings as eagles.' Power to soar, to

lift our heavy selves from earth, and to reach the heavenly places

where we shall commune with God, that is the greatest of all gifts to

strengthened spirits. And it is the foundation of all the others, for

it is only they who know how to soar that can creep, and it is only

they who have renewed their strength hour by hour, by communion with

the Source of all energy and might, who when they drop with quivering

wings, composed and still,' down to the low earth, there live unwearied

and unfainting.

They shall run and not be weary.' Crises come--moments when

circumstances demand from us more than ordinary energy and swifter rate

of progress. We have often, in the course of our years, to make short

spurts of unusual effort. They shall run and not be weary. They shall

walk.' The bulk of our lives is a slow jog-trot, and it is harder to

keep elasticity, buoyancy, freshness of spirit, in the eventless

mill--horse round of our trivial lives than it is in the rarer bursts.

Excitement helps us in the one; nothing but dogged principle, and close

communion with God, mounting on wings as eagles,' will help us in the

other. But we may have Him with us in all the arid and featureless

levels across which we have to plod, as well as in the height to which

we sometimes have to struggle upwards, or in the depths into which we

have sometimes to plunge. If we have the life of Christ within us, then

neither the one nor the other will exhaust our energy or darken our

spirits.

Lastly, one word as to--

III. The way by which these contrasts can be reconciled, and this

likeness secured.

They that wait upon the Lord'--that is the whole secret. What does

waiting on the Lord include? Let me put it in three brief exhortations.

Keep near Him; keep still; expect. If I stray away from Him, I cannot

expect His power to come to me. If I fling myself about, in vain

impatience, struggling, resisting providences, shirking duties,

perturbing my soul, I cannot expect that the peace which brings

strength, or the strength which brings peace, will come to me. It must

be a windless sea that mirrors the sunshine and the blue, and the

troubled heart has not God's strength in it. If I do not expect to get

anything from Him, He will not give me anything; not because He will

not, but because He cannot. Take the old Psalmist's words, I have

quieted myself as a weaned child,' and nestle on the great bosom, and

its warmth, its fragrance, its serenity will be granted to you. Keep

hold of God's hand in expectation, in submission, in close union, and

the contact will communicate something of His own power. In quietness

and in confidence shall be your strength.' The bitter contrasts may all

be harmonised, and the miraculous assimilation of humanity to divinity

may, in growing measure according to our faith, be realised in us. And

though we must still bear the limitations of our present corporeal

condition, and though life's tasks must still oftentimes be felt by us

as toils, and life's burdens as too burdensome for our feeble

shoulders, yet we shall be held up. As thy day so shall thy strength

be,' and at last, when we mount up further than eagle's wings have ever

soared, and look down upon the stars that are rolled together as a

scroll,' we shall through eternal ages run and not be weary' and walk

and not faint.'

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THE SECRET OF IMMORTAL YOUTH

Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall

utterly fall. But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their

strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and

not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.'--ISAIAH xl. 30, 31.

I remember a sunset at sea, where the bosom of each wavelet that

fronted the west was aglow with fiery gold, and the back of each turned

eastward was cold green; so that, looking on the one hand all was

glory, and on the other all was sober melancholy. So differently does

life look to you young people and to us older ones. Every man must buy

his own experience for himself, and no preaching nor talking will ever

make you see life as we see it. It is neither possible nor desirable

that you should; but it is both possible and most desirable that you

should open your eyes to plain, grave facts, which do not at all depend

on our way of looking at things, and that if they be ascertainable, as

they are, you should let them shape your lives.

Here are a couple of facts in my text which I ask you to look steadily

in the face, and to take account of them, because, if you do so now, it

may save you an immense deal of disappointment and sorrow in the days

that are to come. You have the priceless prerogative still in your

hands of determining what that future is to be; but you will never use

that power rightly if you are guided by illusions, or if, unguided by

anything but inclination, you let things drift, and do as you like.

So, then, my object is simply to deal with these two forecasts which my

text presents; the one a dreary certainty of weariness and decay, the

other a blessed possibility of inexhaustible and incorruptible strength

and youth, and on the contrast to build as earnest an appeal to you as

I can make.

I. Now, then, look at the first fact here, that of the dreary certainty

of weariness and decay.

I do not need to spend much time in talking about that. It is one of

the commonplaces which are so familiar that they have lost all power of

impression, and can only be rescued from their trivial insignificance

by being brought into immediate connection with our own experience. If,

instead of the toothless generality, the youths shall faint and be

weary,' I could get you young people to say, I--I shall faint and be

weary, and, as sure as I am living, I shall lose what makes to me the

very joy of life at this moment,' I should not have preached in vain.

Of course the words of my text point to the plain fact that all created

and physical life, by the very law of its being, in the act of living

tends to death; and by the very operation of its strength tends to

exhaustion. There are three stages in every creature's life--that of

growth, that of equilibrium, that of decay. You are in the first. If

you live, it is as certain as fate that you will come to the second and

the third. Your eyes will grow dim,' your natural force' will be

abated,' your body will become a burden, your years that are full of

buoyancy will be changed for years of heaviness and weariness, strength

will decay, and the young men'--that is you--shall utterly fall.'

And the text points also to another fact, that, long before your

natural life shall have begun to tend towards decay, hard work and

occasional sorrows and responsibilities and burdens of all sorts will

very often make you wearied and ready to faint. In your early days you

dream of life as a kind of enchanted garden, full of all manner of

delights; and you stand at the threshold with eager eyes and

outstretched hands. Ah! dear young friend, long before you have

traversed the length of one of its walks, you will often have been sick

and tired of the whole thing, and weary of what is laid upon you.

My text points to another fact, as certain as gravitation, that the

faintness and weariness and decay of the bodily strength will be

accompanied with a parallel change in your feelings. We are drawn

onward by hopes, and when we get them fulfilled we find that they are

disappointing. Custom, which weighs upon us heavy as frost, and deep

almost as life,' takes the edge off everything that is delightsome,

though it does not so completely take away the pain of things that are

burdensome and painful. Men travel from a tinted morning into the sober

light of common day, and with failing faculties and shattered illusions

and dissipated hopes, and powers bending under the long monotony of

middle life, most of them live. Now all that is the veriest threadbare

morality, and I dare say while I have been speaking, some of you have

been thinking that I am repeating platitudes that every old woman could

preach. So I am. That is to say, I am trying to put into feeble words

the universal human experience. That is your experience, and what I

want to get you to think about now is that, as sure as you are living

and rejoicing in your youth and strength, this is the fate that is

awaiting you--the youths shall faint and be weary, and shall utterly

fall.'

Well, then, one question: Do you not think that, if that is so, it

would be as well to face it? Do you not think that a wise man would

take account of all the elements in forecasting his life and would

shape his conduct accordingly? If there be something certain to come,

it is a very questionable piece of wisdom to make that the thing which

we are most unwilling to think about. I do not want to be a kill-joy; I

do not want to take anything out of the happy buoyancy of youth. I

would say, as even that cynical, bitter Ecclesiastes says, Rejoice, O

young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of

thy youth.' By all means; only take all the facts into account, and if

you have joys which shrivel up at the touch of this thought, then the

sooner you get rid of such joys the better. If your gladness depends

upon your forcibly shutting your eyes to what is inevitably certain to

come about, do you not think that you are living in a fool's paradise

that you had better get out of as soon as possible? There is the fact.

Will you be a wise and brave man and front it, and settle how you are

going to deal with it, or will you let it hang there on your horizon, a

thunder-cloud that you do not like to look at, and that you are all the

more unwilling to entertain the thought of, because you are so sure

that it will burst in storm? Lay this, then, to heart, though it is a

dreary certainty, that weariness and decay are sure to be your fate.

II. Now turn, in the next place, to the blessed opposite possibility of

inexhaustible and immortal strength. They that wait upon the Lord shall

renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they

shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.' The life of

nature tends inevitably downward, but there may be another life within

the life of nature, which shall have the opposite motion, and tend as

certainly upwards. The youths shall faint and be weary'--whether they

be Christians or not, the law of decay and fatigue will act upon them;

but there may be that within each of us, if we will, which shall resist

that law, and have no proclivity whatsoever to extinction in its blaze,

to death in its life, to weariness in its effort, and shall be

replenished and not exhausted by expenditure. They that wait upon the

Lord shall renew their strength,' and, in all forms of motion possible

to a creature they shall expatiate and never tire. So let us look on

this blessed possibility a little more closely.

Note, then, how to get at it. They that wait upon the Lord' is Old

Testament dialect for what in New Testament phraseology is meant by

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.' For the notion expressed here by

waiting' is that of expectant dependence, and the New Testament faith'

is the very same in its attitude of expectant dependence, while the

object of the Old Testament waiting,' Jehovah, is identical with the

object of the New Testament faith, which fastens on God manifest in the

flesh, the Man Jesus Christ.

Therefore, I am not diverting the language of my text from its true

meaning, but simply opening its depth, when I say that the condition of

the inflow of this unwearied and immortal life into our poor, fainting,

dying humanity is simply the trust in Jesus Christ the Redeemer of our

souls. True, the revelation has advanced; the contents of that which we

grasp are more developed and articulate, blessed be God! True, we know

more about Jehovah, when we see Him in Jesus Christ, than Isaiah did.

True, we have to trust in Him as dying on the Cross for our salvation

and as the pattern and example in His humanity of all nobleness and

beauty of life for young or old, but the Christ is the same yesterday,

and to-day, and for ever.' And the faith that knit the furthest back of

the saints of old to the Jehovah, whom they dimly knew, is in essence

identical with the faith that binds my poor sinful heart to the Christ

that died and that lives for my redemption and salvation. So, dear

brethren, here is the simple old message for each of you, young or old.

No matter where we stand on the course of life, there may come into our

hearts a Divine Indweller, who laughs at weariness and knows nothing of

decay; and He will come if, as sinful men, we turn ourselves to that

dear Lord, who fainted and was weary many a time in His humanity, and

who now lives, the strong Son of God, immortal love,' to make us

partakers in His immortality and His strength. The way, then, by which

we get this divine gift is by faith in Jesus Christ, which is the

expansion, as it was the root, of trust in Jehovah.

Further, what is this strength that we thus get, if we will, by faith?

It is the true entrance into our souls of a divine life. God in His Son

will come to us, according to His own gracious and profound promise: If

any man open the door I will enter in.' He will come into our hearts

and abide there. He will give to us a life derived from, and therefore,

kindred with, His own. And in that connection it is very striking to

notice how the prophet, in the context, reiterates these two words,

fainteth not, neither is weary.' He begins by speaking of God, the

Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, who fainteth not, neither

is weary.' He passes on to speak of His gift of power to the faint. He

returns to the contrast between the Creator's incorruptible strength

and the fleeting power of the strongest and youngest. And then he

crowns all with the thought that the same characteristics will mark

them in whom the unwearied God dwells, as mark Him. We too, like Him,

if we have Christ in our hearts by faith, will share, in some fashion

and degree, in His wondrous prerogative of unwearied strength.

So, brethren, here is the promise. God will give Himself to you, and in

the very heart of your decaying nature will plant the seed of an

immortal being which shall, like His own, shake off fatigue from the

limbs, and never tend to dissolution or an end. The life of nature dies

by living; the life of grace, which may belong to us all, lives by

living, and lives evermore thereby. And so that life is continuous and

progressive, with no tendency to decay, nor term to its being. The path

of the just is as the shining light that shineth more and more,' until

it riseth to the zenith of the noontide of the day. Each of you,

looking forward to the certain ebbing away of creatural power, to the

certain changes that will pass upon you, may say, I know that I shall

have to leave behind me my present youthful strength, my unworn

freshness, my buoyancy, my confidence, my wonder, my hope; but I shall

carry my Christ; and in Him I shall possess the secret of an immortal

youth.'

The oldest angels are the youngest. The longer men live in fellowship

with Christ, the stronger do they grow. And though our lives, whether

we are Christians or no, are necessarily subject to the common laws of

mortality, we may carry all that is worth preserving of the earliest

stages into the latest; and when grey hairs are upon us, and we are

living next door to our graves, we may still have the enthusiasm, the

energy, and above all, the boundless hopefulness that made the gladness

and the spring of our long-buried youth. They shall still bring forth

fruit in old age.' The youths shall faint and be weary, but they that

wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.'

There is one more point to touch, and then I have done, and that is the

manner in which this immortal strength is exercised. The latter clauses

of my text give us, so to speak, three forms of motion. They shall

mount up with wings as eagles.' Some good commentators find in this a

parallel to the words in the 103rd Psalm, My youth is renewed like the

eagle's,' and propose to translate it in this fashion, They shall cast

their plumage like the eagle.' But it seems much more in accordance

with the context and the language to adopt substantially the reading of

our English version here, or to make the slight change, They shall lift

up their wings as the eagle,' implying, of course, the steady upward

flight towards the light of heaven.

So, then, there are three forms of unwearied strength lying ready for

you, young men and women, to take for your very own if you like:

strength to soar, strength to run, strength to walk.

There is strength to soar. Old men generally shed their wings, and can

only manage to crawl. They have done with romance. Enthusiasms are

dead. Sometimes they cynically smile at their own past selves and their

dreams. And it is a bad sign when an old man does that. But for the

most part they are content, unless they have got Christ in their

hearts, to keep along the low levels, and their soaring days are done.

But if you and I have Jesus Christ for the life of our spirits, as

certainly as fire sends its shooting tongues upwards, so certainly

shall we rise above the sorrows and sins and cares of this dim spot

which men call earth,' and find an ampler field for buoyant motion high

up in communion with God. Strength to soar means the gracious power of

bringing all heaven into our grasp, and setting our affections on

things above. As the night falls, and joys become fewer and life

sterner, and hopes become rarer and more doubtful, it is something to

feel that, however straitened may be the ground below, there is plenty

of room above, and that, though we are strangers upon earth, we can

lift our thoughts yonder. If there be darkness here, still we can

outsoar the shadow of our night,' and live close to the sun in

fellowship with God. Dear brethren, life on earth were too wretched

unless it were possible to mount up with wings as eagles.'

Again, you may have strength to run--that is to say, there is power

waiting for you for all the great crises of your lives which call for

special, though it may be brief, exertion. Such crises will come to

each of you, in sorrow, work, difficulty, hard conflicts. Moments will

be sprung upon you without warning, in which you will feel that years

hang on the issue of an instant. Great tasks will be clashed down

before you unexpectedly which will demand the gathering together of all

your power. And there is only one way to be ready for such times as

these, and that is to live waiting on the Lord, near Christ, with Him

in your hearts, and then nothing will come that will be too hard for

you. However rough the road, and however severe the struggle, and

however swift the pace, you will be able to keep it up. Though it may

be with panting lungs and a throbbing heart, and dim eyes and quivering

muscles, yet if you wait on the Lord you will run and not be weary. You

will be masters of the crises.

Strength to walk may be yours--that is to say, patient power for

persistent pursuit of weary, monotonous duty. That is the hardest, and

so it is named last. Many a man finds it easy, under the pressure of

strong excitement, and for a moment or two, to keep up a swift pace,

who finds it very difficult to keep steadily at unexciting work. And

yet there is nothing to be done except by doggedly plodding along the

dusty road of trivial duties, unhelped by excitement and unwearied by

monotony. Only one thing will conquer the disgust at the wearisome

round of mill-horse tasks which, sooner or later, seizes all godless

men, and that is to bring the great principles of the gospel to bear on

them, and to do them in the might and for the sake of the dear Lord.

They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk' along life's common

way in cheerful godliness, and they shall not faint.'

Dear friends, life to us all is, and must be, full of sorrow and of

effort. Constant work and frequent sorrows wear us all out, and bring

us many a time to the verge of fainting. I beseech you to begin right,

and not to add to the other occasions for weariness that of having to

retrace, with remorseful heart and ashamed feet, the paths of evil on

which you have run. Begin right, which is to say, begin with Christ and

take Him for inspiration, for pattern, for guide, for companion. Run

with patience the race set before you, looking unto Jesus the author of

your faith, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.'

And if you have Him in your hearts, then, however your creatural power

may grow weary, yet because He is with you, your shoes shall be iron

and brass, and as your days so shall your strength be,' and you may

lift up in your turn the glad, triumphant acknowledgment: For this

cause we faint not, but though our outward man perish, our inward man

is renewed day by day.'

God bless you all and make that your experience!

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CHRIST THE ARRESTER OF INCIPIENT EVIL AND THE NOURISHER OF INCIPIENT GOOD

A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not

quench. . . . He shall not fail nor be discouraged.'--ISAIAH xlii. 3,

4.

The two metaphors which we have in the former part of these words are

not altogether parallel. A bruised reed' has suffered an injury which,

however, is neither complete nor irreparable. Smoking flax,' on the

other hand--by which, of course, is meant flax used as a wick in an

old-fashioned oil lamp--is partially lit. In the one a process has been

begun which, if continued, ends in destruction; in the other, a process

has been begun which, if continued, ends in a bright flame. So the one

metaphor may refer to the beginnings of evil which may still be

averted, and the other the beginnings of incipient and incomplete good.

If we keep this distinction in mind, the words of our text gain

wonderfully in comprehensiveness.

Then again, it is to be noticed that in the last words of our text,

which are separated from the former by a clause which we omit, we have

an echo of these metaphors. The word translated fail' is the same as

that rendered in the previous verse smoking,' or dimly burning'; and

the word discouraged' is the same as that rendered in the previous

verse bruised.' So then, this Servant of the Lord,' who is not to break

the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax, is fitted for His work,

because He Himself has no share in the evils which He would heal, and

none in the weaknesses which He would strengthen. His perfect manhood

knows no flaws nor bruises; His complete goodness is capable of and

needs no increase. Neither outward force nor inward weakness can hinder

His power to heal and bless; therefore His work can never cease till it

has attained its ultimate purpose. He shall not fail nor be

discouraged'; shall neither be broken by outward violence, nor shall

the flame of His fading energy burn faint until He hath set judgment in

the earth,' and crowned His purposes with complete success.

We have, then, here set before us three significant representations of

the servant of the Lord, which may well commend Him to our confidence

and our love. I shall not spend any time in answering the question: Of

whom speaketh the prophet this? The answer is plain for us. He speaks

of the personal Servant of the Lord, and the personal Servant of the

Lord is Jesus Christ our Saviour. I ask you then to come with me while

I deal, as simply as may be, with these three ideas that lie before us

in this great prophecy.

I. Consider then, first, the representation of the Servant of the Lord

as the arrester of incipient ruin.

He shall not break the bruised reed.' Here is the picture--a slender

bulrush, growing by the margin of some tarn or pond; its sides crushed

and dented in by some outward power, a gust of wind, a sudden blow, the

foot of a passing animal. The head is hanging by a thread, but it is

not yet snapped or broken off from the stem.

But, blessed be God! there emerges from the metaphor not only the

solemn thought of the bruises by sin that all men bear, but the other

blessed one, that there is no man so bruised as that he is broken; none

so injured as that restoration is impossible, no depravity so total but

that it may be healed, none so far off but that he may be brought nigh.

On no man has sin fastened its venomous claws so deeply but that these

may be wrenched away. In none of us has the virus so gone through our

veins but that it is capable of being expelled. The reeds are all

bruised, the reeds are none of them broken. And so my text comes with

its great triumphant hopefulness, and gathers into one mass as capable

of restoration the most abject, the most worthless, the most ignorant,

the most sensuous, the most godless, the most Christ-hating of the

race. Jesus looks on all the tremendous bulk of a world's sins with the

confidence that He can move that mountain and cast it into the depths

of the sea.

There is a man in Paris that says he has found a cure for that horrible

disease of hydrophobia, and who therefore regards the poor sufferers of

whom others despair as not beyond the reach of hope. Christ looks upon

a world of men smitten with madness, and in whose breasts awful poison

is working, with the calm confidence that He carries in His hand an

elixir, one drop of which inoculated into the veins of the furious

patient will save him from death, and make him whole. The blood of

Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.' He will not break,' and that

means He will restore, the bruised reed.' There are no hopeless

outcasts. None of you are beyond the reach of a Saviour's love, a

Saviour's blood, a Saviour's healing.

But then the words in my text may be taken in a somewhat narrower

sense, applying more particularly to a class. In accordance with other

metaphors of Scripture, we may think of the bruised reed' as expressive

of the condition of men whose hearts have been crushed by the

consciousness of their sins. The broken and the contrite heart,'

bruised and pulverised, as it were, by a sense of evil, may be typified

for us by this bruised reed. And then from the words of my text there

emerges the great and blessed hope that such a heart, wholesomely

removed from its self-complacent fancy of soundness, shall certainly be

healed and bound up by His tender hand. Did you ever see a gardener

dealing with some plant, a spray of which may have been wounded? How

delicately and tenderly the big, clumsy hand busies itself about the

tiny spray, and by stays and bandages brings it into an erect position,

and then gives it water and loving care. Just so does Jesus Christ deal

with the conscious and sensitive heart of a man who has begun to find

out how bad he is, and has been driven away from all his foolish

confidence. Christ comes to such an one and restores him, and just

because he is crushed deals with him gently, pouring in His

consolation. Wheresoever there is a touch of penitence, there is

present a restoring Christ.

And the words may be looked at from yet another point of view. We may

think of them as representing to us the merciful dealing of the Master

with the spirits which are beaten and bruised, sore and wounded, by

sorrows and calamities; to whom the Christ comes in all the tenderness

of His gentleness, and lays a hand upon them--the only hand in all the

universe that can touch a bleeding heart without hurting it.

Brother and sister suffering from any sorrow, and bleeding from any

wound, there is a balm and a physician. There is one hand that will

never be laid with blundering kindness or with harshness upon our sore

hearts, but whose touch will be healing, and whose presence will be

peace.

The Christ who knows our sins and sorrows will not break the bruised

reed. The whole race of man may be represented in that parable that

came from His own lips, as fallen among thieves that have robbed him

and wounded him and left him bruised, but, blessed be God! only half

dead'; sorely wounded, indeed, but not so sorely but that he may be

restored. And there comes One with the wine and the oil, and pours them

into the wounds. The bruised reed shall He not break.'

II. Now, in the next place, look at the completing thought that is

here, in the second clause, which represents Christ as the fosterer of

incipient and imperfect good.

The dimly-burning wick He shall not quench.' A process, as I have said,

is begun in the smoking flax, which only needs to be carried on to lead

to a brilliant flame. That represents for us not the beginnings of a

not irreparable evil, but the commencement of very dim and imperfect

good. Now, then, who are represented by this smoking flax'? You will

not misunderstand me, nor think that I am contradicting what I have

already been saying, if I claim for this second metaphor as wide a

universality as the former, and say that in all men, just because the

process of evil and the wounds from it are not so deep and complete as

that restoration is impossible, therefore is there something in their

nature which corresponds to this dim flame that needs to be fostered in

order to blaze brightly abroad. There is no man out of hell but has in

him something that needs but to be brought to sovereign power in his

life in order to make him a light in the world. You have consciences at

the least; you have convictions, you know you have, which if you

followed them out would make Christians of you straight away. You have

aspirations after good, desires, some of you, after purity and

nobleness of living, which only need to be raised to the height and the

dominance in your lives which they ought to possess, in order to

revolutionise your whole course. There is a spark in every man which,

fanned and cared for, will change him from darkness into light. Fanned

and cared for it needs to be, and fanned and cared for it can only be

by a divine power coming down upon it from without. This second

metaphor of my text, as truly as the other, belongs to every soul of

man upon the earth. He from whom all sparks and light have died out is

not a man but a devil. And for all of us the exhortation comes: Thou

hast a voice within testifying to God and to duty'; listen to it and

care for it.

Then again, dear brethren, in a narrower way, the words may be applied

to a class. There are some of us who have in us a little spark, as we

believe, of a divine life, the faint beginnings of a Christian

character. We call ourselves Christ's disciples. We are; but oh! how

dimly the flax burns. They say that where there is smoke there is fire.

There is a great deal more smoke than fire in the most of Christian

people in this generation, and if it were not for such thoughts as this

of my text about that dear Christ who will not lay a hasty hand upon

some little tremulous spark, and by one rash movement extinguish it for

ever, there would be but small hope for a great many of us.

Whether, then, the dimly-burning wick be taken to symbolise the

lingering remains of a better nature which still abides with all sinful

men, yet capable of redemption, or whether it be taken to mean the low

and imperfect and inconsistent and feeble Christianity of us professing

Christians, the words of my text are equally blessed and equally true.

Christ will neither despise, nor so bring down His hand upon it as to

extinguish, the feeblest spark. Look at His life on earth, think how He

bore with those blundering, foolish, selfish disciples of His; how

patient the divine Teacher was with their slow learning of His meaning

and catching of His character. Remember how, when a man came to Him

with a very imperfect goodness, the Evangelist tells us that Jesus,

beholding him, loved him. And take out of these blessed stories this

great hope, that howsoever small men despise the day of small things,'

the Greatest does not; and howsoever men may say Such a little spark

can never be kindled into flame, the fire is out, you may as well let

it alone,' He never says that, but by patient teaching and fostering

and continual care and wise treatment will nourish and nurture it until

it leaps into a blaze.

How do you make smoking flax' burn? You give it oil, you give it air,

and you take away the charred portions. And Christ will give you, in

your feebleness, the oil of His Spirit, that you may burn brightly as

one of the candlesticks in His Temple; and He will let air in, and

sometimes take away the charred portions by the wise discipline of

sorrow and trial, in order that the smoking flax may become a shining

light. But by whatsoever means He may work, be sure of this, that He

will neither despise nor neglect the feeblest inclination of good after

Him, but will nourish it to perfection and to beauty.

The reason why so many Christian men's Christian light is so fuliginous

and dim is just that they keep away from Jesus Christ. Abide in Me and

I in you.' As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide

in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.' How can the Temple

lamps burn bright unless the Priest of the Temple tends them? Keep near

Him that His hand may nourish your smoking dimness into a pure flame,

leaping heavenward and illuminating your lives.

III. And now, lastly, we have here the representation of the servant of

the Lord's exemption from human evil and weakness, as the foundation of

His restoring and fostering work.

He shall not burn dimly nor be broken till He hath set judgment in the

earth.' There are no bruises in this reed; that is to say, Christ's

manhood is free from all scars and wounds of evil or of sin. There is

no dimness in this light, that is to say, Christ's character is

perfect, His goodness needs no increase. There is no trace of effort in

His holiness, no growth manifest in His God-likeness, from the

beginning to the end. There is no outward violence that can be brought

to bear upon Him that will stay Him in His purpose. There is no inward

failure of strength in Him that may lead us to fear that His work shall

not be completed. And because of these things, because of His perfect

exemption from human infirmity, because in Him was no sin. He is

manifested to take away our sins. Because in Him there was goodness

incapable of increase, being perfect from the beginning, therefore He

is manifested to make us participants of His own unalterable and

infinite goodness and purity. Because no outward violence, no inward

weakness, can ever stay His course, nor make Him abandon His purpose,

therefore His gospel looks upon the world with boundless hopefulness,

with calm triumph; will not hear of there being any outcast and

irreclaimable classes; declares it to be a blasphemy against God and

Christ to say that any men or any nations are incapable of receiving

the gospel and of being redeemed by it, and comes with supreme love and

a calm consciousness of infinite power to you, my brother, in your

deepest darkness, in your moods most removed from God and purity, and

insures you that it will heal you, and will raise all that in you is

feeble to its own strength. Every man may pray to that strong Christ

who fails not nor is discouraged--

What in me is dark

Illumine; what is low, raise and support,'

in the confidence that He will hear and answer. If you do that you will

not do it in vain, but His gentle hand laid upon you will heal the

bruises that sin has made. Out of your weakness, as of a reed shaken

with the wind,' the Restorer will make a pillar of marble in the Temple

of His God. And out of your smoking dimness and wavering light, a spark

at the best, almost buried in the thick smoke that accompanies it, the

fostering Christ will make a brightness which shall flame as the

perfect light that shineth more and more unto the noontide of the day.'

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THE BLIND MAN'S GUIDE

I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in

paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them,

and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not

forsake them.'--ISAIAH xlii. 16.

The grand stormy verses before these words, with all their dread array

of natural convulsions, have one object--the tender guidance promised

in the text. So we have the combination of terror and love, the

blending in the divine government of terrible judgments and most gentle

guidance. The words apply, of course, primarily to the redemption of

Israel; but through them shines a picture of the greater redemption of

humanity.

1. The blind travellers. They are blind, and their road is unknown to

them. It is a symbol of our condition and of our paths in life. Our

limited foresight cannot discern certainly even the next moment. It is

always the unexpected that happens. We cannot tell what lies behind the

next bend in the road, and there are so many bends; and behind one of

them, we cannot tell whether it may be the next, sits the Shadow feared

of man.' Life is like the course of the Congo, which makes so mighty a

bend northward that, till it had been followed from source to mouth, no

one could have supposed that it was to enter the ocean far away to the

west. Not only God's mercies, but our paths, are new every morning.'

Experience, like conscience, sheds light mainly on what lies behind,

and scarcely doth attain to something of prophetic strain.'

2. The Leader. How tenderly God makes Himself the leader of the blind

pilgrims! It does not matter about being blind, if we put our hands in

His. Then He will be to us instead of eyes.' Jesus took the blind man

by the hand.

So here is the promise of guidance by Providence, Word, Spirit. And

here is the condition of receiving it, namely, our conscious blindness

and realisation of the complexities of life, leading to putting

ourselves into His hands in docile faith.

3. The gradual light. Darkness is made light. We receive the knowledge

of each step, when it needs to be taken; the light shines only on the

next; we are like men in a fog, who are able only to see a yard ahead.

4. The clearing away of hindrances. Crooked things straight.' A careful

guide lifts stones out of a blind man's way. How far is this true?

There will be plenty of crooked things left crooked, but still so many

straightened as to make our road passable.

5. The perpetual Presence. If God is with me, then all these blessings

will surely be mine. He will be with me if I keep myself with Him. It

is His felt presence that gives me light on the road, and levels and

straightens out the crookedest and roughest path.

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THY NAME: MY NAME

I have called thee by thy name.'--ISAIAH xliii. 1.

Every one that is called by My name.'--ISAIAH xliii. 7.

Great stress is laid on names in Scripture. These two parallel and

antithetic clauses bring out striking complementary relations between

God and the collective Israel. But they are as applicable to each

individual member of the true Israel of God.

I. What does God's calling a man by his name imply?

1. Intimate knowledge.

Adam naming the creatures.

Christ naming His disciples.

2. Loving friendship.

Moses, I know thee by name, and thou hast found grace in my sight.'

3. Designation and adaptation to work.

Bezaleel--Exodus xxxi. 2; Cyrus--ISAIAH xlv. 3; Servant of the

Lord--ISAIAH xlix. 1.

II. What does God's calling a man by His name imply?

1. God's possession of him. That possession by God involves God's

protection and man's safety. He does not hold His property slackly.

None shall pluck them out of My Father's hand.'

2. Kindred. The man bears the family name. He is adopted into the

household. The sonship of the receiver of the new name is dimly

shadowed.

3. Likeness.

The Biblical meaning of name' is character manifested.'

Nomen and omen coincide.

We must bring into connection with the texts the prominence given in

the Apocalypse to analogous promises.

I will write on him the name of My God.' That means a fuller disclosing

of God's character, and a clear impress of that character on perfected

men His name shall be in their foreheads.'

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JACOB--ISRAEL--JESHURUN

Yet now hear, O Jacob My servant; and Israel, whom I have chosen. . . .

