Expositions of Holy Scripture Psalms

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Title: Expositions of Holy Scripture: Psalms

Creator(s): Maclaren, Alexander (1826-1910)

CCEL Subjects: All; Bible

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

PSALMS

by

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

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

VOLUME I: PSALMS I to XLIX

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

CONTENTS

BLESSEDNESS AND PRAISE (Psalm i. 1, 2; cl. 6)

A STAIRCASE OF THREE STEPS (Psalm v. 11, 12)

ONE SAYING FROM THREE MEN (Psalm x. 6; xvi. 8; xxx. 6)

MAN'S TRUE TREASURE IN GOD (Psalm xvi. 5, 6)

GOD WITH US, AND WE WITH GOD (Psalm xvi. 8, 11)

THE TWO AWAKINGS (Psalm xvii. 15; lxxiii. 20)

SECRET FAULTS (Psalm xix. 12)

OPEN SINS (Psalm xix. 13)

FEASTING ON THE SACRIFICE (Psalm xxii. 26)

THE SHEPHERD KING OF ISRAEL (Psalm xxiii. 1-6)

A GREAT QUESTION AND ITS ANSWER (Psalm xxiv. 3)

THE GOD WHO DWELLS WITH MEN (Psalm xxiv. 7-10)

GUIDANCE IN JUDGMENT (Psalm xxv. 8, 9)

A PRAYER FOR PARDON AND ITS PLEA (Psalm xxv. 11)

GOD'S GUESTS (Psalm xxvii. 4)

SEEK YE'--I WILL SEEK' (Psalm xxvii. 8, 9)

THE TWO GUESTS (Psalm xxx. 5)

BE . . . FOR THOU ART' (Psalm xxxi. 2, 3, R.V.)

INTO THY HANDS' (Psalm xxxi. 5)

GOODNESS WROUGHT AND GOODNESS LAID UP (Psalm xxxi. 19)

HID IN LIGHT (Psalm xxxi. 20)

A THREEFOLD THOUGHT OF SIN AND FORGIVENESS (Psalm xxxii. 1, 2)

THE ENCAMPING ANGEL (Psalm xxxiv. 7)

STRUGGLING AND SEEKING (Psalm xxxiv. 10)

NO CONDEMNATION (Psalm xxxiv. 22)

SKY, EARTH, AND SEA: A PARABLE OF GOD (Psalm xxxvi. 5-7)

WHAT MEN FIND BENEATH THE WINGS OF GOD (Psalm xxxvi. 8, 9)

THE SECRET OF TRANQUILLITY (Psalm xxxvii. 4, 5, 7)

THE BITTERNESS AND BLESSEDNESS OF THE BREVITY OF LIFE (Psalm xxxix. 6,

12)

TWO INNUMERABLE SERIES (Psalm xl. 5, 12)

THIRSTING FOR GOD (Psalm xlii. 2)

THE PSALMIST'S REMONSTRANCE WITH HIS SOUL (Psalm xliii. 5)

THE KING IN HIS BEAUTY (Psalm xlv. 2-7, R.V.)

THE PORTRAIT OF THE BRIDE (Psalm xlv. 10-15, R.V.)

THE CITY AND RIVER OF GOD (Psalm xlvi. 4-7)

THE LORD OF HOSTS, THE GOD OF JACOB (Psalm xlvi. 11)

A SONG OF DELIVERANCE (Psalm xlviii. 1-14)

TWO SHEPHERDS AND TWO FLOCKS (Psalm xlix. 14; Rev. vii. 17)

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

BLESSEDNESS AND PRAISE

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor

standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the

scornful. 2. But his delight is in the law of the Lord.' --PSALM i. 1,

2.

Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the

Lord.'--PSALM cl. 6.

The Psalter is the echo in devout hearts of the other portions of

divine revelation. There are in it, indeed, further disclosures of

God's mind and purposes, but its especial characteristic is--the

reflection of the light of God from brightened faces and believing

hearts. As we hold it to be inspired, we cannot simply say that it is

man's response to God's voice. But if the rest of Scripture may be

called the speech of the Spirit of God to men, this book is the answer

of the Spirit of God in men.

These two verses which I venture to lay side by side present in a very

remarkable way this characteristic. It is not by accident that they

stand where they do, the first and last verses of the whole collection,

enclosing all, as it were, within a golden ring, and bending round to

meet each other. They are the summing up of the whole purpose and issue

of God's revelation to men.

The first and second psalms echo the two main portions of the old

revelation--the Law and the Prophets. The first of them is taken up

with the celebration of the blessedness and fruitful, stable being of

the man who loves the Law of the Lord, as contrasted with the rootless

and barren life of the ungodly, who is like the chaff. The second is

occupied with the contemplation of the divine decree' by which the

coming King is set in God's holy hill of Zion,' and of the blessedness

of all they who put their trust in Him,' as contrasted with the swift

destruction that shall fall on the vain imaginations of the rebellious

heathen and banded kings of earth.

The words of our first text, then, may well stand at the beginning of

the Psalter. They express the great purpose for which God has given His

Law. They are the witness of human experience to the substantial,

though partial, accomplishment of that purpose. They rise in buoyant

triumph over that which is painful and apparently opposed to it; and in

spite of sorrow and sin, proclaim the blessedness of the life which is

rooted in the Law of the Lord.

The last words of the book are as significant as its first. The closing

psalms are one long call to praise--they probably date from the time of

the restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah, when, as we know, the service

of song' was carefully re-established, and the harps which had hung

silent upon the willows by the rivers of Babylon woke again their

ancient melodies. These psalms climb higher and higher in their

rapturous call to all creatures, animate and inanimate, on earth and in

heaven, to praise Him. The golden waves of music and song pour out ever

faster and fuller. At last we hear this invocation to every instrument

of music to praise Him, responded to, as we may suppose, by each, in

turn as summoned, adding its tributary notes to the broadening river of

harmony--until all, with gathered might of glad sound blended with the

crash of many voices, unite in the final words, Let every thing that

hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord.'

I. We have here a twofold declaration of God's great purpose in all His

self-revelation, and especially in the Gospel of His Son.

Our first text may be translated as a joyful exclamation, Oh! the

blessedness of the man--whose delight is in the law of the Lord.' Our

second is an invocation or a command. The one then expresses the

purpose which God secures by His gift of the Law; the other the purpose

which He summons us to fulfil by the tribute of our hearts and

songs--man's happiness and God's glory.

His purpose is Man's blessedness.

That is but another way of saying, God is love. For love, as we know

it, is eminently the desire for the happiness of the person on whom it

is fixed. And unless the love of God be like ours, however it may

transcend it, there is no revelation of Him to our hearts at all. If He

be love, then He delights in the prosperity' of His children.

And that purpose runs through all His acts. For perfect love is

all-pervasive, and even with us men, it rules the whole being; nor does

he love at all who seeks the welfare of the heart he clings to by fits

and starts, by some of his acts and not by others. When God comes forth

from the unvisioned light, which is thick darkness, of His own eternal,

self-adequate Being, and flashes into energy in Creation, Providence,

or Grace, the Law of His Working and His Purpose are one, in all

regions. The unity of the divine acts depends on this--that all flow

from one deep source, and all move to one mighty end. Standing on the

height to which His own declarations of His own nature lift our

feebleness, we can see how the river of God that waters the garden' and

parts' into many heads,' gushes from one fountain. One of the psalms

puts what people call the philosophy' of creation and of providence

very clearly, in accordance with this thought--that the love of God is

the source, and the blessedness of man the end, of all His work: To Him

that made great lights; for His mercy endureth for ever. To Him that

slew mighty kings; for His mercy endureth for ever.'

Creation, then, is the effluence of the loving heart of God. Though the

sacred characters be but partially legible to us now, what He wrote, on

stars and flowers, on the infinitely great and the infinitely small, on

the infinitely near and the infinitely far off, with His creating hand,

was the one inscription--God is love. And as in nature, so in

providence. The origination, and the support, and the direction of all

things, are the works and the heralds of the same love. It is printed

in starry letters on the sky. It is graven on the rocks, and breathed

by the flowers. It is spoken as a dark saying even by sorrow and pain.

The mysteries of destructive and crushing providences have come from

the same source. And he who can see with the Psalmist the ever-during

mercy of the Lord, as the reason of creation and of judgments, has in

his hands the golden key which opens all the locks in the palace

chambers of the great King. He only hath penetrated to the secret of

things material, and stands in the light at the centre, who understands

that all comes from the one source--God's endless desire for the

blessedness of His creatures.

But while all God's works do thus praise Him by testifying that He

seeks to bless His creatures, the loftiest example of that desire is,

of course, found in His revelation of Himself to men's hearts and

consciences, to men's spirits and wills. That mightiest act of love,

beginning in the long-past generations, has culminated in Him in whom

dwelleth the whole fulness of the Godhead bodily,' and in whose work is

all the love--the perfect, inconceivable, patient, omnipotent love of

our redeeming God.

And then, remember that this is not inconsistent with or contradicted

by the sterner aspects of that revelation, which cannot be denied, and

ought not to be minimised or softened. Here, on the right hand, are the

flowery slopes of the Mount of Blessing; there, on the left, the

barren, stern, thunder-riven, lightning-splintered pinnacles of the

Mount of Cursing. Every clear note of benediction hath its low minor of

imprecation from the other side. Between the two, overhung by the hopes

of the one, and frowned upon and dominated by the threatenings of the

other, is pitched the little camp of our human life, and the path of

our pilgrimage runs in the trough of the valley between. And yet--might

we not go a step farther, and say that above the parted summits

stretches the one overarching blue, uniting them both, and their roots

deep down below the surface interlace and twine together? That is to

say, the threatenings and rebukes, the acts of retributive judgment,

which are contained in the revelation of God, are no limitation nor

disturbance of the clear and happy faith that all which we behold is

full of blessing, and that all comes from the Father's hand. They are

the garb in which His Love needs to array itself when it comes in

contact with man's sin and man's evil. The love of God appears no less

when it teaches us in grave sad tones that the wages of sin is death,'

than when it proclaims that the gift of God is eternal life.'

Love threatens that it may never have to execute its threats. Love

warns that we may be wise in time. Love prophesies that its sad

forebodings may not be fulfilled. And love smites with lighter strokes

of premonitory chastisements, that we may never need to feel the whips

of scorpions.

Remember, too, that these sterner aspects both of Law and of Gospel

point this lesson--that we shall very much misunderstand God's purpose

if we suppose it to be blessedness for us men anyhow, irrespective

altogether of character. Some people seem to think that God loves us so

much, as they would say--so little, so ignobly, as I would say--as that

He only desires us to be happy. They seem to think that the divine love

is tarnished unless it provides for men's felicity, whether they are

God-loving and God-like or no. Thus the solemn and majestic love of the

Father in heaven is to be brought down to a weak good nature, which

only desires that the child shall cease crying and be happy, and does

not mind by what means that end is reached. God's purpose is

blessedness; but, as this very text tells us, not blessedness anyhow,

but one which will not and cannot be given by God to those who walk in

the way of sinners. His love desires that we should be holy, and

followers of God as dear children'--and the blessedness which it

bestows comes from pardon and growing fellowship with Him. It can no

more fall on rebellious hearts than the pure crystals of the snow can

lie and sparkle on the hot, black cone of a volcano.

The other text that I have read sets forth another view of God's

purpose. God seeks our praise. The glory of God is the end of all the

divine actions. Now, that is a statement which no doubt is

irrefragable, and a plain deduction from the very conception of an

infinite Being. But it may be held in such connections, and spoken with

such erroneous application, and so divorced from other truths, that

instead of being what it is in the Bible, good news, it shall become a

curse and a lie. It may be so understood as to describe not our Father

in heaven, but an almighty devil! But, when the thought that God's

purpose in all His acts is His own glory, is firmly united with that

other, that His purpose in all His acts is our blessing, then we begin

to understand how full of joy it may be for us. His glory is sought by

Him in the manifestation of His loving heart, mirrored in our

illuminated and gladdened hearts. Such a glory is not unworthy of

infinite love. It has nothing in common with the ambitious and hungry

greed of men for reputation or self-display. That desire is altogether

ignoble and selfish when it is found in human hearts; and it would be

none the less ignoble and selfish if it were magnified into infinitude,

and transferred to the divine. But to say that God's glory is His great

end, is surely but another way of saying that He is love. The love that

seeks to bless us desires, as all love does, that it should be known

for what it is, that it should be recognised in our glad hearts, and

smiled back again from our brightened faces. God desires that we should

know Him, and so have Eternal Life; He desires that knowing Him, we

should love Him, and loving should praise, and so should glorify Him.

He desires that there should be an interchange of love bestowing and

love receiving, of gifts showered down and of praise ascending, of fire

falling from the heavens and sweet incense, from grateful hearts, going

up in fragrant clouds acceptable unto God. It is a sign of a Fatherly

heart that He seeketh such to worship Him'. He desires to be glorified

by our praise, because He loves us so much. He commences with an offer,

He advances to a command. He gives first, and then (not till then) He

comes seeking fruit from the trees' which are the planting of the Lord,

that He might be glorified.' His plea is not the vineyard belongs to

Me, and I have a right to its fruits,' but what could have been done

more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it?--judge between Me and

My vineyard.' First, He showers down blessings; then, He looks for the

revenue of praise!

II. We may also take these passages as giving us a twofold expression

of the actual effects of God's revelation, especially in the Gospel,

even here upon earth.

The one text is the joyful exclamation built upon experience and

observation. The other is a call which is answered in some measure even

by voices that are often dumb in unthankfulness, often broken by sobs,

often murmuring in penitence.

God does actually, though not completely, make men blessed here. Our

text sums up the experience of all the devout hearts and lives whose

emotions are expressed in the Psalms. He who wrote this psalm would

preface the whole book by words into which the spirit of the book is

distilled. It will have much to say of sorrow and pain. It will touch

many a low note of wailing and of grief. There will be complaints and

penitence, and sighs almost of despair before it closes. But this which

he puts first is the note of the whole. So it is in our histories. They

will run through many a dark and desert place. We shall have bitterness

and trials in abundance, there will be many an hour of sadness caused

by my own evil, and many a hard struggle with it. But high above all

these mists and clouds will rise the hope that seeks the skies, and

deep beneath all the surface agitations of storms and currents there

will be the unmoved stillness of the central ocean of peace in our

hearts. In the valley of weeping' we may still be blessed' if the ways'

are in our hearts, and if we make of the very tears a well,' drawing

refreshment from the very trials. With all its sorrows and pains, its

fightings and fears, its tribulations in the world, and its chastenings

from a Father's hand, the life of a Christian is a happy life, and the

joy of the Lord' remains with His servants.

More than twenty centuries have passed since that psalm was written. As

many stretched dim behind the Psalmist as he sang. He was gathering up

in one sentence the spirit of the past, and confirming it by his own

life's history. And has any one that has lived since then stood up and

said--Behold! I have found it otherwise. I have waited on God, and He

has not heard my cry. I have served Him, and that for nought. I have

trusted in Him, and been disappointed. I have sought His face--in vain.

And I say, from my own experience, that the man who trusts in Him is

not blessed'? Not one, thank God! The history of the past, so far as

this matter is concerned, may be put in one sentence They looked unto

Him and were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed,' and as for

the present, are there not some of us who can say, This poor man cried,

and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles'?

Brethren! make the experiment for yourselves. Test this experience by

your own simple affiance and living trust in Jesus Christ. We have the

experience of all generations to encourage us. What has blessed them is

enough for you and me. Like the meal and the oil, which were the

Prophet's resource in famine, yesterday's supply does not diminish

to-morrow's store. We, too, may have all that gladdened the hearts and

stayed the spirits of the saints of old. Oh! taste and see that God is

good.' Blessed is the man that trusteth in Him.'

So, too, God's gift produces man's praise.

What is it that He desires from us? Nothing but our thankful

recognition and reception of His benefits. We honour God by taking the

full cup of salvation which He commends to our lips, and by calling,

while we drink, upon the name of the Lord. Our true response to His

Word, which is essentially a proffer of blessing to us, is to open our

hearts to receive, and, receiving, to render grateful acknowledgment.

The echo of love which gives and forgives, is love which accepts and

thanks. We have but to lift up our empty and impure hands, opened wide

to receive the gift which He lays in them--and though they be empty and

impure, yet the lifting up of our hands' is as the evening sacrifice';

our sense of need stands in the place of all offerings. The stained

thankfulness of our poor hearts is accepted by Him who inhabits the

praises of eternity, and yet delights in the praises of Israel. He

bends from heaven to give, and all He asks is that we should take. He

only seeks our thankfulness--but He does seek it. And wherever His

grace is discerned, and His love is welcomed, there praise breaks

forth, as surely as streams pour from the cave of the glacier when the

sun of summer melts it, or earth answers the touch of spring with

flowers.

And that effect is produced, notwithstanding all the complaints and

sighs and tears which sometimes choke our praise. It is produced even

while these last; the psalms of thanksgiving are not all reserved for

the end of the book. But even in those which read like the very sobs of

a broken heart, there is ever present some tone of grateful

acknowledgment of God's mercy. He sends us sorrow, and He wills that we

should weep--but they should be tears like David's, who, at the lowest

point of his fortunes, when he plaintively besought God, Put Thou my

tears into Thy bottle'--could say in the same breath, Thy vows are upon

me, O God: I will render praises unto Thee.' God works on our souls

that we may have the consciousness of sin, and He wills that we should

come with broken and contrite hearts, and like the king of Israel wail

out our confessions and supplications--Have mercy upon me, O God!

according to Thy loving-kindness.' But, like him, we should even in our

lowliest abasement, when our hearts are bruised, be able to say along

with our contrition, Open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth

Thy praise.' Our sorrows are never so great that they hide our mercies.

The sky is never so covered with clouds that neither sun nor stars

appear for many days. And in every Christian heart the low tones of

lamentation and confession are blended with grateful praise. So it is

even in the darkest moments, whilst the blast of misfortune and misery

is as a storm against the wall.

But a brighter hope even for our life here rises from these words, if

we think of the place which they hold in the whole book. They are the

last words. Whatever other notes have been sounded in its course, all

ends in this. The winter's day has had its melancholy grey sky, with

many a bitter dash of snow and rain--but it has stormed itself out, and

at eventide, a rent in the clouds reveals the sun, and it closes in

peaceful clearness of light.

The note of gladness heard at the beginning, Oh! the blessedness of the

man that delights in the law of the Lord,' holds on persistently, like

a subdued and almost bewildered undercurrent of sweet sound amid all

the movements of some colossal symphony, through tears and sobs,

confession and complaint, and it springs up at the close triumphant,

like the ruddy spires of a flame long smothered, and swells and

broadens, and draws all the intricate harmonies into its own rushing

tide. Some of you remember the great musical work which has these very

words for its theme. It begins with the call, All that hath life and

breath, praise ye the Lord,' and although the gladness saddens into the

plaintive cry of a soul sick with hope deferred, Will the night soon

pass?' yet, ere the close, all discords are reconciled, and at last,

with assurance firmer for the experience of passing sorrows, loud as

the voice of many waters and sweet as harpers harping with their harps,

the joyful invocation peals forth again, and all ends, as it does in a

Christian man's life, and as it does in this book, with Praise ye the

Lord.'

III. We have here also a twofold prophecy of the perfection of Heaven.

Whilst it is true that both of these purposes are accomplished here and

now, it is also true that their accomplishment is but partial, and that

therefore for their fulfilment we have to lift our eyes beyond this

world of imperfect faith, of incomplete blessedness, of interrupted

praise. Whether the Psalmist looked forward thus we do not know. But

for us, the very shortcomings of our joys and of our songs are

prophetic of the perfect and perpetual rapture of the one, and the

perfect and perpetual music of the other. We know that He who has given

us so much will not stay His hand until He has perfected that which

concerns us. We know that He who has taught our dumb hearts to magnify

His name will not cease till out of the lips of babes and sucklings, He

has perfected praise.' We know that the pilgrims in whose hearts are

the ways are blessed, and we are sure that a fuller blessedness must

belong to those who have reached the journey's end.

And so these words give us a twofold aspect of that future on which our

longing hopes may well fix.

It is the perfection of man's blessedness. Then the joyous exclamation

of our first text, which we have often had to strive hard not to

disbelieve, will be no more a truth of faith but a truth of experience.

Here we have had to trust that it was so, even when we could scarce

cleave to the confidence. There, memory will look back on our

wanderings through this great wilderness, and, enlightened by the issue

of them all, will speak only of Mercy and Goodness as our angel guides

all our lives. The end will crown the work. Pure unmingled

consciousness of bliss will fill all hearts, and break into the old

exclamation, which we had sometimes to stifle sobs ere we could speak

on earth. When He says, Come in! ye blessed of My Father,' all our

tears and fears, and pains and sins, will be forgotten, and we shall

but have to say, in wonder and joy, Blessed are they that dwell in Thy

house; they will be still praising Thee.'

It is the perfection of God's praise. We may possibly venture to see in

these wonderful words of our text a dim and far-off hint of a

possibility that seems to be pointed at in many parts of

Scripture--that the blessings of Christ's mighty work shall, in some

measure and manner, pass through man to his dwelling-place and its

creatures. Dark shadows of evil--the mystery of pain and sorrow--lie

over earth and all its tribes. We look for new heavens and a new earth

wherein dwelleth righteousness.' And the statements of Scripture which

represent creation as suffering by man's sin, and participant in its

degree in man's redemption, seem too emphatic and precise, as well as

too frequent, and in too didactic connections, to be lightly brushed

aside as poetic imagery. May it not be that man's transgression

Broke the fair music that all creatures made

To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed,'

and that man's restoration may, indeed, bring back all that hath life

and breath to a harmonious blessedness--according to the deep and

enigmatical words, which declare that the creature itself also shall be

delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory

of the children of God'? Be that as it may, at all events our second

text opens to us the gates of the heavenly temple, and shows us there

the saintly ranks and angel companies gathered in the city whose walls

are salvation and its gates praise. They harmonise with that other

later vision of heaven which the Seer in Patmos beheld, not only in

setting before us worship as the glad work of all who are there, but in

teaching the connection between the praises of men, and the answering

hymns of angels. The harps of heaven are hushed to hear their praise

who can sing, Thou hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood,' and, in

answer to that hymn of thanksgiving for unexampled deliverance and

resorting grace, the angels around the throne break forth into new

songs to the Lamb that was slain--while still wider spread the

broadening circles of harmonious praise, till at last every creature

which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as

are in the sea, and all that are in them,' join in the mighty hymn of

Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, unto Him that sitteth upon

the throne, and to the Lamb for ever and ever.' Then the rapturous

exclamation from human souls redeemed,--Oh! the blessedness of the men

whom Thou hast loved and saved,' shall be answered by choral praise

from everything that hath breath.

And are you dumb, my friend, in these universal bursts of praise? Is

that because you have not chosen to take the universal blessing which

God gives? You have nothing to do but to receive the things that are

freely given to you of God--the forgiveness, the cleansing, the life,

that come from Christ by faith. Take them, and call upon the name of

the Lord, And can you refuse His gifts and withhold your praise? You

can be eloquent in thanks to those who do you kindnesses, and in praise

of those whom you admire and love, but your best Friend receives none

of your gratitude and none of your praise. Ignoble silence and dull

unthankfulness--with these you requite your Saviour! I tell you that,

if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry

out!'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A STAIRCASE OF THREE STEPS

All those that put their trust in Thee . . . them also that love Thy

name . . . the righteous.'--PSALM v. 11, 12.

I have ventured to isolate these three clauses from their context,

because, if taken in their sequence, they are very significant of the

true path by which men draw nigh to God and become righteous. They are

all three designations of the same people, but regarded under different

aspects and at different stages. There is a distinct order in them, and

whether the Psalmist was fully conscious of it or not, he was

anticipating and stating, with wonderful distinctness, the Christian

sequence--faith, love, righteousness.

These three are the three flights of stairs, as it were, which lead men

up to God and to perfection, or if you like to take another metaphor,

meaning the same thing, they are respectively the root, the stalk, and

the fruit of religion. They that put their trust in Thee . . . them

also that love Thy Name . . . the righteous.'

I. So, then, the first thought here is that the foundation of all is

trust.

Now, the word that is employed here is very significant. In its literal

force it really means to flee to a refuge.' And that the literal

signification has not altogether been lost in the spiritual and

metaphorical use of it, as a term expressive of religious experience,

is quite plain from many of the cases in which it occurs. Let me just

repeat one of them to you. Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful to

me, for my soul trusteth in Thee; yea, in the shadow of Thy wings will

I make my refuge.' There the picture that is in the words is distinctly

before the Psalmist's mind, and he is thinking not only of the act of

mind and heart by which he casts himself in confidence upon God, but

upon that which represents it in symbol, the act by which a man flees

into some hiding-place. The psalm is said in the superscription to have

been written when David hid in a cave from his persecutor. Though no

weight be given to that statement, it suggests the impression made by

the psalm. In imagination we can see the rough sides of the cavern that

sheltered him arching over the fugitive, like the wings of some great

bird, and just as he has fled thither with eager feet and is safely

hidden from his pursuers there, so he has betaken himself to the

everlasting Rock, in the cleft of which he is at rest and secure. To

trust in God is neither more nor less than to flee to Him for refuge,

and there to be at peace. The same presence of the original metaphor,

colouring the same religious thought, is found in the beautiful words

with which Boaz welcomes Ruth, when he prays for her that the God of

Israel may reward her, under the shadow of whose wings thou hast come

to trust.'