Fear not, O Jacob, My servant; and thou, Jeshurun, whom I have

chosen.'--ISAIAH xliv. 1, 2.

You observe that there are here three different names applied to the

Jewish nation. Two of them, namely Jacob and Israel, were borne by

their great ancestor, and by him transmitted to his descendants. The

third was never borne by him, and is applied to the people only here

and in the Book of Deuteronomy.

The occurrence of all three here is very remarkable, and the order in

which they stand is not accidental. The prophet begins with the name

that belonged to the patriarch by birth; the name of nature, which

contained some indications of character. He passes on to the name which

commemorated the mysterious conflict where, as a prince, Jacob had

power with God and prevailed. He ends with the name Jeshurun, of which

the meaning is the righteous one,' and which was bestowed upon the

people as a reminder of what they ought to be.

Now, as I take it, the occurrence of these names here, and their

sequence, may teach us some very important lessons; and it is simply to

these lessons, and not at all to the context, that I ask your

attention.

I. I take, then, these three names in their order as teaching us,

first, the path of transformation.

Every Jacob' may become a righteous one,' if he will tread Jacob's

road. We start with that first name of nature which, according to

Esau's bitter etymology of it, meant a supplanter'--not without some

suggestions of craft and treachery in it. It is descriptive of the

natural disposition of the patriarch, which was by no means attractive.

Cool, calculating, subtle, with a very keen eye to his own interests,

and not at all scrupulous as to the means by which he secured them, he

had no generous impulses, and few unselfish affections. He told lies to

his poor old blind father, he cheated his brother, he met the

shiftiness of Laban with equal shiftiness. It was diamond cut diamond'

all through. He tried to make a bargain with God Himself at Bethel, and

to lay down conditions on which he would bring Him the tenth of his

substance. And all through his earlier career he does not look like the

stuff of which heroes and saints are made.

But in the mid-path of his life there came that hour of deep dejection

and helplessness, when, driven out of all dependence on self, and

feeling round in his agony for something to lay hold upon, there came

into his nightly solitude a vision of God. In conscious weakness, and

in the confidence of self-despair, he wrestled with the mysterious

Visitant in the only fashion in which He can be wrestled with. He wept

and made supplication to Him,' as one of the prophets puts it, and so

he bore away the threefold gift--blessing from those mighty lips whose

blessing is the communication, and not only the invocation, of mercy, a

deeper knowledge of that divine and mysterious Name, and for himself a

new name.

That new name implied a new direction given to his character.

Hitherto he had wrestled with men whom he would supplant, for his own

advantage, by craft and subtlety; henceforward he strove with God for

higher blessings, which, in striving, he won. All the rest of his life

was on a loftier plane. Old ambitions were dead within him, and though

the last of these names in our text was never actually borne by him, he

began to deserve it, and grew steadily in nobleness and beauty of

character until the end, when he sang his swan-song and lay down to

die, with thanksgiving for the past and glowing prophecies for the

future, pouring from his trembling lips.

And now, brethren, that is the outline of the only way in which, from

out of the evil and the sinfulness of our natural disposition, any of

us can be raised to the loftiness and purity of a righteous life. There

must be a Peniel between the two halves of the character, if there is

to be transformation.

Have you ever been beaten out of all your confidence, and ground down

into the dust of self-disgust and self-abandonment? Have you ever felt,

there is nothing in me or about me that I can cling to or rely upon'?

Have you ever in the thickest of that darkness had, gleaming in upon

your solitude, the vision of His face, whose face we see in Jesus

Christ? Have you ever grasped Him who is infinitely willing to be held

by the weakest hand, and who never makes as though He would go

further,' except in order to induce us to say, with deeper earnestness

of desire, Abide with us, for it is dark'? And have you ever, in

fellowship with Him thus, found pouring into your enlightened mind a

deeper reading of the meaning of His character and a fuller conception

of the mystery of His love? And have you ever--certainly you have if

these things have preceded it, certainly you have not if they have not

--have you ever thereby been borne up on to a higher level of feeling

and life, and been aware of new impulses, hopes, joys, new directions

and new capacities budding and blossoming in your spirit?

Brethren! there is only one way by which, out of the mire and clay of

earth, there can be formed a fair image of holiness, and that is, that

Jacob's experience, in deeper, more inward, more wonderful form, should

be repeated in each one of us; and that thus, penitent and yet hopeful,

we should behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and draw

from Him our righteousness. That is the path of transformation. The

road passes through Peniel, and Jacob must become Israel before he is

Jeshurun. He must hold communion with God in Christ before he is

clothed with righteousness.

How different that path is from the road which men are apt to take in

working out their own self-improvement! How many forms of religion, and

how many toiling souls put the cart before the horse, and in effect

just reverse the process, and say practically--first make yourselves

righteous, and then you will have communion with God'! That is an

endless and a hopeless task. I have no doubt that some of you have

spent--and I would not say wasted, but it has been almost so--years of

life, not without many an honest effort, in the task of

self-improvement, and are very much where you were long ago. Why have

you failed? Because you have never been to Peniel. You have never seen

the face of God in Christ, You have not received from Him the blessing,

even righteousness, from the God of your salvation.

Dear friends, give up treading that endless, weary path of vain effort;

and learn--oh! learn--that the righteousness which makes a soul pure

and beautiful must come as a gift from God, and is given only in Jesus

Christ.

This sequence too, I think, may very fairly be used to teach us the

lesson that there is no kind of character so debased but that it may

partake of the purifying and ennobling influence. All the Jacobs may be

turned into righteous ones, however crafty, however subtle, however

selfish, however worldly they are. Christianity looks at no man and

says, That is too bad a case for me to deal with.' It will undertake

any and every case, and whoever will take its medicines can be cured of

whatsoever disease he had.'

To all of us, no matter what our past may have been, this blessed

message comes: There is hope for thee, if thou wilt use these means.'

Only remember, the road from the depths of evil to the heights of

purity always lies through Peniel. You must have power with God and

draw a blessing from Him, and hold communion with Him, before you can

become righteous.

How do they print photographs? By taking sensitive paper, and laying

it, in touch with the negative, in the sun. Lay your spirits on Christ,

and keep them still, touching Him, in the light of God, and that will

turn you into His likeness. That, and nothing else will do it.

II. And now there is a second lesson from the occurrence of these three

names, viz., here we may find expressed the law for the Christian life.

There are some religious people that seem to think that it is enough if

only they can say; Well! I have been to Jesus Christ and I have got my

past sins forgiven; I have been on the mountain and have held communion

with God; I do know what it is to have fellowship with Him, in many an

hour of devout communion.' and who are in much danger of treating the

further stage of simple, practical righteousness as of secondary

importance. Now the order of these names here points the lesson that

the apex of the pyramid, the goal of the whole course,

is--Righteousness. The object for which the whole majestic structure of

Revelation has been builded up, is simply to make good men and women.

God does not tell us His Name merely in order that we may know His

Name, but in order that, knowing it, we may be smitten with the love of

it, and so may come into the likeness of it. There is no religious

truth which is given men for the sake of clearing their understandings

and enlightening their minds only. We get the truth to enlighten our

minds and to clear our understandings in order that thereby, as becomes

reasonable men with heads on our shoulders, we may let our principles

guide our conduct. Conduct is the end of principle, and all Revelation

is given to us in order that we may be pure and good men and women.

For the same end all God's mercy of forgiveness and deliverance from

guilt and punishment in Jesus Christ is given to you, not merely in

order that you may escape the penalties of your evil, but in order

that, being pardoned, you may in glad thankfulness be lifted up into an

enthusiasm of service which will make you eager to serve Him and long

to be like Him. He sets you free from guilt, from punishment, and His

wrath, in order that by the golden cord of love you may be fastened to

Him in thankful obedience. God's purpose in redemption is that we,

being delivered out of the hand of our enemies should serve Him without

fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.'

And in like manner, righteousness, by which, in the present connection,

we mean simply the doing of the things, and the being the character,

which a conscience enlightened by the law of God dictates to us to be

and to do--righteousness is the intention and the aim of all religious

emotion and feeling. It is all very well to have the joy of fellowship

with God in our inmost soul, but there is a type of Christianity which

is a great deal stronger on the side of devout emotion than on the side

of transparent godliness; and although it becomes no man to say what

Jesus Christ could say to those whose religion is mainly emotional,

Hypocrites!' it is the part of every honest preacher to warn all that

listen to him that there does lie a danger, a very real danger, very

close to some of us, to substitute devout emotion for plain, practical

goodness, and to be a great deal nearer God in the words of our prayers

than we are in the current and set of our daily lives. Take, then,

these three names of my text as flashing into force and emphasis the

exhortation that the crown of all religion is righteousness, and as

preaching, in antique guise, the same lesson that the very Apostle of

affectionate contemplation uttered with such earnestness:--Little

children! let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is

righteous, even as He is righteous.' An ounce of practical godliness is

worth a pound of fine feeling and a ton of correct orthodoxy. Remember

what the Master said, and take the lesson in the measure in which you

need it: Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not

prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name have cast out devils, and in

Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them,

I never knew you, depart from Me.' And the proof that I never knew you,

nor you Me, is: Ye that work iniquity.'

III. Then there is another lesson still which I draw from these words,

viz. the merciful judgment which God makes of the character of them

that love Him.

Jeshurun means the righteous one.' How far beneath the ideal of the

name these Jewish people fell we all know, and yet the name is applied

to them. Although the realisation of the ideal has been so imperfect,

the ideal is not destroyed. Although they have done so many sins, yet

He calls them by His name of righteous.' And so we Christian people

find that the New Testament calls us saints.' That name is not applied

to some select and lofty specimens of Christianity, but to all

Christians, however imperfect their present life and character may be.

Then people sneer and say, Ah! a strange kind of saints these

Christians are! Do you think that a man can condone practical

immorality by saying that he is trusting in Jesus Christ? The Church's

"saint" seems to mean less than the world's "man of honour."' God

forbid that it should be fancied that Christian sainthood is more

tolerant of evil than worldly morality, or has any fantastic standard

of goodness which makes up for departures from the plain rule of right

by prayers and raptures. But surely there may be a principle of action

deep down at the bottom of a heart, very feeble in its present exercise

and manifestation, which yet is the true man, and is destined to

conquer the whole nature which now wars against it. Here, for instance,

is a tiny spark, and there is a huge pile of damp, green wood. Yes; and

the little spark will turn all the wood into flame, if you give it time

and fair play. The leaven may be hid in an immensely greater mass of

meal, but it, and not the three measures of flour, is the active

principle. And if there is in a man, overlaid by ever so many

absurdities, and contradictions, and inconsistencies, a little seed of

faith in Jesus Christ, there will be in him proportionately a little

particle of a divine life which is omnipotent, which is immortal, which

will conquer and transform all the rest into its own likeness; and He

who sees not as men see, beholds the inmost tendencies and desires of

the nature, as well as the facts of the life, and discerning the inmost

and true self of His children, and knowing that it will conquer, calls

us righteous ones,' even while the outward life has not yet been

brought into harmony with the new man, created in righteousness after

God's image.

All wrong-doing is inconsistent with Christianity, but, thank God, it

is not for us to say that any wrong-doing is incompatible with it; and

therefore, for ourselves there is hope, and for our estimate of one

another there ought to be charity, and for all Christian people there

is the lesson--live up to your name. Noblesse oblige! Fulfil your

ideal. Be what God calls you, and press toward the mark for the prize.'

If one had time to deal with it, there is another lesson naturally

suggested by these names, but I only put it in a sentence and leave it;

and that is the union between the founder of the nation and the nation.

The name of the patriarch passes to his descendants, the nation is

called after him that begat it. In some sense it prolongs his life and

spirit and character upon the earth. That is the old-world way of

looking at the solidarity of a nation. There is a New Testament fact

which goes even deeper than that. The names which Christ bears are

given to Christ's followers. Is He a King, is He a Priest? He makes us

kings and priests.' Is He anointed the Messiah? God hath anointed us in

Him.' Is He the Light of the World?

Ye are the lights of the world.' His life passeth into all that love

Him in the measure of their trust and love. We are one with Jesus if we

rest upon Him; one in life, one in character, approximating by slow

degrees, but surely, to His likeness; and blessed be His name! one in

destiny. Then, my friend, if you will only keep near that Lord, trust

Him, live in the light of His face, go to Him in your weakness, in your

despair, in your self-abandonment; wrestle with Him, with the

supplication and the tears that He delights to receive, then you will

be knit to Him in a union so real and deep that all which is His shall

be yours, His life shall be the life of your spirit, His power the

strength of your life, His dominion the foundation of your dignity as a

prince with God, His all-prevailing priesthood the security that your

prayer shall have power, and the spotless robe of His righteousness the

fine linen, clean and white, in which arrayed, you shall be found of

Him, and in Him at last, in peace, not having your own righteousness,

but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which

is of God by faith.'

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FEEDING ON ASHES

He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he

cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right

hand?'--ISAIAH xliv. 20.

The prophet has been pouring fierce scorn on idolaters. They make, he

says, the gods they worship. They take a tree and saw it up: one log

serves for a fire to cook their food, and with compass and pencil and

plane they carve the figure of a man, and then they bow down to it and

say, Deliver me, for thou art my god!' He sums up the whole in this

sentence of my text, in which the tone changes from bitter irony to

astonished pity. Now, if this were the time and the place, one would

like to expand and illustrate the deep thoughts in these words in

reference to idolatry; thoughts which go dead in the teeth of a great

deal that is now supposed to be scientifically established, but which

may be none the more true for all that. He asserts that idolatry is

empty, a feeding on ashes. He declares, in opposition to modern ideas,

that the low, gross forms of polytheism and idol-worship are a

departure from a previous higher stage, whereas to-day we are told by a

hundred voices that all religion begins at the bottom, and slowly

struggles up to the top. Isaiah says the very opposite. The pure form

is the primitive; the secondary form is the gross, which is a

corruption. They tell us too, nowadays, that all religion pursues a

process of evolution, and gradually clears itself of its more imperfect

and carnal elements. Isaiah says, he cannot deliver his soul'; and no

religion ever worked itself up, unless under the impulse of a

revelation from without. That is Isaiah's philosophy of idolatry, and I

expect it will be accepted as the true one some day.

But my text has a wider bearing. It not only describes, in pathetic

language, the condition of the idolater, but it is true about all

lives, which are really idolatrous in so far as they make anything else

than God their aim and their joy. Every word of this text applies to

such lives--that is to say, to the lives of a good many people

listening to me now. And I would fain try to lay the truths here on

some hearts. Let me just take them as they lie in the words before me.

I. A life that substantially ignores God is empty of all true

satisfaction.

He feedeth on ashes'! Very little imagination will realise the force of

that picture. The gritty cinders will irritate the lips and tongue,

will dry up the moisture of the mouth, will interfere with the

breathing, and there will be no nourishment in a sackful of them.

Dear brethren, the underlying truth is this--God is the only food of a

man's soul. You pick up the skeleton of a bird upon a moor; and if you

know anything about osteology--the science of bones--you will see, in

the very make of its breast-bone and its wing-bones, the declaration

that its destiny was to soar into the blue. You pick up the skeleton of

a fish lying on the beach, and you will see in its very form and

characteristics that its destiny is to expatiate in the depths of the

sea. And, written on you, as distinctly as flight on the bird, or

swimming on the fish, is this, that you are meant, by your very make,

to soar up into the heights of the glory of God, and to plunge deep

into the abysses of His infinite love and wisdom. Man is made for God.

Whose image and superscription hath it?' said Christ. The coin belongs

to the king whose head and titles are displayed upon it; and on your

heart, friend, though a usurper has tried to recoin the piece, and put

his own foul image on the top of the original one, is stamped deep that

you belong to the King of kings, to God Himself.

For what does our heart want? A perfect, changeless, all-powerful love.

And what does our mind want? Reliable, guiding, inexhaustible, and yet

accessible truth. And what does our will want? Commandments which have

an authoritative ring in their very utterance, and which will serve for

infallible guides for our lives. And what do our weak, sinful natures

want? Something that shall free our consciences, and shall deliver us

from the burden of our transgressions, and shall calm our fears, and

shall quicken and warrant our lofty hopes. And what do men whose

destiny is to live for ever want but something that shall go with them

through all changes of condition, and, like a light in the midst of the

darkest tunnel, shall burn in the passage between this and the other

world, and shall never be taken away from them? We want a Person to be

everything to us. No accumulation of things will satisfy a man. And we

want all our treasures to be in one Person, and we need that that

Person shall live as long as we live, and as long as we need shall be

sufficient to supply us. And all this is only the spelling in many

letters of the one name--God. That is what we want, that, and nothing

less.

Then the next step that I suggest to you is, that where a man will take

God for the food of his spirit, and turn love and mind and will and

conscience and practical life to Him, seeing Him in everything, and

seeing all things in Him; saturating, as it were, the universe with the

thought of God, and recreating his own spirit with communion of

friendship to Him; to that man lower goods do first disclose their real

sweetness, their most poignant delight, and their most solid

satisfaction. To say of a world where God has set us, that it is all

vanity and vexation of spirit,' goes in flat contradiction to what He

said when, creation finished, He looked upon His world, and proclaimed

to the waiting seraphim around that it was very good.' There is a view

of the world which calls itself pious, but is really an insult to God;

and the irreligious pessimism that is fashionable nowadays, as if human

life were a great mistake, and everything were mean and poor and

insufficient, is contrary to the facts and to the consciousness of

every man. But if you make things first which were meant to be second,

then you make what was meant to be food ashes.' They are all good in

their place. Wealth is good; wisdom is good; success is good; love is

good. And all these things may be enjoyed without God, and will each of

them yield their proportional satisfaction to the part of our nature to

which they belong. But if you put them first you degrade them; a change

passes over them at once. A long row of cyphers means nothing; put a

significant digit in front of it, and it means millions. Take away the

digit, and it goes back to nothing again. The world, and all its fading

sweets, if you put God in the forefront of it, and begin the series

with Him, is sweet, though it may be fleeting, and is meant to be felt

by us as such. But if you take away Him, it is a row of cyphers

signifying nothing, and able to contribute nothing to the real, deepest

necessities of the human soul. And so the old question comes--Why do ye

spend your money for that which is not bread?' It is bread, if only you

will remember first that God is the food of your souls. But if you try

to nourish yourselves on it alone, then, as I said, a sackful of such

ashes will not stay your appetite. Oh! brethren, God has not so

blundered in making the world that He has surrounded us with things

that are all lies, but He has so made it that whosoever flies in the

face of the gracious commandment which is also an invitation, Seek ye

first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness,' has not only no

security that the other things' shall be added unto him,' but has the

certainty that though they were added to him, in degree beyond his

dreams and highest hopes, they would avail nothing to satisfy the

hunger of his heart. As George Herbert puts it--

Shadows well mounted, dreams in a career,

Embroidered lies, nothing between two dishes,

These are the pleasures here.'

He feedeth on ashes,' because he does not take God for the food of his

soul.

II. So, secondly, notice that a life which thus ignores God is

tragically unaware of its own emptiness.

A deceived heart hath turned him aside.' That explains how the man

comes to fancy that ashes are food. His whole nature is perverted, his

vision distorted, his power of judgment marred. He is given over to

hallucinations and illusions and dreams.

That explains, too, why men persist in this feeding on ashes after all

experience. There is no fact stranger or more tragical in our histories

than that we do not learn by a thousand failures that the world will

not avail to make us restful and blessed. You will see a dog chasing a

sparrow,--it has chased hundreds before and never caught one. Yet, when

the bird rises from the ground, away it goes after it once more, with

eager yelp and rush, to renew the old experience. Ah! that is like what

a great many of you are doing, and you have not the same excuse that

the dog has. You have been trying all your lives--and some of you have

grey hairs on your heads--to slake your thirst by dipping leaky buckets

into empty wells, and you are at it yet. As some one says, experience

throws a light on the wave behind us,' but it does very little to fling

a light on the sea before us. Experience confirms my text, for I

venture to put it to the experience of every man--how many moments of

complete satisfaction and rest can you summon up in your memory as

having been yours in the past? He that loveth silver shall not be

satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase.'

Appetite always grows faster than supply. And so, though we have tried

them in vain so often, we turn again to the old discredited sources,

and fancy we shall do better this time. Is it not strange? Is there any

explanation of it, other than that of my text? A deceived heart hath

turned him aside.'

And that deceived heart, stronger than experience, is also stronger

than conscience. Do you not know that you ought to be Christians? Do

you not know that it is both wrong and foolish of you to ignore God? Do

you not know that you will have to answer for it? Have you not had

moments of illumination when there has risen up before you the whole

vanity of your past lives, and when you have felt I have played the

fool, and erred exceedingly'? And yet, what has come of it all with

some of you? Why, what comes of it with the drunkard in the Book of

Proverbs, who, as soon as he has got over the bruises and the sickness

of his last debauch, says, I will seek it yet again.' A deceived heart

hath turned him aside.'

And how is it that this hallucination that you have fed full and been

satisfied, when all the while your hunger has not been appeased, can

continue to act on us? For the very plain reason that every one of us

has in himself a higher and a lower self, a set of desires for the

grosser, more earthly, and, using the word in its proper sense, worldly

sort--that is to say, directed towards material things, and a higher

set which look right up to God if they were allowed fair play. And of

these two sets--which really are one at bottom, if a man would only see

it--the lower gets the upper hand, and suppresses the higher and the

nobler. And so in many a man and woman the longing for God is crushed

out by the grosser delights of sense.

One sometimes hears of cowardly, unmanly sailors, who in shipwreck push

the women and children aside, and struggle to the boats. And there are

in all of us groups of sturdy mendicants, so to speak, who elbow their

way to the front, and will have their wants satisfied. What becomes of

the gentler group that stand behind, unnoticed and silent? It is an

awful thing when men and women do, as so many of us do, pervert the

tastes that are meant to lead them to God, in order to stifle the

consciousness that they need a God at all. There are tribes of low

savages who are known as clay-eaters.' That is what a great many of us

are; we feed upon the serpent's meat, the dust of the earth, and let

all the higher heavenly food, which addresses itself first to loftier

desires, but also satisfies these lower ones, stand unnoticed, unsought

for, unpartaken of. Dear friends, do not be befooled by that

treacherous heart of yours, but let the deepest voices in your soul be

heard. Understand, I beseech you, that their cry is for no created

person or thing, and that only God Himself can satisfy them.

III. And now, lastly, notice that a life thus ignoring God needs a

power from without to set it free.

He cannot deliver his soul.' Can you? Do you think you can break the

habits of a lifetime? Do you think that, left to yourself, you would

ever have any inclination to break them? Certainly, left to yourselves,

you will never have the power. These long indulged appetites of ours

grow with indulgence; and that which first was light as a cobweb, and

soft as a silken bracelet, becomes heavier and solider until it is an

iron fetter upon the limb, which no man can break. There is nothing

more awful in life than the influence of habit, so unthinkingly

acquired, so inexorably certain, so limiting our possibilities and

enclosing us in its grip.

Dear brethren, there is something more wanted than yourselves to break

this chain. You have tried, I have no doubt, in the course of your

lives, more and more resolutely, to cure yourselves of some more or

less unworthy habits. They may be but mere slight tricks of attitude or

intonation, or movement. Has your success been such as to encourage you

to think that you can revolutionise your lives, and dethrone the

despots that have ruled over you in the past? I leave the question to

yourselves. To me it seems that the world of men is certain to go on

ignoring God, and seeking its delight only in the world of creatures,

unless there comes in an outside power into the heart of the world and

revolutionises all things.

It is that power that I have to preach, the Christ who is the Bread of

God that came down from Heaven,' who can lift up any soul from the most

obstinate and long-continued grovelling amongst the transitory things

of this limited world, and the superficial delights of sense and a

gratified bodily life; who can bring the forgiveness which is

essential, the deliverance from the power of evil which is not less

essential, and who can fill our hearts with Himself the food of the

world. He comes to each of us; He comes to you, with the old

unanswerable question upon His lips, Why do you spend your money for

that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth

not?' It is unanswerable, for you can give no reason sufficient for

such madness. All that you could say, and you durst not say it to Him,

is, a deceived heart hath turned me aside.' He comes with the old

gracious word upon His lips, Take! eat! this is My body which is broken

for you.' He offers us Himself. He can stay all the hungers of all

mankind. He can feed your heart with love, your mind with truth which

is Himself, your will with His sweet commands.

As of old He made the thousands sit down upon the grass, and they did

all eat and were filled, so He stands before the world to-day and says,

I am the Bread of Life; He that cometh to Me shall never hunger.' And

if you will only come to Him--that is to say, will trust yourselves

altogether to the merits of His sacrifice, and the might of His

indwelling Spirit--He will take away all the taste for the leeks and

onions and garlic, and will give you the appetite for heavenly food. He

will spread for you a table in the wilderness, and what would else be

ashes will become sweet, wholesome, and nourishing. Nor will He cease

there, for in His own good time He will call us to the banqueting house

above, where He will make us to sit down to meat, and come forth

Himself and serve us. Here, hunger often brings pain, and eating is

followed by repletion. But there, appetite and satisfaction will

produce each other perpetually, and the blessed ones who then hunger

will not hunger so as to feel faintness or emptiness, nor be so filled

as to cease to desire larger portions of the Bread of God. I beseech

you, cry, Lord, ever more give us this bread!'

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WRITING BLOTTED OUT AND MIST MELTED

I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a

cloud, thy sins.'--ISAIAH xliv. 22.

Isaiah has often and well been called the Evangelical Prophet. Many

parts of this second half of his prophecies referring to the Messiah

read like history rather than prediction. But it is not only from the

clearness with which the great figure of the future king of Israel

stands out on his page that he deserves that title. Other thoughts

belonging to the very substance of the gospel appear in him with a

vividness and a frequency which well warrants its application to him.

He speaks much of the characteristically Christian conceptions of sin,

forgiveness, and redemption. The whole of the latter parts of this book

are laden with that burden. They are gathered up in the extraordinarily

pregnant and blessed words of my text, in which metaphors are blended

with much disregard to oratorical propriety, in order to bring out the

whole fulness of the prophet's meaning. I have blotted out'--that

suggests a book. I have blotted out as a cloud'--that suggests the

thinning away of morning mists. The prophet blends the two thoughts

together, and on that great revelation of a forgiveness granted before

it has been asked, and given, not only to one penitent soul wailing out

like the abased king of Israel in his deep contrition, according to the

multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions,' but

promised to a whole people, is rested the great invitation, Return unto

Me, for I have redeemed thee.'

Let me try and bring out, as simply and earnestly as I can, the great

teaching that is condensed into these words.

I. Observe here the penetrating glance into the very essential

characteristics of all sin.

There are two words, as you see, employed in my text, transgressions'

and sins.' They apply to the same kind of actions, but they look at

them from different angles and points of view. They are partially

synonymous, but they cover very various conceptions, and if we take

note of the original significations of the two words, we get two very

important and often forgotten thoughts.

For that expression rendered in my text, and rendered correctly enough

--transgressions--means at bottom, rebellion,' the rising up of a

disobedient will, not only against a law, but against a lawgiver. There

we have a deepening of that solemn fact of a man's wrongdoing, which

brings it into immediate connection with God, and marks its foulness by

reason of that connection.

Ah! brethren, it makes all the difference to a man's notions of right

and wrong, whether he stops on the surface or goes down to the depths;

whether he says to himself, The thing is a vice; it is wrong; it is

contrary to what I ought to be'; or whether he gets down to the darker,

deeper, and truer thought, and says, The damnable thing about every

little evil that I do is this, that in it I--poor puny I--perk myself

up against God, and say to Him, "Thou wilt; wilt thou? I shall not!"'

Sin is rebellion.

And so what becomes of the hazy distinction between great sins and

little ones? An overt act of rebellion is of the same gravity,

whatsoever may be its form. The man that lifts his sword against the

sovereign, and the man behind him that holds his horse, are equally

criminal. And when once you let in the notion that in all our actions

we have to do with a Person, to whom we are bound to be obedient, then

the distinction which sophisticates so many people's consciences, and

does such infinite harm in so many lives, between great and small

transgressions, disappears altogether. Sin is rebellion.

Then the other word of my text is equally profound and significant. For

it, literally taken, means--as the words for sin' do in other languages

besides the Hebrew--missing a mark. Every wrong thing that any man does

is beside the mark, at which he, by virtue of his manhood, and his very

make and nature, ought to aim. It is beside the mark in another sense

than that. As some one says, A rogue is a roundabout fool.' No man ever

secures that, and only that, which he aims at by any departure from the

straight path of imperative duty. For if he gets some vulgar and

transient titillation of appetite, or satisfaction of desire, he gets

along with it something that takes all the gilt off the gingerbread,

and all the sweetness out of the satisfaction. So that it is always a

blunder to be bad, and every arrow that is drawn by a sinful hand

misses the target to which all our arrows should be pointed, and misses

even the poor mark that we think we are aiming at. Take these two

thoughts with you--I will not dwell on them, but I desire to lay them

upon all your hearts--all evil is sin, and every sin is rebellion

against God, and a blunder in regard to myself.

II. And now I come to the second point of our text, and ask you to note

the permanent record which every sin leaves.

I explained in the earlier part of my remarks that we have a case here

of the thing that horrifies rhetoricians, but does not matter a bit to

a prophet, the blending or confusing of two metaphors. The first of

them--I have blotted out'--suggests a piece of writing, a book, or

manuscript of some sort. And the plain English of what lies behind that

metaphor is this solemn thought, which I would might blaze before each

of us, in all our lives, that God's calm and all-comprehensive

knowledge and remembrance takes and keeps filed, and ready for

reference, the whole story of our whole acts. There is a book. It is a

violent metaphor, no doubt, but there is a solemn truth underlying it

which we are too apt to forget. The world is groaning nowadays with

two-volume memoirs of men that nobody wants to know anything more

about. But every man is ever writing his autobiography with invisible

but indelible ink. You have seen those old-fashioned manifold writers'

in your places of business, and the construction of them is this: a

flimsy sheet of tissue paper, a bit of black to be put in below it, and

then another sheet on the other side; and the pen that writes on the

flimsy top surface makes an impression that is carried through the

black to the sheet below, and there is a duplicate which the writer

keeps. You and I, upon the flimsinesses of this fleeting--sometimes, we

think, futile--life, are penning what is neither flimsy nor futile,

which goes through the opaque dark, and is reproduced and docketed

yonder. That is what we are doing every day and every minute, writing,

writing, writing our own biography. And who is going to read it? Well,

God does read it now, and you will have to read it out one day, and how

will you like that?

This metaphor will bear a little further expansion. Scripture tells us,

and conscience tells us, what manner of manuscript it is that we are

each so busy adding line upon line to. It is a ledger; it is an

indictment. Our own handwriting puts down in the ledger our own debts,

and we cannot deny our own handwriting when we are confronted with it.

It is an indictment, and our own hand draws it, and we have to plead

guilty,' or not guilty,' to it. Which, being translated into plain

fact, is this--that there goes with all our deeds some sense and

reality of responsibility for them, and that all our rebellions against

God, and our blunders against self, be they great or small, carry with

them a sense of guilt and a reality of guilt whether we have the sense

of it or not. God has a judgment at this moment about every man and

woman, based upon the facts of the unfinished biography which they are

writing.

Mystical and awful, yet blessed and elevating, is the thought that

nothing--nothing, ever dies; and that what was, is now, and always will

be.

Amongst the specimens from the coal measures in a museum you will find

slabs upon which the tiniest fronds of ferns that grew nobody knows how

many millenniums since are preserved for ever. Our lives, when the blow

of the last hammer lays them open, will, in like manner, bear the

impress of the minutest filament of every deed that we have ever done.

But my metaphor will bear yet further expansion, for this

autobiographical record which we are busy preparing, which is at once

ledger and indictment, is to be read out one day. There is a great

scene in the last book of Scripture, the whole solemn significance of

which, I suppose, we shall not understand till we have learned it by

experience, but the truth of which we have sufficient premonitions to

assure us of, which declares that at a given time, on the confines of

Eternity, the Great White Throne is to be set, and the books are to be

opened, and the dead are judged out of the books,' which, the seer goes

on to explain, is according to their works.' The story of Esther tells

us how the sleepless monarch in the night-watches sent for the records

of the kingdom and had them read to him. The King who never slumbers

nor sleeps, in that dawning of heaven's eternal morning, will have the

books opened before Him, and my deeds will be read out. He and I will

hear them, whether any else may hear or no. That is my second lesson.

III. The third is, that we have here suggested the darkening power of

sin.

The prophet, as I said, mixes metaphors. I have blotted out as a cloud

thy transgressions.' He uses two words for cloud' here; both of them

mean substantially the same thing, and both suggest the same idea. When

cloud fills the sky it darkens the earth, and shuts out the sunshine

and the blue, it closes the petals of the little flowers, it hushes the

songs of the birds. Sin makes for the sinning man an under-roof of

doleful grey,' which shuts out all the glories above. Put that metaphor

into plain English, and it is just this, Your sins have separated

between you and your God, and your iniquities have hid His face from

you that He will not hear.' It is impossible for a man that has his

heart all stiffened by the rebellion of his will against God's, or all

seething with unrestrained passions, or perturbed with worldly longings

and desires, to enter into calm fellowship with God or to keep the

thought of God clear before his mind. For we know Him, not by sense nor

by reason, but by sympathy and by feeling. And whatsoever comes in to

disturb a man's purity, comes in to hinder his vision of God. Blessed

are the pure in heart, for they'--and they only--shall see God.'

Whenever from the undrained swamps of my own passions and sensualities,

or from the as malarious though loftier grounds of my own self-regard,

be I student or thinker, or moral man, there rise up these light mists,

they will fill the sky and hide the sun. On a winter's night you will

see the Pleiades, or other bright constellations, varying in brilliancy

from moment to moment as some invisible cloud-wrack floats across the

heavens. So, brother, every evil thing that we do rises up and gets

diffused through our atmosphere, and blots out from our vision the face

of God Himself, the blessed Son.

Not only by reason of dimming and darkening my thoughts of Him is my

sin rightly compared to an obscuring cloud; but the comparison also

holds good because, just as the blanket of a wet mist swathing the

wintry fields prevents the sunshine from falling upon them in blessing,

so the accumulated effect of my evil doings and evil designings and

thinkings and willings comes between me and all spiritual blessings

which God can bestow, so that the very light of light, the highest

blessings that He yearns to give, and we faint for want of possessing,

are impossible even to His love to communicate until the cloud is swept

away. So my sin darkens my soul, and separates me from the light of

life.

But the metaphor carries with it, too, a suggestion of the limitations

of the power of sin. For when the cloud is thickest and most obscuring

it only hugs the earth, and rises but a little way Into the heavens;

and far above it the blue is as blue, and the sunshine as bright, as if

there were no mist or fog in the lower regions. Therefore, let us

remember that, while the cloud must veil us from the light, the light

is above it, and every cloud that veileth love' may some day be thinned

away by the love it veils.

IV. That brings me to the last word of my text,--viz. the prophet's

teaching as to the removal of the sin.

We have to carry both the metaphors together with us here. I have

blotted out'--that is, as erasing from a book. I have blotted out as a

cloud'--that is, the thinning away of the mist. The blurred and stained

page can be cancelled. Chemicals will take the ink out. The blood of

Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin'; and it, passed over all that foul

record, makes it pure and clean. What I have written, I have written,'

said Pilate in his obstinacy. What I have written, I have written,'

wails many a man in the sense of the irrevocableness of his past.

Brother! be not afraid. Christ can take away all that stained record,

and give you back the page ready to receive holier words.

The cloud is thinned away. What thins the cloud? As I have said, the

light which the cloud obscures, shining on the upper surface of it,

dissipates it layer by layer till it gets down at last to the

lowermost, and then rends a gap in it, and sends the shaft of the

sunbeam through on to the green earth. And that is only a highly

imaginative way of saying that it is the love against which we

transgress that thins away the cloud of transgression, and at last, as

the placid moon, by simply shining silently on, will sweep the whole

sky clear of its clouds, dissipates them all, and leaves the calm blue.

God forgives. The ledger account--if I may use so grossly commercial a

figure--is settled in full; the indictment is endorsed, acquitted.' He

remembers the sins only to breathe into the child's heart the assurance

of pardon, and no obstacle rises by reason of forgiven transgression

between the sinning man and the reconciled God.

Now, all this preaching of Isaiah's is enlarged and confirmed, and to

some extent the rationale of it is set before us in the great Gospel

truth of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. Unless we know

that truth, we may well stand amazed and questioning as to whether a

righteous God, administering a rigorous universe, can ever pardon sin.

And unless we know that by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, granted to our

spirits, our whole nature may be remade and moulded, we might well be

tempted to say, Ah! the Ethiopian cannot change his skin nor the

leopard his spots. But Jesus Christ can change more than skin, even the

heart and spirit, the inmost depths of the nature.

Now, brother, my text speaks of this great blotting out as a past fact.

It is so in the divine mind with regard to each of us, because Christ's

great work has made reconciliation and atonement for all the sins of

all the world. And on the fact that it is past is based the

exhortation, Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.' God does not

say, Come back and I will forgive'; He does not say, Return and I will

blot out'; but He says, Return, for I have blotted out.' Though

accomplished, the forgiveness has to be appropriated by individual

faith. The sins of the world have been borne, and borne away, by the

Lamb of God, but your sins are not borne away unless your hand is laid

on this head.

If it is, then you do not need to say, What I have written is written,

and it cannot be blotted out.' But as in the old days a monk would take

some manuscript upon which filthy stories about heathen gods and

foolish fables were written, and erase these to write the legends of

saints, or perhaps the words of the Gospels themselves; so on our

hearts, which have been scribbled all over with obscenities and

follies, He will write His new best name of Love, and we may be

epistles of Christ, written with the Spirit of the living God.

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HIDDEN AND REVEALED

Verily thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the

Saviour. . . . I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the

earth; I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain: I the

Lord speak righteousness, I declare things that are right.'--ISAIAH

xlv. 15, 19.

The former of these verses expresses the thoughts of the prophet in

contemplating the close of a great work of God's power which issues in

the heathen's coming to Israel and acknowledging God. He adores the

depth of the divine counsels which, by devious ways and after long

ages, have led to this bright result. And as he thinks of all the

long-stretching preparations, all the apparently hostile forces which

have been truly subsidiary, all the generations during which these

Egyptian and Ethiopian tribes have been the enemies and oppressors of

that Israel whom they at last acknowledge for the dwelling-place of

God, and enemies of that Jehovah before whom they finally bow down, he

feels that he has no measuring-line to fathom the divine purposes, and

bows his face to the ground in reverent contemplation with that word

upon his lips: Verily Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of

Israel, the Saviour.' It is a parallel to the apostolic words, O the

depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How

unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out.'

But such thoughts are but a half truth, and may very easily become in

men's minds a whole error, and therefore they are followed by a

marvellous section in which the Lord Himself speaks, and of which the

whole burden is--the clearness and fulness with which God makes Himself

known to men. True it is that there are depths inaccessible in the

divine nature. True it is that there are mysteries unrevealed in the

method of the divine procedure, and especially in that of the relation

of heathen tribes to His gospel and His love. True it is that there are

mysteries opened in the very word of His grace. But notwithstanding all

this--it is also true that He makes Himself known to us all, that He

declares righteousness, that He calls us to seek Him, and that He wills

to be found and known by us.

The collocation of these two passages may be taken, then, as

representing the two phases of the Divine Manifestation, the obscurity

which must ever be associated with all our finite knowledge of God, and

the clear sunlight in which blazes all that we need to know of Him.

I. After all revelation, God is hidden.

There is revelation of His Name in all His works. His action must be

all self-manifestation. But after all it is obscure and hidden.

1. Nature hides while it reveals.

Nature's revelation is unobtrusive.

God is concealed behind second causes.

God is concealed behind regular modes of working (laws).

Nature's revelation is partial, disclosing only a fragment of the name.

Nature's revelation is ambiguous. Dark shadows of death and pain in the

sensitive world, of ruin and convulsions, of shivered stars, seem to

contradict the faith that all is very good; so that it has been

possible for men to drop their plummet in the deep and say, I find no

God,' and for others to fall into Manichaeism or some form or other of

dualism.

2. Providence hides while it reveals.

That is the sphere in which men are most familiar with the idea of

mystery.

There is much of which we do not see the issue. The process is not

completed, and so the end is not visible.

Even when we believe that to Him' and for good' are all things,' we

cannot tell how all will come circling round. We are like men looking

only at one small segment of an ellipse which is very eccentric.

There is much of which we do not see the consistency with the divine

character.

We are confronted with stumbling-blocks in the allotment of earthly

conditions; in the long ages and many tribes which are without

knowledge of God; in the sore sorrows, national and individual.

We can array a formidable host. But it is to be remembered that

revelation actually increases these. It is just because we know so much

of God that we feel them so keenly. I suppose the mysteries of the

divine government trouble others outside the sphere of revelation but

little. The darkness is made visible by the light.

3. Even in grace' God is hidden while revealed.

The Infinite and Eternal cannot be grasped by man.

The conception of infinity and eternity is given us by revelation, but

it is not comprehended so that its contents are fully known. The words

are known, but their full meaning is not, and no revelation can make

them, known to finite intelligences.

God dwells in light inaccessible, which is darkness.

Revelation opens abysses down which we cannot look. It raises and

leaves unsettled as many questions as it solves.

The telescope resolves many nebulae, but only to bring more

unresolvable ones into the field of vision.

Now all this is but one side of the truth. There is a tendency in some

minds to underrate what is plain because all is not plain. For some

minds the obscure has a fascination, apart altogether from its nature,

just because it is obscure. It is a noble emulation to press forward

and still to be closing up what we know not with what we know.' But

neither in science nor in religion shall we make progress if we do not

take heed of the opposing errors of thinking that all is seen, and of

thinking that what we have is valueless because there are gaps in it.

The constellations are none the less bright nor immortal fires, though

there be waste places in heaven where nothing but opaque blackness is

seen. In these days it is especially needful to insist both on the

incompleteness of all our religious knowledge, and to say that--

II. Notwithstanding all obscurity, God has amply revealed Himself.

Though God hides Himself, still there comes from heaven the voice--I

have not spoken in secret,' Now these words contain these thoughts--

1. That whatever darkness there may be, there is none due to the manner

of the revelation.

God has not spoken in secret, in a corner. There are no arbitrary

difficulties made or unnecessary darkness left in His revelation. We

have no right to say that He has left difficulties to test our faith.

He Himself has never said so. He deals with us in good faith, doing all

that can be done to enlighten, regard being had to still loftier

considerations, to the freedom of the human will, to the laws which He

has Himself imposed on our nature, and the purposes for which we are

here. It is very important to grasp this. We have been told as much as

can be told. Contrast with such a revelation the cave-muttered oracles

of heathenism and their paltering double sense. Be sure that when God

speaks, He speaks clearly and to all, and that in Christianity there is

no esoteric teaching for a few initiated only, while the multitude are

put off with shows.

2. That whatever obscurity there may be, there is none which hides the

divine invitation or Him from those who obey it.

I have never said . . . seek ye Me in vain.' Much is obscure if

speculative completeness is looked for, but the moral relations of God

and man are not obscure.

All which the heart needs is made known. His revelation is clearly His

seeking us, and His revelation is His gracious call to us to seek Him.

He is ever found by those who seek. They have not to press through

obscurities to find Him, but the desire to possess must precede

possession in spiritual matters. He is no hidden God, lurking in

obscurity and only to be found by painful search. They who seek' Him

know where to find Him, and seek because they know.

3. That whatever may be obscure, the Revelation of righteousness is

clear.

We have to face speculative difficulties in plenty, but the great fact

remains that in Revelation steady light is focussed on the moral

qualities of the divine Nature and especially on His righteousness.

And the revelation of the divine righteousness reaches its greatest

brightness, as that of all the divine Nature does, in the Person and

work of Jesus. Very significantly the idea of God's righteousness is

fully developed in the immediately subsequent context. There we find

that attribute linked in close and harmonious conjunction with what

shallower thought is apt to regard as being in antagonism to it. He

declares Himself to be a just (righteous) God and a Saviour.' So then,

if we would rightly conceive of His righteousness, we must give it a

wider extension than that of retributive justice or cold, inflexible

aloofness from sinners. It impels God to be man's saviour. And with

similar enlarging of popular conceptions there follows: In the Lord is

righteousness and strength,' and therefore, In the Lord shall all the

seed of Israel be justified (declared and made righteous) and shall

glory'--then, the divine Righteousness is communicative.

All these thoughts, germinal in the prophet's words, are set in fullest

light, and certified by the most heart-moving facts, in the Person and

work of Jesus Christ. He declares at this time His righteousness, that

He might Himself be righteous and the maker righteous of them that have

faith in Jesus.' Whatever is dark, this is clear, that Jehovah our

Righteousness' has come to us in His Son, in whom seeking Him we shall

never seek in vain, but be found in Him, not having a righteousness of

our own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith

in Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.'

If the great purpose of revelation is to make us know that God loves

us, and has given us His Son that in Him we may know Him and possess

His Righteousness, difficulties and obscurities in its form or in its

substance take a very different aspect. What need we more than that

knowledge and possession? Be not robbed of them.

Many things are not written in the book of the divine Revelation,

whether it be that of Nature, of human history, or of our own spirits,

or even of the Gospel, but these are written that we may believe that

Jesus is the Son of God, and believing, may have life in His name.

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A RIGHTEOUSNESS NEAR AND A SWIFT SALVATION

Hearken unto Me, ye stout-hearted, that are far from righteousness: I

bring near My righteousness; it shall not be far off, and My salvation

shall not tarry.'--ISAIAH xlvi. 12, 13.

God has promised that He will dwell with him that is humble and of a

contrite heart. Jesus has shed the oil of His benediction on the poor

in spirit. It is the men who form the exact antithesis to these

characters who are addressed here. The stout-hearted' are those who,

being untouched in conscience and ignorant of their sin, are

self-reliant and almost defiant before God. That temper is branded

here, though, of course, there is a sense in which a stout heart is a

priceless possession, but that sort of stoutness of heart is best

secured by the contrite of heart. Those who are far from righteousness

are those who are not only sinful in act, but do not desire to be

otherwise, having no approximation or drawing towards a nobler life, by

aspiration or effort.

To such men God speaks, as in the tone of a royal proclamation; and

what should we expect to hear pealing from His lips? Words of rebuke,

warning, condemnation? No; His voice is gentle and wooing, and does not

threaten blows, but proffers blessings: I will bring near My

righteousness. It shall not be far off,' though the stout-hearted maybe

far from' it. Here we have a divine proclamation of a divine Love that

will not let us away from its presence; of a divine Work for us that is

finished without us; of an all-sufficient Gift to us.

I. A divine proclamation of a divine Love that will not let us away

from its presence.

There is a great contest between God and man: man seeking to withdraw

from God, and God following in patient, persistent love.

1. In general terms God keeps near us, however far away we go from Him.

Think of our forgetfulness of Him and His continual thought of us.

Think of our alienated hearts and His unchanging love.

We cannot turn away His care, we cannot exhaust His compassion, we

cannot alienate His heart. All men everywhere are objects of these, as

in every corner of the world the sky is overhead, and all lands have

sunshine.

What a picture of divine patience and placability that truth points for

us! It shows the Father coming after His prodigal son, and so surpasses

even the pearl of the parables.

2. The special reference to Christ's work.

That work is the exhibition in manhood and to men of a perfect

righteousness.

It is the implanting in the corrupt world of a new beginning. It is the

clothing us with Christ's righteousness, for which we are forgiven and

in which we are sanctified.

So Christ's work is God's coming to bring near His righteousness, and

now it is nigh thee in thy mouth and in thy heart.'

II. A divine proclamation of a divine Work which is finished without

us.

The divine righteousness and its consequence are here represented as

being brought near while men are still stout-hearted.' We must feel the

emphasis laid on I will bring near My righteousness,' and the

impression of merciful speed given by My salvation shall not tarry.'

The whole suggests such thoughts as these:--

The divine love is not drawn out by anything in us, but pours out on

us, even while we are far off and indifferent to it. His bringing near

of righteousness, and setting His salvation to run very swiftly side by

side with it, originates in Himself. It is the self-impelled and

self-fed flow of a fountain, and we need no pump or machinery to draw

it forth.

The divine work is accomplished without man's co-operation.

It is finished,' was Christ's dying cry. But what is finished?--

Bringing the righteousness near. What still remains to be done?--Making

it mine. And that is accomplished by faith.

It is mine if by faith I claim it as mine, and knit myself with Him who

is righteousness and salvation for every man that they may be

accessible to and possessed by any man.

A man may be far from righteousness though it is near him and all

around him. Like Gideon's fleece, he may be dry when all is wet, or

like some rock in a field, barren and sullen, while all around the corn

is waving.

III. The proclamation of an all-sufficient Gift.

Righteousness, salvation, glory, are here brought together in

significant sequence. They are but several names for the same divine

gift, looked at from different angles. A diamond flashes varying

prismatic hues from its different facets.

That encyclopaedical gift, which in regard to man considered as sinful

brings pardon and a new nature in righteousness and holiness of truth,'

brings deliverance from peril and from every form of evil and death, to

him considered as exposed to consequences of sin both physical and

moral, and a true though limited participation in the divine glory,

even now, with the hope of entering into the blaze of it hereafter, to

him as considered as made in the divine image and having lost it.

And all this wonderful triple hope, rapturous and impossible as it

seems when we think of man as he is, and of each of ourselves as we

each feel ourselves to be, is for us a sober certainty and a fact

sufficiently accomplished, to give firm ground for our largest

expectations if we hold fast by Jesus who brings that all-sufficient

gift of God within reach of each of us. The divine patience and love

follow us in all our wild wanderings, praying us with much entreaty

that we should receive the gift.' Jesus, who is God's righteousness and

love incarnate, beseeches us to take Him, and in Him righteousness,

salvation, and glory.

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A RIVER OF PEACE AND WAVES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Oh that thou hadst hearkened to My commandments! then had thy peace

been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the

sea.'--ISAIAH xlviii. 18.

I. The Wonderful Thought of God here.

This is an exclamation of disappointment; of thwarted love. The good

which He purposed has been missed by man's fault, and He regards the

faulty Israel with sorrow and pity as a would-be benefactor balked of a

kind intention might do. O Jerusalem! how often would I have gathered

thee.' If thou hadst known . . . the things that belong unto thy

peace!'

II. Man's opposition to God's loving purpose for us.

To have hearkened to His commandments would have enabled Him to let His

kindness have its way.

It is not only our act contrary to God's Law, but the source of that

act in our antagonistic will, which fatally bars out the possibility of

God's intended good from us. It is not hearkening' which is the root of

not doing.

That possibility of lifting up our puny wills against the

all-sovereign, Infinite Will is the mystery of mysteries.

The fact that the mysterious possibility becomes an actuality in us is

still more mysterious. If we could solve those two mysteries, we should

be far on the way to solve all the mysteries of man's relation to God,

and God's to man.

A will absolutely submitted to Him is His great ideal of human nature.

And that ideal we all can thwart, and alas, alas! we all do. It is the

deepest mystery; it is the blackest sin; it is the intensest folly.

Sin is negative as well as positive. Not to hearken is as bad as to act

in dead opposition to.

III. The lost good.

The great purpose of the divine Commandment is to show us, for our own

sakes, the path that leads to all blessedness.

Peace and Righteousness, or, in more modern words, all well-being and

all goodness, are the sure results of taking God's expressed Will as

the guide of life.

These two are inseparable. Indeed they are one and the same fact of

human experience, looked at from two points of view.

The force of the metaphor in both clauses is substantially the same. It

suggests in both--Abundance--Continuity--Uninterrupted Succession. But

regarded separately each has its own fair promise. As a river'--

flowing softly, not stagnant--that suggests the calm and gentle flow of

a placid and untroubled stream refreshing and fertilising. As waves of

the sea,' these suggest greater force than river.' The image speaks of

a righteousness massive and having power and a resistless swing in it.

It is the more striking because the waves of the sea are the ordinary

emblem of rebellious power. But here they stand as emblem of the

strength of a submissive, not of a rebellious, will. In that obedience

human nature rises to a higher type of strength than it ever attains

while in opposition to the Source of all strength.

Contrast--Whose waters cast up mire and dirt.'

IV. The lost good regained.

God has yet a method to accomplish His loving desire. Even those who

have not hearkened may receive through Christ the good which they have

sinned away. In Him is peace; in Him is Righteousness, which comes from

faith. Hear, and your soul shall live.'

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EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D., Litt. D.

ISAIAH AND JEREMIAH

Isaiah, Chaps. XLIX to End. Jeremiah.

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FEEDING IN THE WAYS

They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high

places.'--ISAIAH xlix. 9.

This is part of the prophet's glowing description of the return of the

Captives, under the figure of a flock fed by a strong shepherd. We have

often seen, I suppose, a flock of sheep driven along a road, some of

them hastily trying to snatch a mouthful from the dusty grass by the

wayside. Little can they get there; they have to wait until they reach

some green pasture in which they can be folded. This flock shall feed

in the ways'; as they go they will find nourishment. That is not all;

the top of the mountains is not the place where grass grows. There are

bare, savage cliffs, from which every particle of soil has been washed

by furious torrents, or the scanty vegetation has been burnt up by the

fierce sunbeams like swords.' There the wild deer and the ravens live,

the sheep feed down in the valleys. But their pasture shall be in all

high places.' The literal rendering is even more emphatic: Their

pasture shall be in all bare heights,' where a sudden verdure springs

to feed them according to their need. Whilst, then, this prophecy is

originally intended simply to suggest the abundant supplies that were

to be provided for the band of exiles as they came back from Babylon,

there lie in it great and blessed principles which belong to the

Christian pilgrimage, and the flock that follows Christ.

They who follow Him, says my text, to begin with, shall find in the

dusty paths of common life, and in all the smallnesses and distractions

of daily duty, nourishment for their spirits. Do you remember what

Jesus said? My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to

finish His work.' We, too, may have the same meat to eat which the

world knows not of, and He will give that hidden manna to the combatant

as well as to him that overcometh.' In the measure in which we follow

the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,' in that measure do we find--like the

stores of provisions that Arctic explorers come upon, cached for

them--food in the wilderness, and nourishment for our highest life in

our common work. That is a great promise, and it is a great duty.

It is a promise the fulfilment of which is plainly guaranteed by the

very nature of the case. Religion is meant to direct conduct, and the

smallest affairs of life are to come under its imperial control, and

the only way by which a man can get any good out of his Christianity is

by living it. It is when he sets to work on the principles of the

Gospel that the Gospel proves itself to be a reality in his blessed

experience. It is when he does the smallest duties from the great

motives that these great motives are strengthened by exercise, as every

motive is. If you wish to weaken the influence of any principle upon

you, do not work it out, and it will wither and die. If a man would

grasp the fulness of spiritual sustenance which lies in the Gospel of

Jesus Christ, let him go to work on the basis of the Gospel, and he

shall feed in the ways,' and common duties will minister strength to

him instead of taking strength from him. We can make the smallest daily

incidents subserve our growth and our spiritual strength, because, if

we thus do them, they will bring to us attestations of the reality of

the faith by which we act on them. For convincing a man that a lifebuoy

is reliable there is nothing like having had experience of its power to

hold his head above the waves when he has been cast into them. Live

your Christianity, and it will attest itself. There will come, besides

that, the blessed memory of past times in which we trusted in the Lord

and were lightened, we obeyed God and found His promises true, we

risked all for God and found that we had all more abundantly. It is

only an active Christian life that is a nourished and growing Christian

life.

The food which God gives us is not only to be taken by faith, but it

has to be made ours more abundantly by work. Saint Augustine said in

another connection, Believe, and thou hast eaten.' Yes, that is

blessedly true, but it needs to be supplemented by they shall feed in

the ways,' and their work will bring them nourishment.

But this is a great duty as well as a great promise. How many of us

Christian people have but little experience of getting nearer to God

because of our daily occupations? To by far the larger number of us, in

by far the greater space of time in our lives, our daily work is a

distraction, and tends to obscure the face of God to us and to shut us

out from many of the storehouses of sustenance by which a quiet,

contemplative faith is refreshed. Therefore we need times of special

prayer and remoteness from daily work; and there will be very little

realisation of the nourishing power of common duties unless there is

familiar to us also the entrance into the secret place of the Most

High,' where He feeds His children on the bread of life.

We must not neglect either of these two ways by which our souls are

fed, and we must ever remember that the reason why so many Christian

people cannot set to their seal that this promise is true, lies mainly

in this, that the ways on which they go are either not the ways that

the Shepherd has walked in before them, or that they are trodden in

forgetfulness of Him and without looking to His guidance. The work that

is to minister to the Christian life must be work conformed to the

Christian ideal, and if we fling ourselves into our secular business,

as it is called--if you go to your counting-houses and shops, and I go

to my desk and books, and forget the Shepherd--then there is no grass

by the wayside for such sheep. But if we subject our wills to Him, and

if in all that we do we are trying to refer to Him and are working in

dependence on Him, and for Him, then the poorest work, the meanest, the

most entirely secular, will be a source of Christian nourishment and

blessing. We have to settle for ourselves whether we shall be

distracted, torn asunder by pressure of cares and responsibilities and

activities, or whether, far below the agitated surface which is ruffled

by the winds, and borne along by the tidal wave, there will be a great

central depth, still but not stagnant--whether we shall be fed, or

starved in our Christian life, by the pressure of our worldly tasks.

The choice is before us. They shall feed in the ways,' if the ways are

Christ's ways, and He is at every step their Shepherd.

Further, my text suggests that for those who follow the Lamb there

shall be greenness and pasture on the bare heights. Strip that part of

our text of its metaphor, and it just comes to the blessed old thought,

which I hope many of us have known to be a true one, that the times of

sorrow are the times when a Christian may have the most of the presence

and strength of God. In the days of famine they shall be satisfied,'

and up among the most barren cliffs, where there is not a bite for any

four-footed creature, they shall find springing grass and watered

pastures. Our prophet puts the same thought, under a kindred though

somewhat different metaphor, in another place in this book, where he

says, I will open rivers in high places.' That is clean contrary to

nature. The rivers do not run on the mountain-tops, but down in the low

ground. But for us, as the darkness thickens, the pillar may glow the

brighter; as the gloom increases, the glory may grow; the less of

nutriment or refreshment earth affords, the more abundantly does God

spread His stores before us, if we are wise enough to take them. It is

an experience, I suppose, common to all devout men, that their times of

most rapid growth were their times of trouble. In nature winter stops

all vegetable life. In grace the growing time is the winter. They tell

us that up in the Arctic regions the reindeer will scratch away the

snow, and get at the succulent moss that lies beneath it. When that

Shepherd, Who Himself has known sorrows, leads us up into those barren

regions of perpetual cold and snow, He teaches us, too, how to brush it

away, and find what we need buried and kept safe and warm beneath the

white shroud. It is the prerogative of the Christian soul not to be

without trouble, but to turn the trouble into nourishment, and to feed

on the barest heights.

May I turn these latter words of our text a somewhat different way,

attaching to them a meaning which does not belong to them, but by way

of accommodation? If Christian people want to have the bread of God

abundantly, they must climb. It is to those who live on the heights

that provision comes according to their need. If you would have your

Christian life starved, go down into the fertile valleys. Remember

Abraham and Lot, and the choice which each made. The one said: I want

cattle and wealth, and I am going down to Sodom. Never mind about the

vices of the inhabitants. There is money to be made there.' Abraham

said: I am going to stay up here on the heights, the breezy, barren

heights,' and God stayed beside him. If we go down we starve our souls.

If we desire them to be fat and flourishing, nourished with the hidden

manna, then we must go up. Their pasture shall be in all high places.'

Before I finish, let me remind you of the application of the words of

my text, which we owe to the New Testament. The context runs, as you

will remember, they shall not hunger nor thirst, neither shall the heat

nor the sun smite them. For He that hath mercy on them shall lead them,

even by the springs of water shall He guide them.' And you remember the

beautiful variation and deepening of this promise in that great saying

which the Seer in the Apocalypse gives us, when he speaks of those who

follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,' and are led by living

fountains of water,' where God shall wipe away all tears from their

eyes.' So we are entitled to believe that on the loftiest heights, far

above this valley of weeping, there shall be immortal food, and that on

the high places of the mountains of God there shall be pasture that

never withers. The prophet Ezekiel has a similar variation of my text,

and transfers it from the captives on their march homewards, to the

happy pilgrims who have reached home, when he says: I will bring them

unto their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel'--when

they have reached them at last after the weary march--I will feed them

in a good pasture, and upon the mountains of Israel shall their fold

be; there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall

they feed upon the mountains of Israel.'

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THE MOUNTAIN ROAD

And I will make all My mountains a way, and My highways shall be

exalted.'--ISAIAH xlix. 11.

This grand prophecy is far too wide to be exhausted by the return of

the exiles. There gleamed through it the wider redemption and the true

return of the real captives. The previous promises all find their

fulfilment in the experiences of the soul on its journey back to God.

Here we have two characteristics of that journey.

I. The Path through the mountains.

My mountains.' That is the claim that all the world is His; and also

the revelation that He is the Lord of Providence. He makes our

difficult and steep places. Submission comes with that thought, and

even for the strength of the hills we bless Thee.' There are mountains

which are not His but ours, artificial difficulties of our own

creating.

1. Our way does lie over the mountains. There are difficulties. The

Christian course is like a Roman road which never turned aside, but

went straight up and on. So much the better. A keener air blows,

bracing and health-giving, up there. Mosquitoes and malaria keep to the

lower levels.

2. There is always a path over the mountains. Some way opens when we

get close up, like a path through heather, which is not seen till

reached. We walk by faith. We foolishly forebode and fancy that we

cannot live if something happens, but there is no cul de sac in our

paths if God's mountain-way is our way, nor does the faint track ever

die out if our faith is keen-sighted and docile.

II. The Pasture on the mountains--lit. bare heights.'

Pastures in the East are down in bottoms, not, like ours, upon the

hills. But this flock finds supplies on the barren hill-tops.

Sustenance in Sorrow and Loss.

1. Promise that whatever be our trials and losses we shall be taken

care of. Not, perhaps, as we should have liked, nor as abundantly fed

as down in the valleys, but still not left to starve. No carcases

strewed on the bleakest bit of road as one sees dead camels by the side

of the tracks in the desert.

2. Promise of sustenance of a higher kind even in sorrow. The Alpine

flora is specially beautiful, though minute. The blessings of

affliction; the more intimate knowledge of His love, submission of

will. Out of the eater came forth meat.'

Passing through the valley of weeping they make it a well'; the tears

shed in times of rightly borne sorrow are gathered into a reservoir

from which refreshment, patience, trust and strength may be drawn in

later days.