So, as a man in peril runs into a hiding-place or fortress, as the

chickens beneath the outspread wing of the mother bird nestle close in

the warm feathers and are safe and well, the soul that trusts takes its

flight straight to God, and in Him reposes and is secure.

Now, it seems to me that such a figure as that is worth tons of

theological lectures about the true nature of faith, and that it tells

us, by means of a picture that says a great deal more than many a

treatise, that faith is something very different from a cold-blooded

act of believing in the truth of certain propositions; that it is the

flight of the soul--knowing itself to be in peril, and naked, and

unarmed--into the strong Fortress.

What is it that keeps a man safe when he thus has around him the walls

of some citadel? Is it himself, is it the act by which he took refuge,

or is it the battlements behind which he crouches? So in faith--which

is more than a process of a man's understanding, and is not merely the

saying, Yes, I believe all that is in the Bible is true; at any rate,

it is not for me to contradict it,' but is the running of the man, when

he knows himself to be in danger, into the very arms of God--it is not

the running that makes him safe, but it is the arms to which he runs.

If we would only lay to heart that the very essence of religion lies in

this flight of the lonely soul to the only God,' we should understand

better than we do what He asks from us in order that He may defend us,

and how blessed and certain His defence is. So let us clear our minds

from the thought that anything is worth calling trust which is not thus

taking refuge in God Himself.

Now, I need not remind you, I suppose, that all this is just as true

about us as it was about David, and that the emotion or the act of his

will and heart which he expresses in these words of my text is neither

more nor less than the Christian act of faith. There is no difference

except a difference of development; there is no difference between the

road to God marked out in the Psalms, and the road to God laid down in

the Gospels. The Psalmist who said, Trust ye in the Lord for ever,' and

the Apostle who said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt

be saved,' were preaching identically the same doctrine. One of them

could speak more fully than the other could of the Person on whom trust

was to be rested, but the trust itself was the same, and the Person on

whom it rested was the same, though His Name of old was Jehovah, and

His Name to-day is Immanuel, God with us.'

Nor need I do more than point out how the context of the words that I

have ventured to detach from their surroundings is instructive: Let all

those that put their trust in Thee rejoice because Thou defendest

them.' The word for defending there continues the metaphor that lies in

the word for trust,' for it means literally to cover over and so to

protect. Thus, when a man runs to God for His refuge, God

Covers his defenceless head With the shadow of His wings.'

And the joy of trust is, first, that it brings round me the whole

omnipotence of God for my defence, and the whole tenderness of God for

my consolation, and next, that in the very exercise of trust in such

defence, so fortified and vindicated by experience, there is great

reward. All who thus flee into the refuge shall find refuge whither

they flee, and shall be glad.

II. Then the next thought of my texts, which I do not force into them,

but which results, as it seems to me, distinctly from the order in

which they occur in the context, is that love follows trust.

All those that put their trust in Thee--they also that love Thee.' If I

am to love God, I must be quite sure that God loves me. My love can

never be anything else than an answer to His. It can only be secondary

and derived, or I would rather say reflected and flashed back from His.

And so, very significantly, the Psalmist says, Those that love Thy

Name,' meaning by Name,' as is always meant by it, the revealed

character of God. If I am to love God, He must not hide in the darkness

behind His infinity, but must come out and give me something about Him

that I know. The three letters G O D mean nothing, and there is no

power in them to stir a man's heart. It must be the knowledge of the

acts of God that brings men to love Him. And there is no way of getting

that knowledge but through the faith which, as I said, must precede

love. For faith realises the fact that God loves. We have known and

believed the love that God hath to us.' The first step is to grasp the

great truth of the loving God, and through that truth to grasp the God

that loves. And then, and not till then, does there spring up in a

man's heart love towards Him. But it is only the faith that is set on

Him who hath declared the Father unto us that gives us for our very own

the grasp of the facts, which facts are the only possible fuel that can

kindle love in a human heart. We love Him because He first loved us,'

and we shall never know that He loves us unless we come to the

knowledge through the road of faith. So John himself tells us when he

says, in the words that I have already quoted, We have known and

believed.' He puts the foundation last, We have known,' because we have

believed' the love that God hath to us.'

And so faith is the only possible means by which any of us can ever

experience, as well as realise, the love that kindles ours. It is the

possession of the fact of redemption for my very own and of the

blessings which accompany it, and that alone, that binds a man to God

in the bonds of love that cannot be broken, and that subdues and unites

all vagrant emotions, affections, and desires in the mighty tide of a

love that ever sets towards Him. As surely as the silvery moon in the

sky draws after it the heaped waters of the ocean all round the world,

so God's love draws ours. They that believe contemplate, and they that

believe experience the effects of that divine love, which must be

experienced ere our answering love can be flashed back to heaven.

Students of acoustics tell us that if you have two stringed instruments

in adjacent apartments, tuned to the same pitch, a note sounded on one

of them will be feebly vibrated upon the other as soon as the waves of

sound have reached the sensitive string. In like manner a man's heart

gives off a faint, but musical, little tinkle of answering love to God

when the deep note of God's love to him, struck on the chords of heaven

up yonder, reaches his poor heart.

Love follows trust. So, brethren, if we desire to be warmed, let us get

into the sunshine and abide there. If we desire to have our hearts

filled with love to God, do not let us waste our time in trying to pump

up artificial emotions or to persuade ourselves that we love Him better

than we do, but let us fix our thoughts and fasten our refuge-seeking

trust on Him, and then that shall kindle ours.

III. Lastly, righteousness follows trust and love.

The last description here of the man who begins as a believer and then

advances to being a lover is righteous. That is the evangelical order.

That is the great blessing and beauty of Christianity, that it goes an

altogether different way to work to make men good from that which any

other system has ever dreamed of. It says, first of all, trust, and

that will create love and that will ensure obedience. Faith leads to

righteousness because, in the very act of trusting God, I come out of

myself, and going out of myself and ceasing from all self-admiration

and self-dependence and self-centred life is the beginning of all good

and has in it the germ of all righteousness, even as to live for self

is the mother tincture out of which we can make all sins.

And faith leads to righteousness in another way. Open the heart and

Christ comes in. Trust Him and He fills our poor nature with the law of

the Spirit of life that was in Christ Jesus,' and that makes me free

from the law of sin and death.' Righteousness, meaning thereby just

what irreligious men mean by it--viz. good living, plain obedience to

the ordinary recognised dictates of morality, going straight--that is

most surely attained when we cease from our own works and say to Jesus

Christ, Lord, I cannot walk in the narrow path. Do Thou Thyself come to

me and fill my heart and keep my feet.' They that trust and love are

found in Him, not having their own righteousness, but that which is of

God by faith.'

And love leads to righteousness because it brings the one motive into

play in our hearts which turns duty into delight, toil into joy, and

makes us love better to do what will please our beloved Lover than

anything besides. Why did Jesus Christ say, My yoke is easy and My

burden is light'? Was it because He diminished the weight of duties or

laid down an easier slipshod morality than had been enjoined before?

No! He intensified it all, and His Commandment is far harder to flesh

and blood than any commandments that were ever given. But for all that,

the yoke that He lays upon our necks is, if I may so say, padded with

velvet; and the burden that we have to draw behind us is laid upon

wheels that will turn so easily that the load is diminished, inasmuch

as for Duty He substitutes Himself and says to us, If ye love Me, keep

My Commandments.'

So, dear brethren! here is a very easily applied, and a very

far-reaching test for us who call ourselves Christians: Does our love

and does our trust culminate in practical righteousness? We are all

tempted to make too much of the emotions of the religious life, and too

little of its persistent, dogged obedience. We are all too apt to think

that a Christian is a man that believes in Jesus Christ. Justification

by faith alone without the works of the law' used to be the watchword

of the Evangelical Church. It might be so held as to be either a

blessed truth or a great error, and many of us make it an error instead

of a blessing.

On the other hand, there is only one way by which righteousness can be

attained, and that is: first by faith and then by love. Here are three

steps: we have known and believed the love that God hath to us'; that

is the broad, bottom step. And above it we love Him because He first

loved us,' that is the central one. And on the top of all, herein is

our love made perfect that we keep His Commandments.' They that trust

are they also who love Thy Name, and they who trust through love are,

and only they are, the righteous.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

ONE SAYING FROM THREE MEN

The wicked hath said in his heart, I shall not be moved.' --PSALM x. 6.

Because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.'--PSALM xvi. 8.

And in my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved.'--PSALM xxx. 6.

How differently the same things sound when said by different men! Here

are three people giving utterance to almost the same sentiment of

confidence. A wicked man says it, and it is insane presumption and

defiance. A good man says it, having been lulled into false security by

easy times, and it is a mistake that needs chastisement. A humble

believing soul says it, and it is the expression of a certain and

blessed truth. The wicked saith in his heart, I shall not be moved.' A

good man, led astray by his prosperity, said, I shall not be moved,'

and the last of the three put a little clause in which makes all the

difference, because He is at my right hand, I shall never be moved.'

So, then, we have the mad arrogance of godless confidence, the mistake

of a good man that needs correction, and the warranted confidence of a

believing soul.

I. The mad arrogance of godless confidence.

The wicked' man, in the psalm from which our first text comes, said a

good many wrong things in his heart.' The tacit assumptions on which a

life is based, though they may never come to consciousness, and still

less to utterance, are the really important things. I dare say this

wicked man' was a good Jew with his lips, and said his prayers all

properly, but in his heart he had two working beliefs. One is thus

expressed: As for all his enemies, he puffeth at them. He hath said in

his heart, I shall not be moved.' The other is put into words thus: He

hath said in his heart, God hath forgotten, He hideth His face. He will

never see it.'

That is to say, the only explanation of a godless life, unless the man

is an idiot, is that there lie beneath it, as formative principles and

unspoken assumptions, guiding and shaping it, one or both of these two

thoughts: either There is no God,' or He does not care what I do, and I

am safe to go on for evermore in the present fashion.' It might seem as

if a man with the facts of human life before him, could not, even in

the insanest arrogance, say, I shall not be moved, for I shall never be

in adversity.' But we have an awful power--and the fact that we

exercise, and choose to exercise, it is one of the strange riddles of

our enigmatical existence and characters--of ignoring unwelcome facts,

and going cheerily on as though we had annihilated them, because we do

not reflect upon them. So this man, in the midst of a world in which

there is no stay, and whilst he saw all round him the most startling

and tragical instances of sudden change and complete collapse, stands

quietly and says, Ah! I shall never be moved'; God doth not require

it.'

That absurdity is the basis of every life that is not a life of

consecration and devotion--so far as it has a basis of conviction at

all. The wicked' man's true faith is this, absurd as it may sound when

you drag it out into clear, distinct utterance, whatever may be his

professions. I wonder if there are any of us whose life can only be

acquitted of being utterly unreasonable and ridiculous by the

assumption, I shall never be moved'?

Have you a lease of your goods? Do you think you are tenants at will or

owners? Which? Is there any reason why any of us should escape, as some

of us live as if we believed we should escape, the certain fate of all

others? If there is not, what about the sanity of the man whose whole

life is built upon a blunder? He is convicted of the grossest folly,

unless he be assured that either there is no God, or that He does not

care one rush about what we do, and that consequently we are certain of

a continuance in our present state.

Do you say in your heart, I shall never be moved'? Then you must be

strong enough to resist every tempest that beats against you. Is that

so? I shall never be moved'--then nothing that contributes to your

well-being will ever slip from your grasp, but you will be able to hold

it tight. Is that so? I shall never be moved'--then there is no grave

waiting for you. Is that so? Unless these three assumptions be

warranted, every godless man is making a hideous blunder, and his

character is the sentence pronounced by the loving lips of Incarnate

Truth on the rich man who thought that he had much goods laid up for

many years,' and had only to be merry--Thou fool! Thou fool!' If an

engineer builds a bridge across a river without due calculation of the

force of the winds that blow down the gorge, the bridge will be at the

bottom of the stream some stormy night, and the train piled on the

fragments of it in hideous ruin. And with equal certainty the end of

the first utterer of this speech can be calculated, and is foretold in

the psalm, The Lord is King for ever and ever. . . . The godless are

perished out of the land.'

II. We have in our second text the mistake of a good man who has been

lulled into false confidence.

The Psalmist admits his error by the acknowledgment that he spoke in my

prosperity'; or, as the word might be rendered, in my security.' This

suggests to us the mistake into which even good men, lulled by the

quiet continuance of peaceful days, are certain to fall, unless there

be continual watchfulness exercised by them.

It is a very significant fact that the word which is translated in our

Authorised Version prosperity' is often rendered security,' meaning

thereby, not safety, but a belief that I am safe. A man who is

prosperous, or at ease, is sure to drop into the notion that to-morrow

will be as this day, and much more abundant,' unless he keeps up

unslumbering watchfulness against the insidious illusion of permanence.

If he yields to the temptation, in his foolish security, forgetting how

fragile are its foundations, and what a host of enemies surround him

threatening it, then there is nothing for it but that the merciful

discipline, which this Psalmist goes on to tell us he had to pass

through by reason of his fall, shall be brought to bear upon him. The

writer gives us a page of his own autobiography. In my security I said,

I shall never be moved.' Lord! by Thy favour Thou hast made my mountain

to stand strong. Thou didst hide Thy face.' What about the security

then? What about I shall never be moved' then? I was troubled. I cried

to Thee, O Lord!'--and then it was all right, his prayer was heard, and

he was in security'--that is, safety--far more really when he was

troubled' and sore beset than when he had been, as he fancied, sure of

not being moved.

Long peace rusts the cannon, and is apt to make it unfit for war. Our

lack of imagination, and our present sense of comfort and well-being,

tend to make us fancy that we shall go on for ever in the quiet

jog-trot of settled life without any very great calamities or changes.

But there was once a village at the bottom of the crater of Vesuvius,

and great trees, that had grown undisturbed there for a hundred years,

and green pastures, and happy homes and flocks. And then, one day, a

rumble and a rush, and what became of the village? It went up in

smoke-clouds. The quiescence of the volcano is no sign of its

extinction. And as surely as we live, so sure is it that there will

come a to-morrow' to us all which shall not be as this day. No man has

any right to calculate upon anything beyond the present moment, and

there is no basis whatever, either for the philosophical assertion that

the order of nature is fixed, and that therefore there are no miracles,

or for the practical translation of the assertion into our daily lives,

that we may reasonably expect to go on as we are without changes or

calamities. There is no reason capable of being put into logical shape

for believing that, because the sun has risen ever since the beginning

of things, it will rise to-morrow, for there will come a to-morrow when

it will not rise. In like manner, the longest possession of our mercies

is no reason for forgetting the precarious tenure on which we hold them

all.

So, Christian men and women! let us try to keep vivid that

consciousness which is so apt to get dull, that nothing continueth in

one stay, and that we shall be moved, as far as the outward life and

its circumstances are concerned. If we forget it, we shall need, and we

shall get, the loving Fatherly discipline, which my second text tells

us followed the false security of this good man. The sea is kept from

putrefying by storms. Wine poured from vessel to vessel is purified

thereby. It is an old truth and a wholesome one, to be always

remembered, because they have no changes therefore they fear not God .'

III. Lastly, we have the same thing said by another man in another key.

Because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.' The prelude to

the assertion makes all the difference. Here is the warranted

confidence of a simple faith.

The man who clasps God's hand, and has Him standing by his side, as his

Ally, his Companion, his Guide, his Defence--that man does not need to

fear change. For all the things which convict the arrogant or mistaken

confidences of the other men as being insanity or a lapse from faith

prove the confidence of the trustful soul to be the very perfection of

reason and common sense.

We may be confident of our power to resist anything that can come

against us, if He be at our side. The man that stands with his back

against an oak-tree is held firm, not because of his own strength, but

because of that on which he leans. There is a beautiful story of some

heathen convert who said to a missionary's wife, who had felt faint and

asked that she might lean for a space on her stronger arm, If you love

me, lean hard.' That is what God says to us, If you love Me, lean

hard.' And if you do, because He is at your right hand, you will not be

moved. It is not insanity; it is not arrogance; it is simple faith, to

look our enemies in the eyes, and to feel sure that they cannot touch

us, Trust in Jehovah; so shall ye be established.' Rest on the Lord,

and ye shall rest indeed.

In like manner the man who has God at his right hand may be sure of the

unalterable continuance of all his proper good. Outward things may come

or go, as it pleases Him, but that which makes the life of our life

will never depart from us as long as He stands there. And whilst He is

there, if only our hearts are knit to Him, we can say, My heart and my

flesh faileth, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for

ever. I shall not be moved. Though all that can go goes, He abides; and

in Him I have all riches.' Trust not in the uncertainty of outward

good, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.

The wicked man was defiantly arrogant, and the forgetful good man was

criminally self-confident, when they each said, I shall not be moved.'

We are only taking up the privileges that belong to us if, exercising

faith in Him, we venture to say, Take what Thou wilt; leave me Thyself;

I have enough.' And the man who says, Because God is at my right hand,

I shall not be moved,' has the right to anticipate an unbroken

continuance of personal being, and an unchanged continuance of the very

life of his life. That which breaks off all other lives abruptly is no

breach in the continuity, either of the consciousness or of the

avocations of a devout man. For, on the other side of the flood, he

does what he does on this side, only more perfectly and more

continually. He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever,' and it

makes comparatively little difference to him whether his place be on

this or on the other side of Jordan. We shall not be moved,' even when

we change our station from earth to heaven, and the sublime fulfilment

of the warranted confidence of the trustful soul comes when the

to-morrow' of the skies is as the to-day' of earth, only much more

abundant.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

MAN'S TRUE TREASURE IN GOD

The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup; Thou

maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places;

yea, I have a goodly heritage.'--PSALM xvi. 5, 6.

We read, in the law which created the priesthood in Israel, that the

Lord spake unto Aaron, Thou shalt have no inheritance in their land,

neither shalt thou have any part among them. I am thy part and thine

inheritance among the children of Israel' (Numbers xvii. 20). Now there

is an evident allusion to that remarkable provision in this text. The

Psalmist feels that in the deepest sense he has no possession amongst

the men who have only possessions upon earth, but that God is the

treasure which he grasps in a rapture of devotion and self-abandonment.

The priest's duty is his choice. He will walk by faith and not by

sight.'

Are not all Christians priests? and is not the very essence and

innermost secret of the religious life this--that the heart turns away

from earthly things and deliberately accepts God as its supreme good,

and its only portion? These first words of my text contain the essence

of all true religion.

The connection between the first clause and the others is closer than

many readers perceive. The lot' which Thou maintainest,' the pleasant

places,' the goodly heritage,' all carry on the metaphor, and all refer

to God as Himself the portion of the heart that chooses and trusts Him.

Thou maintainest my lot'--He who is our inheritance also guards our

inheritance, and whosoever has taken God for his possession has a

possession as sure as God can make it. The lines are fallen to me in

pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage'--the heritage that is

goodly is God Himself. When a man chooses God for his portion, then,

and then only, is he satisfied--'satisfied with favour, and full of the

goodness of the Lord.' Let me try to expand and enforce these thoughts,

with the hope that we may catch something of their fervour and their

glow.

I. The first thought, then, that comes out of the words before us is

this: all true religion has its very heart in deliberately choosing God

as my supreme good.

The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup.' The two words

which are translated in our version portion' and inheritance' are

substantially synonymous. The latter of them is used continually in

reference to the share of each individual, or family, or tribe in the

partition of the land of Canaan. There is a distinct allusion,

therefore, to that partition in the language of our text; and the two

expressions, part or portion,' and inheritance,' are substantially

identical, and really mean just the same as if the single expression

had stood--The Lord is my Portion.'

I may just notice in passing that these words are evidently alluded to

in the New Testament, in the Epistle to the Colossians, where Paul

speaks of God having made us meet for our portion of the inheritance of

the saints in light.'

And then the portion of my cup' is a somewhat strange expression. It is

found in one of the other Psalms, with the meaning fortune,' or

destiny,' or sum of circumstances which make up a man's life.' There

may be, of course, an allusion to the metaphor of a feast here, and God

may be set forth as the portion of my cup,' in the sense of being the

refreshment and sustenance of a man's soul. But I should rather be

disposed to consider that there is merely a prolongation of the earlier

metaphor, and that the same thought as is contained in the figure of

the inheritance' is expressed here (as in common conversation it is

often expressed) by the word cup,' namely, that which makes up a man's

portion in this life.' It is used with such a meaning in the well-known

words, My cup runneth over,' and in another shape in The cup which My

Father hath given Me, shall I not drink it?' It is the sum of

circumstances which make up a man's fortune.' So the double metaphor

presents the one thought of God as the true possession of the devout

soul.

Now, how do we possess God? We possess things in one fashion and

persons in another. The lowest and most imperfect form of possession is

that by which a man simply keeps other people off material good, and

asserts the right of disposal of it as he thinks proper. A blind man

may have the finest picture that ever was painted; he may call it his,

that is to say, nobody else can sell it, but what good is it to him? A

lunatic may own a library as big as the Bodleian, but what use is it to

him? Does the man who collects the rents of a mountain-side, or the

poet or painter to whom its cliffs and heather speak far-reaching

thoughts, most truly possess it? The highest form of possession, even

of things, is when they minister to our thought, to our emotion, to our

moral and intellectual growth. We possess even them really, according

as we know them and hold communion with them. But when we get up into

the region of persons, we possess them in the measure in which we

understand them, and sympathise with them, and love them. Knowledge,

intercourse, sympathy, affection--these are the ways by which men can

possess men, and spirits, spirits. A disciple who gets the thoughts of

a great teacher into his mind, and has his whole being saturated by

them, may be said to have made the teacher his own. A friend or a lover

owns the heart that he or she loves, and which loves back again; and

not otherwise do we possess God.

Such ownership must be, from its very nature, reciprocal. There must be

the two sides to it. And so we read in the Bible, with equal frequency:

the Lord is the inheritance of His people, and His people are the

inheritance of the Lord. He possesses me, and I possess Him--with

reverence be it spoken--by the very same tenure; for whoso loves God

has Him, and whom He loves He owns. There is deep and blessed mystery

involved in this wonderful prerogative, that the loving, believing

heart has God for its possession and indwelling Guest; and people are

apt to brush such thoughts aside as mystical. But, like all true

Christian mysticism, it is intensely practical.

We have God for ours, first, in the measure in which our minds are

actively occupied with thoughts of Him. We have no merely mystical or

emotional possession of God to preach. There is a real, adequate

knowledge of Him in Jesus Christ. We know God, His character, His

heart, His relations to us, His thoughts of good concerning us,

sufficiently for all intellectual and for all practical purposes.

I wish to ask you a plain question: Do you ever think about Him? There

is only one way of getting God for yours, and that is by bringing Him

into your life by frequent meditation upon His sweetness, and upon the

truths that you know about Him. There is no other way by which a spirit

can possess a spirit, that is not cognisable by sense, except only by

the way of thinking about him, to begin with. All else follows that.

That is how you hold your dear ones when they go to the other side of

the world. That is how you hold God, who dwells on the other side of

the stars. There is no way to have' Him, but through the understanding

accepting Him, and keeping firm hold of Him. Men and women that from

Monday morning to Saturday night never think of His name--how do they

possess God? And professing Christians that never remember Him all the

day long--what absurd hypocrisy it is for them to say that God is

theirs!

Yours, and never in your mind! When your husband, or your wife, or your

child, goes away from home for a week, do you forget them as utterly as

you forget God? Do you have them in any sense if they never dwell in

the study of your imagination,' and never fill your thoughts with

sweetness and with light?

And so again when the heart turns to Him, and when all the faculties of

our being, will, hope, and imagination, and all our affections and all

our practical powers, when they all touch Him, each in its proper

fashion, then and then only can we in any reasonable and true sense be

said to possess God.

Thought, communion, sympathy, affection, moral likeness, practical

obedience, these are the way--and not by mystical raptures only--by

which, in simple prose fact, it is possible for the finite to grasp the

infinite, and for a man to be the owner of God.

Now there is another consideration very necessary to be remembered, and

that is that this possession of God involves, and is possible only by,

a deliberate act of renunciation. The Levite's example, that is glanced

at in my text, is always our law. You must have no part or inheritance

amongst the sons of earth if God is to be your inheritance. Or, to put

it into plain words, there must be a giving up of the material and the

created if there is to be a possession of the divine and the heavenly.

There cannot be two supreme, any more than there can be two pole-stars,

one in the north and the other in the south, to both of which a man can

be steering. You cannot stand with

One foot on land, and one on sea,

To one thing constant never.'

If you are to have God as your supreme good, you must empty your heart

of earth and worldly things, or your possession of Him will be all

words, and imagination, and hypocrisy. Brethren! I wish to bring that

message to your consciences to-day.

And what is this renunciation? There must be, first of all, a fixed,

deliberate, intelligent conviction lying at the foundation of my life

that God is best, and that He and He only is my true delight and

desire. Then there must be built upon that intelligent conviction that

God is best, the deliberate turning away of the heart from these

material treasures. Then there must be the willingness to abandon the

outward possession of them, if they come in between us and Him. Just as

travellers in old days, that went out looking for treasures in the

western hemisphere, were glad to empty their ships of their less

precious cargo in order to load them with gold, you must get rid of the

trifles, and fling these away if ever they so take up your heart that

God has no room there. Or rather, perhaps, if the love of God in any

real measure, howsoever imperfectly, once gets into a man's soul, it

will work there to expel and edge out the love and regard for earthly

things. Just as when the chemist collects oxygen in a vessel filled

with water, as it passes into the jar it drives out the water before

it; the love of God, if it come into a man's heart in any real sense,

in the measure in which it comes, will deliver him from the love of the

world. But between the two there is warfare so internecine and endless

that they cannot co-exist: and here, to-day, it is as true as ever it

was that if you want to have God for your portion and your inheritance

you must be content to have no inheritance amongst your brethren, nor

part amongst the sons of earth.

Men and women! are you ready for that renunciation? Are you prepared to

say, I know that the sweetness of Thy presence is the truest sweetness

that I can taste; and lo! I give up all besides and my own self'?

O God of good, the unfathomed Sea!

Who would not yield himself to Thee?'

And remember, that nothing less than these is Christianity--the

conviction that the world is second and not first; that God is best,

love is best, truth is best, knowledge of Him is best, likeness to Him

is best, the willingness to surrender all if it come in contest with

His supreme sweetness. He that turns his back upon earth by reason of

the drawing power of the glory that excelleth, is a Christian. The

Christianity that only trusts to Christ for deliverance from the

punishment of sin, and so makes religion a kind of fire insurance, is a

very poor affair. We need the lesson pealed into our ears as much as

any generation has ever done, Ye cannot serve God and mammon.' A man's

real working religion consists in his loving God most and counting His

love the sweetest of all things.

II. Now let me turn to the next point that is here, viz. that this

possession is as sure as God can make it. Thou maintainest my lot.'

Thou art Thyself both my heritage and the guardian of my heritage. He

that possesses God, says the text, by implication, is lifted above all

fear and chance of change.

The land, the partition of which amongst the tribes lies at the bottom

of the allusive metaphor of my text, was given to them under the

sanction of a supernatural defence; and the law of their continuance in

it was that they should trust and serve the unseen King. It was He,

according to the theocratic theory of the Old Testament, and not

chariots and horses, their own arm and their own sword, that kept them

safe, though the enemies on the north and the enemies on the south were

big enough to swallow up the little kingdom at a mouthful.

And so, says the Psalmist allusively, in a similar manner, the Divine

Power surrounds the man who chooses God for his heritage, and nothing

shall take that heritage from him.

The lower forms of possession, by which men are called the owners of

material goods, are imperfect, because they are all precarious and

temporary. Nothing really belongs to a man if it can be taken from him.

What we may lose we can scarcely be said to have. They are mine, they

were yours, they will be somebody else's to-morrow. Whilst we have them

we do not have them in any deep sense; we cannot retain them, they are

not really ours at all. The only thing that is worth calling mine is

something that so passes into and saturates the very substance of my

soul that, like a piece of cloth dyed in the grain, as long as two

threads hold together the tint will be there. That is how God gives us

Himself, and nothing can take Him out of a man's soul. He, in the

sweetness of His grace, bestows Himself upon man, and guards His own

gift in the heart, which is Himself. He who dwells in God and God in

him lives as in the inmost keep and citadel. The noise of battle may

roar around the walls, but deep silence and peace are within. The storm

may rage upon the coasts, but he who has God for his portion dwells in

a quiet inland valley where tempests never come. No outer changes can

touch our possession of God. They belong to another region altogether.

Other goods may go, but this is held by a different tenure. The life of

a Christian is lived in two regions: in the one his life has its roots,

and its branches extend to the other. In the one there may be whirling

storms and branches may toss and snap, whilst in the other, to which

the roots go down, may be peace. Root yourselves in God, making Him

your truest treasure, and nothing can rob you of your wealth.

We here in this commercial community see many examples of great

fortunes and great businesses melting away like yesterday's snow. And

surely the certain alternations of booms' and bad times might preach to

some of you this lesson: Set not your hearts on that which can pass,

but make your treasure that which no man can take from you.

Then, too, there is the other thought. God will help us so that no

temptations shall have power to make us rob ourselves of our treasure.

None can take it from us but ourselves, but we are so weak and

surrounded by temptations so strong that we need Him to aid us if we

are not to be beguiled by our own treacherous hearts into parting with

our highest good. A handful of feeble Jews were nothing against the

gigantic might of Assyria, or against the compacted strength of

civilised Egypt; but there they stood, on their rocky mountains,

defended, not by their own strength, but by the might of a present God.

And so, unfit to cope with the temptations round us as we are, if we

cast ourselves upon His power and make Him our supreme delight, nothing

shall be able to rob us of that possession and that sweetness.

And there is just one last point that I would refer to here on this

matter of our stable possession of God. It is very beautiful to observe

that this psalm, which, in the language of my text, rises to the very

height of spiritual and, in a good sense, mystical devotion,

recognising God as the One Good for souls, is also one of the psalms

which has the clearest utterance of the faith in immortality. Just

after the words of my text we read these others, in which the Old

Testament confidence in a life beyond the grave reaches its very

climax: Thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol, neither wilt Thou suffer

Thine holy one to see corruption. Thou wilt show me the path of life;

in Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are

pleasures for evermore.'

That connection teaches us that the measure in which a man feels his

true possession of God here and now, is the measure in which his faith

rises triumphant over the darkness of the grave, and grasps, with

unfaltering confidence, the conviction of an immortal life. The more we

know that God is our portion and our treasure, the more sure, and

calmly sure, we shall be that a thing like death cannot touch a thing

like that, that the mere physical fact is far too small and

insignificant a fact to have any power in such a region as that; that

death can no more affect a man's relation to God, whom he has learned

to love and trust, than you can cut thought or feeling with a knife.

The two belong to two different regions. Thus we have here the Old

Testament faith in immortality shaping itself out of the Old Testament

enjoyment of communion with God, with a present God. And you will find

the very same process of thought in that seventy-third psalm, which

stands in some respects side by side with this one as attaining the

height of mystical devotion, joined with a very clear utterance of the

faith in immortality: Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none

upon earth that I desire beside Thee! Thou wilt guide me with Thy

counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory.'

So Death himself cannot touch the heritage of the man whose heritage is

the Lord. And his ministry is not to rob us of our treasures as he robs

men of all treasures besides (for their glory shall not descend after

them'), but to give us instead of the earnest of the inheritance'--the

bit of turf by which we take possession of the estate--the broad land

in all the amplitude of its sweep, into our perpetual possession. Thou

maintainest my lot.' Neither death nor life shall separate us from the

love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

III. And then the last thought here is that he who thus elects to find

his treasure and delight in God is satisfied with his choice. The

lines'--the measuring-cord by which the estate was parted off and

determined--are fallen in pleasant places; yea!'--not as our Bible has

it, merely I have a goodly heritage,' putting emphasis on the fact of

possession, but--the heritage is goodly to me,' putting emphasis on the

fact of subjective satisfaction with it.

I have no time to dwell upon the thoughts that spring from these words.

Take them in the barest outline. No man that makes the worse choice of

earth instead of God, ever, in the retrospect, said: I have a goodly

heritage.' One of the later Roman Emperors, who was among the best of

them, said, when he was dying: I have been everything, and it profits

me nothing.' No creature can satisfy your whole nature. Portions of it

may be fed with their appropriate satisfaction, but as long as we feed

on the things of earth there will always be part of our being like an

unfed tiger in a menagerie, growling for its prey, whilst its fellows

are satisfied for the moment. You can no more give your heart rest and

blessedness by pitching worldly things into it, than they could fill up

Chat Moss, when they made the first Liverpool and Manchester Railway,

by throwing in cartloads of earth. The bog swallowed them and was none

the nearer being filled.

No man who takes the world for his portion ever said, The lines are

fallen to me in pleasant places.' For the make of your soul as plainly

cries out God!' as a fish's fins declare that the sea is its element,

or a bird's wings mark it out as meant to soar. Man and God fit each

other like the two halves of a tally. You will never get rest nor

satisfaction, and you will never be able to look at the past with

thankfulness, nor at the present with repose, nor into the future with

hope, unless you can say, God is the strength of my heart, and my

portion for ever.' But oh! if you do, then you have a goodly heritage,

a heritage of still satisfaction, a heritage which suits, and

gratifies, and expands all the powers of a man's nature, and makes him

ever capable of larger and larger possession of a God who ever gives

more than we can receive, that the overplus may draw us to further

desire, and the further desire may more fully be satisfied.

The one true, pure, abiding joy is to hold fellowship with God and to

live in His love. The secret of all our unrest is the going out of our

desires after earthly things. They fly forth from our hearts like

Noah's raven, and nowhere amid all the weltering flood can find a

resting-place. The secret of satisfied repose is to set our affections

thoroughly on God. Then our wearied hearts, like Noah's dove returning

to its rest, will fold their wings and nestle fast by the throne of

God. All the happiness of this life,' said William Law, is but trying

to quench thirst out of golden empty cups.' But if we will take the

Lord for the portion of our cup,' we shall never thirst.

Let me beseech you to choose God in Christ for your supreme good and

highest portion; and having chosen, to cleave to your choice. So shall

you enter on possession of good that truly shall be yours, even that

good part, which shall not be taken away from' you.

And, lastly, remember that if you would have God, you must take Christ.

He is the true Joshua, who puts us in possession of the inheritance. He

brings God to you--to your knowledge, to your love, to your will. He

brings you to God, making it possible for your poor sinful souls to

enter His presence by His blood; and for your spirits to possess that

divine Guest. He that hath the Son, hath the Father'; and if you trust

your souls to Him who died for you, and cling to Him as your delight

and your joy, you will find that both the Father and the Son come to

you and make their home in you. Through Christ the Son you will receive

power to become sons of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of

God,' because joint heirs with Christ.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

GOD WITH US, AND WE WITH GOD

I have set the Lord always before me: because He is at my right hand, I

shall not be moved. . . . 11. In Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy

right hand there are pleasures for evermore.'--PSALM xvi. 8, 11.

There are, unquestionably, large tracts of the Old Testament in which

the anticipation of immortality does not appear, and there are others

in which its presence may be doubtful. But here there can be no

hesitation, I think, as to the meaning of these words. If we regard

them carefully, we shall not only see clearly the Psalmist's hope of

immortal life, but shall discern the process by which he came to it,

and almost his very act of grasping at it; for the first verse of our

text is manifestly the foundation of the second; and the facts of the

one are the basis of the hopes of the other. That is made plain by the

therefore' which, in one of the intervening verses, links the

concluding rapturous anticipations with the previous expressions.

If, then, we observe that here, in these two verses which I have read,

there is a very remarkable parallelism, we shall get still more

strikingly the connection between the devout life here and the

perfecting of the same hereafter. Note how, even in our translation,

the latter verse is largely an echo of the former, and how much more

distinctly that is the case if we make a little variation in the

rendering, which brings it closer to the original. I have set the Lord

always before me,' says the one,--that is the present. In Thy presence

is fulness of joy,' says the other,--that is the consequent future. And

the two words, which are rendered in the one case before me' and in the

other case in Thy presence,' are, though not identical, so precisely

synonymous that we may take them as meaning the same thing. So we might

render I have set the Lord always before my face': Before Thy face is

fulness of joy.' The other clause is, to an English reader, more

obviously parallel: Because He is at my right hand I shall not be

moved'--shall be steadied here. At Thy right hand are pleasures for

evermore'--the steadfastness here merges into eternal delights

hereafter.

So then, we have two conditions set before us, and the link between

them made very plain. And I gather all that I have to say about these

words into two statements. First, life here may be God's presence with

us, to make us steadfast. And secondly, if so, life hereafter will be

our presence with God to make us glad. That is the Psalmist's teaching,

and I will try to enforce it.

I. First, then, life here may be God's presence with us, to make us

steadfast.

Mark the Psalmist's language. I have set the Lord always in front of

me--before my face.' Emphasis is placed on set' and always.' God is

ever by our sides, but we may be very far away from Him, though He be

not far off from every one of us,' and if we are to have Him blazing,

clear and unobscured above and beyond all the mists and hubbub of

earth, we shall need continual effort in order to keep Him in our

sight. I have set the Lord'--He permits me to put out my hand, as it

were, and station Him where I want Him, that I may always have Him in

my sight, and be able to look at Him and be calm and blessed.

You cannot do that, if you let the world, and wealth, and business, and

anxieties, and ambitions, and cares, and sorrows, and duties, and

family responsibilities, jostle and hustle Him out of your minds and

hearts. You cannot do it if, like John Bunyan's man with the muckrake,

you keep your eyes always down on the straw at your feet, and never

lift them to the crown above. How many men in Manchester walk its

streets from year's end to year's end, and never look up to the sky

except to see whether they must take their umbrellas with them or not?

And so all the magnificence and beauty of the daily heavens, and the

nightly gemming of the empty places with perpetually burning stars, are

lost to them! So, God is blazing there in front of us, but unless we

set ourselves to it, we shall never see Him. You have to look, by a

conscious effort, over and away from the things that are seen and

temporal' if you want to see the things that are unseen and eternal.'

But if you disturb the whole tenor of your being by agitations and

distractions and petty cares, or if you defile it by sensual and

fleshly lusts, and animal propensities gratified, and poor, miserable,

worldly ambitions and longings filling up your souls, then God can no

more be visible before your face than the blessed sun can mirror

himself in a storm-tossed sea or in a muddy puddle. The heart must be

pure, and the heart must be still, and the mind must be detached from

earth, and glued to Heaven, and the glasses of the telescope must be

sedulously cleansed from dust, if we are to be blessed with the vision

of God continuously before our face.

Then note, still further, that if thus we have made God present with

us, by realising the fact of His presence, when He comes, He comes with

His hands full. I have set the Lord always before me,' says the

Psalmist. And then he goes on to say, Because He is at my right hand.'

Not only in front of you, then, David, to be looked at, but at your

side! What for? What do we summon some one to come and stand beside us

for? In order that from his presence there may come help and succour

and courage and confidence. And so God comes to the right hand of the

man who honestly endeavours through all the confusions and bustles of

life to realise His sweet and calming presence. Where He comes He comes

to help; not to be a spectator, but an ally in the warfare; and whoever

sets the Lord before him will have the Lord at his right hand.

And then, note, still further, the steadfastness which God brings. I

have spoken of the effort which brings God. I speak now of the

steadfastness which He brings by His coming. The Psalmist's

anticipation is a singularly modest one. Because He is at my right hand

I shall'--What? Be triumphant? No! Escape sorrows? No! Have my life

filled with serenity? No! I shall not be moved.' That is the best I can

hope for. To be able to stand on the spot, with steadfast convictions,

with steadfast purposes, with steadfast actions--continuously in one

direction; having overcome all, to stand'--that is as much as the best

of us can desire or expect, in this poor struggling life of ours.

What a profound consciousness of inward weakness and of outward

antagonism there breathes in that humble and modest hope, as being the

loftiest result of the presence of Omnipotence for our aid: I shall not

be moved'! When we think of our inner weakness, when we remember the

fluctuations of our feelings and emotions, when we compare the ups and

downs of our daily life, or when we think of the larger changes

covering years, which affect all our outlooks, our thoughts, our plans;

and how

We all are changed by still degrees,

All but the basis of the soul,'

it is much to say, I shall not be moved.' And when we think of the

obstacles that surround us, of the storms that dash against us, how we

are swept by surges of emotion that wash away everything before their

imperious onrush, or swayed by blasts of temptation that break down the

strongest defences, or smitten by the shocks of change and sorrow that

crush the firmest hearts, it is much to say, in the face of a world

pressing upon us with the force of the wind in a cyclone, that our

poor, feeble reed shall stand upright and not be moved' in the fiercest

blast. What went ye out for to see?' A reed shaken with the wind'--that

is humanity. Behold! I have made thee an iron pillar and brazen walls,

and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail'--that is

weak man, stiffened into uprightness, and rooted in steadfastness by

the touch of the hand of a present God.

And, brother! there is nothing else that will stay a man's soul. The

holdfast cannot be a part of the chain. It must be fastened to a fixed

point. The anchor that is to keep the ship of your life from dragging

and finding itself, when the morning breaks, a ghastly wreck upon the

reef, must be outside of yourself, and the cable of it must be wrapped

round the throne of God. The anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast,

which will neither break nor drag, can only be firm when it enters into

that within the veil.' God, and God only, can thus make us strong! So,

dear friends, let us see to it that we fasten our aims and purposes,

our faith and love, our submission and obedience, upon that mighty

Helper who will be with us and make us strong, that we may stand fast

in the Lord and in the power of His might.'

II. Now, secondly, notice how, if so, life hereafter will be our

presence with God, to make us glad.

I have already pointed out briefly the connection between these two

portions of my text, and I need only remark here that the link which

holds them together is very obvious. If a man loves God, and trusts

Him, and walks with Him,' after the fashion described in our former

verse, then there will spring up, irrepressible and unconquerable, a

conviction in that man's soul that this sweet and strong communion,

which makes so much of the blessedness of life, must last after death.

Anything is conceivable rather than that a man who walks with God shall

cease to be! Rather, when he is not' any more found' among men, it is

only because God took him.' Thus the emotions and experiences of a

truly devout soul are (apart from the great revelation in Jesus Christ

which hath brought life and immortality to light') the best evidence

and confirmation of the anticipation of immortal life. It cannot be,

unless our whole intellectual faculties are to be put into utter

confusion, that such an experience as that of the man who loves God,

and tries to trust Him, and walk before Him, is destined to be brought

to nothingness with the mere dissolution of this earthly frame. The

greatness and the smallness, the achievements and the failures, of the

religious life as we see it here, all bear upon their front the mark of

imperfection, and in their imperfection prophesy and proclaim a future

completion. Because it is so great in itself, and because, being so

great, its developments and influence are so strangely and sadly

checked, the faith that knits a man to Christ demands eternity for its

duration, and infinitude for its perfection. Thus, he that says I have

set the Lord always before me,' goes on to say, with an undeniable

accuracy of inference, Therefore Thou wilt not leave my soul in the

under world.' God is not going to forget the soul that clave to Him,

and anything is believable sooner than that.

Our texts not only assert this connection and base the confidence of

immortality on the present experiences of the spirit that trusts in

God, but also give the outline, at least, of the correspondences

between the imperfections of the present and the perfectnesses of the

future. And I cast this into two or three words before I close.

This is the first of them. If you will turn your faces to God, amidst

all the flaunting splendours and vain shows and fleeting possessions of

this present, His face will dawn on you yonder. We can say but little

of what is meant by such a hope as that. But only this we can say, that

there will be, as yet unimaginable, new wealths of revelation of the

Father, and to match them, as yet unimaginable new inlets of

apprehension and perception upon our parts, so that the sweetest,

clearest, closest, most satisfying vision of God that has ever dawned

on sad souls here, shall be but as in a glass darkly' compared with

that face to face sight. We live away out on the far-off outskirts of

the system where those great planets plough along their slow orbits,

and turn their languid rotations at distances that imagination faints

in contemplating, and the light and the heat and the life that reach

them are infinitesimally small. We shall be shifted into the orb that

is nearest the sun; and oh! what a rapture of light and life and heat

will come to our amazed spirits: I have set the Lord always before me.'

Twilight though the light has been, I have tried to keep it. I shall be

of the sons of light close to the Throne and shall see Thy face. I

shall be satisfied when I wake out of this sleep of life into Thy

likeness.

Then, again, if you will keep God at your right hand here, He will set

you on His hereafter. Keep Him here for your Companion, for your Ally,

for your Advocate, to breathe strength into you by the touch of His

hand, as some feeble man, leaning upon a stronger arm, may be upheld.

If you will do that, then the place where the favoured servants stand

will be yours; the place where trusted counsellors stand will be yours;

the place where the sheep stand will be yours; the place where the

Shepherd sits will be yours; for He to whom it is said, Sit Thou at My

right hand till I make Thine enemies Thy footstool,' says to us, Where

I am there shall also My servant be.' Keep God by your sides, and you

will be lifted to Christ's place at the right hand of the Majesty on

high.

Lastly, if we let ourselves be stayed by God amidst the struggle and

difficulty, we shall be gladdened by Him with perpetual joys. The

emphasis of the last words of my text is rather on the adjectives than

on the nouns--full joy, eternal pleasure. And how both characteristics

contradict the experiences of earth, even the gladdest, which we fain

would make permanent! For I suppose that no earthly joy is either

central, reaching the deepest self, or circumferential, embracing the

whole being of a man, but that only God can so go into the depths of my

soul as that from His throne there He can flood the whole of my nature

with felicity and peace. In all other gladnesses there is always in the

landscape one bit of sullen shadow somewhere or other, unparticipant of

the light, while all around is blazing. And we need that He should come

to make us blessed.

Joys here are no more lasting than they are complete. As one who only

too sadly proved the truth of his own words, burning out his life

before he was six-and-thirty, has said--

Pleasures are like poppies spread,

You seize the flower, its bloom is shed!

Or like the snowflake in the river.

A moment white--then gone for ever.'

Oh! my friend, why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?'

The life of faith on earth is the beginning, and only the beginning, of

that life of calm and complete felicity in the heavenly places.

I have shown you the ladder's foot, I have set the Lord always before

me.' The top round reaches the throne of God, and whoever begins at the

bottom, and holds fast the beginning of his confidence firm unto the

end, for him the great promise of the Master will come true, and

Christ's joy will remain in him and his joy shall be full.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE TWO AWAKINGS

I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness.' --PSALM xvii.

15.

As a dream when one awaketh; so, O Lord, when Thou awakest, Thou shalt

despise their image.'--PSALM lxxiii. 20.

Both of these Psalms are occupied with that standing puzzle to Old

Testament worthies--the good fortune of bad men, and the bad fortune of

good ones. The former recounts the personal calamities of David, its

author. The latter gives us the picture of the perplexity of Asaph its

writer, when he saw the prosperity of the wicked.'

And as the problem in both is substantially the same, the solution also

is the same. David and Asaph both point onwards to a period when this

confusing distribution of earthly good shall have ceased, though the

one regards that period chiefly in its bearing upon himself as the time

when he shall see God and be at rest, while the other thinks of it

rather with reference to the godless rich as the time of their

destruction.

In the details of this common expectation, also, there is a remarkable

parallelism. Both describe the future to which they look as an awaking,

and both connect with it, though in different ways and using different

words, the metaphor of an image or likeness. In the one case, the

future is conceived as the Psalmist's awaking, and losing all the vain

show of this dreamland of life, while he is at rest in beholding the

appearance, and perhaps in receiving the likeness, of the one enduring

Substance, God. In the other, it is thought of as God's awaking, and

putting to shame the fleeting shadow of well-being with which godless

men befool themselves.

What this period of twofold awaking may be is a question on which good

men and thoughtful students of Scripture differ. Without entering on

the wide subject of the Jewish knowledge of a future state, it may be

enough for the present purpose to say that the language of both these

Psalms seems much too emphatic and high-pitched, to be fully satisfied

by a reference to anything in this life. It certainly looks as if the

great awaking which David puts in immediate contrast with the death of

men of this world,' and which solaced his heart with the confident

expectation of beholding God, of full satisfaction of all his being,

and possibly even of wearing the divine likeness, pointed onwards,

however dimly, to that within the veil.' And as for the other psalm,

though the awaking of God is, no doubt, a Scriptural phrase for His

ending of any period of probation and indulgence by an act of judgment,

yet the strong words in which the context describes this awaking, as

the destruction' and the end' of the godless, make it most natural to

take it as here referring to the final close of the probation of life.

That conclusion appears to be strengthened by the contrast which in

subsequent verses is drawn between this end' of the worldling, and the

poet's hopes for himself of divine guidance in life, and afterwards of

being taken (the same word as is used in the account of Enoch's

translation) by God into His presence and glory--hopes whose exuberance

it is hard to confine within the limits of any changes possible for

earth.

The doctrine of a future state never assumed the same prominence, nor

possessed the same clearness in Israel as with us. There are great

tracts of the Old Testament where it does not appear at all. This very

difficulty, about the strange disproportion between character and

circumstances, shows that the belief had not the same place with them

as with us. But it gradually emerged into comparative distinctness.