But the perfect fulfilment of the promise lies beyond this life. On the

high mountains of Israel shall their fold be,' and they who have found

pasture on the barren heights of earthly sorrow shall summer high in

bliss upon the hills of God,' and shall at once both lie for ever in a

good fold,' and follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,' and find

fountains of living water bursting forth for ever on these fertile

heights.

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THE WRITING ON GOD'S HANDS

Behold! I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands; thy walls are

continually before Me.'--ISAIAH xlix. 16.

In the preceding context we have the infinitely tender and beautiful

words: Zion hath said, The Lord hath forsaken me. Can a woman forget

her sucking child? . . . yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget

thee.' There is more than a mother's love in the Father's heart. But

wonderful in their revelation of God, and mighty to strengthen, calm,

and comfort, as these transcendent words are, those of my text, which

follow them, do not fall beneath their loftiness. They are a singularly

bold metaphor, drawn from the strange and half-savage custom, which

lingers still among sailors and others, of having beloved names or

other tokens of affection and remembrance indelibly inscribed on parts

of the body. Sometimes worshippers had the marks of the god thus set on

their flesh; here God writes on His hands the name of the city of His

worshippers. And it is not its name only, but its very likeness that He

stamps there, that He may ever look on it, as those who love bear with

them a picture of one dear face. The prophecy goes on: Thy walls are

continually before Me,' but in the prophet's time the walls were in

ruins, and yet they are present to the divine mind.

I. Now, the first thought suggested by these great words is that here

we have set forth for our strength and peace a divine remembrance,

tender as--yea, more tender than--a mother's.

When Israel came out of Egypt, the Passover was instituted as a

memorial unto all generations,' or, as the same idea is otherwise

expressed, it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand.' Here God

represents Himself as doing for Israel what He had bid Israel do for

Him. They were, as it were, to write the supreme act of deliverance in

the Exodus upon their hands, that it might never be forgotten. He

writes Zion on His hands for the same purpose.

Now, of course, the text does not primarily refer to individuals, but

to the community, whether Zion is understood, as the prophet understood

the name, to be ancient Israel, or as the Christian Church. But the

recognition of that fact should not be allowed to rob us of the

preciousness of this text in its bearing on the individual. For God

remembers the community, not as an abstraction or a generalised

expression, but as the aggregate of all the individuals composing it.

We lose sight of the particulars when we generalise. We cannot see the

trees for the wood. We think of the Church,' and do not think of the

thousands of men and women who make it up. We cannot discern the

separate stars in the galaxy. But God's eye resolves what to us is a

nebula, and to Him every single glittering point of light hangs rounded

and separate in the heaven. Therefore this assurance of our text is to

be taken by every single soul that loves God, and trusts Him through

Jesus Christ, as belonging to it, as though there were not another

creature on earth but itself.

The sun whose beams most glorious are,

Disdaineth no beholder.'

Its light floods the world, yet seems to go straight into the eyeball

of every man that looks at it. And such is the divine love and

remembrance. There is no jostling nor confusion in the wide space of

the heart of God. They that go before shall not hinder them that come

after. The hungry crowd sat down in companies on the green grass, and

the first fifty, no doubt, were envied by the last of the hundred

fifties that made up the five thousand, and wondered whether the five

loaves and the two small fishes could go round, but the last fed full

as did the first. The great promise of our text belongs to me and thee,

and therefore belongs to us all.

That remembrance which each man may take for himself--and we are poor

Christians if we do not live in its light--is infinitely tender. The

echo of the music of the previous words still haunts the verse, and the

remembrance promised in it is touched with more than a mother's love. I

am poor and needy,' says the Psalmist, yet the Lord thinketh upon me.'

He might have said, I am poor and needy, therefore the Lord thinketh

upon me.' That remembrance is in full activity when things are darkest

with us. Israel said, My Lord hath forgotten me,' because at the point

of view taken in the second half of Isaiah, it was captive in a far-off

land. You and I sometimes are brought into circumstances in which we

are ready to think God has, somehow or other, left me, has forgotten

me.' Never! never! However mirk the night, however apparently solitary

the way, however mysterious and insoluble the difficulties of our

position, let us fall back on this, that the captive Israel was

remembered by God, and let us be sure that no circumstances of our

lives are so dark or mysterious as to warrant the faintest shadow of

suspicion creeping over the brightness of our confidence in this great

promise. His divine remembrance of each of His servants is certain.

But do not let us forget that it was a very sinful Zion that God thus

remembered. It was because the nation had transgressed that they were

captives, but their very captivity was a proof that they were not

forgotten. The loving divine remembrance had to smite in order to prove

that it was active. Let us neither be puzzled by our sorrows nor made

less confident when we think of our sins. For there is no sin that is

strong enough to chill the divine love, or to erase us from the divine

remembrance. Captive Israel! captive because sinful, I have graven thee

on the palms of My hands.'

II. A second thought here is that the divine remembrance guides the

divine action.

The palm of the hand is the seat of strength, the instrument of work;

and so, if Zion's name is written there, that means not only

remembrance, but remembrance which is at the helm, as it were, which is

moulding and directing all the work that is done by the hand that bears

the name inscribed upon it. The thought is identical with the one which

is suggested by part of the High Priest's official dress, although

there the thought has a different application. He bore the names of the

twelve tribes graven upon his shoulder, the seat of power, and upon his

breastplate that lay above the heart, the home of love. God holds out

the mighty Hand which works all things, and says to His children: Look,

you are graven there'--at the very fountain-head, as it were, of the

divine activity. Which, being turned into plain English, is just this,

that for His Church as a whole, He does move amidst the affairs of

nations. You remember the grand words of one of the Psalms,--He

reproved kings for their sakes, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do

My prophets no harm.' It is no fanatical reading of the history of

earthly politics and kingdoms, if we recognise that one of the most

prominent reasons for the divine activities in moulding the kingdoms,

setting up and casting down, is the advancement of the kingdom of

heaven and the building of the City of God. I have graven thee on the

palms of My hands'--and when the hands go to work, it is for the Zion

whose likeness they bear.

But the same truth applies to us individually. All things work

together'; they would not do so, unless there was one dominant Will

which turned the chaos into a cosmos. All things work,' that is very

plain. The tremendous activities round us both in Nature and in history

are clear to us all. But if all things and events are co-operant,

working into each other, and for one end, like the wheels of a

well-constructed engine, then there must be an Engineer, and they work

together because He is directing them. Thus, because my name is graven

on the palms of the mighty Hand that doeth all things, therefore all

things work together for my good.' If we could but carry that quiet

conviction into all the mysteries, as they sometimes seem to be, of our

daily lives, and interpret everything in the light of that great

thought, how different all our days would be! How far above the petty

anxieties and cares and troubles that gnaw away so much of our strength

and joy; how serene, peaceful, lofty, submissive, would be our lives,

and how in the darkest darkness there would be a great light, not only

of hope for a distant future, but of confident assurance for the

present. I have graven thee on the palms of My hands --do Thou, then,

as Thou wilt with me.

III. A last thought here is that the divine remembrance works all

things, to realise a great ideal end, as yet unreached.

Thy walls are continually before Me.' When this prophecy was uttered

the Israelites were in captivity, and the city was a wilderness, the

holy and beautiful House'--as this very book says--where the fathers

praised Thee was burned with fire,' the walls were broken down, rubbish

and solitude were there. Yet on the palms of God's hands were inscribed

the walls which were nowhere else! They were before Him,' though

Jerusalem was a ruin. What does that mean? It means that that divine

remembrance sees things that are not, as though they were.' In the

midst of the imperfect reality of the present condition of the Church

as a whole, and of us, its actual components, it sees the ideal, the

perfect vision of the perfect future, and all the wonder that shall

be.' Zion may be desolate, but before Him' stands what will one day

stand on the earth before all men, the new Jerusalem, coming down from

heaven,' having walls great and high, and its foundations garnished

with all manner of precious stones. Thy walls are before Me,' though

the ruins are there before men.

So, brethren, the most radiant optimism is the only fitting attitude

for Christian people in looking into the future, either of the Church

as a whole, or of themselves as individual members of it. God's hand is

working for Zion and for me. It is guided by love that does not lose

the individual in the mass, nor ever forgets any of its children, and

it works towards the attainment of unattained perfection. This Man'

does not begin to build and' prove not able to finish.'

So let us be sure that, if only we keep ourselves in the love, and

continue in the grace of God, He will not slack nor stay His hand on

which Zion is graven, until it has perfected that which concerneth us,'

and fulfilled to each of us that which He has spoken to us of.'

I said at the beginning of these remarks that God did what He bids us

do. God bids us do what He does. His name should be on our hands; that

is to say, memory of Him, love of Him, regard to Him, confidence in Him

should mould and guide all our activity, and the aim that we shall be

builded up for a habitation of God through the Spirit should be the

conscious aim of our lives, as it is the aim which He has in view in

all His dealings with us. Our names on His hand; His name on our hands;

so shall we be blessed.

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THE SERVANT'S WORDS TO THE WEARY

The Lord God hath given me the tongue of them that are taught, that I

should know how to sustain with words him that is weary; he wakeneth

morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as they that are

taught.'--ISAIAH l. 4.

In chapter xlix. 1-6, the beginning of the continuous section of which

these verses are part, a transition is made from Israel as collectively

the ideal servant of the Lord, to a personal Servant, whose office it

is to bring Jacob again to Him.' We see the ideal in the very act of

passing to its highest form, and that in which it is finally fulfilled

in history, namely, by the person Jesus. That Jesus was Thy Holy

Servant' was the earliest gospel preached by Peter and John before

people and rulers. It is not the most vital conception of our Lord's

nature and work. The prophet does not here pierce to the core, as in

his fifty-third chapter with its vision of the Suffering Servant, but

this is prelude to that, and the office assigned here to the Servant

cannot be fully discharged without that ascribed to Him there, as the

prophet begins to discern almost immediately. The text gives us a

striking view of the purpose of Messiah's mission and of His training

and preparation for it.

I. The purpose of Christ's mission.

There is a remarkable contrast between the stately prelude to the

section of the prophecy in chapter xlix., and the ideal in this text.

There the Servant calls the isles and the distant peoples to listen,

and declares that His mouth is like a sharp sword'; here all that is

keen and smiting in His word has softened into gentle whispers of

comfort to sustain the weary.

A mission addressed to the weary' is addressed to every man, for who is

not weighed upon with sore distress,' or loaded with the burden and the

weight of tasks beyond his power or distasteful to his inclinations, or

monotonous to nausea, or prolonged to exhaustion, or toiled at with

little hope and less interest? Who is not weary of himself and of his

load? What but universal weariness does the universal secret desire for

rest betray? We are all pilgrims weary of time,' and some of us are

weary of even prosperity, and some of us are worn out with work, and

some of us buffeted to all but exhaustion by sorrow, and all of us long

for rest, though many of us do not know where to look for it.

Jesus may have had this word in mind, when He called to Him all them

that labour and are heavy laden.' At all events, the prophet's ideal

and the evangelists' story accurately correspond. Christ's words have

other characteristics, but are eminently words that sustain the weary

and comfort the down-hearted. Who can ever calculate the new strength

poured by them into fainting hearts and languid hands, the all but dead

hopes that they have reanimated, the sorrows they have comforted, the

wounds they have stanched?

What a lesson here as to the noblest use of high endowments! What a

contrast to the use that so many of those to whom God has given the

tongue of them that are taught' make of their great gifts! Literature

yields but few examples of great writers who have faithfully employed

their powers for that purpose, which seems so humble and is so lofty,

the help of the weary, the comfort of the sad. Many pages in famous

books would be cancelled if all that had been written without

consideration for these classes were obliterated, as it will be one

day.

But Christ not only speaks by outward words, but has other ways of

lodging sustenance and comfort in souls than by vocables audible to the

ear or visible to the eye on the page. The words that I speak unto you,

they are spirit and they are life.' He spoke by His deeds on earth, and

in one and the same set of facts, He began to do and to teach,' the

doing being named first. He now speaketh from Heaven' by many an inward

whisper, by the communication of His own Spirit, on Whom this very

office of ministering sustenance and comfort is laid, and whose very

name of the Comforter means One who by his being with a man strengthens

him.

II. The training and preparation of the Messiah for His mission.

The Messiah is here represented as having the tongue of them that are

taught,' and as having it, because morning by morning He has been

wakened to hear God's lessons. He is thus God's scholar--a thought of

which an unreflecting orthodoxy has been shy, but which it is necessary

to admit unhesitatingly and ungrudgingly, if we would not reduce the

manhood of Jesus to a mere phantasm. He Himself has said, As the Father

taught Me, I speak these things.' With emphatic repetition, He was

continually making that assertion, as, for instance, I have not spoken

of Myself, but the Father which sent Me, He gave Me a commandment what

I should say, and what I should speak . . . the things therefore which

I speak, even as the Father hath said unto Me, so I speak.'

The Gospels tell us of the prayers of Jesus, and of rare occasions in

which a voice from heaven spoke to Him. But while these are palpable

instances of His communion with God, and precious tokens of His true

brotherhood with us in the indispensable characteristics of the life of

faith, they are but the salient points on which the light falls, and

behind them, all unknown by us, stretches an unbroken chain of like

acts of fellowship. In that subordination as of a scholar to teacher,

both His divine and His human nature concurred, the former in filial

submission, the latter in continual, truly human derivation and

reception. The man Jesus was taught and, like the boy Jesus, increased

in wisdom.'

But while He learned as truly as we learn from God, and exercised the

same communion with the Father, the same submission to Him, which other

men have to exercise, and called us brethren, saying, I will put my

trust in Him,' the difference in degree between His close fellowship

with God the Father, and our broken and always partial fellowship,

between His completeness of reception of God's words and our imperfect

comprehension, between His perfect reproduction of the words He had

heard and our faint, and often mistaken echo of them, is so immense as

to amount to a difference in kind. His unity of will and being with the

Father ensured that all His words were God's. Never man spake like this

man.' The man who speaks to us once for all God's words must be more

than man. Other men, the highest, give us fragments of that mighty

voice; Jesus speaks its whole message, and nothing but its message. Of

that perfect reproduction He is calmly conscious, and claims to give

it, in words which are at once lowly and instinct with more than human

authority: All things that I have heard of My Father I have made known

unto you.' Who besides Him dare make such a claim? Who besides Him

could make it without being met by incredulous scorn? His utterance of

the Father's words was unmarred by defect on the one hand, and by

additions on the other. It was like pure water which tastes of no soil.

His soul was like an open vessel plunged in a stream, filled by the

flow and giving forth again its whole contents.

That divine communication to Jesus was no mere impartation of

abstractions or truths,' still less of the poor words of man's speech,

but was the flowing into His spirit of the living Father by whom He

lived. And it was unbroken. Morning by morning' it was going on. The

line was continuous, whereas for the rest of us, at the best, it is a

series of points more or less contiguous, but with dark spaces between.

God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him.'

So, then, let us hold fast by Him, the Son in whom God has spoken to

us, and to all voices without and within that would woo us to listen,

let us answer with the only wise answer: To whom shall we go? Thou hast

the words of eternal life.'

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THE SERVANT'S OBEDIENCE

I was not rebellious, neither turned away back'--ISAIAH l. 5.

I. The secret of Christ's life, filial obedience.

The fact is attested by Scripture. By His own words: My meat is to do

the will of My Father'; For thus it becometh us to fulfil all

righteousness'; I came down from heaven not to do My own will.' By His

servant's words: Obedient unto death'; Made under the law'; He learned

obedience by the things which He suffered.' It is involved in the

belief of His righteous manhood. It is essential to true manhood. The

highest ideal for humanity is conscious dependence on God, and the very

definition of righteousness is conscious conformity to the Will of God.

If Christ had done the noblest acts and yet had not always had this

sense of being a servant, He would not have been pure and holy.

It is not inconsistent with His true Divinity. We stand afar off, but

we can see this much.

The completeness of that obedience. It was continuous and it was

entire.

The living heart of it: I delight to do Thy Will.' The Father's Will

was not a force without, but Christ's whole being was conformed to it,

and it was shrined within His heart and had become His choice and

delight.

The expressions of His obedience were His perfect fulfilment of the

divine commands, and His perfect endurance of the divine appointments.

Thus God's Will was the keynote, to which Christ's will struck the full

chord.

II. The yet deeper mysteries which that perfect obedience discloses.

1. A sinless human life must be more than human. The contrast with all

which we have known--the impossibility of retaining belief in the

perfect obedience of Jesus unless we have underlying it the belief in

His divinity. There is none good but one, that is God.'

2. The sinless human life suffers not for itself but for us. The

combination of holiness and sorrow leads on to the mystery of

atonement. The sinlessness is indispensable to the doctrine of His

sacrificial death.

III. The glorious gifts which flow from that perfect obedience.

1. It gives us a living law to obey.

2. It gives us a transforming power to receive.

3. It gives us a perfect righteousness to trust to.

This perfect obedience may be ours. Being ours, our lives will be

strong, free, peaceful.

That obedience becomes ours by faith, which leads to love, and love to

the glad obedience of sons.

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THE SERVANT'S VOLUNTARY SUFFERINGS

I gave My back to the smiters, and My cheeks to them that plucked off

the hair: I hid not My face from shame and spitting.'--ISAIAH l. 6.

Such words are not to be dealt with coldly. Unless they be grasped by

the heart they are not grasped at all. We do not think of analysing in

the presence of a great sorrow. There can be no greater dishonour to

the name of Christ than an unemotional consideration of His sufferings

for us. The hindrances to a due consideration of these are manifold;

some arising from intellectual, and some from moral, causes. Most men

have difficulty in vivifying any historical event so as to feel its

reality. There is no nobler use of the historical imagination than to

direct it to that great life and death on which the salvation of the

world depends.

The prophet here has advanced from the first general conception of the

Servant of the Lord as recipient of divine commission, and submissive

to the divine voice, to thoughts of the sufferings which He would meet

with on His path, and of how He bore them.

I. The sufferings of the Servant.

The minute particularity is very noteworthy, scourging, plucking the

beard, shame, all sorts of taunts and buffets on the face, and the last

indignity of spitting. Clearly, then, He is not only to suffer

persecution, but is to be treated with insult and to endure that

strange blending, so often seen, of grim infernal laughter with grim

infernal fury, the hyena's laugh and its ferocity. Wherever it occurs,

it implies not only fell hate and cruelty, but also contempt and a

horrible delight in triumphing over an enemy. It is found in all

corrupt periods, and especially in religious persecutions. Here it

implies the rejection of the Servant.

The prophecy was literally fulfilled, but not in all its traits. This

may give a hint as to the general interpretation of prophecy and may

teach that external fulfilment only points to a deeper correspondence.

The most salient instance is in Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem riding

on an ass, which was but a finger-post to guide men's thoughts to His

fulfilling the ideal of the Messianic King. And yet, the minute

correspondences are worth noticing. What a strange, solemn glimpse they

give into that awful divine omniscience, and into the mystery of the

play of the vilest passions as being yet under control in their

extremest rage!

We must note the remarkable prominence in the narratives of the

Passion, of signs of contempt and mockery; Judas' kiss, the purple

robe, the crown of thorns, wagging their heads,' let be, let Elias

come,' etc.

Think of the exquisite pain of this to Christ. That He was sinless and

full of love made it all the worse to bear. Not the physical pain, but

the consciousness that He was encompassed by such an atmosphere of

evil, was the sharpest pang. We should think with reverent sympathy of

His perfect discernment of the sinful malignant hearts from which the

sufferings came, of His pained and rejected love thrown back on itself,

of His clear sight of what their heartless infliction of tortures would

end in for the inflicters, of His true human feeling which shrank from

being the object of contempt and execration.

II. His patient submission.

I gave,'--purely voluntary. That word originally expressed the patient

submission with which He endured at the moment, when the lash scored

His back, but it may be widened out to express Christ's perfect

voluntariness in all His passion. At any moment He could have abandoned

His work if His filial obedience and His love to men had let Him do so.

His would-be captors fell to the ground before one momentary flash of

His majesty, and they could have laid no hand on Him, if His will had

not consented to His capture. Fra Angelico has grasped the thought

which the prophet here uttered, and which the evangelists emphasise,

that all His suffering was voluntary, and that His love to us

restrained His power, and led Him to the slaughter, silent as a sheep

before her shearers. For he has pourtrayed the majestic figure seated

in passive endurance, with eyes blindfolded but yet wide open behind

the bandage, all-seeing, wistful, sad, and patient, while around are

fragments of rods, and smiting hands, and a cruel face blowing spittle

on the unshrinking cheeks. He seems to be saying: These things hast

thou done, and I kept silence.' Thou couldest have no power at all

against Me unless it were given thee.'

III. His submission to suffering in obedience to the Father's Will.

The context connects His opened ear and His not being rebellious with

His giving His back to the smiters. That involves the idea that these

indignities and insults were part of the divine counsel in reference to

Him. That same combination of ideas is strongly presented in the early

addresses of Peter, recorded in the first chapters of Acts, of which

this is a specimen: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and

foreknowledge of God, ye with wicked hands have crucified and slain.'

The full significance of Christ's passion as that of the atoning

sacrifice was not yet clear to the apostle, any more than the Servant's

sufferings were to the prophet, but both prophet and apostle were

carried on by fuller experience and reflection on what they already saw

clearly, to discern the inwardness and depth of these. The one soon

came to see that by His stripes we are healed,' and the other finally

wrote: Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree.' And

whoever deeply ponders the startling fact that it pleased the Lord to

bruise Him,' sinless and ever obedient as He was, will be borne, sooner

or later, into the full sunlight of the blessed belief that when Jesus

suffered and died, He died for all.' His sufferings were those of a

martyr for truth, who is willing to die rather than cease to witness

for it; but they were more. They were the sufferings of a lover of

mankind who will face the extremest wrong that can be inflicted, rather

than abandon His mission; but they were more. They were not merely the

penalty which He had to pay for faithfulness to His work; they were

themselves the crown and climax of His work. The Son of Man came,

indeed, not to be ministered to but to minister,' but that, taken

alone, is but a maimed view of what He came for, and we must

whole-heartedly go on to say as He said, and to give His life a ransom

for many,' if we would know the whole truth as to the sufferings of

Jesus.

Again, since Christ suffers according to the will of God, it is clear

that all representations of the scope of His atoning death, which

represent it as moving the will of the Father to love and pardon, are

travesties of the truth and turn cause into effect. God does not love,

because Jesus died, but Jesus died because God loved.

Further, it is to be noted that His sufferings are the great means by

which He sustains the weary. The word to which His ears were opened,

morning by morning, was the word to which He was docile when He gave

His back to the smiters. It is His passion, regarded as the sacrifice

for a world's sin, from which flow the most powerful stimulants to

service and tonics for weary souls, the tenderest comfortings for

sorrow. He sustains and comforts by the example of His life, but far

more, and more sweetly, more mightily, by that which flows to us

through His death. His sufferings are powerful to sustain, when thought

of as our example, but they are a tenfold stronger source of patience

and strength, when laid on our hearts as the price of our redemption.

The Cross is, in all senses of the expression, the tree of life.

Wonder, reverence, love, gratitude, should well forth from our hearts,

when we think of these cruel sufferings, but the deepest fountains in

them will not be unsealed, unless we see in the suffering Servant the

atoning Son.

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THE SERVANT'S INFLEXIBLE RESOLVE

For the Lord God will help Me; therefore shall I not be confounded:

therefore have I set My face like a flint.'--ISAIAH l. 7.

What a striking contrast between the tone of these words and of the

preceding! There all is gentleness, docility, still communion,

submission, patient endurance. Here all is energy and determination,

resistance and martial vigour. It is like the contrast between a priest

and a warrior. And that gentleness is the parent of this boldness. The

same Will which is all submission to God is all resistance in the face

of hostile men. The utmost lowliness and the most resolved resistance

to opposing forces are found in that prophetic image of the Servant of

the Lord--even as they are found in the highest degree and most

perfectly in Jesus Christ.

The sequence in this context is worth noting. We had first Christ's

communion with God and communications from the Father; then the perfect

submission of His Will; then that submission expressed in His voluntary

sufferings; and now we have His immovable steadfastness of resistance

to the temptation, which lay in these sufferings, to depart from His

attitude of submission, and to abandon His work.

The former verse led us up to the verge of the great mystery of His

sacrificial death. This gives us a glimpse into the depths of His human

life, and shows Him to us as our example in all holy heroism.

I. The need which Christ felt to exercise firm resistance.

The words of the text are found almost reproduced in Jeremiah i. and

Ezekiel iii. All prophets and servants of God have had thus to resist,

and it would be superfluous to show how resistance to opposing

influences is the condition of all noble life and of all true service.

But was it so with Him? The more accurate translation of the second

clause of our text is to be noticed: Therefore I will not suffer Myself

to be overcome by the shame.'

Then the shame had in it some tendency to divert Him from His course.

Christ's humanity felt natural human shrinking from pain and suffering.

It shrank from the contempt and mockery of those around Him, and did so

with especial sensitiveness because of His pure and sinless nature, His

yearning sympathy, the atmosphere of love in which He dwelt, His clear

sight of the sin, and His prevision of the consequent sorrow. If so,

His sufferings did appeal to His human nature and constituted a

temptation.

At the beginning the Tempter addressed himself to natural desires to

procure physical gratification (bread), and to the equally natural

desire to avoid suffering and pain, and to secure His kingdom by an

easier method (All these will I give Thee, if--').

And the latter temptation attended Him all through His life, and was

most insistent at its close. The shadow of the cross stretched along

His path from its beginning. But it is to be remembered that he had not

the same need of self-control which we have, in that His Will was not

reluctant, and that no rebellious desires had escaped from its control

and needed to be reduced to submission. I was not rebellious.' The

spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' was true in the fullest extent

only of Him. So the context gives us His perfect submission of will,

and yet the need to harden His face toward externals from which,

instinctively and without breach of filial obedience, His sensitive

nature recoiled. The reality of the temptation, the limits of its

reach, His consciousness of it, and His immovable obedience and

resistance, are all expressed in the deep and wonderful words, If it be

possible, let this cup pass from Me, nevertheless not as I will, but as

Thou wilt.'

II. The perfect inflexible resolve.

Face like a flint' seems to be quoted in Luke ix. 51; Steadily set His

face.' The whole story of the Gospels gives the one impression of a

life steadfast in its great resolve. There are no traces of His ever

faltering in His purpose, none of His ever suffering Himself to be

diverted from it, no parentheses and no digressions. There are no

blunders either. But what a contrast in this respect to all other

lives! Mark's Gospel, which is eminently the gospel of the Servant, is

full of energy and of this inflexible resolve, which speak in such

sayings as I must be about My Father's business'; I must work the works

of My Father while it is day.' That last journey, during which He

steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem,' is but a type of the

whole. Christ's life was a continuous or rather a continually repeated

effort.

This inflexible resolve is associated in Him with characteristics not

usually allied with it. The gentleness of Christ is so obvious in His

character that little needs to be said to point it out. To the

influence of His character more than to any other cause may be traced

the change in the perspective, so to speak, of Virtue, which

characterises modern notions of perfection as contrasted with antique

ones. Contrast the Greek and Roman type with the mediaeval ascetic, or

with the philanthropic type of modern times. Carlyle's ideal is

retrograde and an anachronism. Women and patient sufferers find example

in Him. But we have in Jesus Christ, too, the highest example of all

the stronger and robuster virtues, the more distinctly heroic,

masculine; and that not merely passive firmness of endurance such as an

American Indian will show in torments, but active firmness which

presses on to its goal, and, immovably resolute, will not be diverted

by anything. In Him we see a resolved Will and a gentle loving Heart in

perfect accord. That is a wonderful combination. We often find that

such firmness is developed at the expense of indifference to other

people. It is like a war chariot, or artillery train, that goes

crashing across the field, though it be over shrieking men and broken

bones, and the wheels splash in blood. Resolved firmness is often

accompanied with self-absorption which makes it gloomy, and with narrow

limitations. Such men gather all their powers together to secure a

certain end, and do it by shutting the eyes of their mind to everything

but the one object, like the painter, who blocks up his studio window

to get a top light, or as a mad bull lowers his head and blindly rushes

on.

There is none of all this in Christ's firmness. He was able at every

moment to give His whole sympathy to all who needed it, to take in all

that lay around Him, and His resolute concentration of Himself on His

work made Him none the less perfect in all which goes to make up

complete manhood. Not only was Christ's firmness that of a fixed Will

and a most loving Heart, like one of these rocking stones,' whose solid

mass can be set vibrating by a poising bird, but the fixed Will came

from the loving Heart. The very compassion and pity of His nature led

to that resolved continuance in His path of redeeming love, though

suffering and mockery waited for Him at each turn.

And so He is the Joshua, the Warrior-King, as well as the Priest. That

Face, ever ready to kindle into pity, to melt into tenderness, to

express every shade of tender feeling, was set as a flint.' That Eye,

ever brimming with tears, was ever fixed on one goal. That Character is

the type of all strength and of all gentleness.

III. The basis of Christ's fixed resolve in filial confidence.

The Lord God will help Me.' So Christ lived by faith.

That faith led to this heroic resistance and immovable resolution.

That confidence of divine help was based upon consciousness of

obedience.

It is most blessed for us to have Him as our example of faith and of

brave opposition to all the antagonistic forces around us. But we need

more than an example. He will but rebuke our wavering purposes of

obedience, if He is no more than our pattern. Thank God, He is more,

even our Fountain of Power, from Whom we can draw life akin to, because

derived from, His own. In Him we can feel strength stealing into

flaccid limbs, and gain the wrestling thews that throw the world.' If

we are in Christ' and on the path of duty, we too may be able to set

our faces as a flint, and to say truthfully: None of these things move

me, neither count I my life dear to myself, that I may finish my course

with joy.' And yet we may withal be gentle, and keep hearts open as day

to melting charity,' and have leisure and sympathy to spare for every

sorrow of others, and a hand to help and sustain him that is weary.'

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THE SERVANT'S TRIUMPH

He is near that justifieth Me; who will contend with Me? let us stand

together: who is Mine adversary? let him come near to Me. 9. Behold,

the Lord God will help Me; who is he that shall condemn Me? lo, they

all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up.'--ISAIAH l.

8, 9.

We have reached the final words of this prophecy, and we hear in them a

tone of lofty confidence and triumph. While the former ones sounded

plaintive like soft flute music, this rings out clear like the note of

a trumpet summoning to battle. The Servant of the Lord seems here to be

eager for the conflict, not merely patient and enduring, not merely

setting His face like a flint, but confidently challenging His

adversaries, and daring them to the strife.

As for the form of the words, the image underlying the whole is that of

a suit at law. It is noteworthy that since Isaiah xli. this metaphor

has run through the whole prophecy. The great controversy is God versus

Idols. God appears at the bar of men, pleads His cause, calls His

witnesses (xliii. 9). Let them' (i.e. idols) bring forth their

witnesses that they may be justified.'

Possibly the form of the words here is owing to the dominance of that

idea in the context, and implies nothing more than the general notion

of opposition and victory. But it is at least worth remembering that in

the life of Christ we have many instances in which the prophetic images

were literally fulfilled even though their meaning was mainly

symbolical: as e.g. the riding on the ass, the birth in Bethlehem, the

silence before accusers, a bone of Him shall not be broken,' and in

this very contest, shame and spitting.' So here there may be included a

reference to that time when the hatred of opposition reached its

highest point--in the sufferings and death of our Lord. And it is at

least a remarkable coincidence that that highest point was reached in

formal trials before the ecclesiastical and civil authorities, for the

purpose of convicting Him, and that these processes as legal procedures

broke down so signally.

Keeping up the metaphor, we mark here--

I. The Messiah's lofty challenge to His accusers. II. The Messiah's

expectation of divine vindication and acquittal. III. The Messiah's

confidence of ultimate triumph.

I. Messiah's lofty challenge to His accusers.

The justifying' which He expects may refer either to personal character

or to official functional faithfulness. I think it refers to both, and

that we have here, expressed in prophetic outline, not only the fact of

Christ's sinlessness, but the fact of His consciousness of sinlessness.

The words are the strongest assertion of His absolute freedom from

anything that an adversary could lay hold of on which to found a

charge, and not merely so, but they also dare to assert that the

unerring and all-penetrating eye of the Judge of all will look into His

heart, and find nothing there but the mirrored image of His own

perfection. I do not need to dwell on the fact of Christ's sinlessness,

that He is perfect manhood without stain, without defect. I have had

occasion to touch upon that truth in a former sermon on I was not

rebellious.' Here we have to do not so much with sinlessness as with

the consciousness of sinlessness.

Now note that consciousness on Christ's part.

We have to reckon with the fact of it as expressed in His own words: I

do always the things that please Him. Which of you convinceth Me of

sin?' The Prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in Me.'

In Him there is the absence of all trace of sense of sin.

No prayer for forgiveness comes from His lips.

No penitence, no acknowledgment of even weakness is heard from Him.

Even in His baptism, which for others was an acknowledgment of

impurity, He puts His submission to the rite, not on the ground of

needing to be washed from sin, but of fulfilling all righteousness.'

Now, unless Christ was sinless, what do we say of these assertions? If

we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not

in us'--are we to apply that canon to Him when He stands before us and

asks, Which of you convinceth Me of sin?' Surely it augurs small

self-knowledge or a low moral standard if, from the lips of a religious

teacher, there never comes one word to indicate that he has felt the

hold of evil on him. I make bold to say that if Christ were not

sinless, the Apostle Paul stood far above Him, with his of whom I am

chief.' What difference would there be between Him and the Pharisees

who called forth His bitterest words by this very absence in them of

consciousness of sin: If ye were blind ye would have no sin, but now ye

say, We see, therefore your sin remaineth.'

Singularly enough the world has accepted Him at His own estimate, and

has felt that these lofty assertions of absolute perfection were borne

out by His life, and were consistent with the utmost lowliness of

heart.

As to the adversary's failure, I need only recall the close of His

life, which is representative of the whole impression made on the world

by Him. What a wonderful and singular concurrence of testimonies was

borne to His pure and blameless life! After months of hatred and

watching, even the rulers' lynx-eyed jealousy found nothing, and they

had to fall back upon false witnesses. Hearest thou not how many things

they witness against Thee?' He stood with unmoved silence, and the lies

fell down dead at His feet. Had He answered, they would have been

preserved and owed their immortality to the Gospels: He held His peace

and they vanished. All attempts failed so signally that at the last

they were fain, in well-simulated holy abhorrence, to base His

condemnation on what He had said in their presence. How think ye, ye

have heard the blasphemy?' So all that the adversary, raking through a

life, could find, was that one word. That was His sin; in all else He

was pure. Remember Pilate's acquittal: I find no fault in Him,' and his

wife's warning, Have thou nothing to do with that just Person.' Think

of Judas, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.'

Listen to the penitent thief's low voice gasping out in his pangs and

almost collapse: This man hath done nothing amiss.' Listen to the

Centurion telling the impression made even on his rough nature: Truly

this was a righteous Man.'

These are the answers to the Servant's challenge, wrung from the lips

of His adversaries; and they but represent the universal judgment of

humanity.

There is one Man whose life has been without stain or spot, whose soul

has never been crossed by a breath of passion, nor dimmed by a speck of

sin, whose will has ever been filled with happy obedience, whose

conscience has been undulled by evil and untaught to speak in

condemnation, whose whole nature has been like some fair marble, pure

in hue, perfect in form, and unstained to the very core. There is one

Man who can front the most hostile scrutiny with the bold challenge,

Which of you convinceth Me of sin?' and His very haters have to answer,

I find no fault in Him,' while those that love Him rejoice to proclaim

Him holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners.' There is one

Man who can front the most rigid Law of Duty and say, I came not to

destroy but to fulfil,' and the stony tables seem to glow with tender

light, as of rocky cliffs in morning sunshine, attesting that He has

indeed fulfilled all righteousness. There is one Man who can stand

before God without repentance or confession, and whose claim I do

always the things that please Him,' the awful voice from the opening

heavens endorses, when it proclaims; This is My beloved Son in whom I

am well pleased.' The lowly Servant of God flings out His challenge to

the universe: Who will contend with Me?' and that gage has lain in the

lists for nineteen centuries unlifted.

II. The Messiah's expectation of divine vindication and acquittal.

Like many another man, Christ had to strengthen Himself against calumny

and slander by turning to God, and finding comfort in the belief that

there was One who would do Him right, and as throughout this context we

have had the true humanity of our Lord in great prominence, it is worth

while to dwell for a moment on that thought of His real sharing in the

pain of misconstruction and groundless charges, and of His too having

to say, as we have so often to say, Well, there is one who knows. Men

may condemn but God will acquit.'

But there is something more than that here. The divine vindication and

acquittal is not a mere hidden thought and judgment in the mind of God.

It is a declaring and showing to be innocent, and that not by word but

by deed. That expectation seemed to be annihilated and made ludicrous

by His death. But the justifying' of which our text speaks takes place

in Christ's resurrection and ascension.

Manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit' (1 Timothy iii. 16).

Declared to be the Son of God with power, . . . by the resurrection

from the dead' (Rom. i. 4).

His death seems the entire abandonment of this holy and sinless man. It

seems to demonstrate His claims to be madness, His hope to be futile,

His promises to be wind. No wonder that the sorrowing apostles wailed,

We trusted that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel.' The

death of Christ, if it were but a martyr's death, and if we had to

believe that that frame had crumbled into dust, and that heart ceased

for ever to beat, would not only destroy the worth of all that He

spoke, but would be the saddest instance in all history of the

irreversible sway that death wields over all mankind, and would deepen

the darkness and sadden the gloom of the grave. True, there were not

wanting even in His dying hours mysterious indications, such as His

promise to the penitent thief. But these only make the disappointment

the deeper, if there was nothing more after His death.

So Christ's justification is in His resurrection and ascension.

III. The Messiah's confidence of ultimate triumph.

In the last words of the text the adversaries are massed together. The

confidence that the Lord God will help and justify leads to the

conviction that all opposition to Him is futile and leads to

destruction.

We see the historical fulfilment in the fate of the nation. His blood

be upon us and upon our children.'

We have a truth applying universally that antagonism to Him is

self-destructive.

Two forms of destruction are here named. There is a slow decay going on

in the opponents and their opposition, as a garment waxing old, and

there is a being fretted away by the imperceptible working of external

causes, as by gnawing moths.

Applied to persons. To opposing systems.

How many antagonists the Gospel has had, and one after another has been

antiquated, and their books are only known because fragments of them

are preserved in Christian writings. Paganism is gone from Europe, and

its idols are in our museums. Each generation has its own phase of

opposition, which lasts for a little while. The mists round the sun

melt, the clouds piled in the north, surging up to bury it beneath

their banks, are dissipated. The sea roars and smashes on the cliffs,

but it ebbs and calms. Some of us have seen more than one school of

thought which came to the assault of Christianity, with colours flying

and drums rattling, defeated utterly and forgotten, and so it will

always be. One may be sure that each enemy in turn will descend to the

oblivion that has already received so many, and can imagine these

beaten foes rising from their seats to welcome the newcomer with the

sad greeting: Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like

unto us?'

We are justified' in His justification.'

The real connection between us and Christ by faith, makes our

justification to be involved in His, so that it is no mere

accommodation but a profound perception of the real relation between

Christ and us, when Paul, in Romans viii. 34, triumphantly claims the

words of our text for Christ's disciples, and rings out their challenge

on behalf of all believers: It is God that justifieth, who is he that

condemneth?'

Do you trust in Christ? Then you too can dare to say: The Lord God will

help me; who is he that shall condemn me?'

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A CALL TO FAITH

Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his

servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in

the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.'--ISAIAH l. 10.

The persons addressed in this call to faith are those who fear the

Lord,' and obey the voice of His Servant.' In that collocation is

implied that these two things are necessarily connected, so that

obedience to Christ is the test of true religion, and the fear of the

Lord does not exist where the word of the Son is neglected or rejected.

But besides that most fruitful and instructive juxtaposition, other

important thoughts come into view here. The fact that the call to faith

is addressed to those who are regarded as already fearing God suggests

the need for renewed and constantly repeated acts of confidence, at

every stage of the Christian life, and opens up the whole subject of

the growth and progress of individual religion, as secured by the

continuous exercise of faith. The call is addressed to all at every

stage of advancement. Of course it is addressed also to those who are

disobedient and rebellious. But that wider aspect of the merciful

invitation does not come into view here.

But there is another clause in the description of the persons

addressed, Who walketh in darkness and hath no light.' This is, no

doubt, primarily a reference to the great sorrow that filled, like a

gloomy thundercloud, the horizon of Jewish prophets, small and

uninteresting as it seems to us, namely, the captivity of Israel and

their expulsion from their land. The faithful remnant are not to escape

their share in the national calamity. But while it lasts, they are to

wait patiently on the Lord, and not to cast away their confidence,

though all seems dark and dreary.

The exhortation thus regarded suggests the power and duty of faith even

in times of disaster and sorrow. But another meaning has often been

attached to these words, they have been lifted into another region, the

spiritual, and have been supposed to refer to a state of feeling not

unknown to devout hearts, in which the religious life is devoid of joy

and peace. That is a phase of Christian experience, which meets any one

who knows much of the workings of men's hearts, and of his own, when

faith is exercised with but little of the light of faith, and the fear

of the Lord is cherished with but scant joy in the Lord. Now if it be

remembered that such an application of the words is not their original

purpose, there can be no harm in using them so. Indeed we may say that,

as the words are perfectly general, they include a reference to all

darkness of life or soul, however produced, whether it come from the

night of sorrow falling on us from without, or from mists and gloom

rising like heavy vapours from our own hearts. So considered, the text

suggests the one remedy for all gloom and weakness in the spiritual

life.

Thus, then, we have three different sets of circumstances in which

faith is enforced as the source of true strength and our all-embracing

duty. In outward sorrow and trial, trust; in inward darkness and

sadness, trust; in every stage of Christian progress, trust. Or I.

Faith the light in the darkness of the world. II. Faith the light in

the darkness of the soul. III. Faith the light in every stage of

Christian progress.

I. Faith our light in the darkness of the world.

The mystery and standing problem of the Old Testament is the

coexistence of goodness and sorrow, and the mystery still remains, and

ever will remain, a fact. It is partially alleviated if we remember

that one main purpose of all our sorrows is to lead us to this

confidence.

1. The call to faith is the true voice of all our sorrows.

It seems easy to trust when all is bright, but really it is just as

hard, only we can more easily deceive ourselves, when physical

well-being makes us comfortable. We are less conscious of our own

emptiness, we mask our poverty from ourselves, we do not seem to need

God so much. But sorrow reveals our need to us. Other props are struck

away, and it is either collapse or Him. We learn the vanity, the

transiency, of all besides.

Sorrow reveals God, as the pillar of cloud glowed brighter when the

evening fell. Sorrow is meant to awaken the powers that are apt to

sleep in prosperity.

So the true voice of all our griefs is Come up hither.' They call us to

trust, as nightfall calls us to light up our lamps. The snow keeps the

hidden seeds warm; shepherds burn heather on the hillside that young

grass may spring.

2. The call to faith echoes from the voice of the Servant.

Jesus in His darkness rested on God, and in all His sorrows was yet

anointed with the oil of gladness. In every pang He has been before us.

The rack is sanctified because He has been stretched upon it.

3. The substance of the call.

It is to trust, not to anything more. No attempts to stifle tears are

required. There is no sin in sorrow. The emotions which we feel to God

in bright days are not appropriate at such times. There are seasons in

every life when all that we can say is, Truly this is a grief, and I

will bear it.'

What then is required? Assurance of God's loving will sending sorrow.

Assurance of God's strengthening presence in it, assurance of

deliverance from it. These, not more, are required; these are the

elements of the faith here called for.

Such faith may co-exist with the keenest sense of loss. The true

attitude in sorrow may be gathered from Christ's at the grave of

Lazarus, contrasted with the excessive mourning of the sisters, and the

feigned grief of the Jews.

There are times when the most that we can do is to trust even in the

great darkness, Though He slay me yet will I trust in Him.' Submissive

silence is sometimes the most eloquent confession of faith. I was dumb,

I opened not my mouth, because Thou didst it.'

4. The blessed results of such faith.

It is implied that we may find all that we need, and more, in God. Have

we to mourn friends? In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord

sitting on a throne.' Have we lost wealth? We have in Him a treasure

that moth or rust cannot touch. Are our hopes blasted? Happy is He

. . . whose hope is in the Lord his God.' Is our health broken? I shall

yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance.' The Lord is able

to give thee much more than these.'

How can we face the troubles of life without Him? God calls us when in

darkness, and by the darkness, to trust in His name and stay ourselves

on Him. Happy are we if we answer Though the fig-tree shall not

blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines . . . yet I will rejoice

in the Lord, and joy in the God of my salvation.'

II. Faith, our light in the darkness of the soul.

No doubt there may be such a thing as true fear of God in the soul

along with spiritual darkness, faith without the joy of faith. Now this

condition seems contradictory of the very nature of the Christian life.

For religion is union with God who is light, and if we walk in Him, we

are in the light. How then can such experience be?

We must dismiss the notion of God's desertion of the trusting soul. He

is always the same; He has never said to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me

in vain.' But while putting aside that false explanation, we can see

how such darkness may be. If our religious life was in more vigorous

exercise, more pure, perfect and continuous, there would be no

separation of faith and the joy of faith. But we have not such

unruffled, perfect, uninterrupted faith, and hence there may be, and

often is, faith without much joy of faith. I would not say that such

experience is always the fruit of sin. But certainly we are not to

blame Him or to think of Him as breaking His promises, or departing

from His nature. No principles, be they ever so firmly held, ever so

undoubtingly received, ever so passionately embraced, exert their whole

power equally at all moments in a life. There come times of languor

when they seem to be mere words, dead commonplaces, as unlike their

former selves as sapless winter boughs to their summer pride of leafy

beauty. The same variation in our realising grasp affects the truths of

the Gospel. Sometimes they seem but words, with all the life and power

sucked out of them, pale shadows of themselves, or like the dried bed

of a wady with blazing, white stones, where flashing water used to

leap, and all the flowerets withered, which once bent their meek little

heads to drink. No facts are always equally capable of exciting their

correspondent emotions. Those which most closely affect our personal

life, in which we find our deepest joys, are not always present in our

minds, and when they are, do not always touch the springs of our

feelings. No possessions are always equally precious to us. The rich

man is not always conscious with equal satisfaction of his wealth. If,

then, the way from the mind to the emotions is not always equally open,

there is a reason why there may be faith without light of joy. If the

thoughts are not always equally concentrated on the things which

produce joy, there is a reason why there may be the habit of fearing

God, though there be not the present vigorous exercise of faith, and

consequently but little light.

Another reason may lie in the disturbing and saddening influence of

earthly cares and sorrows. There are all weathers in a year. And the

highest hope and nearest possible approach to joy is sometimes Unto the

upright there ariseth light in the darkness.' Our lives are sometimes

like an Arctic winter in which for many days is no sun.

Another reason may be found in the very fact that we are apt to look

impatiently for peace and joy, and to be more exercised with these than

with that which produces them.

Another may be errors or mistakes about God and His Gospel.

Another may be absorption with our own sin instead of with Him. To all

these add temperament, education, habit, example, influence of body on

the mind, and of course also positive inconsistencies and a low tone of

Christian life.

It is clear then that, if these be the causes of this state, the one

cure for it is to exercise our faith more energetically.

Trust, do not look back. We are tempted to cast away our confidence and

to say: What profit shall I have if I pray unto Him? But it is on

looking onwards, not backwards, that safety lies.

Trust, do not think about your sins.

Trust, do not think so much about your joy.

It is in the occupation of heart and mind with Jesus that joy and peace

come. To make them our direct aim is the way not to attain them. Though

now there seems a long wintry interval between seed time and harvest,

yet in due season we shall reap if we faint not.'

In the fourth watch of the night Jesus came unto them.'

III. Faith our guiding light in every stage of Christian progress.

Those who already fear God' are in the text exhorted to trust.

In the most advanced Christian life there are temptations to abandon

our confidence. We never on earth come to such a point as that, without

effort, we are sure to continue in the way. True, habit is a wonderful

ally of goodness, and it is a great thing to have it on our side, but

all our lives long, there will be hindrances without and within which

need effort and self-repression. On earth there is no time when it is

safe for us to go unarmed. The force of gravitation acts however high

we climb. Not till heaven is reached will love' be its own security,'

and nature coincide with grace. And even in heaven faith abideth,' but

there it will be without effort.

1. The most advanced Christian life needs a perpetual renewal and

repetition of past acts of faith.

It cannot live on a past any more than the body can subsist on last

year's food. The past is like the deep portions of coral reefs, a mere

platform for the living present which shines on the surface of the sea,

and grows. We must gather manna daily.

The life is continued by the same means as that by which it was begun.

There is no new duty or method for the most advanced Christian; he has

to do just what he has been doing for half a century. We cannot

transcend the creatural position, we are ever dependent. To hoar hairs

will I carry you.' The initial point is prolonged into a continuous

line.

2. The most advanced and mature faith is capable of increase, in regard

to its knowledge of its object, and in intensity, constancy, power. At

first it may be a tremulous trust, afterwards it should become an

assured confidence. At first it may be but a dim recognition, as in a

glass darkly, of the great love which has redeemed us at a great price;

afterwards it should become the clear vision of the trusted Friend and

lifelong companion of our souls, who is all in all to us. At first it

may be an interrupted hold, afterwards it should become such a grasp as

the roots of a tree have on the soil. At first it may be a feeble power

ruling over our rebel selves, like some king beleaguered in his

capital, who has no sway beyond its walls, afterwards it should become

a peaceful sovereign who guides and sways all the powers of the soul

and outgoings of the life. At first it may be like a premature rose

putting forth pale petals on an almost leafless bough, afterwards the

whole tree should be blossomed over with fragrant flowers, the homes of

light and sweetness. The highest faith may be heightened, and the

spirits before the throne pray the prayer, Lord, increase our faith.'

For us all, then, the merciful voice of the servant of the Lord calls

to His light. Our faith is our light in darkness, only as a window is

the light of a house, or the eye, of the body, because it admits and

discerns that true light. He calls us each from the darkness. Do not

try to make fires for yourselves, ineffectual and transient, but look

to Him, and you shall not walk in darkness, even amid the gloom of

earth, but shall have light in your darkness, till the time come when,

in a clearer heaven and a lighter air, Thy sun shall no more go down,

neither shall thy moon withdraw itself, for the Lord shall be thine

everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.'

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DYING FIRES

Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that gird yourselves about with

firebrands: walk ye in the flame of your fire, and among the brands

that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie

down in sorrow.'--ISAIAH l. 11.

The scene brought before us in these words is that of a company of

belated travellers in some desert, lighting a little fire that glimmers

ineffectual in the darkness of the eerie waste. They huddle round its

dying embers for a little warmth and company, and they hope it will

scare wolf and jackal, but their fuel is all burned, and they have to

go to sleep without its solace and security. The prophet's imaginative

picture is painted from life, and is a sad reality in the cases of all

who seek to warm themselves at any fire that they kindle for

themselves, apart from God.

I. A sad, true picture of human life.

It does not cover, nor is presented by the prophet as covering, all the

facts of experience. Every man has his share of sunshine, but still it

is true of all who are not living in dependence on and communion with

God, that they are but travellers in the dark.

Scripture uses the image of darkness as symbolic of three sad facts of

our experience: ignorance, sin, sorrow. Are not all these the

characteristics of godless lives?

As for ignorance--a godless man has no key to the awful problems that

front him. He knows not God, who is to him a dread, a name, a mystery.

He knows not himself, the depths of his nature, its possibilities for

good or evil, whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. He has no solution

for the riddle of the universe. It is to him a chaos, and darkness is

upon the face of the deep.

As to sin, the darkness of ignorance is largely due to the darkness of

sin. In every heart comes sometimes the consciousness that it is thus

darkened by sin. The sense of sin is with all men more or less--much

perverted, often wrong in its judgments, feeble, easily silenced, but

for all that it is there--and it is great part of the cold obstruction

that shuts out the light. Sin weaves the pall that shrouds the world.

As for darkness of sorrow--we must beware that we do not exaggerate.

God makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and there is

gladness in every life, much that arises from fulfilled desires, from

accomplished purposes, from gratified affections. But when all this has

been freely admitted, still sadness crouches somewhere in all hearts,

and over every life the storm sometimes stoops.

We need nothing beyond our own experience and the slightest knowledge

of other hearts to know how shallow and one-sided a view of life that

is which sees only the joy and forgets the sorrow, which ignores the

night and thinks only of the day; which, looking out on nature, is

blind to the pain and agony, the horror and the death, which are as

real parts of it as brightness and beauty, love and life. Every little

valley that lies in lovely loneliness has its scenes of desolation, and

tempest has broken over the fairest scenes. Every river has drowned its

man. Over every inch of blue sky the thunder cloud has rolled. Every

summer has its winter, every day its night, every life its death. All

stars set, all moons wane. Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet

birds sang' come after every leafy June.

Sorrow is as deeply embedded in the necessity and constitution of

things as joy. God hath set one over against another, and hath made all

things double.'

II. The vain attempts at light.

There is bitter irony in the prophet's description of the poor

flickering spot of light in the black waste and of its swift dying out.

The travellers without a watch-fire are defenceless from midnight

prowlers. How full of solemn truth about godless lives the vivid

outline picture is!

Men try to free themselves from the miseries of ignorance, sin, and

sorrow.

Think of the insufficiency of all such attempts, the feeble flicker

which glimmers for an hour, and then fuel fails and it goes out. Then

the travellers can journey no further, but lie down in sorrow,' and

without a watchfire they become a prey to all the beasts of the field.

It is a little picture taken from the life.

It vividly paints how men will try to free themselves from the miseries

of their condition, how insufficient all their attempts are, how

transient the relief, and how bitter and black the end.

We may apply these thoughts to--

1. Men-made grounds of hope before God.

2. Men-made attempts to read the mysteries.

We do not say this of all human learning, but of that which, apart from

God's revelation, deals with the subjects of that revelation.

3. Men-made efforts at self-reformation.

4. Men-made attempts at alleviating sorrow.

Scripture abounds in other metaphors for the same solemn spiritual

facts as are set before us in this picture of the dying watchfire and

the sad men watching its decline. Godless lives draw from broken

cisterns out of which the water runs. They build with untempered

mortar. They lean on broken reeds that wound the hand pressed on them.

They spend money for that which is not bread. But all these metaphors

put together do not tell all the vanity, disappointments, and final

failure and ruin of such a life. That last glimpse given in the text of

the sorrowful sleeper stretched by the black ashes, with darkness round

and hopeless heaviness within, points to an issue too awful to be dwelt

on by a preacher, and too awful not to be gravely considered by each of

us for himself.

III. The light from God.

What would the dead fire and the ring of ashes on the sand matter when

morning dawned? Jesus is our Sun. He rises, and the spectres of the

night melt into thin air, and joy cometh in the morning.' He floods our

ignorance with knowledge of the Father whose name He declares, with

knowledge of ourselves, of the world, of our destiny and our duty, our

hopes and our home. He takes away the sin of the world. He gives the

oil of joy for mourning. For every human necessity He is enough. Follow

Him and your life's pilgrimage shall not be a midnight one, but

accomplished in sunshine. I am the light of the world; he that

followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of

life.'

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THE AWAKENING OF ZION

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the

ancient days, in the generations of old.'--ISAIAH li. 9.

Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion.'--ISAIAH lii. 1.

Both these verses are, I think, to be regarded as spoken by one voice,

that of the Servant of the Lord. His majestic figure, wrapped in a

light veil of obscurity, fills the eye in all these later prophecies of

Isaiah. It is sometimes clothed with divine power, sometimes girded

with the towel of human weakness, sometimes appearing like the

collective Israel, sometimes plainly a single person.

We have no difficulty in solving the riddle of the prophecy by the

light of history. Our faith knows One who unites these diverse

characteristics, being God and man, being the Saviour of the body,

which is part of Himself and instinct with His life. If we may suppose

that He speaks in both verses of the text, then, in the one, as priest

and intercessor, He lifts the prayers of earth to heaven in His own

holy hands--and in the other, as messenger and Word of God, He brings

the answer and command of heaven to earth on His own authoritative

lips--thus setting forth the deep mystery of His person and double

office as mediator between man and God. But even if we put aside that

thought, the correspondence and relation of the two passages remain the

same. In any case they are intentionally parallel in form and connected

in substance. The latter is the answer to the former. The cry of Zion

is responded to by the call of God. The awaking of the arm of the Lord

is followed by the awaking of the Church. He puts on strength in

clothing us with His might, which becomes ours.

The mere juxtaposition of these verses suggests the point of view from

which I wish to treat them on this occasion. I hope that the thoughts

to which they lead may help to further that quickened earnestness and

expectancy of blessing, without which Christian work is a toil and a

failure.

We have here a common principle underlying both the clauses of our

text, to which I must first briefly ask attention, namely--

I. The occurrence in the Church's history of successive periods of

energy and of languor.

It is freely admitted that such alternation is not the highest ideal of

growth, either in the individual or in the community. Our Lord's own

parables set forth a more excellent way--the way of uninterrupted

increase, whereof the type is the springing corn, which puts forth

first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear,'

and passes through all the stages from the tender green spikelets that

gleam over the fields in the spring-tide to the yellow abundance of

autumn, in one unbroken season of genial months. So would our growth be

best, healthiest, happiest. So might our growth be, if the mysterious

life in the seed met no checks. But, as a matter of fact, the Church

has not thus grown. Rather at the best, its emblem is to be looked for,

not in corn, but in the forest tree--the very rings in whose trunk tell

of recurring seasons when the sap has risen at the call of spring, and

sunk again before the frowns of winter. I have not to do now with the

causes of this. These will fall to be considered presently. Nor am I

saying that such a manner of growth is inevitable. I am only pointing

out a fact, capable of easy verification and familiar to us all. Our

years have had summer and winter. The evening and the morning have

completed all the days since the first.

We all know it only too well. In our own hearts we have known such

times, when some cold clinging mist wrapped us round and hid all the

heaven of God's love and the starry lights of His truth; when the

visible was the only real, and He seemed far away and shadowy; when

there was neither confidence in our belief, nor heat in our love, nor

enthusiasm in our service; when the shackles of conventionalism bound

our souls, and the fetters of the frost imprisoned all their springs.

And we have seen a like palsy smite whole regions and ages of the

Church of God, so that even the sensation of impotence was dead like

all the rest, and the very tradition of spiritual power had faded away.

I need not point to the signal historical examples of such times in the

past. Remember England a hundred years ago--but what need to travel so

far? May I venture to draw my example from nearer home, and ask, have

we not been living in such an epoch? I beseech you, think whether the

power which the Gospel preached by us wields on ourselves, on our

churches, on the world, is what Christ meant it and fitted to exercise.

Why, if we hold our own in respect to the material growth of our

population, it is as much as we do. Where is the joyful buoyancy and

expansive power with which the Gospel burst into the world? It looks

like some stream that leaps from the hills, and at first hurries from

cliff to cliff full of light and music, but flows slower and more

sluggish as it advances, and at last almost stagnates in its flat

marshes. Here we are with all our machinery, our culture, money,

organisations--and the net result of it all at the year's end is but a

poor handful of ears. Ye sow much and bring home little.' Well may we

take up the wail of the old Psalm, We see not our signs. There is no

more any prophet; neither is there any among us that knoweth how

long--arise, O Lord, plead Thine own cause.'

If, then, there are such recurring seasons of languor, they must either

go on deepening till sleep becomes death, or they must be broken by a

new outburst of vigorous life. It would be better if we did not need

the latter. The uninterrupted growth would be best; but if that has not

been attained, then the ending of winter by spring, and the suppling of

the dry branches, and the resumption of the arrested growth, is the

next best, and the only alternative to rotting away.

And it is by such times that the Kingdom of Christ always has grown.

Its history has been one of successive impulses gradually exhausted, as

by friction and gravity, and mercifully repeated just at the moment

when it was ceasing to advance and had begun to slide backwards. And in

such a manner of progress, the Church's history has been in full

analogy with that of all other forms of human association and activity.

It is not in religion alone that there are revivals,' to use the word

of which some people have such a dread. You see analogous phenomena in

the field of literature, arts, social and political life. In them all,

there come times of awakened interest in long-neglected principles.

Truths which for many years had been left to burn unheeded, save by a

faithful few watchers of the beacon, flame up all at once as the

guiding pillars of a nation's march, and a whole people strike their

tents and follow where they lead. A mysterious quickening thrills

through society. A contagion of enthusiasm spreads like fire, fusing

all hearts in one. The air is electric with change. Some great advance

is secured at a stride; and before and after that supreme effort are

years of comparative quiescence; those before being times of

preparation, those after being times of fruition and exhaustion--but

slow and languid compared with the joyous energy of that moment. One

day may be as a thousand years in the history of a people, and a nation

may be born in a day.

So also is the history of the Church. And thank God it is so, for if it

had not been for the dawning of these times of refreshing, the steady

operation of the Church's worldliness would have killed it long ago.

Surely, dear brethren, we ought to desire such a merciful interruption

of the sad continuity of our languor and decay. The surest sign of its

coming would be a widespread desire and expectation of its coming,

joined with a penitent consciousness of our heavy and sinful slumber.

For we believe in a God who never sends mouths but He sends meat to

fill them, and in whose merciful providence every desire is a prophecy

of its own fruition. This attitude of quickened anticipation, diffusing

itself silently through many hearts, is like the light air that springs

up before sunrise, or like the solemn hush that holds all nature

listening before the voice of the Lord in the thunder.

And another sign of its approach is the extremity of the need. If

winter come, can spring be far behind?' For He who is always with Zion

strikes in with His help when the want is at its sorest. His right

early' is often the latest moment before destruction. And though we are

all apt to exaggerate the urgency of the hour and the severity of our

conflict, it certainly does seem that, whether we regard the languor of

the Church or the strength of our adversaries, succour delayed a little

longer would be succour too late. The tumult of those that rise up

against Thee increaseth continually. It is time for Thee to work.'

The juxtaposition of these passages suggests for us--

II. The twofold explanation of these variations.

That bold metaphor of God's sleeping and waking is often found in

Scripture, and generally expresses the contrast between the long years

of patient forbearance, during which evil things and evil men go on

their rebellious road unchecked but by Love, and the dread moment when

some throne of iniquity, some Babylon cemented by blood, is smitten to

the dust. Such is the original application of the expression here. But

the contrast may fairly be widened beyond that specific form of it, and

taken to express any apparent variations in the forth-putting of His

power. The prophet carefully avoids seeming to suggest that there are

changes in God Himself. It is not He but His arm, that is to say. His

active energy, that is invoked to awake. The captive Church prays that

the dormant might which could so easily shiver her prison-house would

flame forth into action.