Revelation is progressive, and the appropriation of revelation is

progressive too. There is a history of God's self-manifestation, and

there is a history of man's reception of the manifestation. It seems to

me that in these two psalms, as in other places of Old Testament

Scripture, we see inspired men in the very course of being taught by

God, on occasion of their earthly sorrows, the clearer hopes which

alone could sustain them. They stood not where we stand, to whom Christ

has brought life and immortality to light'; but to their devout and

perplexed souls, the dim regions beyond were partially opened, and

though they beheld there a great darkness, they also saw a great

light.' They saw all this solid world fade and melt, and behind its

vanishing splendours they saw the glory of the God whom they loved, in

the midst of which they felt that there must be a place for them, where

eternal realities should fill their vision, and a stable inheritance

satisfy their hearts.

The period, then, to which both David and Asaph look, in these two

verses, is the end of life. The words of both, taken in combination,

open out a series of aspects of that period which carry weighty

lessons, and to which we turn now.

I. The first of these is that to all men the end of Life is an awaking.

The representation of death most widely diffused among all nations is

that it is a sleep. The reasons for that emblem are easily found. We

always try to veil the terror and deformity of the ugly thing by the

thin robe of language. As with reverential awe, so with fear and

disgust, the tendency is to wrap their objects in the folds of

metaphor. Men prefer not to name plainly their god or their dread, but

find roundabout phrases for the one, and coaxing, flattering titles for

the other. The furies and the fates of heathenism, the supernatural

beings of modern superstition, must not be spoken of by their own

appellations. The recoil of men's hearts from the thing is testified by

the aversion of their languages to the bald name--death. And the

employment of this special euphemism of sleep is a wonderful witness to

our weariness of life, and to its endless toil and trouble. Everywhere

that has seemed to be a comforting and almost an attractive name, which

has promised full rest from all the agitations of this changeful scene.

The prosperous and the wretched alike have owned the fatigue of living,

and been conscious of a soothing expectance which became almost a hope,

as they thought of lying still at last with folded hands and shut eyes.

The wearied workers have bent over their dead, and felt that they are

blest in this at all events, that they rest from their labours; and as

they saw them absolved from all their tasks, have sought to propitiate

the power that had made this ease for them, as well as to express their

sense of its merciful aspect, by calling it not death, but sleep.

But that emblem, true and sweet as it is, is but half the truth. Taken

as the whole, as indeed men are ever tempted to take it, it is a

cheerless lie. It is truth for the senses--the foolish senses,' who

crown' Death, as Omega,' the last, the Lord,' because they find no

motion in the dead.' Rest, cessation of consciousness of the outer

world, and of action upon it, are set forth by the figure. But even the

figure might teach us that the consciousness of life, and the vivid

exercise of thought and feeling, are not denied by it. Death is sleep.

Be it so. But does not that suggest the doubt--in that sleep, what

dreams may come?' Do we not all know that, when the chains of slumber

bind sense, and the disturbance of the outer world is hushed, there are

faculties of our souls which work more strongly than in our waking

hours? We are all poets, makers' in our sleep. Memory and imagination

open their eyes when flesh closes it. We can live through years in the

dreams of a night; so swiftly can spirit move when even partially freed

from this muddy vesture of decay.' That very phrase, then, which at

first sight seems the opposite of the representation of our text, in

reality is preparatory to and confirmatory of it. That very

representation which has lent itself to cheerless and heathenish

thoughts of death as the cessation not only of toil but of activity, is

the basis of the deeper and truer representation, the truth for the

spirit, that death is an awaking. If, on the one hand, we have to say,

as we anticipate the approaching end of life, The night cometh, when no

man can work'; on the other the converse is true, The night is far

spent; the day is at hand.'

We shall sleep. Yes; but we shall wake too. We shall wake just because

we sleep. For flesh and all its weakness, and all its disturbing

strength, and craving importunities--for the outer world, and all its

dissipating garish shows, and all its sullen resistance to our

hand--for weariness, and fevered activity and toil against the grain of

our tastes, too great for our strength, disappointing in its results,

the end is blessed, calm sleep. And precisely because it is so,

therefore for our true selves, for heart and mind, for powers that lie

dormant in the lowest, and are not stirred into full action in the

highest, souls; for all that universe of realities which encompass us

undisclosed, and known only by faint murmurs which pierce through the

opiate sleep of life, the end shall be an awaking.

The truth which corresponds to this metaphor, and which David felt when

he said, I shall be satisfied when I awake,' is that the spirit,

because emancipated from the body, shall spring into greater intensity

of action, shall put forth powers that have been held down here and

shall come into contact with an order of things which here it has but

indirectly known. To our true selves and to God we shall wake. Here we

are like men asleep in some chamber that looks towards the eastern sky.

Morning by morning comes the sunrise, with the tender glory of its rosy

light and blushing heavens, and the heavy eyes are closed to it all.

Here and there some lighter sleeper, with thinner eyelids or face

turned to the sun, is half conscious of a vague brightness, and feels

the light, though he sees not the colours of the sky nor the forms of

the filmy clouds. Such souls are our saints and prophets, but most of

us sleep on unconscious. To us all the moment comes when we shall wake

and see for ourselves the bright and terrible world which we have so

often forgotten, and so often been tempted to think was itself a dream.

Brethren, see to it that that awaking be for you the beholding of what

you have loved, the finding, in the sober certainty of waking bliss, of

all the objects which have been your visions of delight in the sleep of

earth.

This life of ours hides more than it reveals. The day shows the sky as

solitary but for wandering clouds that cover its blue emptiness. But

the night peoples its waste places with stars, and fills all its

abysses with blazing glories. If light so much conceals, wherefore not

life?' Let us hold fast by a deeper wisdom than is born of sense; and

though men, nowadays, seem to be willing to go back to the eternal

sleep' of the most unspiritual heathenism, and to cast away all that

Christ has brought us concerning that world where He has been and

whence He has returned, because positive science and the anatomist's

scalpel preach no gospel of a future, let us try to feel as well as to

believe that it is life, with all its stunted capacities and idle

occupation with baseless fabrics, which is the sleep, and that for us

all the end of it is--to awake.

II. The second principle contained in our text is that death is to some

men the awaking of God.

When Thou awakest, Thou shalt despise their image.' Closely rendered,

the former clause would read simply in awaking,' without any specifying

of the person, which is left to be gathered from the succeeding words.

But there is no doubt that the English version fills the blank

correctly by referring the awaking to God.

The metaphor is not infrequent in the Old Testament, and, like many

others applying to the divine nature, is saved from any possibility of

misapprehension by the very boldness of its materialism. It has a

well-marked and uniform meaning. God awakes' when He ends an epoch of

probation and long-suffering mercy by an act or period of judgment. So

far, then, as the mere expression is concerned, there may be nothing

more meant here than the termination by a judicial act in this life, of

the transient prosperity of the wicked.' Any divinely-sent catastrophe

which casts the worldly rich man down from his slippery eminence would

satisfy the words. But the emphatic context seems, as already pointed

out, to require that they should be referred to that final crash which

irrevocably separates him who has his portion in this life,' from all

which he calls his goods.'

If so, then the whole period of earthly existence is regarded as the

time of God's gracious forbearance and mercy; and the time of death is

set forth as the instant when sterner elements of the divine dealings

start into greater prominence. Life here is predominantly, though not

exclusively, the field for the manifestation of patient love, not

willing that any should perish. To the godless soul, immersed in

material things, and blind to the light of God's wooing love, the

transition to that other form of existence is likewise the transition

to the field for the manifestation of the retributive energy of God's

righteousness. Here and now His judgment on the whole slumbers. The

consequences of our deeds are inherited, indeed, in many a merciful

sorrow, in many a paternal chastisement, in many a partial

exemplification of the wages of sin as death. But the harvest is not

fully grown nor ripened yet; it is not reaped in all its extent; the

bitter bread is not baked and eaten as it will have to be. Nor are

men's consciences so awakened that they connect the retribution, which

does befall them, with its causes in their own actions, as closely as

they will do when they are removed from the excitement of life and the

deceit of its dreams. Sentence against an evil work is not executed

speedily.' For the long years of our stay here, God's seeking love

lingers round every one of us, yearning over us, besetting us behind

and before, courting us with kindnesses, lavishing on us its treasures,

seeking to win our poor love. It is sometimes said that this is a state

of probation. But that phrase suggests far too cold an idea. God does

not set us here as on a knife edge, with abysses on either side ready

to swallow us if we stumble, while He stands apart watching for our

halting, and unhelpful to our tottering feebleness. He compasses us

with His love and its gifts, He draws us to Himself, and desires that

we should stand. He offers all the help of His angels to hold us up. He

will not suffer thy foot to be moved; He that keepeth thee will not

slumber.' The judgment sleeps; the loving forbearance, the gracious aid

wake. Shall we not yield to His perpetual pleadings, and, moved by the

mercies of God, let His conquering love thaw our cold hearts into

streams of thankfulness and self-devotion?

But remember, that that predominantly merciful and long-suffering

character of God's present dealing affords no guarantee that there will

not come a time when His slumbering judgment will stir to waking. The

same chapter which tells us that He is long-suffering to us-ward, not

willing that any should perish, but that all should come to

repentance,' goes on immediately to repel the inference that therefore

a period of which retribution shall be the characteristic is

impossible, by the solemn declaration, But the day of the Lord shall

come as a thief in the night.' His character remains ever the same, the

principles of His government are unalterable, but there may be

variations in the prominence given in His acts, to the several

principles of the one, and the various though harmonious phases of the

other. The method may be changed, the purpose may remain unchanged. And

the Bible, which is our only source of knowledge on the subject, tells

us that the method is changed, in so far as to intensify the vigour of

the operation of retributive justice after death, so that men who have

been compassed with the loving-kindness of the Lord,' and who die

leaving worldly things, and keeping worldly hearts, will have to

confront the terror of the Lord.'

The alternation of epochs of tolerance and destruction is in accordance

with the workings of God's providence here and now. For though the

characteristic of that providence as we see it is merciful forbearance,

yet we are not left without many a premonition of the mighty final day

of the Lord.' For long years or centuries a nation or an institution

goes on slowly departing from truth, forgetting the principles on which

it rests, or the purposes for which it exists. Patiently God pleads

with the evil-doers, lavishes gifts and warnings upon them. He holds

back the inevitable avenging as long as restoration is yet

possible--and His eye and heart see it to be possible long after men

conclude that the corruption is hopeless. But at last comes a period

when He says, I have long still holden My peace, and refrained Myself,

now will I destroy'; and with a crash one more hoary iniquity

disappears from the earth which it has burdened so long. For sixty

times sixty slow, throbbing seconds, the silent hand creeps unnoticed

round the dial and then, with whirr and clang, the bell rings out, and

another hour of the world's secular day is gone. The billows of the

thunder-cloud slowly gather into vague form, and slowly deepen in lurid

tints, and slowly roll across the fainting blue; they touch--and then

the fierce flash, like the swift hand on the palace-wall of Babylon,

writes its message of destruction over all the heaven at once. We know

enough from the history of men and nations since Sodom till to-day, to

recognise it as God's plan to alternate long patience and sudden

destruction':--

The mills of God grind slowly,

But they grind exceeding small';

and every such instance confirms the expectation of the coming of that

great and terrible day of the Lord, whereof all epochs of convulsion

and ruin, all falls of Jerusalem, and Roman empires, Reformations, and

French Revolutions, and American wars, all private and personal

calamities which come from private wrong-doing, are but feeble

precursors. When Thou awakest, Thou wilt despise their image.'

Brethren, do we use aright this goodness of God which is the

characteristic of the present? Are we ready for that judgment which is

the mark of the future?

III. Death is the annihilation of the vain show of worldly life.

The word rendered image is properly shadow, and hence copy or likeness,

and hence image. Here, however, the simpler meaning is the better. Thou

shalt despise their shadow.' The men are shadows, and all their goods

are not what they are called, their substance,' but their shadow, a

mere appearance, not a reality. That show of good which seems but is

not, is withered up by the light of the awaking God. What He despises

cannot live.

So there are the two old commonplaces of moralists set forth in these

grand words--the unsatisfying character of all merely external delights

and possessions, and also their transitory character. They are

non-substantial and non-permanent.

Nothing that is without a man can make him rich or restful. The

treasures which are kept in coffers are not real, but only those which

are kept in the soul. Nothing which cannot enter into the substance of

the life and character can satisfy us. That which we are makes us rich

or poor, that which we own is a trifle.

There is no congruity between any outward thing and man's soul, of such

a kind as that satisfaction can come from its possession. Cisterns that

can hold no water,' that which is not bread,' husks that the swine did

eat'--these are not exaggerated phrases for the good gifts which God

gives for our delight, and which become profitless and delusive by our

exclusive attachment to them. There is no need for exaggeration. These

worldly possessions have a good in them, they contribute to ease and

grace in life, they save from carking cares and mean anxieties, they

add many a comfort and many a source of culture. But, after all, a

true, lofty life may be lived with a very small modicum. There is no

proportion between wealth and happiness, nor between wealth and

nobleness. The fairest life that ever lived on earth was that of a poor

Man, and with all its beauty it moved within the limits of narrow

resources. The loveliest blossoms do not grow on plants that plunge

their greedy roots into the fattest soil. A little light earth in the

crack of a hard rock will do. We need enough for the physical being to

root itself in; we need no more.

Young men! especially you who are plunged into the busy life of our

great commercial centres, and are tempted by everything you see, and by

most that you hear, to believe that a prosperous trade and hard cash

are the realities, and all else mist and dreams, fix this in your mind

to begin life with--God is the reality, all else is shadow. Do not make

it your ambition to get on, but to get up. Having food and raiment, let

us be content.' Seek for your life's delight and treasure in thought,

in truth, in pure affections, in moderate desires, in a spirit set on

God. These are the realities of our possessions. As for all the rest,

it is sham and show.

And while thus all without is unreal, it is also fleeting as the

shadows of the flying clouds; and when God awakes, it disappears as

they before the noonlight that clears the heavens. All things that are,

are on condition of perpetual flux and change. The cloud-rack has the

likeness of bastions and towers, but they are mist, not granite, and

the wind is every moment sweeping away their outlines, till the phantom

fortress topples into red ruin while we gaze. The tiniest stream eats

out its little valley and rounds the pebble in its widening bed, rain

washes down the soil, and frost cracks the cliffs above. So silently

and yet mightily does the law of change work that to a meditative eye

the solid earth seems almost molten and fluid, and the everlasting

mountains tremble to decay.

Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not?' Are we going to be

such fools as to fix our hopes and efforts upon this fleeting order of

things, which can give no delight more lasting than itself? Even whilst

we are in it, it continueth not in one stay, and we are in it for such

a little while! Then comes what our text calls God's awaking, and where

is it all then? Gone like a ghost at cockcrow. Why! a drop of blood on

your brain or a crumb of bread in your windpipe, and as far as you are

concerned the outward heavens and earth pass away with a great'

silence, as the impalpable shadows that sweep over some lone hillside.

The glories of our birth and state

Are shadows, not substantial things;

There is no armour against fate,

Death lays his icy hand on kings.'

What an awaking to a worldly man that awaking of God will be! As when a

hungry man dreameth, and behold he eateth, but he awaketh and his soul

is empty.' He has thought he fed full, and was rich and safe, but in

one moment he is dragged from it all, and finds himself a starving

pauper, in an order of things for which he has made no provision. When

he dieth, he shall carry nothing away.' Let us see to it that not in

utter nakedness do we go hence, but clothed with that immortal robe,

and rich in those possessions that cannot be taken away from us, which

they have who have lived on earth as heirs of God and joint heirs with

Christ. Let us pierce, for the foundation of our life's house, beneath

the shifting sands of time down to the Rock of Ages, and build there.

IV. Finally, death is for some men the annihilation of the vain shows

in order to reveal the great reality.

I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness.'

Likeness' is properly form,' and is the same word which is employed in

reference to Moses, who saw the similitude of the Lord.' If there be,

as is most probable, an allusion to that ancient vision in these words,

then the likeness' is not that conformity to the divine character which

it is the goal of our hopes to possess, but the beholding of His

self-manifestation. The parallelism of the verse also points to such an

interpretation.

If so, then, we have here the blessed confidence that when all the

baseless fabric of the dream of life has faded from our opening eyes,

we shall see the face of our ever-loving God. Here the distracting

whirl of earthly things obscures Him from even the devoutest souls, and

His own mighty works which reveal do also conceal. In them is the

hiding as well as the showing of His power. But there the veil which

draped the perfect likeness, and gave but dim hints through its heavy

swathings of the outline of immortal beauty that lay beneath, shall

fall away. No longer befooled by shadows, we shall possess the true

substance; no longer bedazzled by shows, we shall behold the reality.

And seeing God we shall be satisfied. With all lesser joys the eye is

not satisfied with seeing, but to look on Him will be enough. Enough

for mind and heart, wearied and perplexed with partial knowledge and

imperfect love; enough for eager desires, which thirst, after all

draughts from other streams; enough for will, chafing against lower

lords and yet longing for authoritative control; enough for all my

being--to see God. Here we can rest after all wanderings, and say, I

travel no further; here will I dwell for ever--I shall be satisfied.'

And may these dim hopes not suggest to us too some presentiment of the

full Christian truth of assimilation dependent on vision, and of vision

reciprocally dependent on likeness? We shall be like Him, for we shall

see Him as He is,'--words which reach a height that David but partially

discerned through the mist. This much he knew, that he should in some

transcendent sense behold the manifested God; and this much more, that

it must be in righteousness' that he should gaze upon that face. The

condition of beholding the Holy One was holiness. We know that the

condition of holiness is trust in Christ. And as we reckon up the rich

treasure of our immortal hopes, our faith grows bold, and pauses not

even at the lofty certainty of God without us, known directly and

adequately, but climbs to the higher assurance of God within us,

flooding our darkness with His great light, and changing us into the

perfect copies of His express Image, His only-begotten Son. I shall be

satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness,' cries the prophet

Psalmist. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master,'

responds the Christian hope.

Brethren! take heed that the process of dissipating the vain shows of

earth be begun betimes in your souls. It must either be done by Faith,

whose rod disenchants them into their native nothingness, and then it

is blessed; or it must be done by death, whose mace smites them to

dust, and then it is pure, irrevocable loss and woe. Look away from, or

rather look through, things that are seen to the King eternal,

invisible. Let your hearts seek Christ, and your souls cleave to Him.

Then death will take away nothing from you that you would care to keep,

but will bring you your true joy. It will but trample to fragments the

dome of many-coloured glass' that stains the white radiance of

eternity.' Looking forward calmly to that supreme hour, you will be

able to say, I will both lay me down in peace and sleep, for Thou,

Lord, only makest me dwell in safety.' Looking back upon it from

beyond, and wondering to find how brief it was, and how close to Him

whom you love it has brought you, your now immortal lips touched by the

rising Sun of the heavenly morning will thankfully exclaim, When I

awake, I am still with Thee.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

SECRET FAULTS

Who can understand his errors? cleanse Thou me from secret faults.'

--PSALM xix. 12.

The contemplation of the perfect law, enlightening the eyes,' sends the

Psalmist to his knees. He is appalled by his own shortcomings, and

feels that, beside all those of which he is aware, there is a region,

as yet unilluminated by that law, where evil things nestle and breed.

The Jewish ritual drew a broad distinction between inadvertent--whether

involuntary or ignorant--and deliberate sins; providing atonement for

the former, not for the latter. The word in my text rendered errors' is

closely connected with that which in the Levitical system designates

the former class of transgressions; and the connection between the two

clauses of the text, as well as that with the subsequent verse,

distinctly shows that the secret faults' of the one clause are

substantially synonymous with the errors' of the other.

They are, then, not sins hidden from men, whether because they have

been done quietly in a corner, and remain undetected, or because they

have only been in thought, never passing into act. Both of these pages

are dark in every man's memory. Who is there that could reveal himself

to men? who is there that could bear the sight of a naked soul? But the

Psalmist is thinking of a still more solemn fact, that, beyond the

range of conscience and consciousness, there are evils in us all. It

may do us good to ponder his discovery that he had undiscovered sins,

and to take for ours his prayer, Cleanse Thou me from secret faults.'

I. So I ask you to look with me, briefly, first, at the solemn fact

here, that there are in every man sins of which the doer is unaware.

It is with our characters as with our faces. Few of us are familiar

with our own appearance, and most of us, if we have looked at our

portraits, have felt a little shock of surprise, and been ready to say

to ourselves, Well! I did not know that I looked like that!' And the

bulk even of good men are almost as much strangers to their inward

physiognomy as to their outward. They see themselves in their

looking-glasses every morning, although they go away and forget what

manner of men' they were. But they do not see their true selves in the

same fashion in any other mirror. It is the very characteristic of all

evil that it has a strange power of deceiving a man as to its real

character; like the cuttle-fish, that squirts out a cloud of ink and so

escapes in the darkness and the dirt. The more a man goes wrong the

less he knows it. Conscience is loudest when it is least needed, and

most silent when most required.

Then, besides that, there is a great part of every one's life which is

mechanical, instinctive, and all but involuntary. Habits and emotions

and passing impulses very seldom come into men's consciousness, and an

enormously large proportion of everybody's life is done with the

minimum of attention, and is as little remembered as it is observed.

Then, besides that, conscience wants educating. You see that on a large

scale, for instance, in the history of the slow progress which

Christian principle has made in leavening the world's thinkings. It

took eighteen centuries to teach the Church that slavery was

unchristian. The Church has not yet learned that war is unchristian,

and it is only beginning to surmise that possibly Christian principle

may have something to say in social questions, and in the

determination, for example, of the relations of capital and labour, and

of wealth and poverty. The very same slowness of apprehension and

gradual growth in the education of conscience, and in the perception of

the application of Christian principles to duty, applies to the

individual as to the Church.

Then, besides that, we are all biassed in our own favour, and what,

when another man says it, is flat blasphemy,' we think, when we say it,

is only a choleric word.' We have fine names for our own vices, and

ugly ones for the very same vices in other people. David will flare up

into generous and sincere indignation about the man that stole the poor

man's ewe lamb, but he has not the ghost of a notion that he has been

doing the very same thing himself. And so we bribe our consciences as

well as neglect them, and they need to be educated.

Thus, down below every life there lies a great dim region of habits and

impulses and fleeting emotions, into which it is the rarest thing for a

man to go with a candle in his hand to see what it is like.

But I can imagine a man saying, Well, if I do not know that I am doing

wrong, how can it be a sin?' In answer to that, I would say that, thank

God! ignorance diminishes criminality, but ignorance does not alter the

nature of the deed. Take a simple illustration. Here is a man who, all

unconsciously to himself, is allowing worldly prosperity to sap his

Christian character. He does not know that the great current of his

life has been turned aside, as it were, by that sluice, and is taken to

drive the wheels of his mill, and that there is only a miserable little

trickle coming down the river bed. Is he any less guilty because he

does not know? Is he not the more so, because he might and would have

known if he had thought and felt right? Or, here is another man who has

the habit of letting his temper get the better of him. He calls it

stern adherence to principle,' or righteous indignation'; and he thinks

himself very badly used when other people drive him' so often into a

temper. Other people know, and he might know, if he would be honest

with himself, that, for all his fine names, it is nothing else than

passion. Is he any the less guilty because of his ignorance? It is

plain enough that, whilst ignorance, if it is absolute and inevitable,

does diminish criminality to the vanishing point, the ignorance of our

own faults which most of us display is neither absolute nor inevitable;

and therefore, though it may, thank God! diminish, it does not destroy

our guilt. She wipeth her mouth and saith, I have done no harm': was

she, therefore, chaste and pure? In all our hearts there are many

vermin lurking beneath the stones, and they are none the less poisonous

because they live and multiply in the dark. I know nothing against

myself, yet am I not hereby justified. But he that judgeth me is the

Lord.'

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to look at the special perilousness

of these hidden faults.

As with a blight upon a rose-tree, the little green creatures lurk on

the underside of the leaves, and in all the folds of the buds, and

because unseen, they increase with alarming rapidity. The very fact

that we have faults in our characters, which everybody sees but

ourselves, makes it certain that they will grow unchecked, and so will

prove terribly perilous. The small things of life are the great things

of life. For a man's character is made up of them, and of their

results, striking inwards upon himself. A wine-glassful of water with

one drop of mud in it may not be much obscured, but if you come to

multiply it into a lakeful, you will have muddy waves that reflect no

heavens, and show no gleaming stars.

These secret faults are like a fungus that has grown in a wine-cask,

whose presence nobody suspected. It sucks up all the generous liquor to

feed its own filthiness, and when the staves are broken, there is no

wine left, nothing but the foul growth. Many a Christian man and woman

has the whole Christian life arrested, and all but annihilated, by the

unsuspected influence of a secret sin. I do not believe it would be

exaggeration to say that, for one man who has made shipwreck of his

faith and lost his peace by reason of some gross transgression, there

are twenty who have fallen into the same condition by reason of the

multitude of small ones. He that despiseth little things shall fall by

little and little'; and whilst the deeds which the Ten Commandments

rebuke are damning to a Christian character, still more perilous,

because unseen, and permitted to grow without check or restraint, are

these unconscious sins. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that

thing which he alloweth.'