We may, then, see here implied the cause of these alternations, of

which we have been speaking, on its divine side, and then, in the

corresponding verse addressed to the Church, the cause on the human

side.

As to the former, it is true that God's arm sometimes slumbers, and is

not clothed with power. There are, as a fact, apparent variations in

the energy with which He works in the Church and in the world. And they

are real variations, not merely apparent. But we have to distinguish

between the power, and what Paul calls the might of the power.' The one

is final, constant, unchangeable. It does not necessarily follow that

the other is. The rate of operation, so to speak, and the amount of

energy actually brought into play may vary, though the force remains

the same.

It is clear from experience that there are these variations; and the

only question with which we are concerned is, are they mere arbitrary

jets and spurts of a divine power, sometimes gushing out in full flood,

sometimes trickling in painful drops, at the unknown will of the unseen

hand which controls the flow? Is the law of the Spirit of life' at all

revealed to us; or are the reasons occult, if there be any reasons at

all other than a mere will that it shall be so? Surely, whilst we never

can know all the depths of His counsels and all the solemn concourse of

reasons which, to speak in man's language, determine the energy of His

manifested power, He has left us in no doubt that this is the

weightiest part of the law which it follows--the might with which God

works on the world through His Church varies according to the Church's

receptiveness and faithfulness.

Our second text tells us that if God's arm seems to slumber and really

does so, it is because Zion sleeps. In itself that immortal energy

knows no variableness. He fainteth not, neither is weary.' The Lord's

arm is not shortened that He cannot save.' He that keepeth Israel shall

neither slumber nor sleep.' But He works through us; and we have the

solemn and awful power of checking the might which would flow through

us; of restraining and limiting the Holy One of Israel. It avails

nothing that the ocean stretches shoreless to the horizon; a jar can

hold only a jarful. The receiver's capacity determines the amount

received, and the receiver's desire determines his capacity. The law

has ever been, according to your faith be it unto you.' God gives as

much as we will, as much as we can hold, as much as we use, and far

more than we deserve. As long as we will bring our vessels the golden

oil will flow, and after the last is filled, there yet remains more

that we might have had, if we could have held it, and might have held

if we would. Ye are not straitened in Me, ye are straitened in

yourselves.'

So, dear brethren, if we have to lament times of torpor and small

success, let us be honest with ourselves, and recognise that all the

blame lies with us. If God's arm seems to slumber, it is because we are

asleep. His power is invariable, and the Gospel which is committed to

our trust has lost none of its ancient power, whatsoever men may say.

If there be variations, they cannot be traced to the divine element in

the Church, which in itself is constant, but altogether to the human,

which shifts and fluctuates, as we only too sadly know. The light in

the beacon-tower is steady, and the same; but the beam it throws across

the waters sometimes fades to a speck, and sometimes flames out clear

and far across the heaving waves, according to the position of the

glasses and shades around it. The sun pours out heat as profusely and

as long at midwinter as on midsummer-day, and all the difference

between the frost and darkness and glowing brightness and flowering

life, is simply owing to the earth's place in its orbit and the angle

at which the unalterable rays fall upon it. The changes are in the

terrestrial sphere; the heavenly is fixed for ever the same.

May I not venture to point an earnest and solemn appeal with these

truths? Has there not been poured over us the spirit of slumber? Does

it not seem as if an opium sky had been raining soporifics on our

heads? We have had but little experience of the might of God amongst us

of late years, and we need not wonder at it. There is no occasion to

look far for the reason. We have only to regard the low ebb to which

religious life has been reduced amongst us to have it all and more than

all accounted for. I fully admit that there has been plenty of

activity, perhaps more than the amount of real life warrants, not a

little liberality, and many virtues. But how languid and torpid the

true Christian life has been! how little enthusiasm! how little depth

of communion with God! how little unworldly elevation of soul! how

little glow of love! An improvement in social position and

circumstances, a freer blending with the national life, a full share of

civic and political honours, a higher culture in our pulpits, fine

chapels, and applauding congregations--are but poor substitutes for

what many of us have lost in racing after them. We have the departed

prophets' mantle, the outward resemblance to the fathers who have gone,

but their fiery zeal has passed to heaven with them; and softer, weaker

men, we stand timidly on the river's brink, invoking the Lord God of

Elijah, and too often the flood that obeyed them has no ear for our

feebler voice.

I speak to many who are in some sort representatives of the churches

throughout the land, and they can tell whether my words are on the

whole true or overstrained. We who labour in our great cities, what say

we? If one of the number may speak for the rest, we have to acknowledge

that commercial prosperity and business cares, the eagerness after

pleasure and the exigencies of political strife, diffused doubt and

widespread artistic and literary culture, are eating the very life out

of thousands in our churches, and lowering their fervour till, like

molten iron cooling in the air, what was once all glowing with ruddy

heat is crusted over with foul black scoriae ever encroaching on the

tiny central warmth. You from rural churches, what say you? Have you

not to speak of deepening torpor settling down on quiet corners, of the

passing away of grey heads which leave no successors, of growing

difficulties and lessened power to meet them, that make you sometimes

all but despair?

I am not flinging indiscriminate censures. I know that there are lights

as well as shades in the picture. I am not flinging censures at all.

But I am giving voice to the confessions of many hearts, that our

consciousness of our blame may be deepened, and we may hasten back to

that dear Lord whom we have left to serve alone, as His first disciples

left Him once to agonise alone under the gnarled olives in Gethsemane,

while they lay sleeping in the moonlight. Listen to His gentle rebuke,

full of pain and surprised love, What, could ye not watch with Me one

hour?' Listen to His warning call, loving as the kiss with which a

mother wakes her child, Arise, let us be going'--and let us shake the

spirit of slumber from our limbs, and serve Him as those unsleeping

spirits do, who rest not day nor night from vision and work and praise.

III. The beginning of all awaking is the Church's earnest cry to God.

It is with us as with infants, the first sign of whose awaking is a

cry. The mother's quick ear hears it through all the household noises,

and the poor little troubled life that woke to a scared consciousness

of loneliness and darkness, is taken up into tender arms, and comforted

and calmed. So, when we dimly perceive how torpid we have been, and

start to find that we have lost our Father's hand, the first instinct

of that waking, which must needs be partly painful, is to call to Him,

whose ear hears our feeble cry amid the sound of praise like the voice

of many waters, that billows round His throne, and whose folding arms

keep us as one whom his mother comforteth.' The beginning of all true

awaking must needs be prayer.

For every such stirring of quickened religious life must needs have in

it bitter penitence and pain at the discovery flashed upon us of the

wretched deadness of our past--and, as we gaze like some wakened

sleepwalker into the abyss where another step might have smashed us to

atoms, a shuddering terror seizes us that must cry, Hold Thou me up,

and I shall be safe.' And every such stirring of quickened life will

have in it, too, desire for more of His grace, and confidence in His

sure bestowal of it, which cannot but breathe itself in prayer.

Nor is Zion's cry to God only the beginning and sign of all true

awaking: it is also the condition and indispensable precursor of all

perfecting of recovery from spiritual languor.

I have already pointed out the relation between the waking of God and

the waking of His Church, from which that necessarily follows. God's

power flows into our weakness in the measure and on condition of our

desires. We are sometimes told that we err in praying for the

outpouring of His Holy Spirit, because ever since Pentecost His Church

has had the gift. The objection alleges an unquestioned fact, but the

conclusion drawn from it rests on an altogether false conception of the

manner of that abiding gift. The Spirit of God, and the power which

comes from Him, are not given as a purse of money might be put into a

man's hand once and for all, but they are given in a continuous

impartation and communication and are received and retained moment by

moment, according to the energy of our desires and the faithfulness of

our use. As well might we say, Why should I ask for natural life, I

received it half a century ago? Yes, and at every moment of that

half-century I have continued to live, not because of a past gift, but

because at each moment God is breathing into my nostrils the breath of

life. So is it with the life which comes from His Spirit. It is

maintained by constant efflux from the fountain of Life, by constant

impartation of His quickening breath. And as He must continually

impart, so must we continually receive, else we perish. Therefore,

brethren, the first step towards awaking, and the condition of all true

revival in our own souls and in our churches, is this earnest cry,

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord.

Thank God for the outpouring of a long unwonted spirit of prayer in

many places. It is like the melting of the snows in the high Alps, at

once the sign of spring and the cause of filling the stony river beds

with flashing waters, that bring verdure and growth wherever they come.

The winter has been long and hard. We have all to confess that we have

been restraining prayer before God. Our work has been done with but

little sense of our need of His blessing, with but little ardour of

desire for His power. We have prayed lazily, scarcely believing that

answers would come; we have not watched for the reply, but have been

like some heartless marksman who draws his bow and does not care to

look whether his arrow strikes the target. These mechanical words,

these conventional petitions, these syllables winged by no real desire,

inspired by no faith, these expressions of devotion, far too wide for

their real contents, which rattle in them like a dried kernel in a nut,

are these prayers? Is there any wonder that they have been dispersed in

empty air, and that we have been put to shame before our enemies?

Brethren in the ministry, do we need to be surprised at our fruitless

work, when we think of our prayerless studies and of our faithless

prayers? Let us remember that solemn word, The pastors have become

brutish, and have not sought the Lord, therefore they shall not

prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered.' And let us all,

brethren, betake ourselves, with penitence and lowly consciousness of

our sore need, to prayer, earnest and importunate, believing and

persistent, like this heaven-piercing cry which captive Israel sent up

from her weary bondage.

Look at the passionate earnestness of it--expressed in the short, sharp

cry, thrice repeated, as from one in mortal need; and see to it that

our drowsy prayers be like it. Look at the grand confidence with which

it founds itself on the past, recounting the mighty deeds of ancient

days, and looking back, not for despair but for joyful confidence, to

the generations of old; and let our faint-hearted faith be quickened by

the example, to expect great things of God. The age of miracles is not

gone. The mightiest manifestations of God's power in the spread of the

Gospel in the past remain as patterns for His future. We have not to

look back as from low-lying plains to the blue peaks on the horizon,

across which the Church's path once lay, and sigh over the changed

conditions of the journey. The highest watermark that the river in

flood has ever reached will be reached and overpassed again, though

to-day the waters may seem to have hopelessly subsided. Greater

triumphs and deliverances shall crown the future than have signalised

the past. Let our faithful prayer base itself on the prophecies of

history and on the unchangeableness of God.

Think, brethren, of the prayers of Christ. Even He, whose spirit needed

not to be purged from stains or calmed from excitement, who was ever in

His Father's house whilst He was about His Father's business, blending

in one, action and contemplation, had need to pray. The moments of His

life thus marked are very significant. When He began His ministry, the

close of the first day of toil and wonders saw Him, far from gratitude

and from want, in a desert place in prayer. When He would send forth

His apostles, that great step in advance, in which lay the germ of so

much, was preceded by solitary prayer. When the fickle crowd desired to

make Him the centre of political revolution, He passed from their hands

and beat back that earliest attempt to secularise His work, by prayer.

When the seventy brought the first tidings of mighty works done in His

name, He showed us how to repel the dangers of success, in that He

thanked the Lord of heaven and earth who had revealed these things to

babes. When He stood by the grave of Lazarus, the voice that waked the

dead was preceded by the voice of prayer, as it ever must be. When He

had said all that He could say to His disciples, He crowned all with

His wonderful prayer for Himself, for them, and for us all. When the

horror of great darkness fell upon His soul, the growing agony is

marked by His more fervent prayer, so wondrously compact of shrinking

fear and filial submission. When the cross was hid in the darkness of

eclipse, the only words from the gloom were words of prayer. When,

Godlike, He dismissed His spirit, manlike He commended it to His

Father, and sent the prayer from His dying lips before Him to herald

His coming into the unseen world. One instance remains, even more to

our present purpose than all these--It came to pass, that Jesus also

being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost

descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon Him.' Mighty mystery! In

Him, too, the Son's desire is connected with the Father's gift, and the

unmeasured possession of the Spirit was an answer to His prayer.

Then, brethren, let us lift our voices and our hearts. That which

ascends as prayer descends as blessing, like the vapour that is drawn

up by the kiss of the sun to fall in freshening rain. Call upon Me, and

I will answer thee, and show thee great and hidden things which thou

knowest not.'

IV. The answering call from God to Zion.

Our truest prayers are but the echo of God's promises. God's best

answers are the echo of our prayers. As in two mirrors set opposite to

each other, the same image is repeated over and over again, the

reflection of a reflection, so here, within the prayer, gleams an

earlier promise, within the answer is mirrored the prayer.

And in that reverberation, and giving back to us our petition

transformed into a command, we are not to see a dismissal of it as if

we had misapprehended our true want. It is not tantamount to, Do not

ask me to put on my strength, but array yourselves in your own. The

very opposite interpretation is the true one. The prayer of Zion is

heard and answered. God awakes, and clothes Himself with might. Then,

as some warrior king, himself roused from sleep and girded with

flashing steel, bids the clarion sound through the grey twilight to

summon the prostrate ranks that lie round his tent, so the sign of

God's awaking and the first act of His conquering might is this trumpet

call--The night is far spent, the day is at hand, let us put off the

works of darkness,'--the night gear that was fit for slumber--and put

on the armour of light,' the mail of purity that gleams and glitters

even in the dim dawn. God's awaking is our awaking. He puts on strength

by making us strong; for His arm works through us, clothing itself, as

it were, with our arm of flesh, and perfecting itself even in our

weakness.

Nor is it to be forgotten that this, like all God's commands, carries

in its heart a promise. That earliest word of God's is the type of all

His latter behests: Let there be light,' and the mighty syllables were

creative and self-fulfilling. So ever, with Him, to enjoin and to

bestow are one and the same, and His command is His conveyance of

power. He rouses us by His summons, He clothes us with power in the

very act of bidding us put it on. So He answers the Church's cry by

stimulating us to quickened zeal, and making us more conscious of, and

confident in, the strength which, in answer to our cry, He pours into

our limbs.

But the main point which I would insist on in what remains of this

sermon, is the practical discipline which this divine summons requires

from us.

And first, let us remember that the chief means of quickened life and

strength is deepened communion with Christ.

As we have been saying, our strength is ours by continual derivation

from Him. It has no independent existence, any more than a sunbeam

could have, severed from the sun. It is ours only in the sense that it

flows through us, as a river through the land which it enriches. It is

His whilst it is ours, it is ours when we know it to be His. Then,

clearly, the first thing to do must be to keep the channels free by

which it flows into our souls, and to maintain the connection with the

great Fountainhead unimpaired. Put a dam across the stream, and the

effect will be like the drying up of Jordan before Israel: the waters

that were above rose up upon an heap, and the waters that were beneath

failed and were cut off,' and the foul oozy bed was disclosed to the

light of day. It is only by constant contact with Christ that we have

any strength to put on.

That communion with Him is no mere idle or passive attitude, but the

active employment of our whole nature with His truth, and with Him whom

the truth reveals. The understanding must be brought into contact with

the principles of His word, the heart must touch and beat against His

heart, the will meekly lay its hand in His, the conscience draw at once

its anodyne and its stimulus from His sacrifice, the passions know His

finger on the reins, and follow, led in the silken leash of love. Then,

if I may so say, Elisha's miracle will be repeated in nobler form, and

from Himself, the Life thus touching all our being, life will flow into

our deadness. He put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his

eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and he stretched himself upon the

child, and the flesh of the child waxed warm.' So, dear brethren, all

our practical duty is summed up in that one word, the measure of our

obedience to which is the measure of all our strength--Abide in Me, and

I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in

the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.'

Again, this summons calls us to the faithful use of the power which, on

condition of that communion, we have.

There is no doubt a temptation, in all times like the present, to look

for some new and extraordinary forms of blessing, and to substitute

such expectation for present work with our present strength. There is

nothing new to look for. There is no need to wait for anything more

than we possess. Remember the homely old proverb, You never know what

you can do till you try,' and though we are conscious of much

unfitness, and would sometimes gladly wait till our limbs are stronger,

let us brace ourselves for the work, assured that in it strength will

be given to us that equals our desire. There is a wonderful power in

honest work to develop latent energies and reveal a man to himself. I

suppose, in most cases, no one is half so much surprised at a great

man's greatest deeds as he is himself. They say that there is dormant

electric energy enough in a few raindrops to make a thunderstorm, and

there is dormant spiritual force enough in the weakest of us to flash

into beneficent light, and peal notes of awaking into many a deaf ear.

The effort to serve your Lord will reveal to you strength that you know

not. And it will increase the strength which it brings into play, as

the used muscles grow like whipcord, and the practised fingers become

deft at their task, and every faculty employed is increased, and every

gift wrapped in a napkin melts like ice folded in a cloth, according to

that solemn law, To him that hath shall be given, and from him that

hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.'

Then be sure that to its last particle you are using the strength you

have, ere you complain of not having enough for your tasks. Take heed

of the vagrant expectations that wait for they know not what, and the

apparent prayers that are really substitutes for possible service. Why

liest thou on thy face? Speak unto the children of Israel that they go

forward.'

The Church's resources are sufficient for the Church's work, if the

resources are used. We are tempted to doubt it, by reason of our

experience of failure and our consciousness of weakness. We are more

than ever tempted to doubt it to-day, when so many wise men are telling

us that our Christ is a phantom, our God a stream of tendency, our

Gospel a decaying error, our hope for the world a dream, and our work

in the world done. We stand before our Master with doubtful hearts,

and, as we look along the ranks sitting there on the green grass, and

then at the poor provisions which make all our store, we are sometimes

tempted almost to think that He errs when He says with that strange

calmness of His, They need not depart, give ye them to eat.' But go out

among the crowds and give confidently what you have, and you will find

that you have enough and to spare. If ever our stores seem inadequate,

it is because they are reckoned up by sense, which takes cognizance of

the visible, instead of by faith which beholds the real. Certainly five

loaves and two small fishes are not enough, but are not five loaves and

two small fishes and a miracle-working hand behind them, enough? It is

poor calculation that leaves out Christ from the estimate of our

forces. The weakest man and Jesus to back him are more than all

antagonism, more than sufficient for all duty. Be not seduced into

doubt of your power, or of your success, by others' sneers, or by your

own faint-heartedness. The confidence of ability is ability. Screw your

courage to the sticking place,' and you will not fail--and see to it

that you use the resources you have, as good stewards of the manifold

grace of God. Put on thy strength, O Zion.'

So, dear brethren, to gather all up in a sentence, let us confidently

look for times of blessing, penitently acknowledge that our own

faithlessness has hindered the arm of the Lord, earnestly beseech Him

to come in His rejoicing strength, and, drawing ever fresh power from

constant communion with our dear Lord, use it to its last drop for Him.

Then, like the mortal leader of Israel, as he pondered doubtingly with

sunken eyes on the hard task before his untrained host, we shall look

up and be aware of the presence of the sworded angel, the immortal

Captain of the host of the Lord, standing ready to save, putting on

righteousness as a breastplate, an helmet of salvation on His head, and

clad with zeal as a cloak.' From His lips, which give what they

command, comes the call, Take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye

may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to

stand.' Hearkening to His voice, the city of the strong ones shall be

made an heap before our wondering ranks, and the land shall lie open to

our conquering march.

Wheresoever we lift up the cry, Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of

the Lord,' there follows, swift as the thunderclap on the lightning

flash, the rousing summons, Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion;

put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem!' Wheresoever it is obeyed

there will follow in due time the joyful chorus, as in this context,

Sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem; the Lord hath made bare

His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the

earth have seen the salvation of our God.'

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A PARADOX OF SELLING AND BUYING

Ye have sold yourselves for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without

money.'--ISAIAH lii. 3.

THE first reference of these words is of course to the Captivity. They

come in the midst of a grand prophecy of freedom, all full of leaping

gladness and buoyant hope. The Seer speaks to the captives; they had

sold themselves for nought.' What had they gained by their departure

from God?--bondage. What had they won in exchange for their freedom?--

only the hard service of Babylon. As Deuteronomy puts it: Because thou

servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness. . . by reason of the

abundance of all things, therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies. . .

in want of all things.' A wise exchange! a good market they had brought

their goods to! In striking ironical parallel the prophet goes on to

say that so should they be redeemed. They had got nothing by bondage,

they should give nothing for liberty. This text has its highest

application in regard to our captivity and our redemption.

I. The reality of the captivity.

The true idea of bondage is that of coercion of will and conscience,

the dominance and tyranny of what has no right to rule. So men are

really in bondage when they think themselves most free. The only real

slavery is that in which we are tied and bound by our own passions and

lusts. He that committeth sin is the slave of sin.' He thinks himself

master of himself and his actions, and boasts that he has broken away

from the restraints of obedience, but really he has only exchanged

masters. What a Master to reject--and what a master to prefer!

II. The voluntariness of the captivity.

Ye have sold yourselves,' and become authors of your own bondage. No

sin is forced upon any man, and no one is to blame for it but himself.

The many excuses which people make to themselves are hollow. Now-a-days

we hear a great deal of heredity, how a man is what his ancestors have

made him, and of organisation, how a man is what his body makes him,

and of environment, how a man is what his surroundings make him. There

is much truth in all that, and men's guilt is much diminished by

circumstances, training, and temperament. The amount of responsibility

is not for us to settle, in regard to others, or even in regard to

ourselves. But all that does not touch the fact that we ourselves have

sold ourselves. No false brethren have sold us as they did Joseph.

The strong tendency of human nature is always to throw the blame on

some one else; God or the devil, the flesh or the world, it does not

matter which. But it remains true that every man sinning is drawn away

of his own lust and enticed.'

After all, conscience witnesses to the truth, and by that mysterious

sense of guilt and gnawing of remorse which is quite different from the

sense of mistake, tears to tatters the sophistries. Nothing is more

truly my own than my sin.

III. The profitlessness of the captivity.

For nought'; that is a picturesque way of putting the truth that all

sinful life fails to satisfy a man. The meaning of one of the Hebrew

words for sin is missing the mark.' It is a blunder as well as a crime.

It is trying to draw water from broken cisterns. It is as when a hungry

man dreameth and behold he eateth, but he awaketh and his soul is

empty.' Sin buys men with fairy money, which looks like gold, but in

the morning is found to be but a handful of yellow and faded leaves.

Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?' It cannot but

be so, for only God can satisfy a man, and only in doing His will are

we sure of sowing seed which will yield us bread enough and to spare,

and nothing but bread. In all other harvests, tares mingle and they

yield poisoned flour. We never get what we aim at when we do wrong, for

what we aim at is not the mere physical or other satisfaction which the

temptation offers us, but rest of soul--and that we do not get. And we

are sure to get something that we did not aim at or look for--a wounded

conscience, a worsened nature, often hurts to health or reputation, and

other consequent ills, that were carefully kept out of sight, while we

were being seduced by the siren voice. The old story of the traitress,

who bargained to let the enemies into the city, if they would give her

what they wore on their left arms,' meaning bracelets, and was crushed

to death under their shields heaped on her, is repeated in the

experience of every man who listens to the juggling fiends, who keep

the word of promise to the ear, but break it to the hope.' The truth of

this is attested by a cloud of witnesses. Conscience and experience

answer the question, What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye

are now ashamed?' Wasted lives answer; tyrannous evil habits answer;

diseased bodies, blighted reputations, bitter memories answer.

IV. The unbought freedom.

Ye shall be redeemed without money.' You gained nothing by your

bondage; you need give nothing for your emancipation. The original

reference is, of course, to the great act of divine power which set

these literal captives free, not for price nor reward. As in the Exodus

from Egypt, so in that from Babylon, no ransom was paid, but a nation

of bondsmen was set at liberty without war or compensation. That was a

strange thing in history. The paradox of buying back without buying is

a symbol of the Christian redemption.

(1) A price has been paid.

Ye were redeemed not with corruptible things as silver and gold, but

with the precious blood of Christ.' The New Testament idea of

redemption, no doubt, has its roots in the Old Testament provisions for

the Goel or kinsman redeemer, who was to procure the freedom of a

kinsman. But whatever figurative elements may enter into it, its core

is the ethical truth that Christ's death is the means by which the

bonds of sin are broken. There is much in the many-sided applications

and powers of that Death which we do not know, but this is clear, that

by it the power of sin is destroyed and the guilt of sin taken away.

(2) That price has been paid for all.

We have therefore nothing to pay. A slave cannot redeem himself, for

all that he has is his master's already. So, no efforts of ours can set

ourselves free from the cords of our sins.' Men try to bring something

of their own. I do my best and God will have mercy.' We will bring our

own penitence, efforts, good works, or rely on Church ordinances, or

anything rather than sue in forma pauperis. How hard it is to get men

to see that It is finished,' and to come and rest only on the mere

mercy of God.

How do we ally ourselves with that completed work? By simple faith, of

which an essential is the recognition that we have nothing and can do

nothing.

Suppose an Israelite in Babylon who did not choose to avail himself of

the offered freedom; he must die in bondage. So must we if we refuse to

have eternal life as the gift of God. The prophet's paradoxical

invitation, He that hath no money, come ye, buy. . . without money,' is

easily solved. The price is to give up ourselves and forsake all

self-willed striving after self-purchased freedom which is but subtler

bondage. If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.' If not,

then are ye slaves indeed, having sold yourselves for nought,' and

declined to be redeemed without money.'

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CLEAN CARRIERS

Be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord.'--ISAIAH lii. 11.

The context points to a great deliverance. It is a good example of the

prophetical habit of casting prophecies of the future into the mould of

the past. The features of the Exodus are repeated, but some of them are

set aside. This deliverance, whatever it be, is to be after the pattern

of that old story, but with very significant differences. Then, the

departing Israelites had spoiled the Egyptians and come out, laden with

silver and gold which had been poured into their hands; now there is to

be no bringing out of anything which was tainted with the foulness of

the land of captivity. Then the priests had borne the sacred vessels

for sacrifice, now they are to exercise the same holy function, and for

its discharge purity is demanded. Then, they had gone out in haste;

now, there is to be no precipitate flight, but calmly, as those who are

guided by God for their leader, and shielded from all pursuit by God as

their rearward, the men of this new Exodus are to take their march from

the new Egypt.

No doubt the nearest fulfilment is to be found in the Return from

Babylon, and the narrative in Ezra may be taken as a remarkable

parallel to the prophecy here. But the restriction to Babylon must seem

impossible to any reader who interprets aright the significance of the

context, and observes that our text follows the grand words of verse

10, and precedes the Messianic prophecy of verse 13 and of ch. liii. To

such a reader the principle will not be doubtful according to which

Egypt and Babylon are transparencies through which mightier forms

shine, and a more wonderful and world-wide making bare of the arm of

the Lord is seen. Christ's great redemption is the highest

interpretation of these words; and the trumpet-call of our text is

addressed to all who have become partakers of it.

So Paul quotes the text in 2 Cor. vi. 17, blending with it other words

which are gathered from more than one passage of Scripture. We may then

take the whole as giving the laws of the new Exodus, and also as

shadowing certain great peculiarities connected with it, by which it

surpasses all the former deliverances.

I. The Pilgrims of this new Exodus.

A true Christian is a pilgrim, not only because he, like all men, is

passing through a life which is transient, but because he is

consciously detached from the Visible and Present, as a consequence of

his conscious attachment to the Unseen and Eternal. What is said in

Hebrews of Abraham is true of all inheritors of his faith: dwelling in

tabernacles, for he looked for the city.'

II. The priests.

Priests and Levites bore the sacred vessels. All Christians are

priests. The only true priesthood is Christ's, ours is derived from

Him. In that universal priesthood of believers are included the

privileges and obligations of a. Access to God--Communion.

b. Offering spiritual sacrifices. Service and self-surrender.

c. Mediation with men.

Proclamation. Intercession. Thus follows d. Bearing the holy vessels. A

sacred deposit is entrusted to them--the honour and name of God; the

treasure of the Gospel.

III. The separation that becomes pilgrims.

Come out and be ye separate.' The very meaning of our Christian

profession is separation. There is ludicrous inconsistency in saying

that we are Christians and not being pilgrims. Of course, the

separation is not to be worked out by mere external asceticism or

withdrawal from the world. That has been so thoroughly preached and

practised of late years that we much need the other side to be put.

There should be some plain difference between the life of Christians

and that of men whose portion is in this life. They should differ in

the aspect under which all outward things are regarded.

To a Christian they are to be means to an end, and ever to be felt to

be evanescent. They should differ in the motive for action, which

should, for a Christian, ever be the love of God. They should differ in

that a Christian abstains from much which non-Christians feel free to

do, and often has to say, So did not I, because of the fear of the

Lord.' He who marches light marches quickly and marches far; to bring

the treasures of Egypt along with us, is apt to retard our steps.

IV. The purity that becomes priests.

The Levites would cleanse themselves before taking up the holy vessels.

And for us, clean hands and a pure heart are essential. There is no

communion with God without these; a small speck of dust in the eye

blinds us. There is no sacrificial service without them. No efficient

work among men can be done without them. One main cause of the weakness

of our Christian testimony is the imperfection of character in the

witnesses, which is more powerful than all talk and often neutralises

much effort. Keen eyes are watching us.

The consciousness of our own impurity should send us to Jesus, with the

prayer and the confidence, Cleanse me and I shall be clean.' The blood

of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.' He hath loosed us from our

sins and made us kings and priests to God.'

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MARCHING ORDERS

Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go

ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the

Lord. 12. For ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight: for the

Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your

reward.'--ISAIAH lii. 11, 12.

These ringing notes are parts of a highly poetic picture of that great

deliverance which inspired this prophet's most exalted strains. It is

described with constant allusion to the first Exodus, but also with

significant differences. Now no doubt the actual historical return of

the Jews from the Babylonish captivity is the object that fills the

foreground of this vision, but it by no means exhausts its

significance. The restriction of the prophecy to that more immediate

fulfilment may well seem impossible when we note that my text follows

the grand promise that all the ends of the earth shall see the

salvation of our God,' and immediately precedes the Messianic prophecy

of the fifty-third chapter. Egypt was transparent, and through it shone

Babylon; Babylon was transparent, and through it shone Christ's

redemption. That was the real and highest fulfilment of the prophet's

anticipations, and the trumpet-calls of my text are addressed to all

who have a share in it. We have, then, here, under highly metaphorical

forms, the grand ideal of the Christian life; and I desire to note

briefly its various features.

I. First, then, we have it set forth as a march of warrior priests.

Note that phrase--Ye that bear the vessels of the Lord.' The returning

exiles as a whole are so addressed, but the significance of the

expression, and the precise metaphor which it is meant to convey, may

be questionable. The word rendered vessel' is a wide expression,

meaning any kind of equipment, and in other places of the Old Testament

the whole phrase rendered here, ye that bear the vessels,' is

translated armour-bearers.' Such an image would be quite congruous with

the context here, in which warlike figures abound. And if so, the

picture would be that of an army on the march, each man carrying some

of the weapons of the great Captain and Leader. But perhaps the other

explanation is more likely, which regards the vessels of the Lord' as

being an allusion to the sacrificial and other implements of worship,

which, in the first Exodus, the Levites carried on the march. And if

that be the meaning, as seems more congruous with the command of purity

which is deduced from the function of bearing the vessels, then the

figure here, of course, is that of a company of priests. I venture to

throw the two ideas together, and to say that we may here find an ideal

of the Christian community as being a great company of warrior-priests

on the march, guarding a sacred deposit which has been committed to

their charge.