III. Notice the discipline, or practical issues, to which such

considerations should lead.

To begin with, they ought to take down our self-complacency, if we have

any, and to make us feel that, after all, our characters are very poor

things. If men praise us, let us try to remember what it will be good

for us to remember, too, when we are tempted to praise ourselves--the

underworld of darkness which each of us carries about within us.

Further, let me press upon you two practical points. This whole set of

contemplations should make us practise a very rigid and close

self-inspection. There will always be much that will escape our

observation--we shall gradually grow to know more and more of it--but

there can be no excuse for that which I fear is a terribly common

characteristic of the professing Christianity of this day--the all but

entire absence of close inspection of one's own character and conduct.

I know very well that it is not a wholesome thing for a man to be

always poking in his own feelings and emotions. I know also that, in a

former generation, there was far too much introspection, instead of

looking to Jesus Christ and forgetting self. I do not believe that

self-examination, directed to the discovery of reasons for trusting the

sincerity of my own faith, is a good thing. But I do believe that,

without the practice of careful weighing of ourselves, there will be

very little growth in anything that is noble and good.

The old Greeks used to preach, Know thyself.' It was a high behest, and

very often a very vain-glorious one. A man's best means of knowing what

he is, is to take stock of what he does. If you will put your conduct

through the sieve, you will come to a pretty good understanding of your

character. He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city

broken down, without walls,' into which all enemies can leap

unhindered, and out from which all things that will may pass. Do you

set guards at the gates and watch yourselves with all carefulness.

Then, again, I would say we must try to diminish as much as possible

the mere instinctive and habitual and mechanical part of our lives, and

to bring, as far as we can, every action under the conscious dominion

of principle. The less we live by impulse, and the more we live by

intelligent reflection, the better it will be for us. The more we can

get habit on the side of goodness, the better; but the more we break up

our habits, and make each individual action the result of a special

volition of the spirit guided by reason and conscience, the better for

us all.

Then, again, I would say, set yourselves to educate your consciences.

They need that. One of the surest ways of making conscience more

sensitive is always to consult it and always to obey it. If you neglect

it, and let it prophesy to the wind, it will stop speaking before long.

Herod could not get a word out of Christ when he asked Him many

questions' because for years he had not cared to hear His voice. And

conscience, like the Lord of conscience, will hold its peace after men

have neglected its speech. You can pull the clapper out of the bell

upon the rock, and then, though the waves may dash, there will not be a

sound, and the vessel will drive straight on to the black teeth that

are waiting for it. Educate your conscience by obeying it, and by

getting into the habit of bringing everything to its bar.

And, still further, compare yourselves constantly with your model. Do

as the art students do in a gallery, take your poor daub right into the

presence of the masterpiece, and go over it line by line and tint by

tint. Get near Jesus Christ that you may learn your duty from Him, and

you will find out many of the secret sins.

And, lastly, let us ask God to cleanse us.

My text, as translated in the Revised Version, says, Clear Thou me from

secret faults.' And there is present in that word, if not exclusively,

at least predominantly, the idea of a judicial acquittal, so that the

thought of the first clause of this verse seems rather to be that of

pronouncing guiltless, or forgiving, than that of delivering from the

power of. But both, no doubt, are included in the idea, as both, in

fact, come from the same source and in response to the same cry.

And so we may be sure that, though our eye does not go down into the

dark depths, God's eye goes, and that where He looks He looks to

pardon, if we come to Him through Jesus Christ our Lord.

He will deliver us from the power of these secret faults, giving to us

that divine Spirit which is the candle of the Lord,' to search us, and

to convince of our sins, and to drag our evil into the light; and

giving us the help without which we can never overcome. The only way

for us to be delivered from the dominion of our unconscious faults is

to increase the depth and closeness and constancy of our communion with

Jesus Christ; and then they will drop away from us. Mosquitoes and

malaria, the one unseen in their minuteness, and the other, the

pestilence that walketh in darkness,' haunt the swamps. Go up on the

hilltop, and neither of them are found. So if we live more and more on

the high levels, in communion with our Master, there will be fewer and

fewer of these unconscious sins buzzing and stinging and poisoning our

lives, and more and more will His grace conquer and cleanse.

They will all be manifested some day. The time comes when He shall

bring to light the hidden things and darkness and the counsels of men's

hearts. There will be surprises on both hands of the Judge. Some on the

right, astonished, will say, Lord, when saw we Thee?' and some on the

left, smitten to confusion and surprise, will say, Lord, Lord, have we

not prophesied in Thy name?' Let us go to Him with the prayer, Search

me, O God! and try me; and see if there be any wicked way in me; and

lead me in the way everlasting.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

OPEN SINS

Keep back Thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have

dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from

the great transgression.'--PSALM xix. 13.

Another psalmist promises to the man who dwells in the secret place of

the Most High' that' he shall not be afraid for the terror by night,

nor for the arrow that flieth by day, nor for the pestilence that

walketh at noonday,' but shall tread upon the lion and adder.' These

promises divide the dangers that beset us into the same two classes as

our Psalmist does--the one secret; the other palpable and open. The

former, which, as I explained in my last sermon, are sins hidden, not

from others, but from the doer, may fairly be likened to the pestilence

that stalks slaying in the dark, or to the stealthy, gliding serpent,

which strikes and poisons before the naked foot is aware. The other

resembles the destruction that wasteth at noonday,' or the lion with

its roar and its spring, as, disclosed from its covert, it leaps upon

the prey.

Our present text deals with the latter of these two classes.

Presumptuous sins' does not, perhaps, convey to an ordinary reader the

whole significance of the phrase, for it may be taken to define a

single class of sins--namely, those of pride or insolence. What is

really meant is just the opposite of secret sins'--all sorts of evil

which, whatever may be their motives and other qualities, have this in

common, that the doer, when he does them, knows them to be wrong.

The Psalmist gets this further glimpse into the terrible possibilities

which attach even to a servant of God, and we have in our text these

three things--a danger discerned, a help sought, and a daring hope

cherished.

I. Note, then, the first of these, the dreaded and discerned

danger--presumptuous sins,' which may have dominion over' us, and lead

us at last to a great transgression.'

Now the word which is translated presumptuous' literally means that

which boils or bubbles; and it sets very picturesquely before us the

movement of hot desires--the agitation of excited impulses or

inclinations which hurry men into sin in spite of their consciences. It

is also to be noticed that the prayer of my text, with singular pathos

and lowly self-consciousness, is the prayer of Thy servant,' who knows

himself to be a servant, and who therefore knows that these glaring

transgressions, done in the teeth of conscience and consciousness, are

all inconsistent with his standing and his profession, but yet are

perfectly possible for him.

An old mediaeval mystic once said, There is nothing weaker than the

devil stripped naked.' Would it were true! For there is one thing that

is weaker than a discovered devil, and that is my own heart. For we all

know that sometimes, with our eyes open, and the most unmistakable

consciousness that what we are doing was wrong, we have set our teeth

and done it, Christian men though we may profess to be, and may really

be. All such conduct is inconsistent with Christianity; but we are not

to say, therefore, that it is incompatible with Christianity. Thank

God! that is a very different matter. But as long as you and I have two

things--viz. strong and hot desires, and weak and flabby wills--so long

shall we, in this world full of combustibles, not be beyond the

possibility of a dreadful conflagration being kindled by some

devil-blown sparks. There are plenty of dry sticks lying about to put

under the caldron of our hearts, to make them boil and bubble over! And

we have, alas! but weak wills, which do not always keep the reins in

their hands as they ought to do, nor coerce these lower parts of our

nature into their proper subordination. Fire is a good servant, but a

bad master; and we are all of us too apt to let it become master, and

then the whole course of nature' is set on fire of hell.' The servant

of God may yet, with open eyes and obstinate disregard of his better

self and of all its remonstrances, go straight into presumptuous sin.'

Another step is here taken by the Psalmist. He looks shrinkingly and

shudderingly into a possible depth, and he sees, going down into the

abyss, a ladder with three rungs on it. The topmost one is wilful,

self-conscious transgression. But that is not the lowest stage; there

is another step. Presumptuous sin tends to become despotic sin. Let

them not have dominion over me.' A man may do a very bad thing once,

and get so wholesomely frightened, and so keenly conscious of the

disastrous issues, that he will never go near it again. The prodigal

would not be in a hurry, you may depend upon it, to try the swine

trough and the far country, and the rags, and the fever, and the famine

any more. David got a lesson that he never forgot in that matter of

Bathsheba. The bitter fruit of his sin kept growing up all his life,

and he had to eat it, and that kept him right. They tell us that broken

bones are stronger at the point of fracture than they were before. And

it is possible for a man's sin--if I might use a paradox which you will

not misunderstand--to become the instrument of his salvation.

But there is another possibility quite as probable, and very often

recurring, and that is that the disease, like some other morbid states

of the human frame, shall leave a tendency to recurrence. A pin-point

hole in a dyke will be widened into a gap as big as a church-door in

ten minutes, by the pressure of the flood behind it. And so every act

which we do in contradiction of our standing as professing Christians,

and in the face of the protests, all unavailing, of that conscience

which is only a voice, and has no power to enforce its behests, will

tend to recurrence once and again. The single acts become habits, with

awful rapidity. Just as the separate gas jets from a multitude of

minute apertures coalesce into a continuous ring of light, so deeds

become habits, and get dominion over us. He sold himself to do evil.'

He made himself a bond-slave of iniquity. It is an awful and a

miserable thing to think that professing Christians do often come into

that position of being, by their inflamed passions and enfeebled wills,

servants of the evil that they do. Alas! how many of us, if we were

honest with ourselves, would have to say. I am carnal, sold unto sin.'

That is not the lowest rung of the slippery ladder. Despotic sin ends

in utter departure.

The word translated here, quite correctly, transgression,' and

intensified by that strong adjective attached, a great transgression,'

literally means rebellion, revolt, or some such idea; and expresses, as

the ultimate issue of conscious transgression prolonged and perpetuated

into habit, an entire casting off of allegiance to God. No man can

serve two masters.' His servants ye are whom ye obey,' whomsoever ye

may call your master. The Psalmist feels that the end of indulged evil

is going over altogether to the other camp. I suppose all of us have

known instances of that sort. Men in my position, with a long life of

ministry behind them, can naturally remember many such instances. And

this is the outline history of the suicide of a Christian. First secret

sin, unsuspected, because the conscience is torpid; then open sin,

known to be such, but done nevertheless; then dominant sin, with an

enfeebled will and power of resistance; then the abandonment of all

pretence or profession of religion. The ladder goes down into the pit,

but not to the bottom of the pit. And the man that is going down it has

a descending impulse after he has reached the bottom step and he

falls--Where? The first step down is tampering with conscience. It is

neither safe nor wise to do anything, howsoever small, against that

voice. All the rest will come afterward, unless God restrains--first

the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear,' and then the

bitter harvest of the poisonous grain.

II. So, secondly, note the help sought.

The Psalmist is like a man standing on the edge of some precipice, and

peeping over the brink to the profound beneath, and feeling his head

beginning to swim. He clutches at the strong, steady hand of his guide,

knowing that unless he is restrained, over he will go. Keep Thou back

Thy servant from presumptuous sins.'

So, then, the first lesson we have to take is, to cherish a lowly

consciousness of our own tendency to light-headedness and giddiness.

Blessed is the man that feareth always.' That fear has nothing cowardly

about it. It will not abate in the least the buoyancy and bravery of

our work. It will not tend to make us shirk duty because there is

temptation in it, but it will make us go into all circumstances

realising that without that divine help we cannot stand, and that with

it we cannot fall. Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.' The same

Peter that said, Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I,' was

wiser and braver when he said, in later days, being taught by former

presumption, Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.'

Let me remind you, too, that the temper which we ought to cherish is

that of a confident belief in the reality of a divine support. The

prayer of my text has no meaning at all, unless the actual supernatural

communication by God's own Holy Spirit breathed into men's hearts be a

simple truth. Hold Thou me up,' Keep Thou me back,' means, if it means

anything, Give me in my heart a mightier strength than mine own, which

shall curb all this evil nature of mine, and bring it into conformity

with Thy holy will.'

How is that restraining influence to be exercised? There are many ways

by which God, in His providence, can fulfil the prayer. But the way

above all others is by the actual operation upon heart and will and

desires of a divine Spirit, who uses for His weapon the Word of God,

revealed by Jesus Christ, and in the Scriptures. The sword of the

Spirit is the Word of God,' and God's answer to the prayer of my text

is the gift to every man who seeks it of that indwelling Power to

sustain and to restrain.

That will keep our passions down. The bubbling water is lowered in its

temperature, and ceases to bubble, when cold is added to it. When God's

Spirit comes into a man's heart, that will deaden his desires after

earth and forbidden ways. He will bring blessed higher objects for all

his affections. He who has been fed on the hidden manna' will not be

likely to hanker after the leeks and onions, however strong their smell

and pungent their taste, that grew in the Nile mud in Egypt. He who has

tasted the higher sweetnesses of God will have his heart's desires

after lower delights strangely deadened and cooled. Get near God, and

open your hearts for the entrance of that divine Spirit, and then it

will not seem foolish to empty your hands of the trash that they carry

in order to grasp the precious things that He gives. A bit of

scrap-iron magnetised turns to the pole. My heart, touched by the

Spirit of God dwelling in me, will turn to Him, and I shall find little

sweetness in the else tempting delicacies that earth can supply. Keep

Thy servant back from,' by depriving him of the taste for, presumptuous

sins.'

That Spirit will strengthen our wills. For when God comes into a heart,

He restores the due subordination which has been broken into discord

and anarchy by sin. He dismounts the servant riding on horseback, and

carrying the horse to the devil, according to the proverb, and gives

the reins into the right hands. Now, if the gift of God's Spirit,

working through the Word of God, and the principles and the motives

therein unfolded, and therefrom deducible, be the great means by which

we are to be kept from open and conscious transgression, it follows

very plainly that our task is twofold. One part of it is to see that we

cultivate that spirit of lowly dependence, of self-conscious weakness,

of triumphant confidence, which will issue in the perpetual prayer for

God's restraint. When we enter upon tasks which may be dangerous, and

into regions of temptation which cannot but be so, though they be duty,

we should ever have the desire in our hearts and upon our lips that God

would keep us from, and in, the evil.

The other part of our duty is to make it a matter of conscience and

careful cultivation, to use honestly and faithfully the power which, in

response to our desires, has been granted to us. All of you, Christian

men and women, have access to an absolute security against every

transgression; and the cause lies wholly at your own doors in each case

of failure, deficiency, or transgression, for at every moment it was

open to you to clasp the Hand that holds you up, and at every moment,

if you failed, it was because your careless fingers had relaxed their

grasp.

III. Lastly, observe the daring hope here cherished.

Then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great

transgression.' That is the upshot of the divine answer to both the

petitions which have been occupying us in these two successive sermons.

It is connected with the former of them by the recurrence of the same

word, which in the first petition was rendered cleanse'--or, more

accurately, clear'--and in this final clause is to be rendered

accurately, I shall be clear from the great transgression.' And it

obviously connects in sense with both these petitions, because, in

order to be upright and clear, there must, first of all, be divine

cleansing, and then divine restraint.

So, then, nothing short of absolute deliverance from the power of sin

in all its forms should content the servant of God. Nothing short of it

contents the Master for the servant. Nothing short of it corresponds to

the power which Christ puts in operation in every heart that believes

in Him. And nothing else should be our aim in our daily conflict with

evil and growth in grace. Ah! I fear me that, for an immense number of

professing Christians in this generation, the hope of--and, still more,

the aim towards--anything approximating to entire deliverance from sin,

have faded from their consciences and their lives. Aim at the stars,

brother! and if you do not hit them, your arrow will go higher than if

it were shot along the lower levels.

Note that an indefinite approximation to this condition is possible. I

am not going to discuss, at this stage of my discourse, controversial

questions which may be involved here. It will be time enough to discuss

with you whether you can be absolutely free from sin in this world when

you are a great deal freer from it than you are at present. At all

events, you can get far nearer to the ideal, and the ideal must always

be perfect. And I lay it on your hearts, dear friends! that you have in

your possession, if you are Christian people, possibilities in the way

of conformity to the Master's will, and entire emancipation from all

corruption, that you have not yet dreamed of, not to say applied to

your lives. I pray God that He would sanctify you wholly, and that your

whole body, soul, and spirit be preserved blameless unto the coming.'

That daring hope will be fulfilled one day; for nothing short of it

will exhaust the possibilities of Christ's work or satisfy the desires

of Christ's heart.

The Gospel knows nothing of irreclaimable outcasts. To it there is but

one unpardonable sin, and that is the sin of refusing the cleansing of

Christ's blood and the sanctifying of Christ's Spirit. Whoever you are,

whatever you are, go to God with this prayer of our text, and realise

that it is answered in Jesus Christ, and you will not ask in vain. If

you will put yourself into His hands, and let Him cleanse and restrain,

He will give you new powers to detect the serpents in the flowers, and

new resolution to shake off the vipers into the fire. For there is

nothing that God wants half so much as that we, His wandering children,

should come back to Him, and He will cleanse us from the filth of the

swine trough and the rags of our exile, and clothe us in fine linen

clean and white.' We may each be sinless and guiltless. We can be so in

one way only. If we look to Jesus Christ, and live near Him, He will be

made of God unto us wisdom,' by which we shall detect our secret sins;

righteousness,' whereby we shall be cleansed from guilt;

sanctification,' which shall restrain us from open transgression; and

redemption,' by which we shall be wholly delivered from evil and

presented faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding

joy.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

FEASTING ON THE SACRIFICE

The meek shall eat and be satisfied.'--PSALM xxii. 26.

The flesh of the sacrifice of his peace-offering for thanksgiving shall

be offered in the day of his oblation.' Such was the law for Israel.

And the custom of sacrificial feasts, which it embodies, was common to

many lands. To such a custom my text alludes; for the Psalmist has just

been speaking of paying his vows' (that is, sacrifices which he had

vowed in the time of his trouble), and to partake of these he invites

the meek. The sacrificial dress is only a covering for high and

spiritual thoughts. In some way or other the singer of this psalm

anticipates that his experiences shall be the nourishment and gladness

of a wide circle; and if we observe that in the context that circle is

supposed to include the whole world, and that one of the results of

partaking of this sacrificial feast is your heart shall live for ever,'

we may well say with the Ethiopian eunuch, Of whom speaketh the

Psalmist thus?' The early part of the psalm answers the question. Jesus

Christ laid His hand on this wonderful psalm of desolation, despair,

and deliverance when on the Cross He took its first words as expressing

His emotion then: My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?' Whatever

may be our views as to its authorship, and as to the connection between

the Psalmist's utterances and his own personal experiences, none to

whom that voice that rang through the darkness on Calvary is the voice

of the Son of God, can hesitate as to who it is whose very griefs and

sorrows are thus the spiritual food that gives life to the whole world.

From this, the true point of view, then, from which to look at the

whole of this wonderful psalm, I desire to deal with the words of my

text now.

I. We have, first, then, the world's sacrificial feast.

The Jewish ritual, and that of many other nations, as I have remarked,

provided for a festal meal following on, and consisting of the material

of, the sacrifice. A generation which studies comparative mythology,

and spares no pains to get at the meaning underlying the barbarous

worship of the rudest nations, ought to be interested in the question

of the ideas that formed and were expressed by that elaborate Jewish

ritual. In the present case, the signification is plain enough. That

which, in one aspect, is a peace-offering reconciling to God, in

another aspect is the nourishment and the joy of the hearts that accept

it. And so the work of Jesus Christ has two distinct phases of

application, according as we think of it as being offered to God or

appropriated by men. In the one case it is our peace; in the other it

is our food and our life. If we glance for a moment at the marvellous

picture of suffering and desolation in the previous portion of this

psalm, which sounds the very depths of both, we shall understand more

touchingly what it is on which Christian hearts are to feed. The

desolation that spoke in Why hast Thou forsaken Me?' the consciousness

of rejection and reproach, of mockery and contempt, which wailed, All

that see Me laugh Me to scorn; they shoot out the lip; they shake the

head, saying, "He trusted on the Lord that He would deliver Him; let

Him deliver Him, seeing He delighteth in Him"'; the physical sufferings

which are the very picture of crucifixion, so as that the whole reads

liker history than prophecy, in All My bones are out of joint; My

strength is dried up like a potsherd; and My tongue cleaveth to My

jaws'; the actual passing into the darkness of the grave, which is

expressed in Thou hast brought Me into the dust of death'; and even the

minute correspondence, so inexplicable upon any hypothesis except that

it is direct prophecy, which is found in They part My garments among

them, and cast lots upon My vesture'--these be the viands, not without

bitter herbs, that are laid on the table which Christ spreads for us.

They are parts of the sacrifice that reconciles to God. Offered to Him

they make our peace. They are parts and elements of the food of our

spirits. Appropriated and partaken of by us they make our strength and

our life.

Brethren! there is little food, there is little impulse, little

strength for obedience, little gladness or peace of heart to be got

from a Christ who is not a Sacrifice. If we would know how much He may

be to us, as the nourishment of our best life, and as the source of our

purest and permanent gladness, we must, first of all, look upon Him as

the Offering for the world's sin, and then as the very Life and Bread

of our souls. The Christ that feeds the world is the Christ that died

for the world.

Hence our Lord Himself, most eminently in one great and profound

discourse, has set forth, not only that He is the Bread of God which

came down from heaven,' but that His flesh and His blood are such, and

the separation between the two in the discourse, as in the memorial

rite, indicates that there has come the violent separation of death,

and that thereby He becomes the life of humanity.

So my text, and the whole series of Old Testament representations in

which the blessings of the Kingdom are set forth as a feast, and the

parables of the New Testament in which a similar representation is

contained, do all converge upon, and receive their deepest meaning

from, that one central thought that the peace-offering for the world is

the food of the world.

We see, hence, the connection between these great spiritual ideas and

the central act of Christian worship. The Lord's Supper simply says by

act what my text says in words. I know no difference between the rite

and the parable, except that the one is addressed to the eye and the

other to the ear. The rite is an acted parable; the parable is a spoken

rite. And when Jesus Christ, in the great discourse to which I have

referred, dilates at length upon the eating of His flesh and the

drinking of His blood' as being the condition of spiritual life, He is

not referring to the Lord's Supper, but the discourse and the rite

refer both to the same spiritual truth. One is a symbol; the other is a

saying; and symbol and saying mean just the same thing. The saying does

not refer to the symbol, but to that to which the symbol refers. It

seems to me that one of the greatest dangers which now threaten

Evangelical Christianity is the strange and almost inexplicable

recrudescence of Sacramentarianism in this generation to which those

Christian communities are contributing, however reluctantly and

unconsciously, who say there is something more than commemorative

symbols in the bread and wine of the Lord's table. If once you admit

that, it seems, in my humble judgment, that you open the door to the

whole flood of evils which the history of the Church declares have come

with the Sacramentarian hypothesis. And we must take our stand, as I

believe, upon the plain, intelligible thoughts--Baptism is a

declaratory symbol, and nothing more; the Lord's Supper is a

commemorative symbol, and nothing more; except that both are acts of

obedience to the enjoining Lord. When we stand there we can face all

priestly superstitions, and say, Jesus I know; and Paul I know; but who

are ye?' The meek shall eat and be satisfied,' and the food of the

world is the suffering Messiah.

But what have we to say about the act expressed in the text? The meek

shall eat.' I do not desire to dwell at any length upon the thought of

the process by which this food of the world becomes ours, in this

sermon. But there are two points which perhaps may be regarded as

various aspects of one, on which I would like to say just a sentence or

two. Of course, the translation of the eating' of my text into

spiritual reality is simply that we partake of the food of our spirits

by the act of faith in Jesus Christ. But whilst that is so, let me put

emphasis, in a sentence, upon the thought that personal appropriation,

and making the world's food mine, by my own individual act, is the

condition on which alone I get any good from it. It is possible to die

of starvation at the door of a granary. It is possible to have a table

spread with all that is needful, and yet to set one's teeth, and lock

one's lips, and receive no strength and no gladness from the rich

provision. Eat' means, at any rate, incorporate with myself, take into

my very own lips, masticate with my very own teeth, swallow down by my

very own act, and so make part of my physical frame. And that is what

we have to do with Jesus Christ, or He is nothing to us. Eat'; claim

your part in the universal blessing; see that it becomes yours by your

own taking of it into the very depths of your heart. And then, and then

only, will it become your food.