Look, then, at that combination in the true Christian character of the

two apparently opposite ideas of warrior and priest. It suggests that

all the life is to be conflict, and that all the conflict is to be

worship; that everywhere, in the thick of the fight, we may still bear

the remembrance of the secret place of the most High.' It suggests,

too, that the warfare is worship, that the offices of the priest and of

the warrior are one and the same thing, and both consist in their

mediating between man and God, bringing God in His Gospel to men, and

bringing men through their faith to God. The combination suggests,

likewise, how, in the true Christian character, there ought ever to be

blended, in strange harmony, the virtues of the soldier and the

qualities of the priest; compassion for the ignorant and them that are

out of the way, with courage; meekness with strength; a quiet, placable

heart hating strife, joined to a spirit that cheerily fronts every

danger and is eager for the conflict in which evil is the foe and God

the helper. The old Crusaders went to battle with the Cross on their

hearts, and on their shoulders, and on the hilts of their swords; and

we, too, in all our warfare, have to remember that its weapons are not

carnal but spiritual, and that only then do we fight as the Captain of

our salvation fought, when our arms are meekness and pity, and our

warfare is waged in gentleness and love.

Note, further, that in this phrase we have the old, old metaphor of

life as a march, but so modified as to lose all its melancholy and

weariness and to become an elevating hope. The idea which runs through

all poetry, of life as a journey, suggests effort, monotonous change, a

uniform law of variety and transiency, struggle and weariness, but the

Christian thought of life, while preserving the idea of change,

modifies it into the blessed thought of progress. Life, if it is as

Christ meant it to be, is a journey in the sense that it is a

continuous effort, not unsuccessful, toward a clearly discerned goal,

our eternal home. The Christian march is a march from slavery to

freedom, and from a foreign land to our native soil.

Again, this metaphor suggests that this company of marching priests

have in charge a sacred deposit. Paul speaks of the glorious Gospel

which was committed to my trust.' That good thing which was committed

unto thee by the Holy Ghost, keep.' The history of the return from

Babylon in the Book of Ezra presents a remarkable parallel to the

language of my text, for there we are told how, in the preparation for

the march, the leader entrusted the sacred vessels of the temple, which

the liberality of the heathen king had returned to him, to a group of

Levites and priests, weighing them at the beginning, and bidding them

keep them safe until they were weighed again in the courts of the

Lord's house in Jerusalem.

And, in like manner, to us Christians is given the charge of God's

great weapons of warfare, with which He contends with the wickedness of

the world--viz. that great message of salvation through, and in, the

Cross of Jesus Christ. And there are committed to us, further, to guard

sedulously, and to keep bright and untarnished and undiminished in

weight and worth, the precious treasures of the Christian life of

communion with Him. And we may give another application to the figure

and think of the solemn trust which is put into our hands, in the gift

of our own selves, which we ourselves can either waste, and stain, and

lose, or can guard and polish into vessels meet for the Master's use.'

Gathering, then, these ideas together, we take this as the ideal of the

Christian community--a company of priests on the march, with a sacred

deposit committed to their trust. If we reflected more on such a

conception of the Christian life, we should more earnestly hearken to,

and more sedulously discharge, the commands that are built thereon. To

these commands I now turn.

II. Note the separation that befits the marching company.

Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing, go

ye out of the midst of her.' In the historical fulfilment of my text,

separation from Babylon was the preliminary of the march. Our task is

not so simple; our separation from Babylon must be the constant

accompaniment of our march. And day by day it has to be repeated, if we

would lift a foot in advance upon the road. There is still a Babylon.

The order in the midst of which we live is not organised on the

fundamental laws of Christ's Kingdom. And wherever there are men who

seek to order their lives as Christ would have them to be ordered, the

first necessity for them is, Come out from amongst them, and be ye

separate, saith the Lord.' There is no need in this day to warn

Christian people against an exaggerated interpretation of these

commandments. I almost wish there were more need. We have been told so

often, in late years, of how Christian men ought to mingle with all the

affairs of life, and count nothing that is human foreign to themselves,

that it seems to me there is vast need for a little emphasis being put

on the other side of the truth, and for separation being insisted upon.

Wherever there is a real grasp of Jesus Christ for a man's own personal

Saviour, and a true submission to Him as the Pattern and Guide of life,

a broad line of demarcation between that man and the irreligious life

round him will draw itself. If the heart have its tendrils twined round

the Cross, it will have detached them from the world around. Separation

by reason of an entirely different conception of life, separation

because the present does not look to you as it looks to the men who see

only it, separation because you and they have not only a different

ideal and theory of life, but are living from different motives and for

different ends and by different powers, will be the inevitable result

of any real union with Jesus Christ. If I am joined to Him I am

separated from the world; and detachment from it is the simple and

necessary result of any real attachment to Him. There will always be a

gulf in feeling, in purpose, in view, and therefore there will often

have to be separation outward things. So did not I because of the fear

of the Lord' will have to be said over and over again by any real and

honest follower of the Master.

This separation will not only be the result of union with Jesus Christ,

but it is the condition of all progress in our union with Him. We must

be unmoored before we can advance. Many a caravan has broken down in

African exploration for no other reason than because it was too well

provided with equipments, and so collapsed of its own weight.

Therefore, our prophet in the context says, Touch no unclean thing.'

There is one of the differences between the new Exodus and the old.

When Israel came out of Egypt they spoiled the Egyptians, and came away

laden with gold and jewels; but it is dangerous work bringing anything

away from Babylon with us. Its treasure has to be left if we would

march close behind our Lord and Master. We must touch no unclean

thing,' because our hands are to be filled with the vessels of the

Lord.' I am preaching no impossible asceticism, no misanthropical

withdrawal from the duties of life, and the obligations that we owe to

society. God's world is a good one; man's world is a bad one. It is

man's world that we have to leave, but the lofties, sanctity requires

no abstention from anything that God has ordained.

Now, dear friends, I venture to think that this message is one that we

all dreadfully need to-day. There are a great many Christians,

so-called, in this generation, who seem to think that the main object

they should have in view is to obliterate the distinction between

themselves and the world of ungodly men, and in occupation and

amusements to be as like people that have no religion as they possibly

can manage. So they get credit for being liberal' Christians, and

praise from quarters whose praise is censure, and whose approval ought

to make a Christian man very uncomfortable. Better by far the narrowest

Puritanism--I was going to say better by far monkish austerities--than

a Christianity which knows no self-denial, which is perfectly at home

in an irreligious atmosphere, and which resents the exhortation to

separation, because it would fain keep the things that it is bidden to

drop. God's reiteration of the text through Paul to the Church in

luxurious, corrupt, wealthy Corinth is a gospel for this day for

English Christians, Come out from among them, and I will receive you.'

III. Further, note the purity which becomes the bearers of the vessels

of the Lord.

Be ye clean.' The priest's hands must be pure, which figure, being

translated, is that transparent purity of conduct and character is

demanded from all Christian men who profess to bear God's sacred

deposit. You cannot carry it unless your hands are clean, for all the

gifts that God gives us glide from our grasp if our hands be stained.

Monkish legends tell of sacred pictures and vessels which, when an

impure touch was laid upon them, refused to be lifted from their place,

and grew there, as rooted, in spite of all efforts to move them.

Whoever seeks to hold the gifts of God in His Gospel in dirty hands

will fail miserably in the attempt; and all the joy and peace of

communion, the assurance of God's love, and the calm hope of immortal

life will vanish as a soap bubble, grasped by a child, turns into a

drop of foul water on its palm, if we try to hold them in foul hands.

Be clean, or you cannot bear the vessels of the Lord.

And further, remember that no priestly service nor any successful

warfare for Jesus Christ is possible, except on the same condition. One

sin, as well as one sinner, destroys much good, and a little

inconsistency on the part of us professing Christians neutralises all

the efforts that we may ever try to put forth for Him. Logic requires

that God's vessels should be carried with clean hands. God requires it,

men require it, and have a right to require it. The mightiest witness

for Him is the witness of a pure life, and if we go about the world

professing to be His messengers, and carrying His epistle in our dirty

fingers, the soiled thumb-mark upon it will prevent men from caring for

the message; and the Word will be despised because of the unworthiness

of its bearers. Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord.'

IV. Lastly, notice the leisurely confidence which should mark the march

that is guarded by God. Ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by

flight, for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be

your reward.'

This is partly an analogy and partly a contrast with the story of the

first Exodus. The unusual word translated with haste' is employed in

the Pentateuch to describe the hurry and bustle, not altogether due to

the urgency of the Egyptians, but partly also to the terror of Israel,

with which that first flight was conducted. And, says my text, in this

new coming out of bondage there shall be no need for tremor or

perturbation, lending wings to any man's feet; but, with quiet

deliberation, like that with which Peter was brought out of his

dungeon, because God knew that He could bring him out safely, the new

Exodus shall be carried on.

He that believeth shall not make haste.' Why should he? There is no

need for a Christian man ever to be flurried, or to lose his

self-command, or ever to be in an undignified and unheroic hurry. His

march should be unceasing, swift, but calm and equable, as the motions

of the planets, unhasting and unresting.

There is a very good reason why we need not be in any haste due to

alarm. For, as in the first Exodus, the guiding pillar led the march,

and sometimes, when there were foes behind, as at the Red Sea, shifted

its place to the rear, so the Lord will go before you, and the God of

Israel will be your rereward.' He besets us behind and before, going in

front to be our Guide, and in the rear for our protection, gathering up

the stragglers, so that there shall not be a hoof left behind,' and

putting a wall of iron between us and the swarms of hovering enemies

that hang on our march. Thus encircled by God, we shall be safe. Christ

fulfils what the prophet pledged God to do; for He goes before us, the

Pattern, the Captain of our salvation, the Forerunner, the Breaker is

gone up before them ; and He comes behind us to guard us from evil; for

He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, the Almighty.'

Dear brethren, life for us all must be a weary pilgrimage. We cannot

alter that. It is the lot of every son of man. But we have the power of

either making it a dreary, solitary tramp over an undefended desert, to

end in the great darkness, or else of making it a march in which the

twin sisters Joy and Peace shall lead us forth, and go out with us, and

the other pair of angel-forms, Goodness and Mercy,' shall follow us all

the days of our lives. We may make it a journey with Jesus for Guide

and Companion, to Jesus as our Home. The ransomed of the Lord shall

return, and come to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy upon their

heads.'

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THE ARM OF THE LORD

To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?'--ISAIAH liii 1.

In the second Isaiah there are numerous references to the arm of the

Lord.' It is a natural symbol of the active energy of Jehovah, and is

analogous to the other symbol of the Face of Jehovah,' which is also

found in this book, in so far as it emphasises the notion of power in

manifestation, though the Face' has a wider range and may be explained

as equivalent to that part of the divine Nature which is turned to men.

The latter symbol will then be substantially parallel with the Name.'

But there are traces of a tendency to conceive of the arm of the Lord'

as personified, for instance, where we read (ch. lxiii. 12) that

Jehovah caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses.'

Moses was not the true leader, but was himself led and sustained by the

divine Power, dimly conceived as a person, ever by his side to sustain

and direct. There seems to be a similar imperfect consciousness of

personification in the words of the text, especially when taken in

their close connection with the immediately following prophecy of the

suffering servant. It would be doing violence to the gradual

development of Revelation, like tearing asunder the just-opening petals

of a rose, to read into this question of the sad prophet full-blown

Christian truth, but it would be missing a clear anticipation of that

truth to fail to recognise the forecasting of it that is here.

I. We have here a prophetic forecast that the arm of the Lord is a

person.

The strict monotheism of the Old Testament does not preclude some very

remarkable phenomena in its modes of conception and speech as to the

divine Nature. We hear of the angel of His face,' and again of the

angel in whom is His Name.' We hear of the angel' to whom divine

worship is addressed and who speaks, as we may say, in a divine dialect

and does divine acts. We meet, too, with the personification of Wisdom

in the Book of Proverbs, to which are ascribed characteristics and are

attributed acts scarcely distinguishable from divine, and eminently

associated in the creative work. Our text points in the same direction

as these representations. They all tend in the direction of preparing

for the full Christian truth of the personal Power of God.' What was

shown by glimpses at sundry times and in divers manners,' with many

gaps in the showing and much left all unshown, is perfectly revealed in

the Son. The New Testament, by its teaching as to the Eternal Word,'

endorses, clears, and expands all these earlier dimmer adumbrations.

That Word is the agent of the divine energy, and the conception of

power as being exercised by the Word is even loftier than that of it as

put forth by the arm,' by as much as intelligent and intelligible

utterance is more spiritual and higher than force of muscle. The

apostolic designation of Jesus as the power of God and the wisdom of

God' blends the two ideas of these two symbols. The conception of Jesus

Christ as the arm of the Lord, when united with that of the Eternal

Word, points to a threefold sphere and manner of His operations, as the

personal manifestation of the active power of God. In the beginning,

the arm of the Lord stretched out the heavens as a tent to dwell in,

and without Him was not anything made that was made.' In His

Incarnation, He carried into execution all God's purposes and fulfilled

His whole will. From His throne He wields divine power, and rules the

universe. The help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself,' and

He works in the midst of humanity that redeeming work which none but He

can effect.

II. We have here a prophetic paradox that the mightiest revelation of

the arm of the Lord is in weakness.

The words of the text stand in closest connection with the great

picture of the Suffering Servant which follows, and the pathetic figure

portrayed there is the revealing of the arm of the Lord. The close

bringing together of the ideas of majesty and power and of humiliation,

suffering, and weakness, would be a paradox to the first hearers of the

prophecy. Its solution lies in the historical manifestation of Jesus.

Looking on Him, we see that the growing up of that root out of a dry

ground was the revelation of the great power of God. In Jesus' lowly

humanity God's power is made perfect in man's weakness, in another and

not less true sense than that in which the apostle spoke. There we see

divine power in its noblest form, in its grandest operation, in its

widest sweep, in its loftiest purpose. That humble man, lowly and poor,

despised and rejected in life, hanging faint and pallid on the Roman

cross, and dying in the dark, seems a strange manifestation of the

glory' of God, but the Cross is indeed His throne, and sublime as are

the other forms in which Omnipotence clothes itself, this is, to human

eyes and hearts, the highest of them all. In Jesus the arm of the Lord

is revealed in its grandest operation. Creation and the continual

sustaining of a universe are great, but redemption is greater. It is

infinitely more to say, He giveth power to the faint,' than to say, For

that He is strong in might, not one faileth,' and to principalities and

powers in heavenly places who have gazed on the grand operations of

divine power for ages, new lessons of what it can effect are taught by

the redemption of sinful men. The divine power that is enshrined in

Jesus' weakness is power in its widest sweep, for it is to every one

that believeth, and in its loftiest purpose, for it is unto salvation.'

III. We have here a prophetic lament that the power revealed to all is

unseen by many.

The text is a wail over darkened eyes, blind at noonday. The prophet's

radiant anticipations of the Servant's exaltation, and of God's holy

arm being made bare in the eyes of all nations, are clouded over by the

thought of the incredulity of the multitude to our report.' Jehovah had

indeed made bare His arm,' as a warrior throws back his loose robe,

when he would strike. But what was the use of that, if dull eyes would

not look? The report' had been loudly proclaimed, but what was the use

of that, if ears were obstinately stopped? Alas, alas! nothing that God

can do secures that men shall see what He shows, or listen to what He

speaks. The mystery of mysteries is that men can, the tragedy of

tragedies is that they will, make any possible revelation of none

effect, so far as they are concerned.

The Arm is revealed, but only by those who have believed our report'

does the prophet deem it to be actually beheld. Faith is the individual

condition on which the perfected revelation becomes a revelation to me.

The salvation of our God' is shown in splendour to all the ends of the

earth,' but only they who exercise faith in Jesus, who is the power of

God, will see that far-shining light. If we are not of those who

believe the report,' we shall, notwithstanding that He hath made bare

His holy arm,' be of those who grope at noonday as in the dark.

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT--I

For He grew up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry

ground He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no

beauty that we should desire Him. 3. He was despised, and rejected of

men, a Man of Sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom

men hide their face He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.'--ISAIAH

liii, 2, 3.

To hold fast the fulfilment of this prophecy of the Suffering Servant

in Jesus it is not necessary to deny its reference to Israel. Just as

offices, institutions, and persons in it were prophetic, and by their

failures to realise to the full their own role, no less than by their

partial presentation of it, pointed onwards to Him, in whom their idea

would finally take form and substance, so this great picture of God's

Servant, which was but imperfectly reproduced even by the Israel within

Israel, stood on the prophet's page a fair though sad dream, with

nothing corresponding to it in the region of reality and history, till

He came and lived and suffered.

If we venture to make it the theme of a short series of sermons, our

object is simply to endeavour to bring out clearly the features of the

wonderful portrait. If they are fully apprehended, it seems to us that

the question of who is the original of the picture answers itself. We

must note that the whole is introduced by a For,' that is to say, that

it is all explanatory of the unbelief and blindness to the revealed arm

of the Lord, which the prophet has just been lamenting. This close

connection with the preceding words accounts for the striking way in

which the description of the person of the Servant is here blended

with, or interrupted by, that of the manner in which he was treated.

I. The Servant's lowly origin and growth.

He grew,'--not shall grow.' The whole is cast into the form of history,

and to begin the description with a future tense is not only an error

in grammar but gratuitously introduces an incongruity. The word

rendered tender plant' means a sucker, and root' probably would more

properly be taken as a shoot from a root, the tree having been felled,

and nothing left but the stump. There is here, then, at the outset, an

unmistakable reference to the prophecy in ch. xi. 1, which is Messianic

prophecy, and therefore there is a presumption that this too has a

Messianic reference. In the original passage the stump or stock' is

explained as being the humiliated house of David, and it is only

following the indications supplied by the fact of the second Isaiah's

quotation of the first, if we take the implication in his words to be

the same. Royal descent, but from a royal house fallen on evil days, is

the plain meaning here.

And the eclipse of its glory is further brought out in that not only

does the shoot spring from a tree, all whose leafy honours have long

been lopped away, but which is in a dry ground.' Surely we do not force

a profounder meaning than is legitimate into this feature of the

picture when we think of the Carpenter's Son of the house and lineage

of David,' of the Son of God who was found in fashion as a man,' of Him

who was born in a stable, and grew up in a tiny village hidden away

among the hills of Galilee, who, as it were, stole into the world not

with observation,' and opened out, as He grew, the wondrous blossom of

a perfect humanity such as had never before been evolved from any root,

nor grown on the most sedulously cultured plant. Is this part of the

prophet's ideal realised in any of the other suggested realisations of

it?

But there is still another point in regard to the origin and growth of

the lowly shoot from the felled stump--it is before Him.' Then the

unnoticed growth is noticed by Jehovah, and, though cared for by no

others, is cared for, tended, and guarded, by Him.

II. The Servant's unattractive form.

Naturally a shoot springing in a dry ground would show but little

beauty of foliage or flower. It would be starved and colourless beside

the gaudy growths in fertile, well-watered gardens. But that

unattractiveness is not absolute or real; it is only that we should

desire Him.' We are but poor judges of true form or comeliness,' and

what is lustrous with perfect beauty in God's eyes may be, and

generally is, plain and dowdy in men's. Our tastes are debased.

Flaunting vulgarities and self-assertive ugliness captivate vulgar

eyes, to which the serene beauties of mere goodness seem insipid.

Cockatoos charm savages to whom the iridescent neck of a dove has no

charms. Surely this part of the description fits Jesus as it does no

other. The entire absence of outward show, or of all that pleases the

spoiled tastes of sinful men, need not be dwelt on. No doubt the world

has slowly come to recognise in Him the moral ideal, a perfect man, but

He has been educating it for nineteen hundred years to get it up to

that point, and the educational process is very far from complete. The

real desire of most men is for something much more pungent and dashing

than Jesus' meek wisdom and stainless purity, which breed in them ennui

rather than longing. Not this man but Barabbas,' was the approximate

realisation of the Jewish ideal then; not this man but--some type or

other of a less oppressive perfection, and that calls for less effort

to imitate it, is the world's real cry still. Pilate's scornfully

wondering question: Art Thou--such a poor-looking creature--the King of

the Jews? is very much of a piece with the world's question still: Art

Thou the perfect instance of manhood? Art Thou the highest revelation

of God?

III. The Servant's reception by men.

The two preceding characteristics naturally result in this third. For

lowliness of condition and lack of qualities appealing to men's false

ideals will certainly lead to being despised and rejected.' The latter

expression is probably better taken, as in the margin of the Rev. Ver.

as forsaken.' But whichever meaning is adopted, what an Iliad of woes

is condensed into these two words! The spurns that patient merit of the

unworthy takes,' the loneliness of one who, in all the crowd descries

none to trust--these are the wages that the world ever gives to its

noblest, who live but to help it and be misunderstood by it, and as

these are the wages of all who with self-devotion would serve God by

serving the world for its good, they were paid in largest measure to

the Servant of the Lord.' His claims were ridiculed, His words of

wisdom thrown back on Himself; none were so poor but could afford to

despise Him as lower than they, His love was repulsed, surely He drank

the bitterest cup of contempt. All His life He walked in the solitude

of uncomprehended aims, and at His hour of extremest need appealed in

vain for a little solace of companionship, and was deserted by those

whom He trusted most. His was a lifelong martyrdom inflicted by men.

His was a lifelong solitude which was most utter at the last. And He

brought it all on Himself because He would be God's Servant in being

men's Saviour.

IV. The Servant's sorrow of heart.

The remarkable expression acquainted with grief' seems to carry an

allusion to the previous clause, in which men are spoken of as

despising and rejecting the Servant. They left Him alone, and His only

companion was grief'--a grim associate to walk at a man's side all his

days! It is to be noted that the word rendered grief' is literally

sickness. That description of mental or spiritual sorrows under the

imagery of bodily sicknesses is intensified in the subsequent terrible

picture of Him as one from whom men hide their faces with disgust at

His hideous appearance, caused by disease. Possibly the meaning may

rather be that He hides His face, as lepers had to do.

Now probably the sorrows' touched on at this point are to be

distinguished from those which subsequently are spoken of in terms of

such poignancy as laid on the Servant by God. Here the prophet is

thinking rather of those which fell on Him by reason of men's rejection

and desertion. We shall not rightly estimate the sorrowfulness of

Christ's sorrows, unless we bring to our meditations on them the other

thought of His joys. How great these were we can judge, when we

remember that He told the disciples that by His joy remaining in them

their joy would be full. As much joy then as human nature was capable

of from perfect purity, filial obedience, trust, and unbroken communion

with God, so much was Jesus' permanent experience. The golden cup of

His pure nature was ever full to the brim with the richest wine of joy.

And that constant experience of gladness in the Father and in Himself

made more painful the sorrows which He encountered, like a biting wind

shrieking round Him, whenever He passed out from fellowship with God in

the stillness of His soul into the contemptuous and hostile world. His

spirit carrying with it the still atmosphere of the Holy Place, would

feel more keenly than any other would have done the jarring tumult of

the crowds, and would know a sharper pain when met with greetings in

which was no kindness. Jesus was sinless, His sympathy with all sorrow

was thereby rendered abnormally keen, and He made others' griefs His

own with an identification born of a sympathy which the most

compassionate cannot attain. The greater the love, the greater the

sorrow of the loving heart when its love is spurned. The intenser the

yearning for companionship, the sharper the pang when it is repulsed.

The more one longs to bless, the more one suffers when his blessings

are flung off. Jesus was the most sensitive, the most sympathetic, the

most loving soul that ever dwelt in flesh. He saw, as none other has

ever seen, man's miseries. He experienced, as none else has ever

experienced, man's ingratitude, and, therefore, though God, even His

God, anointed Him with the oil of gladness above His fellows,' He was a

Man of Sorrows,' and grief was His companion during all His life's

course.

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT--II

Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did

esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 5. But He was

wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the

chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are

healed. 6. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one

to his own way; and the Lord hath laid (made to light) on Him the

iniquity of us all.'--ISAIAH liii. 4-6.

The note struck lightly in the close of the preceding paragraph becomes

dominant here. One notes the accumulation of expressions for suffering,

crowded into these verses--griefs, sorrows, wounded, bruised, smitten,

chastisement, stripes. One notes that the cause of all this multiform

infliction is given with like emphasis of reiteration--our griefs, our

sorrows, and that these afflictions are invested with a still more

tragic and mysterious aspect, by being traced to our transgressions,

our iniquities. Finally, the deepest word of all is spoken when the

whole mystery of the servant's sufferings is referred to Jehovah's

making the universal iniquity to lie, like a crushing burden, on Him.

I. The Burdened Servant.

It is to be kept in view that the griefs' which the servant is here

described as bearing are literally sicknesses,' and that, similarly,

the sorrows' may be diseases. Matthew in his quotation of the verse

(viii. 17) takes the words to refer to bodily ailments, and finds their

fulfilment' in Christ's miracles of healing. And that interpretation is

part of the whole truth, for Hebrew thought drew no such sharp line of

distinction between diseases of the body and those of the soul as we

are accustomed to draw. All sickness was taken to be the consequence of

sin, and the intimate connection between the two was, as it were, set

forth for all forms of bodily disease by the elaborate treatment

prescribed for leprosy, as pre-eminently fitted to stand as type of the

whole. But the fulfilment through the miracles is but a parable of the

deeper fulfilment in regard to the more virulent and deadly diseases of

the soul. Sin is the sickness, as it is also the grief, which most

afflicts humanity. Of the two words expressing the Servant's taking

their burden on His shoulders, the former implies not only the taking

of it but the bearing of it away, and the latter emphasises the weight

of the load.

Following Matthew's lead, we may regard Christ's miracles of healing as

one form of His fulfilment of the prophecy, in which the principles

that shape all the forms are at work, and which, therefore, may stand

as a kind of pictorial illustration of the way in which He bears and

bears away the heavier burden of sin. And one point which comes out

clearly is that, in these acts of healing, He felt the weight of the

affliction that He took away. Even in that region, the condition of

ability to remove it, was identifying Himself with the sorrow. Did He

not sigh and look up' in silent appeal to heaven before He could say,

Ephphatha? Did He not groan in Himself before He sent the voice into

the tomb which the dead heard? His miracles were not easy, though He

had all power, for He felt all that the sufferers felt, by the

identifying power of the unparalleled sympathy of a pure nature. In

that region His pain on account of the sufferers stood in vital

relation with His power to end their sufferings. The load must gall His

shoulders, ere He could bear it away from theirs.

But the same principles as apply to these deeds of mercy done on

diseases apply to all His deeds of deliverance from sorrow and from

sin. In Him is set forth in highest fashion the condition of all

brotherly help and alleviation. Whoever would lighten a brother's load

must stoop his own shoulders to carry it. And whilst there is an

element in our Lord's sufferings, as the text passes on to say, which

is not explained by the analogy with what is required from all human

succourers and healers, the extent to which the lower experience of

such corresponds with His unique work should always be made prominent

in our devout meditations.

II. The Servant's sufferings in their reason, their intensity, and

their issue.

The same measure that was meted out to Job by his so-called friends was

measured to the servant, and at the Impulse of the same heartless

doctrinal prepossession. He must have been had to suffer so much; that

is the rough and ready verdict of the self-righteous. With crashing

emphasis, that complacent explanation of the Servant's sufferings and

their own prosperity is shivered to atoms, by the statement of the true

reason for both the one and the other. You thought that He was

afflicted because He was bad and you were spared because you were

good--no, He was afflicted because you were bad, and you were spared

because He was afflicted.

The reason for the Servant's sufferings was our transgressions.' More

is suggested now than sympathetic identification with others' sorrows.

This is an actual bearing of the consequences of sins which He had not

committed, and that not merely as an innocent man may be overwhelmed by

the flood of evil which has been let loose by others' sins to sweep

over the earth. The blow that wounds Him is struck directly and solely

at Him. He is not entangled in a widespread calamity, but is the only

victim. It is pre-supposed that all transgression leads to wounds and

bruises; but the transgressions are done by us, and the wounds and

bruises fall on Him. Can the idea of vicarious suffering be more

plainly set forth?

The intensity of the Servant's sufferings is brought home to our hearts

by the accumulation of epithets, to which reference has already been

made. He was wounded' as one who is pierced by a sharp sword; bruised'

as one who is stoned to death; beaten and with livid weales on His

flesh. A background of unnamed persecutors is dimly seen. The

description moves altogether in the region of physical violence, and

that violence is more than symbol.

It is no mere coincidence that the story of the Passion reproduces so

many of the details of the prophecy, for, although the fulfilment of

the latter does not depend on such coincidences, they are not to be

passed by as of no importance. Former generations made too much of the

physical sufferings of Jesus; is not this generation in danger of

making too little of them?

The issue of the Servant's sufferings is presented in a startling

paradox. His bruises and weales are the causes of our being healed. His

chastisement brings our peace. Surely it is very hard work, and needs

much forcing of words and much determination not to see what is set

forth in as plain light as can be conceived, to strike the idea of

atonement out of this prophecy. It says as emphatically as words can

say, that we have by our sins deserved stripes, that the Servant bears

the stripes which we have deserved, and that therefore we do not bear

them.

III. The deepest ground of the Servant's sufferings.

The sad picture of humanity painted in that simile of a scattered flock

lays stress on the universality of transgression, on its divisive

effect, on the solitude of sin, and on its essential characteristic as

being self-willed rejection of control. But the isolation caused by

transgression is blessedly counteracted by the concentration of the sin

of all on the Servant. Men fighting for their own hand, and living at

their own pleasure, are working to the disruption of all sweet bonds of

fellowship. But God, in knitting together all the black burdens into

one, and loading the Servant with that tremendous weight, is preparing

for the establishment of a more blessed unity, in experience of the

healing brought about by His sufferings.

Can one man's iniquity,' as distinguished from the consequences of

iniquity, be made to press upon any other? It is a familiar and not

very profound objection to the Christian Atonement that guilt cannot be

transferred. True, but in the first place, Christ's nature stands in

vital relations to every man, of such intimacy that what is impossible

between two of us is not impossible between Christ and any one of us;

and, secondly, much in His life, and still more in His passion, is

unintelligible unless the black mass of the world's sin was heaped upon

Him, to His own consciousness. In that dread cry, wrung from Him as He

hung there in the dark, the consciousnesses of possessing God and of

having lost Him are blended inextricably and inexplicably. The only

approach to an explanation of it is that then the world's sin was felt

by Him, in all its terrible mass and blackness, coming between Him and

God, even as our own sins come, separating us from God. That grim

burden not only came on Him, but was laid on Him by God. The same idea

is expressed by the prophet in that awful representation and by Jesus

in that as awful cry, Why hast Thou forsaken Me?'

The prophet constructs no theory of Atonement. But no language could be

chosen that would more plainly set forth the fact of Atonement. And it

is to be observed that, so far as this prophecy is concerned, the

Servant's sole form of service is to suffer. He is not a teacher, an

example, or a benefactor, in any of the other ways in which men need

help. His work is to bear our griefs and be bruised for our healing.

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT--III.

He was oppressed, yet He humbled Himself and opened not His mouth; as a

lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before her

shearers is dumb; yea, He opened not His mouth. 8. By oppression and

judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who among them

considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living? for the

transgression of my people was He stricken. 9. And they made His grave

with the wicked, and with the rich in His death; although He had done

no violence, neither was any deceit in His mouth'--ISAIAH liii, 7-9. R.

V.

In this section of the prophecy we pass from contemplating the

sufferings inflicted on the Servant to the attitude of Himself and of

His contemporaries towards these, His patience and their blindness. To

these is added a remarkable reference to His burial, which strikes one

at first sight as interrupting the continuity of the prophecy, but on

fuller consideration assumes great significance.