And how are we to do that if, day in and day out, and week in and week

out, and year in and year out, with some of us, there be scarce a

thought turned to Him; scarce a desire winging its way to Him; scarce

one moment of quiet contemplation of these great truths. We have to

ruminate, we have to meditate; we have to make conscious and frequent

efforts to bring before the mind, in the first place, and then before

the heart and all the sensitive, emotional, and voluntary nature, the

great truths on which our salvation rests. In so far as we do that we

get good out of them; in so far as we fail to do it, we may call

ourselves Christians, and attend to religious observances, and be

members of churches, and diligent in good works, and all the rest of

it, but nothing passes from Him to us, and we starve even whilst we

call ourselves guests at His table.

Oh! the average Christian life of this day is a strange thing; very,

very little of it has the depth that comes from quiet communion with

Jesus Christ; and very little of it has the joyful consciousness of

strength that comes from habitual reception into the heart of the grace

that He brings. What is the good of all your profession unless it

brings you to that? If a coroner's jury were to sit upon many of

us--and we are dead enough to deserve it--the verdict would be, Died of

starvation.' The meek shall eat,' but what about the professing

Christians that feed their souls upon anything, everything rather than

upon the Christ whom they say they trust and serve?

II. And now let me say a word, in the second place, about the rich

fruition of this feast.

The meek shall be satisfied.' Satisfied!' Who in the world is? And if

we are not, why are we not? Jesus Christ, in the facts of His death and

resurrection--for His resurrection as well as His death are included in

the psalm--brings to us all that our circumstances, relationships, and

inward condition can require.

Think of what that death, as the sacrifice for the world's sin, does.

It sets all right in regard to our relation to God. It reveals to us a

God of infinite love. It provides a motive, an impulse, and a Pattern

for all life. It abolishes death, and it gives ample scope for the

loftiest and most exuberant hopes that a man can cherish. And surely

these are enough to satisfy the seeking spirit.

But go to the other end, and think, not of what Christ's work does for

us, but of what we need to have done for us. What do you and I want to

be satisfied? It would take a long time to go over the catalogue; let

me briefly run through some of the salient points of it. We want, for

the intellect, which is the regal part of man, though it be not the

highest, truth which is certain, comprehensive, and inexhaustible; the

first, to provide anchorage; the second, to meet and regulate and unify

all thought and life; and the last, to allow room for endless research

and ceaseless progress. And in that fact that the Eternal Son of the

Eternal Father took upon Himself human nature, lived, died, rose, and

reigns at God's right hand, I believe there lie the seeds of all truth,

except the purely physical and material, which men need. Everything is

there; every truth about God, about man, about duty, about a future,

about society; everything that the world needs is laid up in germ in

that great gospel of our salvation. If a man will take it for the

foundation of his beliefs and the guide of his thinkings, he will find

his understanding is satisfied, because it grasps the personal Truth

who liveth, and is with us for ever.

Our hearts crave, however imperfect their love may be, a perfect love;

and a perfect love means one untinged by any dash of selfishness,

incapable of any variation or eclipse, all-knowing, all-pitying,

all-powerful. We have made experience of precious loves that die. We

know of loves that change, that grow cold, that misconstrue, that may

have tears but have no hands. We know of loves' that are only a fine

name for animal passions, and are twice cursed, cursing them that give

and them that take. The happiest will admit, and the lonely will

achingly feel, how we all want for satisfaction a love that cannot

fail, that can help, that beareth all things, and that can do all

things. We have it in Jesus Christ, and the Cross is the pledge

thereof.

Conscience wants pacifying, cleansing, enlightening, directing, and we

get all these in the good news of One that has died for us, and that

lives to be our Lord. The will needs authority which is not force. And

where is there an authority so constraining in its sweetness and so

sweet in its constraint as in those silken bonds which are stronger

than iron fetters? Hope, imagination, and all other of our powers or

weaknesses, our gifts or needs, are satisfied when they feed on Christ.

If we feed upon anything else it turns to ashes that break our teeth

and make our palates gritty, and have no nourishment in them. We shall

be for ever roaming with a hungry heart' unless we take our places at

the feast on the one sacrifice for the world's peace.

III. I can say but a word as to the guests.

It is the meek' who eat. The word translated meek' has a wider and

deeper meaning than that. Meek' refers, in our common language, mainly

to men's demeanour to one another; but the expression here goes deeper.

It means both afflicted' and lowly'--the right use of affliction being

to bow men, and they that bow themselves are those who are fit to come

to Christ's feast. There is a very remarkable contrast between the

words of my text and those that follow a verse or two afterwards. The

meek shall eat and be satisfied,' says the text. And then close upon

its heels comes, All those that be fat upon earth shall eat.' That is

to say, the lofty and proud have to come down to the level of the

lowly, and take indiscriminate places at the table with the poor and

the starving, which, being turned into plain English is just this--the

one thing that hinders a man from partaking of the fulness of Christ's

feeding grace is self-sufficiency, and the absence of a sense of need.

They that hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled'; and

they that come, knowing themselves to be poor and needy, and humbly

consenting to accept a gratuitous feast of charity--they, and only

they, do get the rich provisions.

You are shut out because you shut yourselves out. They that do not know

themselves to be hungry have no ears for the dinner-bell. They that

feel the pangs of starvation and know that their own cupboards are

empty, they are those who will turn to the table that is spread in the

wilderness, and there find a feast of fat things.'

And so, dear friends! when He calls, do not let us make excuses, but

rather listen to that voice that says to us, Why do you spend your

money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which

satisfieth not. . . . Incline your ear unto Me; hear, and your soul

shall live.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE SHEPHERD KING OF ISRAEL

The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want. 2. He maketh me to lie down

in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. 3. He

restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His

name's sake. 4. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of

death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy

staff, they comfort me. 5. Thou preparest a table before me in the

presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup

runneth over. 6. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days

of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.'--PSALM

xxiii. 1-6.

The king who had been the shepherd-boy, and had been taken from the

quiet sheep-cotes to rule over Israel, sings this little psalm of Him

who is the true Shepherd and King of men. We do not know at what period

of David's life it was written, but it sounds as if it were the work of

his later years. There is a fulness of experience about it, and a tone

of subdued, quiet confidence which speaks of a heart mellowed by years,

and of a faith made sober by many a trial. A young man would not write

so calmly, and a life which was just opening would not afford material

for such a record of God's guardianship in all changing circumstances.

If, then, we think of the psalm as the work of David's later years, is

it not very beautiful to see the old king looking back with such vivid

and loving remembrance to his childhood's occupation, and bringing up

again to memory in his palace the green valleys, the gentle streams,

the dark glens where he had led his flocks in the old days; very

beautiful to see him traversing all the stormy years of warfare and

rebellion, of crime and sorrow, which lay between, and finding in all

God's guardian presence and gracious guidance? The faith which looks

back and says, It is all very good,' is not less than that which looks

forward and says, 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the

days of my life.'

There is nothing difficult of understanding in the psalm. The train of

thought is clear and obvious. The experiences which it details are

common, the emotions it expresses simple and familiar. The tears that

have been dried, the fears that have been dissipated, by this old song;

the love and thankfulness which have found in them their best

expression, prove the worth of its simple words. It lives in most of

our memories. Let us try to vivify it in our hearts, by pondering it

for a little while together now.

The psalm falls into two halves, in both of which the same general

thought of God's guardian care is presented, though under different

illustrations, and with some variety of detail. The first half sets Him

forth as a shepherd, and us as the sheep of His pasture. The second

gives Him as the Host, and us as the guests at His table, and the

dwellers in His house.

First, then, consider that picture of the divine Shepherd and His

leading of His flock.

It occupies the first four verses of the psalm. There is a double

progress of thought in it. It rises, from memories of the past, and

experiences of the present care of God, to hope for the future. The

Lord is my Shepherd'--I will fear no evil.' Then besides this progress

from what was and is, to what will be, there is another string, so to

speak, on which the gems are threaded. The various methods of God's

leading of His flock, or rather, we should say, the various regions

into which He leads them, are described in order. These are Rest, Work,

Sorrow--and this series is so combined with the order of time already

adverted to, as that the past and the present are considered as the

regions of rest and of work, while the future is anticipated as having

in it the valley of the shadow of death.

First, God leads His sheep into rest. He maketh me to lie down in green

pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters.' It is the hot

noontide, and the desert lies baking in the awful glare, and every

stone on the hills of Judaea burns the foot that touches it. But in

that panting, breathless hour, here is a little green glen, with a

quiet brooklet, and moist lush herb-age all along its course, and great

stones that fling a black shadow over the dewy grass at their base; and

there would the shepherd lead his flock, while the sunbeams, like

swords,' are piercing everything beyond that hidden covert. Sweet

silence broods there, The sheep feed and drink, and couch in cool lairs

till he calls them forth again. So God leads His children.

The psalm puts the rest and refreshment first, as being the most marked

characteristic of God's dealings. After all, it is so. The years are

years of unbroken continuity of outward blessings. The reign of

afflictions is ordinarily measured by days. Weeping endures for a

night.' It is a rainy climate where half the days have rain in them;

and that is an unusually troubled life of which it can with any truth

be affirmed that there has been as much darkness as sunshine in it.

But it is not mainly of outward blessings that the Psalmist is

thinking. They are precious chiefly as emblems of the better spiritual

gifts; and it is not an accommodation of his words, but is the

appreciation of their truest spirit, when we look upon them, as the

instinct of devout hearts has ever done, as expressing both God's gift

of temporal mercies, and His gift of spiritual good, of which higher

gift all the lower are meant to be significant and symbolic. Thus

regarded, the image describes the sweet rest of the soul in communion

with God, in whom alone the hungry heart finds food that satisfies, and

from whom alone the thirsty soul drinks draughts deep and limpid

enough.

This rest and refreshment has for its consequence the restoration of

the soul, which includes in it both the invigoration of the natural

life by the outward sort of these blessings, and the quickening and

restoration of the spiritual life by the inward feeding upon God and

repose in Him.

The soul thus restored is then led on another stage; He leadeth me in

the paths of righteousness for His name's sake,'--that is to say, God

guides us into work.

The quiet mercies of the preceding verse are not in themselves the end

of our Shepherd's guidance; they are means to an end, and that

is--work. Life is not a fold for the sheep to lie down in, but a road

for them to walk on. All our blessings of every sort are indeed given

us for our delight. They will never fit us for the duties for which

they are intended to prepare us, unless they first be thoroughly

enjoyed. The highest good they yield is only reached through the lower

one. But, then, when joy fills the heart, and life is bounding in the

veins, we have to learn that these are granted, not for pleasure only,

but for pleasure in order to power. We get them, not to let them pass

away like waste steam puffed into empty air, but that we may use them

to drive the wheels of life. The waters of happiness are not for a

luxurious bath where a man may lie, till, like flax steeped too long,

the very fibre be rotted out of him; a quick plunge will brace him, and

he will come out refreshed for work. Rest is to fit for work, work is

to sweeten rest.

All this is emphatically true of the spiritual life. Its seasons of

communion, its hours on the mount, are to prepare for the sore sad work

in the plain; and he is not the wisest disciple who tries to make the

Mount of Transfiguration the abiding place for himself and his Lord.

It is not well that our chief object should be to enjoy the

consolations of religion; it is better to seek first to do the duties

enjoined by religion. Our first question should be, not, How may I

enjoy God? but, How may I glorify Him? A single eye to His glory' means

that even our comfort and joy in religious exercises shall be

subordinated, and (if need were) postponed, to the doing of His will.

While, on the one hand, there is no more certain means of enjoying Him

than that of humbly seeking to walk in the ways of His commandments, on

the other hand, there is nothing more evanescent in its nature than a

mere emotion, even though it be that of joy in God, unless it be turned

into a spring of action for God. Such emotions, like photographs,

vanish from the heart unless they be fixed. Work for God is the way to

fix them. Joy in God is the strength of work for God, but work for God

is the perpetuation of joy in God.

Here is the figurative expression of the great evangelical principle,

that works of righteousness must follow, not precede, the restoration

of the soul. We are justified not by works, but for works, or, as the

Apostle puts it in a passage which sounds like an echo of this psalm,

we are created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before

ordained that we should walk in them.' The basis of obedience is the

sense of salvation. We work not for the assurance of acceptance and

forgiveness, but from it. First the restored soul, then the paths of

righteousness for His name's sake who has restored me, and restored me

that I may be like Him.

But there is yet another region through which the varied experience of

the Christian carries him, besides those of rest and of work. God leads

His people through sorrow. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the

shadow of death, I will fear no evil.'

The valley of the shadow of death' does not only mean the dark approach

to the dark dissolution of soul and body, but any and every gloomy

valley of weeping through which we have to pass. Such sunless gorges we

have all to traverse at some time or other. It is striking that the

Psalmist puts the sorrow, which is as certainly characteristic of our

lot as the rest or the work, into the future. Looking back he sees

none. Memory has softened down all the past into one uniform tone, as

the mellowing distance wraps in one solemn purple the mountains which,

when close to them, have many a barren rock and gloomy rift, All behind

is good. And, building on this hope, he looks forward with calmness,

and feels that no evil shall befall.

But it is never given to human heart to meditate of the future without

some foreboding. And when Hope enchanted smiles,' with the light of the

future in her blue eyes, there is ever something awful in their depths,

as if they saw some dark visions behind the beauty. Some evils may

come; some will probably come; one at least is sure to come. However

bright may be the path, somewhere on it, perhaps just round that

turning, sits the shadow feared of man.' So there is never hope only in

any heart that wisely considers the future. But to the Christian heart

there may be this--the conviction that sorrow, when it comes, will not

harm, because God will be with us; and the conviction that the Hand

which guides us into the dark valley, will guide us through it and up

out of it. Yes, strange as it may sound, the presence of Him who sends

the sorrow is the best help to bear it. The assurance that the Hand

which strikes is the Hand which binds up, makes the stroke a blessing,

sucks the poison out of the wound of sorrow, and turns the rod which

smites into the staff to lean on.

The second portion of this psalm gives us substantially the same

thoughts under a different image. It considers God as the host, and us

as the guests at His table and the dwellers in His house.

In this illustration, which includes the remaining verses, we have, as

before, the food and rest, the journey and the suffering. We have also,

as before, memory and present experience issuing in hope. But it is all

intensified. The necessity and the mercy are alike presented in

brighter colours; the want is greater, the supply greater, the hope for

the future on earth brighter; and, above all, while the former set of

images stopped at the side of the grave, and simply refused to fear,

here the vision goes on beyond the earthly end; and as the hope comes

brightly out, that all the weary wanderings will end in the peace of

the Father's house, the absence of fear is changed into the presence of

triumphant confidence, and the resignation which, at the most, simply

bore to look unfaltering into the depth of the narrow house, becomes

the faith which plainly sees the open gate of the everlasting home.

God supplies our wants in the very midst of strife. Thou preparest a

table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head

with oil. My cup runneth over.' Before, it was food and rest first,

work afterwards. Now it Is more than work--it is conflict. And the

mercy is more strikingly portrayed, as being granted not only before

toil, but in warfare. Life is a sore fight; but to the Christian man,

in spite of all the tumult, life is a festal banquet. There stand the

enemies, ringing him round with cruel eyes, waiting to be let slip upon

him like eager dogs round the poor beast of the chase. But for all

that, here is spread a table in the wilderness, made ready by invisible

hands; and the grim-eyed foe is held back in the leash till the servant

of God has fed and been strengthened. This is our condition--always the

foe, always the table.

What sort of a meal should that be? The soldiers who eat and drink, and

are drunken in the presence of the enemy, like the Saxons before

Hastings, what will become of them? Drink the cup of gladness, as men

do when their foe is at their side, looking askance over the rim, and

with one hand on the sword, ready, aye ready,' against treachery and

surprise. But the presence of the danger should make the feast more

enjoyable too, by the moderation it enforces, and by the contrast it

affords--as to sailors on shore, or soldiers in a truce. Joy may grow

on the very face of danger, as a slender rose-bush flings its bright

sprays and fragrant blossoms over the lip of a cataract; and that not

the wild mirth of men in a pestilence, with their Let us eat and drink,

for to-morrow we die,' but the simple-hearted gladness of those who

have preserved the invaluable childhood gift of living in the present

moment, because they know that to-morrow will bring God, whatever it

brings, and not take away His care and love, whatever it takes away.

This, then, is the form under which the experience of the past is

presented in the second portion,--joy in conflict, rest and food even

in the strife. Upon that there is built a hope which transcends that in

the previous portion of the psalm. As to this life, Goodness and mercy

shall follow us.' This is more than I will fear no evil.' That said,

sorrow is not evil if God be with us. This says, sorrow is mercy. The

one is hope looking mainly at outward circumstances, the other is hope

learning the spirit and meaning of them all. These two angels of

God--Goodness and Mercy--shall follow and encamp around the pilgrim.

The enemies whom God held back while he feasted, may pursue, but will

not overtake him. They will be distanced sooner or later; but the white

wings of these messengers of the covenant will never be far away from

the journeying child, and the air will often be filled with the music

of their comings, and their celestial weapons will glance around him in

all the fight, and their soft arms will bear him up over all the rough

ways, and up higher at last to the throne.

So much for the earthly future. But higher than all that rises the

confidence of the closing words, I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

for ever.' This should be at once the crown of all our hopes for the

future, and the one great lesson taught us by all the vicissitudes of

life. The sorrows and the joys, the journeying and the rest, the

temporary repose and the frequent struggles, all these should make us

sure that there is an end which will interpret them all, to which they

all point, for which they may all prepare. We get the table in the

wilderness here. It is as when the son of some great king comes back

from foreign soil to his father's dominions, and is welcomed at every

stage in his journey to the capital with pomp of festival, and

messengers from the throne, until he enters at last his palace home,

where the travel-stained robe is laid aside, and he sits down with his

father at his table. God provides for us here in the presence of our

enemies; it is wilderness food we get, manna from heaven, and water

from the rock. We eat in haste, staff in hand, and standing round the

meal. But yonder we sit down with the Shepherd, the Master of the

house, at His table in His kingdom. We put off the pilgrim-dress, and

put on the royal robe; we lay aside the sword, and clasp the palm. Far

off, and lost to sight, are all the enemies. We fear no change. We go

no more out.'

The sheep are led by many a way, sometimes through sweet meadows,

sometimes limping along sharp-flinted, dusty highways, sometimes high

up over rough, rocky mountain-passes, sometimes down through deep

gorges, with no sunshine in their gloom; but they are ever being led to

one place, and when the hot day is over they are gathered into one

fold, and the sinking sun sees them safe, where no wolf can come, nor

any robber climb up any more, but all shall rest for ever under the

Shepherd's eye.

Brethren! can you take this psalm for yours? Have you returned unto

Christ, the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls? Oh! let Him, the

Shepherd of Israel, and the Lamb of God, one of the fold and yet the

Guide and Defender of it, human and divine, bear you away from the

dreary wilderness whither He has come seeking you. He will carry you

rejoicing to the fold, if only you will trust yourselves to His gentle

arm. He will restore your soul. He will lead you and keep you from all

dangers, guard you from every sin, strengthen you when you come to die,

and bring you to the fair plains beyond that narrow gorge of frowning

rock. Then this sweet psalm shall receive its highest fulfilment, for

then they shall hunger no more, neither shall they thirst any more,

neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat, for the Lamb which

is in the midst of the Throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto

living fountains of waters, and God shall wipe all tears from their

eyes.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A GREAT QUESTION AND ITS ANSWER

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? and who shall stand in His

holy place?'--PSALM xxiv. 3.

The psalm from which these words are taken flashes up into new beauty,

if we suppose it to have been composed in connection with the bringing

of the Ark into the Temple, or for some similar occasion. Whether it is

David's or not is a matter of very small consequence. But if we look at

the psalm as a whole, we can scarcely fail to see that some such

occasion underlies it. So just exercise your imaginations for a moment,

and think of the long procession of white-robed priests bearing the

Ark, and followed by the joyous multitude chanting as they ascended,

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His

holy place?' They are bethinking themselves of the qualifications

needed for that which they are now doing. They reach the gates, which

we must suppose to have been closed that they might be opened, and from

the half-chorus outside there peals out the summons, Lift up your

heads, O ye gates! and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the

King of Glory shall come in.' Then from within another band of singers

answers with the question, Who is this King of Glory' who thus demands

entrance? And triumphantly the reply rings out, The Lord, strong and

mighty; the Lord, mighty in battle.' Still reluctant, the question is

put again, Who is this King of Glory?' and the answer is given once

more, The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory.' There is no

reference in the second answer to battle.' The conflicts are over, and

the dominion is established, and at the reiterated summons the ancient

gates roll back on their hinges, burst as by a strong blow, and Jehovah

enters into His rest, He and the Ark of His strength. If that is the

general connection of the psalm--and I think you will admit that it

adds to its beauty and dramatic force if we suppose it so--then this

introductory question, sung as the procession climbed the steep, had

realised what was needed for those who should get the entrance that

they sought, and comes to be a very significant and important one. I

deal now with the question and its answer.

I. The question of questions.

That question lies deep in all men's hearts, and underlies sacrifices

and priesthoods and asceticisms and tortures of all sorts, and is the

inner meaning of Hindoos swinging with hooks in their backs, and others

of them measuring the road to the temple by prostrating themselves

every yard or two as they advance. These self-torturers are all asking

the same question: Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?' It

sometimes rises in the thoughts of the most degraded, and it is present

always with some of the better and nobler of men.

Now, there are three places in the Old Testament where substantially

the same question is asked. There is this psalm of ours; there is

another psalm which is all but a duplicate, which begins with Lord, who

shall abide in Thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in Thy holy hill?' And

there is another shape into which the question is cast by the fervent

and somewhat gloomy imagination of one of the prophets, who puts it

thus: Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who shall dwell

with the everlasting burnings?' There never was a more disastrous

misapplication of Scripture than the popular idea that these two last

questions suggest the possibility of a creature being exposed to the

torments of future punishment. They have nothing to do with that. Who

among us shall dwell with the devouring fire?' If you want a

commentary, remember the words, Our God is a consuming fire.' That puts

us on the right track, if we needed any putting on it, for answering

this question, not in the gruesome and ghastly sense in which some

people take it, but in all the grandeur of Isaiah's thought. He sees

God as the everlasting burnings.' Fire is the emblem of life as well as

of death; fire is the means of quickening as well as of destroying; and

when we speak of Him as the everlasting burnings' we are reminded of

the bush in the desert, where His own signature was set, burning and

not consumed.'

So the question in all the three places referred to is substantially

the same--and what does it indicate? It indicates the deep

consciousness that men have that they need to be in that home, that for

life and peace and blessedness, they must get somehow to the side of

God, and be quiet there, as children in their Father's house. We all

know that this is true, whether our life is regulated by it or not.

Very deep in every man's conscience, if he will attend to its voice,

there is that which says, You are a pilgrim and a sojourner, and

homeless and desolate until you nestle beneath the outspread wings in

the Holy Place, and are a denizen of God's house.'

The question further suggests another. The universal

consciousness--which is, I believe, universal--though it is overlain

and stifled by many of us, and neglected and set at nought by

others--is that this fellowship with God, which is indispensable to a

man's peace, is impossible to a man's impurity. So the question raises

the thought of the consciousness of sin which comes creeping over a man

when he is sometimes feeling after God, and seems to batter him in the

face, and fling him back into the outer darkness, How can I enter in

there?' and conscience has no answer, and the world has none, and as I

shall have to say presently, the answer which the Old Testament, as

Law, gives is almost as hopeless as the answer which conscience gives.

But at all events that this question should rise and insist upon being

answered as it does proves these three things--man's need of God, man's

sense of God's purity, man's consciousness of his own sin.

And what does that ascent to the hill of the Lord include? All the

present life, for, unless we are dwelling in the house of the Lord all

the days of our lives beholding His beauty and inquiring in His

Temple,' then we have little in life that is worth the having. The old

Arab right of claiming hospitality of the Sheikh into whose tent the

fugitive ran is used in Scripture over and over again to express the

relation in which alone it is blessed for a man to live--namely, as a

guest of God's. That is peace. That is all that we require, to sit at

His fireside, if I may so say, to claim the rites of hospitality, which

the Arab chief would not refuse to the veriest tatterdemalion, or the

greatest enemy that he knew, if he came into his tent and sought it.

God sits in the door of His tent, and is ready to welcome us.

The ascent to the hill of the Lord means more than that. It includes

also the future. I suppose that when men think about another

world--which I am afraid none of us think about as often as we ought to

do, in order to make the best of this one--the question, in some shape

or other, which this band of singers lifted up, rises to their lips,

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His

Holy Place' beyond the stars? Well, brethren! that is the question

which concerns us all, more than anything else in the world, to have

clearly and rightly answered.

II. Note the answer to this great question.

The psalm answers it in an instructive fashion, which we take as it

stands. He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.' Let me measure

myself by the side of that requirement. Clean hands?'--are mine clean?

And a pure heart?'--what about mine? Who hath not lifted up his soul

unto vanity'--and where have my desires and thoughts so often gone? Nor

sworn deceitfully.' These are the qualifications that our psalm dashes

down in front of us when we ask the question.

The other two occasions to which I have referred, where the same

question is put, give substantially the same answer. It might be

interesting, if one had time, or this was the place, to look at the

differences in the replies, as suggesting the slight differences in the

ideal of a good man as presented by the various writers, but that must

be left untouched now. Taking these four conditions that are laid down

here, we come to this, that psalmist and prophet with one voice say

that same solemn thing: Holiness, without which no man shall see the

Lord.' There is no faltering in the answer, and it is an answer to

which the depths of conscience say Yes.' We all admit, when we are

wise, that for communion with God on earth, and for treading the golden

pavements of that city into which nothing that is unclean shall enter,

absolute holiness is necessary. Let no man deceive himself--that stands

the irreversible, necessary condition.

Well, then, is anybody to go in? Let us read on in our psalm. An

impossible requirement is laid down, broad and stern and unmistakable.

But is that all? He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and

righteousness from the God of his salvation.' So, then, the impossible

requirement is made possible as a gift to be received. And although I

do not know that this psalmist, in the twilight of revelation, saw all

that was involved in what he sang, he had caught a glimpse of this

great thought, that what God required, God would give, and that our way

to get the necessary, impossible condition realised in ourselves is to

receive' it. He shall receive . . . righteousness from the God of his

salvation.' Now, do you not see how, like some great star, trembling

into the field of the telescope, and sending arrowy beams before it to

announce its approach, the great central Christian truth is here

dawning, germinant, prophesying its full rising? And the truth is this,

that I might be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, but that

which is of God through Christ.' Ah, brethren! impossibilities become

possible when God comes and says, I give thee that which thou canst not

have.' The old prophet asked the question, What doth God require of

thee?' and his answer was, That thou shouldst do justice, and love

mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.' If he had gone on to ask a better

question, What does God give thee?' he would have said what all the New

Testament says, He gives what He commands, and He bestows before He

requires.' And so in Jesus Christ there is the forgiveness that blots

out the past, and there is the new life bestowed that will develop the

righteousness far beyond our reach. And thus the question which evoked

first the answer that might drive us to despair, evokes next a response

that commands us to hope.

But that is not all, for the psalm goes on: This is the generation of

them that seek Him, that seek Thy face.' Yes; couched in germ there

lies in that last word the great truth which is expanded in the New

Testament, like a beech-leaf folded up in its little brown sheath

through all the winter, and ready to break and give out its green

plumelets as soon as the warm rains and sunshine of spring come. They

that seek Him'--if thou seek Him He will be found of thee.' The

requirement of righteousness, as I have said, is not abolished by the

Gospel, as some people seem to think that it substitutes faith for

righteousness; but it is made possible by the Gospel which through

faith gives righteousness. And what the Psalmist meant by seeking' we

Christian people mean by faith.' Earnest desire and confident

application to Him are sure to obtain righteousness. To these there

will never be returned a refusing answer. I have never said to any of

the seed of Jacob, seek ye Me in vain.' So, brethren! if we seek we

shall receive; if we receive we shall be holy, if we are holy we shall

dwell with God, in sweet and blessed communion, and be denizens of His

house, and sit together in heavenly places with Him all the days of our

lives, and then shall pass, when goodness and mercy have followed us

all the days of our lives,' and dwell in the house of the Lord for

ever.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE GOD WHO DWELLS WITH MEN

Lift up your heads, O ye gates: and be ye lift up, ye everlasting

doors; and the King of glory shall come in. 8. Who is this King of

glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. 9. Lift

up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and

the King of glory shall come in. 10. Who is this King of glory? The

Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory.' --PSALM xxiv. 7-10.

This whole psalm was probably composed at the time of the bringing of

the ark into the city of Zion. The former half was chanted as the

procession wound its way up the hillside. It mainly consists of the

answer to the question Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?' and

describes the kind of men that dwell with God, and the way by which

they obtain their purity.

This second half of our psalm is probably to be thought of as being

chanted when the procession had reached the summit of the hill and

stood before the barred gates of the ancient Jebusite city. It is

mainly in answer to the question, Who is this King of Glory?' and is

the description of the God that dwells with men, and the meaning of His

dwelling with them.

We are to conceive of a couple of half choirs, the one within, the

other without the mountain hold. The advancing choir summons the gates

to open in the grand words: Lift up your heads, O ye gates! even lift

them up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.'

Their lofty lintels are too low for His head to pass beneath; so they

have to be lifted that He may find entrance. They are everlasting

doors,' grey with antiquity, hoary with age. They have looked down,

perhaps, upon Melchizedek, King of Salem, as he went forth in the

morning twilight of history to greet the patriarch. But in all the

centuries they have never seen such a King as this King of Glory, the

true King of Israel who now desires entrance.

The answer to the summons comes from the choir within. Who is this King

of Glory?' the question represents ignorance and possible hesitation,

as if the pagan inhabitants of the recently conquered city knew nothing

of the God of Israel, and recognised no authority in His name. Of

course, the dramatic form of question and answer is intended to give

additional force to the proclamation as by God Himself of the Covenant

name, the proper name of Israel's God, as Baal was the name of the

Canaanite's God, the Lord strong and mighty; the Lord mighty in

battle,' by whose warrior power David had conquered the city, which now

was summoned to receive its conqueror. Therefore the summons is again

rung out, Lift up your heads, O ye gates! and the King of Glory shall

come in.' And once more, to express the lingering reluctance, ignorance

not yet dispelled, suspicion and unwilling surrender, the dramatic

question is repeated, Who is this King of Glory?' The answer is sharp

and authoritative in its brevity, and we may fancy it shouted with a

full-throated burst--The Lord of Hosts,' who, as Captain, commands all

the embattled energies of earth and heaven conceived as a disciplined

army. That great name, like a charge of dynamite, bursts the gates of

brass asunder, and with triumphant music the procession sweeps into the

conquered city.

Now these great words, throbbing with the enthusiasm at once of poetry

and of devotion, may, I think, teach us a great deal if we ponder them.

I. Notice, first, their application, their historical and original

application, to the King who dwelt with Israel.

We must never forget that in the Old Testament we have to do with an

incomplete and a progressive revelation, and that if we would

understand its significance, we must ever endeavour to ascertain to

what point in that progress the words before us belong. We are not to

read into these words New Testament depth and fulness of meaning; we

are to take them and try to find out what they meant to David and to

his people; and so we shall get a firm basis for any deeper

significance which we may hereafter see in them. The thought of God,

then, in these words is mainly that of a God of strong and victorious

energy, a warrior-God, a conquering King, one whose word is power, who

rules amidst the armies of heaven, and amidst the inhabitants of earth.

A brief consideration of each expression is all which can be attempted

here. Who is this King of Glory?' The first idea, then, is that of

sovereign rule; the idea which had become more and more plain and clear

to the national consciousness of the Hebrew with the installation of

monarchy amongst them. And it is very beautiful to see how David lays

hold of that thought of God being Himself the King of Israel; and

dwells so often in his psalms on the idea that he, poor, pale, earthly

shadow, is but a representative and a viceroy of the true King who sits

in the heavens. He takes off his crown and lays it before His throne

and says: Thou art the King of Israel, the King of Glory.'

The Old Testament meaning of that word glory' is a great deal more

definite than the ordinary religious use of it amongst us. The glory of

God' in the Old Testament is, first and foremost, the supernatural

light that dwelt between the cherubim and was the manifestation and

symbol of the divine Presence. And next it is the sum total of all the

impression made upon the world by God's manifestation of Himself, the

Light, of which the material and supernatural light between the cherubs

was but the emblem; all by which God flames and flashes Himself upon

the trembling and thankful heart; that glory which is substantially the

same as the Name of the Lord. And in this brightness, lustrous and dark

with excess of light, this King dwells. The splendour of His regalia is

the brightness that emanates from Himself. He is the King of Glory.

Next, we have the great Name, the Lord,' Jehovah, which speaks of

timeless, independent, unchanging, self-sufficing being. It declares

that He is His own cause, His own law, His own impulse, the staple from

which all the links of the chain of being depend, and not Himself a

link, the fontal Source of all which is.

We say: I am that which I have become; I am that which I have been

made; I am that which I have inherited; I am that which circumstances

and example and training have shaped me to be.' God says: I AM THAT I

AM.' This name is also significant, not only because it proclaims

absolute, independent, underived, timeless being, but because it is the

Covenant name, and speaks of the God who has come into fellowship with

men, and has bound Himself to a certain course of action for their

blessing, and is thus the Lord of Israel, and the God, in a special

manner, of His people.

The Lord mighty in battle.' A true warrior-God, who went out in no

metaphorical sense, but in prose reality, fought for His people and

subdued the nations under them, in order that His name might be spread

and His glory be known in the earth.

And then, still further, the Lord of Hosts,' the Captain of all the

armies of heaven and earth. In that name is the thought to which the

modern world is coming so slowly by scientific paths, that all being is

one ordered whole, subject to the authority of one Lord. And in

addition to that, the grander thought, that the unity of nature is the

will of God; and that as the Commander issues His orders over all the

field, so He speaks and it is done. The hosts are the angels of whom it

is said: Bless the Lord all ye His hosts; ye ministers of His that do

His pleasure.' The hosts are the stars that fill the nightly heavens,

of whom it is said, He bringeth out their host by number.' The hosts

are all creatures that live and are; and all are the soldiers and

servants of this conquering King. Such is the name of the Lord that

dwelt with Israel, the great conception that rises before this

Psalmist.

II. Now turn to the second application of these great words, that speak

to us not only of the God that dwelt in Zion in outward and symbolical

form, by means of a material Presence which was an emblem of the true

nearness of Israel's God, but yet more distinctly, as I take it, of the

Christ that dwells with men.

The devout hearts in Israel felt that there was something more needed

than this dwelling of Jehovah within an earthly Temple, and the process

of revelation familiarised them with the thought that there was to be

in the future a coming of the Lord' in some special manner unknown to

them. So that the whole anticipation and forward look of the Old

Testament system is gathered into and expressed by almost its last

words, which prophesy that the Lord shall suddenly come to His Temple,'

and that once again this King of Glory shall stand before the

everlasting gates and summon them to open.

And when was that fulfilled? Fulfilled in a fashion that at first sight

seems the greatest contrast to all this vision of grandeur, of warlike

strength, of imperial power and rule with which we have been dealing;

but which yet was not the contrast to these ideas so much as the

highest embodiment of them. For, although at first sight it seems as if

there could be no greater contrast than between the lion might of the

Jehovah of the Old Testament, and the lamb gentleness of the Jesus of

the New, if we look more closely we shall see that it is not a relation

of contrast that exists between the two. Christ is all, and more than

all, that this psalm proclaimed the Jehovah of the Old Covenant to be.

Let us look again from that point of view at the particulars already

referred to.

He is the highest manifestation of the divine rule and authority. There

is no dominion like the dominion of the loving Christ, a kingdom based

upon suffering and wielded in gentleness, a kingdom of which the crown

is a wreath of thorns, and the sceptre a rod of reed; a dominion which

is all exercised for the blessing of its subjects, and which,

therefore, is an everlasting dominion. There is no rule like that; no

height of divine authority towers so high as the authority of Him who

rules us so absolutely because He gave Himself for us utterly. This is

the King, the Prince of the kings of the earth, because this is the

Incarnate God who died for us.

Christ is the highest raying out of the divine Light, or, as the

Epistle to the Hebrews calls it, the effulgence of His glory.' The true

glory of God lies in His love, and of that love Christ is the noblest

and most wondrous example. So all other beams of the divine character,

bright as their light is, are but dim as compared with the sevenfold

lustre of the light that shines from the gentle loving-kindness of the

heart of Christ. He has glorified God because He shows us that the

divinest thing in God is love.

For the same reason, He is the mightiest exhibition of the divine

power--the Lord strong and mighty.' There is no work of God's hand, no

work of God's will so great as that by which we are turned from

darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. The Cross is

God's noblest revelation of power; and in Him, His weakness, His

surrender, His death, with all the wonderful energies that flow from

that death for man's salvation, we see the divine strength made perfect

in the human weakness of Jesus. The Gospel of Christ is the power of

God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.' There is divine power

in its noblest form, in the paradoxical shape of a dying man; in its

noblest effect, salvation; in its widest sweep to all who believe.

'Twas great to speak a world from nought,

'Tis greater to redeem.'

This strong Son of God' is the arm of the Lord in whom live and act the

energies of omnipotence.

Christ is the Lord mighty in battle.' True, He is the Prince of peace,

but He is also the better Joshua, the victorious Captain, in whom

dwells the conquering divine might. Through all the gentleness of His

life there winds a martial strain, and it is not in vain that the

Evangelist who was most deeply penetrated by the sweetness of His love,

is the one who most often speaks of Him as overcoming, and who has

preserved as His last words to His timid followers, that triumphant

command, Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.' He has conquered

for us, binding the strong man, and so He will spoil his house. Sin,

hell, death, the devil, law, fear, our own foolish hearts, all

temptations that hover around us--they are all vanquished foes of a

Lord' that is mighty in battle.' And as He overcame, so shall we if we

will trust Him.

Christ is the Commander and Wielder of all the forces of the universe.

As one said to Him in the days of His flesh, I am a man under

authority, and I say to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it. So do

Thou speak and Thy word shall be sovereign.' And so it was. He spake to

diseases and they vanished. He spake to the winds and the seas and

there was a great calm. He spake to demons, and murmuring, but yet

obedient, they came out of their victims. He flung His word into the

recesses of the grave, and Lazarus came forth, fumbling with the knots

on his grave-clothes, and stumbling into the light. He spake and it was

done.' Who is He, the utterance of whose will is sovereign amongst all

the regions of being? Who is the King of Glory?' Thou art the King of

Glory, O Christ!' Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father.'

III. And now, lastly, let me ask you to look, and that for a moment, at

the application of these words to the Christ who will dwell in our

hearts.

His historical manifestation here upon earth and His Incarnation, which

is the true dwelling of Deity amongst men, are not enough. They have

left something more than a memory to the world. He is as ready to abide

as really within our spirits as He was to tabernacle upon earth amongst

men. And the very central message of that Gospel which Is proclaimed to

us all is this, that if we will open the gates of our hearts He will

come in, in all the plenitude of His victorious power, and dwell in our

hearts, their Conqueror and their King.

What a strange contrast, and yet what a close analogy there is between

the victorious tones and martial air of this summons of my text. Lift

up your heads, O ye gates! that the King of Glory may come in,' and the

gentle words of the Apocalypse: Behold, I stand at the door and knock;

if any man hear My voice and open the door, I will come in to him.' But

He that in the Old Covenant arrayed in warrior arms, summoned the

rebels to surrender, is the same as He who, in the New, with the

night-dews in His hair, and patience on His face, and gentleness in the

touch of His hand upon the door, waits to enter in. Brethren! open your

hearts, and the King of Glory shall come in.'

And He will come in as a king that might seek to enter some city far

away on the outposts of his kingdom, besieged by his enemies. If the

King comes in, the city will be impregnable. If you open your hearts

for Him He will come and keep you from all your foes and give you the

victory over them all. So, to every hard-pressed heart, waging an

unequal contest with toils and temptations, and sorrows and sins, this

great hope is given, that Christ the Victor will come in His power to

garrison heart and mind. As of old the encouragement was given to

Hezekiah in his hour of peril, when the might of Sennacherib insolently

threatened Jerusalem, so the same stirring assurances are given to each

who admits Christ's succours to his heart--He shall not come into this

city, for I will defend this city to save it for Mine own sake' Open

your hearts and the conquering King will come in.

And do not forget that there is another possible application of these

words lying in the future, to the conquering Christ who shall come

again. The whole history of the past points onwards to yet a last time

when the Lord shall suddenly come to His temple,' and predicts that

Christ shall so come in like manner as He went up to heaven. Again will

the summons ring out. Again will He come arrayed in flashing

brightness, and the visible robes of His imperial majesty. Again will

He appear, mighty in battle, when in righteousness He shall judge and

make war.' For a Christian, one great memory fills the past--Christ has

come; and one great hope brightens the else waste future--Christ will

come. That hope has been far too much left to be cherished only by

those who hold a particular opinion as to the chronology of unfulfilled

prophecy. But it should be to every Christian heart the blessed hope,'

even the appearing of the glory of Him who has come in the past. He is

with and in us, in the present. He will come in the future in His

glory, and shall sit upon the throne of His glory.' All our pardon and

hope of God's love depend upon that great fact in the past, that the

Lord was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.' Our

purity which will fit us to dwell with God, our present blessedness,

all our power for daily strife, and our companionship in daily

loneliness, depend on the present fact that He dwells in our hearts by

faith, the seed of all good, and the conquering Antagonist of every

evil. And the one light which fills the future with hope, peaceful

because assured, streams from that most sure promise that He will come

again, sweeping from the highest heavens, on His head the many crowns

of universal monarchy, in His hand the weapons of all-conquering power,

and none shall need to ask, Who is this King of Glory?' for every eye

shall know Him, the Judge upon His throne, to be the Christ of the

Cross. Open the doors of your hearts to Him, as He sues for entrance

now in the meekness of His patient love, that on you may fall in that

day of the coming of the King, the blessing of the servants who wait

for their returning Lord, that when He cometh and knocketh, they may

open unto Him immediately.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

GUIDANCE IN JUDGMENT

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore will He teach sinners in the

way. 9. The meek will He guide in judgment; and the meek will He teach

His way.'--PSALM xxv. 8, 9.

The Psalmist prays in this psalm for three things: deliverance,

guidance, and forgiveness. Of these three petitions the central one is

that for guidance. Show me Thy ways, O Lord,' he asks in a previous

verse; where he means by Thy ways,' not God's dealings with men, but

men's conduct as prescribed by God. In my text he exchanges petition

for contemplation; and gazes on the character of God, in order thereby

to be helped to confidence in an answer to his prayer. Such

alternations of petition and contemplation are the very heartbeats of

devotion, now expanding in desire, now closing on its treasure in

fruition. Either attitude is incomplete without the other. Do our

prayers pass into such still contemplation of the face of God? Do our

thoughts of His character break into such confident petition? My text

contains a striking view of the divine character, a grand confidence

built thereupon, and a condition appended on which the fulfilment of

that confidence depends. Let us look at these in turn.

I. First, then, we have here the Psalmist's thought of God. Good and

upright is the Lord.'

Now it is clear that the former of these two epithets is here employed,

not in its widest sense of moral perfectness, or else upright,' which

follows, would be mere tautology, but in the narrower sense, which is

familiar too, to us, in our common speech, in which good is tantamount

to kind, beneficent, or to say all in a word, loving. Upright needs no

explanation; but the point to notice is the decisiveness with which the

Psalmist binds together, in one thought, the two aspects of the divine

nature which so many people find it hard to reconcile, and the

separation of which has been the parent of unnumbered misconceptions

and errors as to Him and to His dealings. Good and upright, loving and

righteous is the Lord,' says the Psalmist. He puts in no qualifying

word such as, loving though righteous, righteous and yet loving. Such

phrases express the general notions of the relation of these two

attributes. But the Psalmist employs no such expressions. He binds the

two qualities together, in the feeling of their profoundest harmony.

Now let me remind you that neither of these two resplendent aspects of

the divine nature reaches its highest beauty and supremest power,

except it be associated with the other. In the spectrum analysis of

that great light there are the two lines; the one purest white of

righteousness, and the other tinged with a ruddier glow, the line of

love. The one adorns and sets off the other. Love without righteousness

is flaccid, a mere gush of good-natured sentiment, impotent to confer

blessing, powerless to evoke reverence. Righteousness without love is

as white as snow, and as cold as ice; repellent, howsoever it may

excite the sentiment of awe-struck distance. But we need that the

righteousness shall be loving, and that the love shall be righteous, in

order that the one may be apprehended in its tenderest tenderness and

the other may be adored in its loftiest loftiness.

And yet we are always tempted to wrench the two apart, and to think

that the operation of the one must sometimes, at all events on the

outermost circumference of the spheres, impinge upon, and collide with,

the operations of the other. Hence you get types of religion--yes! and

two types of Christianity--in which the one or the other of these two

harmonious attributes is emphasised to such a degree as almost to blot

out the other. You get forms of religion in which the righteousness has

swallowed up the love, and others in which the love has destroyed the

righteousness. The effect is disastrous. In old days our fathers fell

into the extreme on the one hand; and the pendulum has swung with a

vengeance as far from the vertical line, to the other extreme, in these

days as it ever did in the past. The religion which found its

centre-point and its loftiest conception of the divine nature in the

thought of His absolute righteousness made strong, if it made somewhat

stern, men. And now we see renderings of the truth that God is love

which degrade the lofty, noble, sovereign conception of the righteous

God that loveth, into mere Indulgence on the throne of the universe.

And what is the consequence? All the stern teachings of Scripture men

recoil from, and try to explain away. The ill desert of sin, and the

necessary iron nexus between sin and suffering--and as a consequence

the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, and the supreme glory of His

mission in that He is the Redeemer of mankind--are all become

unfashionable to preach and unfashionable to believe. God is Love. We

cannot make too much of His love, unless by reason of it we make too

little of His righteousness.

The Psalmist, in his childlike faith, saw deeper and more truly than

many would-be theologians and thinkers of this day, when he proclaimed

in one breath Good and upright is the Lord.' Let us not forget that the

Apostle, whose great message to the world was, as the last utterance

completing the process of revelation, God is Love,' had it also in

charge to declare unto us that God is Light, and in Him is no darkness

at all.'

II. And so, secondly, mark the calm confidence builded on this

conception of the divine character.

What a wonderful therefore' that is!--the logic of faith and not of

sense. Good and upright is the Lord; therefore will He teach sinners in

the way.' The coexistence of these two aspects in the perfect divine

character is for us a guarantee that He cannot leave men, however

guilty they may be, to grope in the dark, or keep His lips locked in

silence. The Psalmist does not mean guidance as to practical advantages

and worldly prosperity. That may also be looked for, in a modified

degree. But what he means is guidance as to the one important thing,

the sovereign conception of duty, the eternal law of right and wrong.

God will not leave a man without adequate teaching as to that, just

because He is loving and righteous.

For what is love, in its loftiest, purest, and therefore in its divine

aspect? What is it except an infinite desire to impart, and that the

object on which it falls shall be blessed. So because the Lord is good,

and His tender mercies are over all His works,' certainly He must

desire, if one may so say, as His deepest desire, the blessedness of

His creatures. He is a God whose nature and property it is to love, and

His love is the infinite and ceaseless welling out of Himself, in all

forms of beauty and blessedness, according to the capacity and contents

of His recipient creatures. He is the giving God,' as James in his

epistle eloquently and wonderfully calls Him, whose very nature it is

to give. And that is only to say, in other words, good is the Lord.'

But then good and upright'--that combination determines the form which

His blessings shall assume, the channel in which by preference they

will flow. If we had only to say, good is the Lord,' then our

happiness, as we call it, the satisfaction of our physical needs and of

lower cravings, might be the adequate expression of His love. But if

God be righteous, then because Himself is so, it must be His deepest

desire for us that we should be like Him. Not our happiness but our

rectitude is God's end in all that He does with us. It is worth His

while to make us, in the lower sense of the word, happy,' but the

purpose of joy as of sorrow is to make us pure and righteous. We shall

never come to understand the meaning of our own lives, and will always

be blindly puzzling over the mysteries of the providences that beset

us, until we learn that not enjoyment and not sorrow is His ultimate

end concerning us, but that we may be partakers of His holiness. Since

He is righteous, the dearest desire of His loving heart, and that to

which all His dealings with us are directed; and that, therefore, to

which all our desires and efforts should be directed likewise, is to

make us righteous also.

Therefore will He teach sinners in the way.' If the righteousness

existed without the love it must come with a rod,' and the sinners who

are out of the way must incontinently be crushed where they have

wandered. But since righteousness is blended with love, therefore He

comes, and must desire to bring all wanderers back into the paths which

are His own.

I need not do more than in a word remind you how strong a presumption

there lies in this combination of aspects of the divine nature, in

favour of an actual revelation. It seems to me that, notwithstanding

all the objections that are made to a supernatural and objective

revelation, there is nothing half so monstrous as it would be to

believe, with the pure deist or theist, that God, being what He is,

righteous and loving, had never rent His heavens to say one word to man

to lead him in the paths of righteousness. I can understand Atheism,

and I can understand a revealing God, but not a God that dwells in the

thick darkness, and is yet Love and Righteousness, and looks down upon

this world and never puts out a finger to point the path of duty. A

silent God seems to me no God but an Almighty Devil. Revelation is the

plain conclusion from the premisses that good and upright is the Lord!'

I speak not, for there is no time to do so, of the various manners in

which this divine desire to bring sinners into the way fulfils itself.

There are our consciences; there are His providences; there is the

objective revelation of His word; there are the whispers of His Spirit

in men's hearts. I do not know what you believe, but I believe that God

can find His way to my heart and infuse there illumination, and move

affections, and make my eye clear to discern what is right. He that

formed the eye, shall He not see?' He that formed the eye, shall He not

send light to it? Are we to shut out God, in obedience to the dictates

of an arbitrary psychology, from access to His own creature; and to

say, Thou hast made me, and Thou canst not speak to me. My soul is

Thine by creation, but its doors are close barred against Thee; and

Thou canst not lay Thy hand upon it?' Good and upright is the Lord,

therefore will He teach sinners in the way.'