I. The unresisting endurance of the Servant.

The Revised Version's rendering of the first clause is preferable to

that of the Authorised Version. Afflicted' would be little better than

tautology, but humbled Himself' strikes the keynote of the verse, which

dwells not on the Servant's afflictions, but on His bearing under them.

Similarly, the pathetic imagery of the lamb led and the sheep dumb

gives the same double representation, first of the indignities, and

next of His demeanour in enduring them, as is conveyed in He was

oppressed, yet He humbled Himself.' Unremonstrating, unresisting

endurance, then, is the point emphasised in the lovely metaphor.

We recall the fact that this emphatically reduplicated phrase opened

not His mouth' was verbally fulfilled in our Lord's silence before each

of the three authorities to whom He was presented, before the Jewish

rulers, before Pilate, and before Herod. Only when adjured by the

living God and when silence would have been tantamount to withdrawal of

His claims, did He speak before the Sanhedrin. Only when silence would

have been taken as disowning His Kingship, did He speak before Pilate.

And Herod, who had no right to question Him, received no answer at all.

Jesus' lips were opened in witness but never in complaint or

remonstrance. No doubt, the prophecy would have been as really

fulfilled though there had been no such majestic silences, for its

substance is patient endurance, not mere abstinence from speech. Still,

as with other events in His life, the verbal correspondence with

prophetic details may help, and be meant to help, to bring out more

clearly, for purblind eyes, the true fulfilment. So we may meditate on

the wonder and the beauty of that picture which the evangelists draw,

and which the world has recognised, with whatever differences as to its

interpretation, as the most perfect, pathetic, and majestic picture of

meek endurance that has ever been painted.

But we gather only the most superficial of its lessons, if that is all

that we find to say about it. For the main point for us to lay to heart

is not merely the fact of that silent submission, but the motive which

led to it. He opened not His mouth, because He willingly embraced the

Cross, and He willingly embraced the Cross because He loved the Father

and would do His will, because He loved the world and would be its

Saviour,

That touching imagery of the dumb lamb has manifold felicities and

significances beyond serving to figure meekness. And we are not forcing

unintended meanings into a mere piece of poetic imagination when we

note how remarkably the metaphor links on to that of strayed sheep in

the preceding verse, or when we venture to recall John Baptist's first

proclamation of the Lamb of God, and Peter's quotation of this very

prophecy, and the continual recurrence in the Apocalypse of the name of

The Lamb as the title of honour of Him who sitteth on the throne.' A

kind of nimbus or aureole shines round the humble figure as drawn by

the prophet.

II. The misunderstood end of the Servant's life.

The difficult expressions of verse 8 are rendered in the Revised

Version with clearness and so as to yield a profound meaning. We may

note that here, for the first time, is spoken out that end to which all

the preceding description of sufferings has been leading up, and yet it

is spoken with a kind of solemn reticence, very impressive. The Servant

is taken away,' cut off,' stricken.' Not yet is the grim word death'

plainly uttered; that comes in the next verse, only after the Servant's

death is supposed to be past. The three words suggest, at all events,

though in half-veiled language, violence and suddenness in the

Servant's fate. Who were the agents who took Him, cut Him off and

struck Him, is left in impressive obscurity. But the fact that His

death was a judicial murder is set in clear light. Whether we read By'

or From--oppression and judgment He was taken away,' the forms of law

are represented as wrested to bring about flagrant injustice. And, if

it were my object now to defend the Messianic interpretation, one might

ask where any facts corresponding to this element in the picture are to

be found in regard to either the national Israel, or the Israel within

the nation.

That unjust death by illegal violence under the mask of law was,

further, wholly misunderstood by His generation.' We need not do more

than remark in a sentence how that feature corresponds with the facts

in regard to Jesus, and ask whether it does so on any other theory of

fulfilment.' Neither friends nor foes had even the faintest conception

of what the death of Jesus was or was to effect. And it is worth while

to dwell for a moment on this, because we are often told that there is

no trace of the doctrine of an atoning sacrifice in the Gospels, and

the inference is drawn that it was an afterthought of the apostles, and

therefore to be set aside as an excrescence on Christianity according

to Christ. The silence of Jesus on that subject is exaggerated; but

certainly no thought of His being the Sacrifice for the sins of the

world was in the minds of the sad watchers by the Cross, nor for many a

day thereafter. Is it not worth noting that precisely such a blindness

to the meaning of His death had been prophesied eight hundred years

before?

But the reason why this feature is introduced seems mainly to be to

underscore the lesson, that those who exercised the violence which

hurried the Servant from the land of the living were blind instruments

of a higher power. And may we not also see in it a suggestion of the

great solitude of sorrow in which the Servant was to die, even as He

had lived in it? Misapprehended and despised He lived, misapprehended

He died. Jesus was the loneliest man that ever breathed human breath.

He gave up His breath in a more awful solitude than ever isolated any

other dying man. Utterly solitary, He died that none of us need ever

face death alone.

III. The Servant's Grave.

Following on the mystery of the uncomprehended death comes the enigma

of the burial. The words are an enigma, but they seem meaningless on

any hypothesis but the Messianic one. As they stand, they assert that

unnamed persons gave Him a grave with the wicked, as they would do by

putting Him to death under strained forms of law, and that then,

somehow, the criminal destined to be buried with other criminals in a

dishonoured grave was laid in a tomb with the rich. It seems a

singularly minute trait to find place in such a prophecy. The remarks

already made as to similar minute correspondences in details of the

prophecy with purely external facts in Christ's life need not be

repeated now. One does not see that it is a self-evident axiom needing

only to be enunciated in order to be accepted, that such minute

prophecies are beneath the dignity of revelation. It might rather seem

that, as one element in prophecy, they are eminently valuable. The

smaller the detail, the more remarkable the prevision and the more

striking the fulfilment. For a keen-sighted man may forecast tendencies

and go far to anticipate events on the large scale, but only God can

foresee trifles. The difficulty in which this prediction of the

Servant's grave being with the rich' places those who reject the

Messianic reference of the prophecy to our Lord may be measured by the

desperate attempts to evade it by suggesting other readings, or by

making rich' to be synonymous with wicked.' The words as they stand

have a clear and worthy meaning on one interpretation, and we even

venture to say, on one interpretation only, namely, that they refer to

the reverent laying of the body of the Lord in the new tomb belonging

to a certain rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph.'

If in the latter clause of verse 9 we render Because' rather than

Although,' we get the thought that the burial was a sign that the

Servant, slain as a criminal, yet was not a criminal. The criminals

were either left unburied or disgraced by promiscuous interment in an

unclean place. But that body reverently bedewed with tears, wrapped in

fine linen clean and white, softly laid down by loving hands, watched

by love stronger than death, lay in fitting repose as the corpse of a

King till He came forth as a Conqueror. So once more the dominant note

is struck, and this part of the prophecy closes with the emphatic

repetition of the sinlessness of the Suffering Servant, which makes His

sufferings a deep and bewildering mystery, unless they were endured

because of our transgressions.'

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT--IV

It pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief: when Thou

shalt make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He

shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in

His hand.'--ISAIAH liii. 10.

We have seen a distinct progress of thought in the preceding verses.

There was first the outline of the sorrows and rejection of the

Servant; second, the profound explanation of these as being for us;

third, the sufferings, death and burial of the Servant.

We have followed Him to the grave. What more can there be to be said?

Whether the Servant of the Lord be an individual or a collective or an

ideal, surely all fitness of metaphor, all reality of fact would

require that His work should be represented as ending with His life,

and that what might follow His burial should be the influence of His

memory, the continued operation of the principles He had set agoing and

so on, but nothing more.

Now observe that, however we may explain the fact, this is the fact to

be explained, that there is a whole section, this closing one, devoted

to the celebration of His work after His death and burial, and, still

more remarkable, that the prophecy says nothing about His activity on

the world till after death. In all the former portion there is not a

syllable about His doing anything, only about His suffering; and then

when He is dead He begins to work. That is the subject of these last

three verses, and it would be proper to take them all for our

consideration now, but fur two reasons, one, because of their great

fulness and importance, and one because, as you will observe, the two

latter verses are a direct address of God's concerning the Servant. The

prophetic words, spoken as in his own person, end with verse 10, and,

catching up their representations, expanding, defining, glorifying

them, comes the solemn thunder of the voice of God. I now deal only

with the prophet's vision of the work of the Servant of the Lord.

One other preliminary remark is that the work of the Servant after

death is described in these verses with constant and very emphatic

reference to His previous sufferings. The closeness of connection

between these two is thus thrown into great prominence.

I. The mystery of God's treatment of the sinless Servant.

The first clause is to be read in immediate connection with the

preceding verse. The Servant was of absolute sinlessness, and yet the

Divine Hand crushed and bruised Him. Certainly, if we think of the

vehemence of prophetic rebukes, and of the standing doctrine of the Old

Testament that Israel was punished for its sin, we shall be slow to

believe that this picture of the Sinless One, smitten for the sins of

others, can have reference to the nation in any of its parts, or to any

one man. However other poetry may lament over innocent sufferers, the

Old Testament always takes the ground: Our iniquities, like the wind,

have carried us away.' But mark that here, however understood, the

prophet paints a figure so sinless that God's bruising Him is an

outstanding wonder and riddle, only to be solved by regarding these

bruises as the stripes by which our sins were healed, and by noting

that the pleasure of the Lord' is carried on through Him, after and

through His death. What conceivable application have such

representations except to Jesus? We note, then, here:--

1. The solemn truth that His sufferings were divinely inflicted. That

is a truth complementary to the other views in the prophecy, according

to which these sufferings are variously regarded as either inflicted by

men (By oppression and judgment He was taken away') or drawn on Him by

His own sacrificial act (His soul shall make an offering for sin'). It

was the divine counsel that used men as its instruments, though they

were none the less guilty. The hands that crucified and slew' were no

less the hands of lawless men,' because it was the determinate counsel

and foreknowledge of God' that delivered Him up.'

But a still deeper thought is in these words. For we can scarcely avoid

seeing in them a glimpse into that dim region of eclipse and agony of

soul from which, as from a cave of darkness, issued that last cry:

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani?' The bruises inflicted by the God, who

made to meet on Him the iniquities of us all, were infinitely more

severe than the weales of the soldiers' rods, or the wounds of the

nails that pierced His hands and feet.

2. The staggering mystery of His sinlessness and sufferings.

The world has been full from of old of stories of goodness tortured and

evil exalted, which have drawn tears and softened hearts, but which

have also bewildered men who would fain believe in a righteous Governor

and loving Father. But none of these have cast so black a shadow of

suspicion on the government of the world by a good God as does the fate

of Jesus, unless it is read in the light of this prophecy. Standing at

the cross, faith in God's goodness and providence can scarcely survive,

unless it rises to be faith in the atoning sacrifice of Him who was

wounded there for our transgressions.

II. The Servant's work in His sufferings.

The margin of the Revised Version gives the best rendering--His soul

shall make an offering for sin.' The word employed for offering' means

a trespass offering, and carries us at once back to the sacrificial

system. The trespass offering was distinguished from other offerings.

The central idea of it seems to have been to represent sin or guilt as

debt, and the sacrifice as making compensation. We must keep in view

the variety of ideas embodied in His sacrifice, and how all correspond

to realities in our wants and spiritual experience.

Now there are three points here:--

a. The representation that Christ's death is a sacrifice. Clearly

connecting with whole Mosaic system--and that in the sense of a

trespass offering. Christ seems to quote this verse in John x. 15, when

He speaks of laying down His life, and when He declares that He came to

give His life a ransom for many.' At any rate here is the great word,

sacrifice, proclaimed for the first time in connection with Messiah.

Here the prophet interprets the meaning of all the types and shadows of

the law.

That sacrificial system bore witness to deep wants of men's souls, and

prophesied of One in whom these were all met and satisfied.

b. His voluntary surrender.

He is sacrifice, but He is Priest also. His soul makes the offering,

and His soul is the offering and offers itself in concurrence with the

Divine Will. It is difficult and necessary to keep that double aspect

in view, and never to think of Jesus as an unwilling Victim, nor of God

as angry and needing to be appeased by blood.

c. The thought that the true meaning of His sufferings is only reached

when we contemplate the effects that have flowed from them. The

pleasure of the Lord in bruising Him is a mystery until we see how

pleasure of the Lord prospers in the hand of the Crucified.

III. The work of the Servant after death.

Surely this paradox, so baldly stated, is meant to be an enigma to

startle and to rouse curiosity. This dead Servant is to see of the

travail of His soul, and to prolong His days. All the interpretations

of this chapter which refuse to see Jesus in it shiver on this rock.

What a contrast there is between platitudes about the spirit of the

nation rising transformed from its grave of captivity (which was only

very partially the case), and the historical fulfilment in Jesus

Christ! Here, at any rate, hundreds of years before His Resurrection,

is a word that seems to point to such a fact, and to me it appears that

all fair interpretation is on the side of the Messianic reference.

Note the singularity of special points.

a. Having died, the Servant sees His offspring.

The sacrifice of Christ is the great power which draws men to Him, and

moves to repentance, faith, love. His death was the communication of

life. Nowhere else in the world's history is the teacher's death the

beginning of His gathering of pupils, and not only has the dead Servant

children, but He sees them. That representation is expressive of the

mutual intercourse, strange and deep, whereby we feel that He is truly

with us, Jesus Christ, whom having not seen we love.'

b. Having died, the Servant prolongs His days.

He lives a continuous life, without an end, for ever. The best

commentary is the word which John heard, as he felt the hand of the

Christ laid on his prostrate form: I became dead, and lo, I am alive

for evermore.'

c. Having died, the Servant carries into effect the divine purposes.

Prosper' implies progressive advancement. Christ's Sacrifice carried

out the divine pleasure, and by His Sacrifice the divine pleasure is

further carried out.

If Christ is the means of carrying out the divine purpose, consider

what this implies of divinity in His nature, of correspondence between

His will and the divine.

But Jesus not only carries into effect the divine purpose as a

consequence of a past act, but by His present energy this dead man is a

living power in the world today. Is He not?

The sole explanation of the vitality of Christianity, and the sole

reason which makes its message a gospel to any soul, is Christ's death

for the world and present life in the world.

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT--V

He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied: by His

knowledge shall My righteous servant justify many; and He shall bear

their iniquities'--ISAIAH liii. 11.

These are all but the closing words of this great prophecy, and are the

fitting crown of all that has gone before. We have been listening to

the voice of a member of the race to whom the Servant of the Lord

belonged, whether we limit that to the Jewish people or include in it

all humanity. That voice has been confessing for the speaker and his

brethren their common misapprehensions of the Servant, their blindness

to the meaning of His sufferings and the mystery of His death. It has

been proclaiming the true significance of these as now he had learned

them, and has in verse 10 touched the mystery of the reward and triumph

of the Servant.

That note of His glory and coronation is caught up in the two closing

verses, which, in substance, are the continuation of the idea of verse

10. But this identity of substance makes the variety of form the more

emphatic. Observe the My Servant' of verse 11, and the I will divide'

of verse 12. These oblige us to take this as the voice of God. The

confession and belief of earth is hushed, that the recognition and the

reward of the Servant may be declared from heaven. An added solemnity

is thus given to the words, and the prophecy comes round again to the

keynote on which it started in chapter lii, 13, My Servant.' Notice,

too, how the same characteristic is here as in verse 10--that the

recapitulation of the sufferings is almost equally prominent with the

description of the reward. The two are so woven together that no power

can part them. We may take these two verses as setting forth mainly two

things--the divine promise that the Servant shall give righteousness to

many, and the divine promise that the Servant shall conquer many for

Himself.

As to the exposition, of' here is probably casual, not partitive, as

the Authorised Version has it; travail' is not to be understood in the

sense of childbirth, but of toil and suffering; soul' is equivalent to

life. This fruit of His soul's travail is further defined in the words

which follow. The great result which will be beheld by Him and will

fill and content His heart is that by His knowledge He shall justify

many.' By His knowledge' certainly means, by the knowledge of Him on

the part of others. The phrase might be taken either objectively or

subjectively, but it seems to me that only the former yields an

adequate sense. My righteous servant' is scarcely emphatic enough. The

words in the original stand in an unusual order, which might be

represented by the righteous one, My servant,' and is intended to put

emphasis on the Servant's righteousness, as well as to suggest the

connection between His righteousness and His justifying,' in virtue of

His being righteous. Justify' is an unusual form, and means to procure

for, or impart righteousness to. The many' has stress on the article,

and is the antithesis not to all, but to few. We might render it the

masses,' an indefinite expression, which if not declaring universality,

approaches very near to it, as in Romans v. 19 and Matthew xxvi. 28. He

shall bear,' a future referring to the Servant in a state of

exaltation, and pointing to His continuous work after death. This

bearing is the root of our righteousness.

We may put the thoughts here in a definite order.

I. The great work which the Servant carries on.

It consists in giving or imparting righteousness. It seems to me that

it is out of place to be too narrow here in interpreting so as to draw

distinctions between righteousness imparted and righteousness bestowed.

We should rather take the general idea of making righteous, making, in

fact, like Himself. Note that this is the work which is Christ's

characteristic one. All thoughts of His blessings to the world which

omit that are imperfect.

II. The preparation for that making of us righteous.

The roots of our being made righteous by the righteous Servant are

found in His bearing our sins. His sin-bearing work is basis of our

righteousness. Christ justifies men by giving to them His own

righteousness, and taking in turn their sins on Himself that He may

expiate them.

Not only did He bear our sins in His own body on the tree,' but He will

bear them in His exaltation to the Throne, and only because He

continuously and eternally does so are we justified on earth and shall

we be sanctified in heaven.

III. The condition on which He imparts righteousness.

His knowledge,' which is to be taken in the profound Biblical sense as

including not only understanding but experience also.

Parallels are found in This is life eternal to know Thee' (John xvii.

3), and in That I may know Him' (Phil. iii. 10). So this prophecy comes

very near to the New Testament proclamation of righteousness by faith.

IV. The grand sweep of the Servant's work.

The many' is indefinite, and its very indefiniteness approximates it to

universality. A shadowy vision of a great multitude that no man can

number stretches out, as to the horizon, before the prophet. How many

they are he knows not. He knows that they are numerous enough to

satisfy' the Servant for all His sufferings. He knows, too, that there

is no limit to the happy crowd except that which is set by the

necessary condition of joining the bands of the justified'--namely, the

knowledge of Him.' They who receive the benefits which the Servant has

died and will live to bring cannot be few; they may be all. If any are

shut out, they are self-excluded.

V. The Servant's satisfaction.

It may be that the word employed means full,' rather than content,' but

the latter idea can scarcely be altogether absent from it. We have,

then, the great hope that the Servant, gazing on the results of His

sufferings, will be content, content to have borne them, content with

what they have effected.

The glory dies not and the grief is past.'

And the grief' has had for fruit not only glory' gathering round the

thorn-pierced head, but reflected glory shining on the brows of the

many,' whom He has justified and sanctified by their experience of Him

and His power. The creative week ended with the rest' of the Creator,

not because His energy was tired and needed repose, but because He had

fully carried out His purpose, and saw the perfected idea embodied in a

creation that was very good.' The redemptive work ends with the

Servant's satisfied contemplation of the many whom He has made like

Himself, His better creation.

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT--VI

Therefore will I divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall

divide the spoil with the strong; because He hath poured out His soul

unto death: and was numbered with the transgressors; and He bare the

sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.'--ISAIAH

liii. 12.

The first clause of this verse is somewhat difficult. There are two

ways of understanding it. One is that adopted in A. V., according to

which the suffering Servant is represented as equal to the greatest

conquerors. He is to be as gloriously successful in His victory as they

have been in theirs. But there are two very strong objections to this

rendering--first, that it takes the many' in the sense of mighty, thus

obscuring the identity of the expression here and in the previous verse

and in the end of this verse; and secondly, that it gives a very feeble

and frigid ending to the prophecy. It does not seem a worthy close

simply to say that the Servant is to be like a Cyrus or a

Nebuchadnezzar in His conquests.

The other rendering, though there are some difficulties, is to be

preferred. According to it the many' and the strong' are themselves the

prey or spoil. The words might be read, I will apportion to Him the

many, and He shall apportion to Himself the strong ones.'

This retains the same meaning of many' for the same expression

throughout the context, and is a worthy ending to the prophecy. The

force of the clause is then to represent the suffering Servant as a

conqueror, leading back from His conquests a long train of captives, a

rich booty.

Notice some points about this closing metaphor.

Mark its singular contrast to the tone of the rest of the prophecy.

Note the lowliness, the suffering, the minor key of it all, and then,

all at once, the leap up to rapture and triumph. The special form of

the metaphor strikes one as singular. Nothing in the preceding context

even remotely suggests it. Even the previous clause about making the

many righteous' does not do much to prepare the way for it. Whatever be

our explanation of the words, it must be one that does full justice to

this metaphor, and presents some conquering power or person, whose

victories are brilliant and real enough to be worthy to stand at the

close of such a prophecy. We must keep in mind, too, what has been

remarked on the two previous verses, that this victorious campaign and

growing conquest is achieved after the Servant is dead. That is a

paradox. And note that the strength of language representing His

activity can scarcely be reconciled with the idea that it is only the

post-mortem influence of His life which is meant.

Note, too, the singular blending of God's power and the Servant's own

activity in the winning of this extended sovereignty. Side by side the

two are put. The same verb is used in order to emphasise the intended

parallel. I will divide,' He shall divide.' I will give Him--He shall

conquer for Himself. Remember the intense vehemence with which the Old

Testament guards the absolute supremacy of divine power, and how

strongly it always puts the thought that God is everything and man

nothing. Look at the contrast of the tone when a human conqueror, whose

conquests are the result of God's providence, is addressed (xlv. 1-3).

There is an entire suppression of his personality, not a word about his

bravery, his military genius, or anything in him. It is all I, I, I.

Remember how, in chapter x., one of the sins for which the Assyrian is

to be destroyed is precisely that he thought of his victories as due to

his own strength and wisdom. So he is indignantly reminded that he is

only a staff in Mine hand,' the axe with which God hewed the nations,

whereas here the voice of God Himself speaks, and gives a strange place

beside Himself to the will and power of this Conqueror. This feature of

the prophecy should be accounted for in any satisfactory

interpretation.

Note, too, the wide sweep of the Servant's dominion, which carries us

back to the beginning of this prophecy in chapter lii. 15, where we

hear of the Servant as sprinkling' (or startling') many nations, and

the kings' is parallel with the strong' in this verse. No bounds are

assigned to the Servant's conquests, which are, if not declared to be

universal, at least indefinitely extended and striding on to world-wide

empire.

These points are plainly here. I do not dilate upon them. But I ask

whether any of the interpretations of these words, except one, gives

adequate force to them? Is there anything in the history of the

restored exiles which corresponds to this picture? Even if you admit

the violent hypothesis that there was a better part of the nation, so

good that the national sorrows had no chastisement for them, and the

other violent hypothesis that the devoutest among the exiles suffered

most, and the other that the death and burial and resurrection of the

Servant only mean the reformation wrought on Israel by captivity. What

is there in the history of Israel which can be pointed at as the

conquest of the world? Was the nation that bore the yokes of a Ptolemy,

an Antiochus, a Herod, a Caesar, the fulfiller of this dream of

world-conquest? There is only one thing which can be called the Jew

conquering the world. It is that which, as I believe, is meant here,

viz. Christ's conquest. Apart from that, I know of nothing which would

not be ludicrously disproportionate if it were alleged as fulfilment of

this glowing prophecy.

This prophetic picture is at least four hundred years before Christ, by

the admission of those who bring it lowest down, in their eagerness to

get rid of prophecy. The life of Christ does correspond to it, in such

a way that, clause by clause, it reads as if it were quite as much a

history of Jesus as a prophecy of the Servant. This certainly is an

extraordinary coincidence if it be not a prophecy. And there is really

no argument against the Messianic interpretation, except dogmatic

prejudice--there cannot be prophecy.'

No straining is needed in order to fit this great prophetic picture of

the world-Conqueror to Jesus. Even that, at first sight incongruous,

picture of a victor leading long lines of captives, such as we see on

Assyrian slabs and Egyptian paintings, is historically true of Him who

leads captivity captive,' and is, through the ages, winning ever fresh

victories, and leading His enemies, turned into lovers, in His

triumphal progress. He, and He only, really owns men. His slaves have

made real self-surrenders to Him. Other conquerors may imprison or load

with irons or deport to other lands, but they are only lords of bodies.

Jesus' chains are silken, and bind hearts that are proud of their

bonds. He carries off His free prisoners from the power of darkness'

into His kingdom of light. His slaves rejoice to say, I am not my own,'

and he only truly possesses himself who has given himself away to the

Conquering Christ. For all these centuries He has been conquering

hearts, enthralling and thereby liberating wills, making Himself the

life of lives. There is nothing else the least like the bond between

Jesus and millions who never saw him. Who among all the leaders of

thought or religious teachers has been able to impress his personality

on others and to dominate them in the fashion that Jesus has done and

is doing to-day? How has He done this thing, which no other man has

been able in the least to do? What is His charm, the secret of His

power? The prophet has no doubt what it is, and unfolds it to us with a

significant For.' We turn, then, to the prophetic explanation of that

worldwide empire and note--

II. The foundation of the Servant's dominion.

That explanation is given in four clauses which fall into two pairs.

They remarkably revert to the thought of the Servant's sufferings, but

in how different a tone these are now spoken of, when they are no

longer regarded as the results of man's blind failure to see His

beauty, or as inflicted by the mysterious pleasure of Jehovah,' but as

the causes of His triumph! Echoes of both the two first clauses are

heard from the lips of Jesus. As He passed beneath the tremulous shadow

of the olives of Gethsemane, He appealed for the companionship of the

three, by an all but solitary revelation of His weakness and sorrow, My

soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; abide ye here and watch

with Me.' And even more distinctly did He lay His hand on this prophecy

when He ended all His words in the upper room with This which is

written must be fulfilled in Me, And He was reckoned with

"transgressors."' May we not claim Jesus as endorsing the Messianic

interpretation of this prophecy? He gazed on the portrait painted ages

before that night of sorrow, and saw in it His own likeness, and said,

That is meant for Me. Some of us feel that, kenosis or no kenosis, He

is the best judge of who is the original of the prophet's portrait.

The two final clauses are separated from the preceding by the emphatic

introduction of the pronominal nominative, and cohere closely as

gathering up for the last time all the description of the Servant, and

as laying broad and firm the basis of His dominion, in the two great

facts which sum up His office and between them stretch over the past

and the future. He bare the sin of many, and maketh intercession for

the transgressors.' The former of these two clauses brings up the

pathetic picture of the scapegoat who bore upon him all their

iniquities into a solitary land.' The Servant conquers hearts because

He bears upon Him the grim burden which a mightier hand than Aaron's

has made to meet on His head, and because He bears it away. The ancient

ceremony, and the prophet's transference of the words describing it to

his picture of the Servant who was to be King, floated before John the

Baptist, when he pointed his brown, thin finger at Jesus and cried:

Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' The

goat had borne the sins of one nation; the prophet had extended the

Servant's ministry indefinitely, so as to include unnumbered many';

John spoke the universal word, the world.' So the circles widened.

But it is not enough to bear away sins. We need continuous help in the

present. Our daily struggles, our ever-felt weakness, all the ills that

flesh is heir to, cry aloud for a mightier than we to be at our sides.

So on the Servant's bearing the sins of the many there follows a

continuous act of priestly intercession, in which, not merely by

prayer, but by meritorious and prevailing intervention, He makes His

own the cause of the many whose sins He has borne.

On these two acts His dominion rests. Sacrifice and Intercession are

the foundations of His throne.

The empire of men's hearts falls to Him because of what He has done and

is doing for them. He who is to possess us absolutely must give Himself

to us utterly. The empire falls to Him who supplies men's deepest need.

He who can take away men's sins rules. He who can effectually undertake

men's cause will be their King.

If Jesus is or does anything less or else, He will not rule men for

ever. If He is but a Teacher and a Guide, oblivion, which shrouds all,

will sooner or later wrap Him in its misty folds. That His name should

so long have resisted its influence is due altogether to men having

believed Him to be something else. He will exercise an everlasting

dominion only if He have brought in an everlasting righteousness. He

will sit King for ever, if and only if He is a priest for ever. All

other rule is transient.

A remarkable characteristic of this entire prophecy is the frequent

repetition of expressions conveying the idea of sufferings borne for

others. In one form or another that thought occurs, as we reckon,

eleven times, and it is especially frequent in the last verses of the

chapter. Why this perpetual harking back to that one aspect? It is to

be further noticed that throughout there is no hint of any other kind

of work which this Servant had to do. He fulfils His service to God and

man by being bruised for men's iniquities. He came not to be ministered

unto but to minister, and the chief form of His ministry was that He

gave His life a ransom for the many. He came not to preach a gospel,

but to die that there might be a gospel to preach. The Cross is the

centre of His work, and by it He becomes the Centre of the world.

Look once more at the sorrowful, august figure that rose before the

prophet's eye--with its strange blending of sinlessness and sorrow,

God's approval and God's chastisement, rejection and rule, death and

life, abject humiliation and absolute dominion. Listen to the last

echoes of the prophet's voice as it dies on our ear--He bore the sins

of the many.' And then hearken how eight hundred years after another

voice takes up the echoes--but instead of pointing away down the

centuries, points to One at his side, and cries, Behold the Lamb of

God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' Look at that life, that

death, that grave, that resurrection, that growing dominion, that

inexhaustible intercession--and say, Of whom speaketh the prophet

this?'

May we all be able to answer with clear confidence, These things saith

Esaias when he saw His glory and spake of Him.' May we all take up the

ancient confession: Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our

sorrows. . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised

for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and

with His stripes we are healed.'

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THE PASSING AND THE PERMANENT

For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but My

kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of My

peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.'--ISAIAH liv,

10.

There is something of music in the very sound of these words. The

stately march of the grand English translation lends itself with

wonderful beauty to the melody of Isaiah's words. But the thought that

lies below them, sweeping as it does through the whole creation, and

parting all things into the transient and eternal, the mortal and

immortal, is still greater than the music of the words. These are

removed; this abides. And the thing in God which abides is all-gentle

tenderness, that strange love mightier than all the powers of Deity

beside, permanent with the permanence of His changeless heart. The

mountains shall depart, the emblems of eternity shall crumble and

change and pass, and the hills be removed; but this immortal,

impalpable, and, in some men's minds, fantastic and unreal something,

My loving kindness and the covenant of My peace,' shall outlast them

all. And this great promise is stamped with the sign manual of Heaven,

being spoken by the Lord that hath mercy on thee.'

So then, dear friends, I think I shall most reverentially deal with

these words if I handle them in the simplest possible way, and think,

first of all, of that great antithesis that is set before us here--what

passes and what abides; and, secondly, draw two or three plain, homely

lessons and applications from the thoughts thus suggested.

I. First, then, we have to deal with the contrast between the

apparently enduring which passes, and that which truly abides.

The mountains depart, the hills remove, My loving-kindness shall not

depart, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed.' Let me then

say a word or two about that first thought--the mountains shall

depart.' There they tower over the plains, looking down upon the flat

valley beneath as they did when the prophet spoke. The eternal

buttresses of the hills stand to the eyes of the fleeting generations

as emblems of permanence, and yet winter storms and summer heats, and

the slow processes of decay which we call the gnawing of time, are ever

working upon them, and changing their forms, and at last they shall

pass. Modern science, whilst it has all but incalculably enlarged our

conceptio