III. Now notice, again, the condition on which the fulfilment of this

confidence depends.

The meek will He guide in judgment, and the meek will He teach His

way.' The fact of our being sinful only makes it the more imperative

that God should speak to us. But the condition of our hearing and

profiting by the guidance is meekness. By meekness the Psalmist means,

I suppose, little else than what we might call docility, of which the

prime element is the submission of my own will to God's. The reason why

we go wrong about our duties is mainly that we do not supremely want to

go right, but rather to gratify inclinations, tastes, or passions. God

is speaking to us, but if we make such a riot with the yelpings of our

own kennelled desires and lusts, and listen to the rattle and noise of

the street and the babble of tongues, He

Can but listen at the gate,

And hear the household jar within.'

The meek will He guide in judgment; the meek will He teach His way.'

Some of us put our heads down like bulls charging a gate. Some of us

drive on full speed, and will not shut off steam though the signals are

against us, and the end of that can only be one thing. Some of us do

not wish to know what God wishes us to do. Some of us cannot bear

suspense of judgment, or of decision, and are always in a hurry to be

in action, and think the time lost that is spent in waiting to know

what God the Lord will speak. If you do not clearly see what to do,

then clearly you may see that you are to do nothing.

The ark was to go half a mile in front of the camp before the foremost

files lifted a foot to follow, in order that there should be no mistake

as to the road. Wait till God points the path, and wish Him to point

it, and hush the noises that prevent your hearing His voice, and keep

your wills in absolute submission; and above all, be sure that you act

out your convictions, and that you have no knowledge of duty which is

not expressed in your practice, and you will get all the light which

you need; sometimes being taught by errors no doubt, often being left

to make mistakes as to what is expedient in regard to worldly

prosperity, but being infallibly guided as to the path of duty, and the

path of peace and righteousness.

And now, before I close, let me just remind you of the great fact which

transcends the Psalmist's confidence whilst it warrants it.

Because God is Love, and God is Righteousness, He cannot but speak. But

this Psalmist did not know how wonderfully God was going to speak by

that Word who has called Himself the Light of men; and who has said, He

that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light

of life.' He teaches sinners in the way,' by Jesus Christ; for we have

Him for our Pattern and Example. We have His love for our impelling

motive. We have His Spirit to speak in our hearts, and to guide us into

all truth.' And this Shepherd, when He putteth forth His own sheep,

goeth before them; and the sheep follow Him and know His voice.' The

Psalmist's confidence, bright as it is, is but the glow of the morning

twilight. The full sunshine of the transcendent fact to which God's

righteous love impelled and bound Him is Christ, who makes us know the

will of the Father. But we want more than knowledge. For we all know

our duty a great deal better than any of us do it. What is the use of a

guide to a lame man? But our Guide says to us, Arise and walk,' and if

we clasp His hand we receive strength, and the lame man leaps as a

hart.'

So, dear brethren! let us all cleave to Him, the Guide, the Way, and

the Life which enables us to walk in the way. If we thus cleave, then

be sure that He will lead us in the paths of righteousness, which are

paths of peace. He is the Way; He is the Leader of the march; He gives

power to walk in the light, and His one command, Follow Me,' unfolds

into all duty and includes all direction, companionship, perfection,

and blessedness.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A PRAYER FOR PARDON AND ITS PLEA

For Thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity; for it is

great.'--PSALM xxv. 11.

The context shows us that this is the prayer of a man who had long

loved and served God. He says that on God' he waits all the day,' that

his eyes are ever toward the Lord,' that he has integrity and

uprightness' which will preserve him, for he waits upon God,' and yet

side by side with this consciousness of devotion and service there lie

the profound sense of sin and of the need of pardon. The better a man

is, the more clearly he sees, and the more deeply he feels, his own

badness. If a shoe is all covered with mud, a splash or two more or

less will make no difference, but if it be polished and clean, one

speck shows. A black feather on a swan's breast is conspicuous. And so

the less sin a man has the more obvious it is, and the more he has the

less he generally knows it. But whilst this consciousness of

transgression and cry for pardon are inseparable and permanent

accompaniments of a devout life all along its course, they are the

roots and beginning of all true godliness. And as a rule, the first

step which a man takes to knit himself consciously to God is through

the gate of recognised and repeated and confessed sin and imploring the

divine mercy.

I. Notice, first, here the cry for pardon.

I believe in the forgiveness of sins' hundreds of thousands of

Englishmen have said twice to-day. Most of us, when we pray at all,

push in somewhere or other the petition, Forgive us our sins.' And how

many of us understand what we mean when we ask for that? And how many

of us feel that we need the thing which we seem to be requesting? Let

me dwell for a moment or two upon the Scriptural idea of forgiveness.

Of course we may say that when we ask forgiveness from God we are

transferring ideas and images drawn from human relations to the divine.

Be it so. That does not show that there is not a basis of reality and

of truth in the ideas thus transferred. But there are two elements in

forgiveness as we know it, both of which it seems to me to be very

important that we should carry in our minds in interpreting the

Scriptural doctrine. There is the forgiveness known to law and

practised by the lawgiver. There is the forgiveness known to love and

practised by the friend, or parent, or lover. The one consists in the

remission of external penalties. A criminal is forgiven, or, as we say

(with an unconscious restriction of the word forgiven to the deeper

thing), pardoned, when, the remainder of his sentence being remitted,

he is let out of gaol, and allowed to go about his business without any

legal penalties. But there is a forgiveness deeper than that legal

pardon. A parent and a child both of them know that parental pardon

does not consist in the waiving of punishment. The averted look, the

cold voice, the absence of signs of love are far harder to bear than

so-called punishment. And the forgiveness, which belongs to love only,

comes when the film between the two is swept away, and both the

offended and the offender feel that there is no barrier to the free,

unchecked flow of love from the heart of the aggrieved to the heart of

the aggressor.

We must carry both of these ideas into our thoughts of God's pardon in

order to see the whole fulness of it. And perhaps we may have to add

yet another illustration, drawn from another region, and which is

enshrined in one of the versions of the Lord's Prayer, where we read,

Forgive us our debts.' When a debt is forgiven it is cancelled, and the

payment of it no longer required. But the two elements that I have

pointed out, the remission of the penalty and the uninterrupted flow of

God's love, are inseparably united in the full Scriptural notion of

forgiveness.

Scripture recognises as equally real and valid, in our relations to

God, the judicial and the fatherly side of the relationship. And it

declares as plainly that the wages of sin is death as it declares that

God's love cannot come in its fulness and its sweetness, upon a heart

that indulges in unconfessed and unrepented sin. They are poor friends

of men who, for the sake of smoothing away the terrible side of the

Gospel, minimise or hide the reality of the awful penalties which

attach to every transgression and disobedience, because they thereby

maim the notion of the divine forgiveness, and lull into a fatal

slumber the consciences of many men.

Dear brethren! I have to stand here saying, Knowing, therefore, the

terrors of the Lord, we persuade men.' This is sure and certain, that

over and above the forcing back upon itself of the love of God by my

sin, that sin by necessary consequence will work out awful results for

the doer in the present and in the future. I do not wish to dwell upon

that thought, only remember that God is a Judge and God is the Father,

and that the divine forgiveness includes both of these elements, the

sweeping away of the penal consequences of men's sin, wholly in the

future, and to some extent in the present; and the unchecked flow of

the love of God to a man's heart.

There are awful words in Scripture--which are not to be ruled out of it

by any easy-going, optimistic, rose-water system of a mutilated

Christianity--there are awful words in Scripture, concerning what you

and I must come to if we live and die in our sins, and there would be

no message of forgiveness worth the proclaiming to men, if it had

nothing to say about the removal of that which a man's own

unsophisticated conscience tells him is certain, the fatal and the

damnable effects of his departure from God.

But let us not forget that these two aspects do to a large extent

coincide, when we come to remember that the worst of all the penal

consequences of sin is that it separates from God, and exposes to the

wrath of God,' a terrible expression by which the Bible means the

necessary disapprobation and aversion of the divine nature, being such

as it is, from man's sin.

Experimentalists will sometimes cut off one or other of the triple rays

of which sunlight is composed by passing the beam through some medium

which intercepts the red, or the violet, or the yellow, as may chance.

And my sin makes an atmosphere which cuts off the gentler rays of that

divine nature, and lets the fiery ones of retribution come through. It

is not that a sinful man, howsoever drenched overhead in the foul pool

of his own unrepented iniquity, is shut out from the love of God, which

lingers about him and woos him, and lavishes upon him all the gifts of

which he is capable, but that he has made himself incapable of

receiving the sweetest of these influences, and that so long as he

continues thus, his life and his character cannot but be odious and

hateful in the pure eyes of perfect love.

But whilst thus there are external consequences which are swept away by

forgiveness, and whilst the real hell of hells and death of deaths is

the separation from God, and the misery that must necessarily ensue

thereupon, there are consequences of man's sin which forgiveness is not

intended to remove, and will not remove, just because God loves us. He

loves us too well to take away the issues in the natural sphere, in the

social sphere, the issues perhaps in bodily health, reputation,

position, and the like, which flow from our transgression. Thou wast a

God that forgavest them, and Thou didst inflict retribution for their

inventions.' He does leave much of these outward issues unswept away by

His forgiveness, and the great law stands, Whatsoever a man soweth that

shall he also reap.' And yet the pardon that you and I need, and which

we can all have for the asking, flows to us unchecked and full--the

great stream of the love of God, to whom we are reconciled, when we

turn to Him in penitent dependence on the blood and righteousness of

Jesus Christ, our Lord.

This consciousness of sin and cry for pardon lie at the foundation of

vigorous practical religion. It seems to me that the differences

between different types of Christianity, insipid elegance and fiery

earnestness, between coldness and fervour, the difference between a

sapless and a living ministry and between a formal and a real

Christianity, are very largely due to the differences in realising the

fact and the gravity of the fact of transgression. The prominence which

we give to that in our thoughts will largely determine our notions of

ourselves, and of Christ's work, and to a great extent settle what we

think Christianity is for, and what in itself it is. If a man has no

deep consciousness of sin he will be satisfied with a very superficial

kind of religion. Every man his own redeemer' will be his motto. And

not knowing the necessity for a Saviour, he will not recognise that

Christianity is fundamentally and before anything else, a system of

redemption. A moral agent? Yes! A large revelation of great truth? Yes!

A power to make men's lives, individually and in the community, nobler

and loftier? By all means. But before all these, and all these

consequentially on its being a system by which sinful men, else

hopeless and condemned, are delivered and set free. So, dear brethren!

let me press upon you this,--unless my Christianity gives large

prominence to the fact of my own transgression, and is full of a

penitent cry for pardon, it lacks the one thing needful, I was going to

say--it lacks, at all events, that which will make it a living power

blessedly ruling my heart and life.

II. Note in the next place the plea for pardon.

For Thy name's sake.' The Psalmist does not come with any carefully

elaborated plea, grounded upon anything in himself, either on the

excuses and palliations of his evil, his corrupt nature, his many

temptations, and the like, or on the depth and reality of his

repentance. He does not say, Forgive me, for I weep for my evil and

loathe myself.' Nor does he say, Forgive me, for I could not help doing

it, or because I was tempted; or because the thing that I have done is

a very little thing after all.' He comes empty-handed, and says, For

Thy name's sake, O Lord!' That means, first, the great thought that

God's mercy flows from the infinite depths of His own character. He is

His own motive. The fountain of His forgiving love wells up of itself,

drawn forth by nothing that we do, but propelled from within by the

inmost nature of God. As surely as it is the property of light to

radiate and of fire to spread, so surely is it His nature and property

to have mercy. He forgives, says our text, because He is God, and

cannot but do so. Therefore our mightiest plea is to lay hold of His

own strength, and to grasp the fact of the unmotived, uncompelled,

unpurchased, and therefore unalterable and eternal pardoning love of

God.

Scientists tell us that the sun is fed and kept in splendour by the

constant impact of bodies from without falling in upon it, and that if

that supply were to cease, the furnace of the heavens would go out. But

God, who is light in Himself, needs no accession of supplies from

without to maintain His light, and no force of motives from without to

sway His will. We do not need to seek to bend Him to mercy, for He is

mercy in Himself. We do not need to stir His purpose into action, for

it has been working from of old and its goings forth are from

everlasting.' He is His own motive, He forgives because of what He is.

So let us dig down to that deepest of all rock foundations on which to

build our confidence, and be sure that, if I may use such an

expression, the necessity of the divine nature compels Him to pardon

iniquity, transgression, and sin.

Then there is another thought here, that the past of God is a plea with

God for present forgiveness. Thy name' in Scripture means the whole

revelation of the divine character, and thus the Psalmist looks back

into the past, and sees there how God has, all through the ages, been

plenteous in mercy and ready to forgive all that called upon Him; and

he pleads that past as a reason for the present and for the future.

Thousands of years have passed since David, if he was the Psalmist,

offered this prayer; and you and I can look back to the blessed old

story of his forgiveness, so swift, so absolute and free, which

followed upon confession so lowly, and can remember that infinitely

pathetic and wonderful word which puts the whole history of the

resurrection and restoration of a soul into two clauses. David said

unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord: and Nathan said unto

David'--finishing the sentence--And the Lord hath made to pass the

iniquity of thy sin.' What He was He is; what He is He will be. For Thy

name's sake, pardon mine iniquity.'

There is yet another thought that may be suggested. The divine

forgiveness is in order that men may know Him better. That is

represented in Scripture as being the great motive of the divine

actions--for the glory of Thine own name.' That may be so put as to be

positively atrocious, or so as to be perfectly divine and lovely. It

has often been put, by hard and narrow dogmatists, in such a way as to

make God simply an Almighty selfishness, but it ought to be put as the

Bible puts it, so as to show Him as an Almighty love. For why does He

desire that His name should be known by us but for our sakes, that the

light of that great Name may come to us, sitting in darkness and in the

shadow of death,' and that, knowing Him for what He is, we may have

peace, and rest, and joy, and love, and purity? It is pure benevolence

that makes Him act, for the glory of His great name'; sweeping away the

clouds that a darkened earth may expand and rejoice, and all the leaves

unfold themselves, and every bird sing, in the restored sunshine.

And there is nothing that reveals the inmost hived sweetness and honey

of the name of God like the assurance of His pardon. There is

forgiveness with Thee that Thou mayest be feared.' Oh, dear brethren!

unless you know God as the God that has forgiven you, your knowledge of

Him is but shallow and incomplete, and you know not the deepest

blessings that flow to them who find that this is life eternal to know

the only true God as the all-forgiving Father.

Note the connection between the Psalmist's plea and the New Testament

plea. David said, For Thy name's sake, pardon,' we say, For Christ's

sake, forgive.' Are the two diverse? Is the fruit diverse from the bud?

Is the complete noonday diverse from the blessed morning twilight?

Christ is the Name of God, the Revealer of the divine heart and mind.

When Christian men pray For the sake of Christ,' they are not bringing

a motive, which is to move the divine love which else lies passive and

inert, because God's love was the cause of Christ's work not Christ's

work the cause of God's love, but they are expressing their own

dependence on the Great Mediator and His work, and solemnly offering,

as the ground of all their hope, that perfect sacrifice which is the

medium by which forgiveness reaches men, and without which it is

impossible that the government of the righteous God could exist with

pardon. Christ has died; Christ, in dying, has borne the sins of the

world; that is, yours and mine. And therefore the pardon of God comes

to us through that channel, without, in the slightest degree, trenching

on the awfulness of the divine holiness or weakening the sanctities of

God's righteous retributive law. For Christ's sake hath forgiven us' is

the daylight which the Psalmist saw as morning dawn when he cried, For

Thy name's sake, pardon mine iniquity.'

III. Lastly, note the reason for the earnest cry, For it is great.'

That may be a reason for the pardon; more probably it is a reason for

the prayer. The fact is true in regard to us all. There is no need to

suppose any special heinous sin in the Psalmist's mind. I would fain

press upon all consciences that listen to me now that these lowly words

of confession are true about every one of us, whether we know it or

not. For if you consider how much of self-will, how much of

indifference, of alienation from, if not of antagonism against, the law

of God, go to every trifling transgression, you will think twice before

you call it small. And if it be small, a microscopic viper, the length

of a cutting from your finger nail, has got the viper's nature in it,

and its poison, and its sting, and it will grow. A very little quantity

of mud held in solution in a continuously flowing river will make a

tremendous delta at the mouth of it in the course of years. And however

small may have been the amount of evil and deflection from God's law in

that flowing river of my past life, what a filthy, foul bank of slime

must be piled up down yonder at the mouth!

If the fact be so, then is not that a reason for our all going to the

only One who can dredge it away, and get rid of it? Pardon me; for it

is great.' That is to say, There is no one else who can deal with it

but Thyself, O Lord! It is too large for me to cart away; it is too

great for any inferior hand to deal with. I am so bad that I can come

only to Thyself to be made better.' It is blessed and wise when the

consciousness of our deep transgression drives us to the only Hand that

can heal, to the only Heart that can forgive.

So, dear friends! in a blessed desperation of otherwise being unable to

get rid of this burden which has grown on our backs ounce by ounce for

long years, let us go to Him. He and He alone can deal with it. Against

Thee, Thee only, have I sinned,' and to Thee, Thee only, will I come.

Only remember that, before you ask, God has given. He is like the dew

upon the grass, that waiteth not for man.' Instead of praying for

pardon which is already bestowed, do you see to it that you take the

pardon which God is praying you to receive. Swallow the bitter pill of

acknowledging your own transgression; and then one look at the

crucified Christ and one motion of believing desire towards Him; and

the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

GOD'S GUESTS

One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I

may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.' --PSALM

xxvii. 4.

We shall do great injustice to this mystical aspiration of the

Psalmist, if we degrade it to be the mere expression of a desire for

unbroken residence in a material Temple. He was no sickly, sentimental

seeker after cloistered seclusion. He knew the necessities and duties

of life far better than in a cowardly way to wish to shirk them, in

order that he might loiter in the temple, idle under the pretence of

worship. Nor would the saying fit into the facts of the case if we gave

it that low meaning, for no person had his residence in the temple. And

what follows in the next verse would, on that hypothesis, be entirely

inappropriate. In the secret of His tabernacle shall He hide me.' No

one went into the secret place of the Most High, in the visible,

material structure, except the high priest once a year. But this singer

expects that his abode will be there always; and that, in the time of

trouble, he can find refuge there.

Apart altogether from any wider considerations as to the relation

between form and spirit under the Old Covenant, I think that such

observations compel us to see in these words a desire a great deal

nobler and deeper than any such wish.

I. Let us, then, note the true meaning of this aspiration of the

Psalmist.

Its fulfilment depends not on where we are, but on what we think and

feel; for every place is God's house, and what the Psalmist desires is

that he should be able to keep up unbroken consciousness of being in

God's presence and should be always in touch with Him.

That seems hard, and people say, Impossible! how can I get above my

daily work, and be perpetually thinking of God and His will, and

consciously realising communion with Him?' But there is such a thing as

having an undercurrent of consciousness running all through a man's

life and mind; such a thing as having a melody sounding in our ears

perpetually, so sweet we know not we are listening to it' until it

stops, and then, by the poverty of the naked and silent atmosphere, we

know how musical were the sounds that we scarcely knew that we heard,

and yet did hear so well high above all the din of earth's noises.

Every man that has ever cherished such an aspiration as this knows the

difficulties all too well. And yet, without entering upon thorny and

unprofitable questions as to whether the absolute, unbroken continuity

of consciousness of being in God's presence is possible for men here

below, let us look at the question, which has a great deal more bearing

upon our present condition--viz. whether a greater continuity of that

consciousness is not possible than we attain to to-day. It does seem to

me to be a foolish and miserable waste of time and temper and energy

for good people to be quarrelling about whether they can come to the

absolute realisation of this desire in this world, when there is not

one of them who is not leagues below the possible realisation of it,

and knows that he is. At all events, whether or not the line can be

drawn without a break at all, the breaks might be a great deal shorter

and a great deal less frequent than they are. An unbroken line of

conscious communion with God is the ideal; and that is what this singer

desired and worked for. How many of my feelings and thoughts to-day, or

of the things that I have said or done since I woke this morning, would

have been done and said and felt exactly the same, if there were not a

God at all, or if it did not matter in the least whether I ever came

into touch with Him or not? Oh, dear friends! it is no vain effort to

bring our lives a little nearer that unbroken continuity of communion

with Him of which this text speaks. And God knows, and we each for

ourselves know, how much and how sore our need is of such a union. One

thing have I desired, that will I seek after; that I, in my study; I,

in my shop; I, in my parlour, kitchen, or nursery; I, in my studio; I,

in my lecture-hall--may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of

my life.' In our Father's house are many mansions.' The room that we

spend most of our lives in, each of us, at our tasks or our work-tables

may be in our Father's house, too; and it is only we that can secure

that it shall be.

The inmost meaning of this Psalmist's desire is that the consciousness

of God shall be diffused throughout the whole of a man's days, instead

of being coagulated here and there at points. The Australian rivers in

a drought present a picture of the Christian life of far too many of

us--a stagnant, stinking pool here, a stretch of blinding gravel there;

another little drop of water a mile away, then a long line of

foul-smelling mud, and then another shallow pond. Why! it ought to run

in a clear stream that has a scour in it and that will take all filth

off the surface.

The Psalmist longed to break down the distinction between sacred and

secular; to consecrate work, of whatsoever sort it was. He had learned

what so many of us need to learn far more thoroughly, that if our

religion does not drive the wheels of our daily business, it is of

little use; and that if the field in which our religion has power to

control and impel is not that of the trivialities and secularities of

our ordinary life, there is no field for it at all.

All the days of my life.' Not only on Wednesday nights, while Tuesday

and Thursday are given to the world and self; not only on Sundays; not

for five minutes in the morning, when I am eager to get to my daily

work, and less than five minutes at night, when I am half asleep, but

through the long day, doing this, that, and the other thing for God and

by God and with God, and making Him the motive and the power of my

course, and my Companion to heaven. And if we have, in our lives,

things over which we cannot make the sign of the cross, the sooner we

get rid of them the better; and if there is anything in our daily work,

or in our characters, about which we are doubtful, here is a good test:

does it seem to check our continual communion with God, as a ligature

round the wrist might do the continual flow of the blood, or does it

help us to realise His presence? If the former, let us have no more to

do with it; if the latter, let us seek to increase it.

II. And now let me say a word about the Psalmist's reason for this

aspiration.

The word which he employs carries with it a picture which is even more

vividly given us by a synonymous word employed in the same connection

in some of the other psalms. That I may dwell in the house of the

Lord'--now, that is an allusion, not only, as I think, to the Temple,

but also to the Oriental habit of giving a man who took refuge in the

tent of the sheikh, guest-rites of protection and provision and

friendship. The habit exists to this day, and travellers among the

Bedouins tell us lovely stories of how even an enemy with the blood of

the closest relative of the owner of the tent on his hands, if he can

once get in there and partake of the salt of the host, is safe, and the

first obligation of the owner of the tent is to watch over the life of

the fugitive as over his own. So the Psalmist says, I desire to have

guest-rites in Thy tent; to lift up its fold, and shelter there from

the heat of the desert. And although I be dark and stained with many

evils and transgressions against Thee, yet I come to claim the

hospitality and provision and protection and friendship which the laws

of the house do bestow upon a guest.' Carrying out substantially the

same idea, Paul tells the Ephesians, as if it were the very highest

privilege that the Gospel brought to the Gentiles: Ye are no more

strangers, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of

God'; incorporated into His family, and dwelling safely in His pavilion

as their home.

That is to say, the blessedness of keeping up such a continual

consciousness of touch with God is, first and foremost, the certainty

of infallible protection. Oh! how it minimises all trouble and

brightens all joys, and calms amidst all distractions, and steadies and

sobers in all circumstances, to feel ever the hand of God upon us! He

who goes through life, finding that, when he has trouble to meet, it

throws him back on God, and that when bright mornings of joy drive away

nights of weeping, these wake morning songs of praise, and are

brightest because they shine with the light of a Father's love, will

never be unduly moved by any vicissitudes of fortune. Like some inland

and sheltered valley, with great mountains shutting it in, that heareth

not the loud winds when they call' beyond the barriers that enclose it,

our lives may be tranquilly free from distraction, and may be full of

peace, of nobleness, and of strength, on condition of our keeping in

God's house all the days of our lives.

There is another blessing that will come to the dweller in God's house,

and that not a small one. It is that, by the power of this one

satisfied longing, driven like an iron rod through all the tortuosities

of my life, there will come into it a unity which otherwise few lives

are ever able to attain, and the want of which is no small cause of the

misery that is great upon men. Most of us seem, to our own

consciousness, to live amidst endless distractions all our days, and

our lives to be a heap of links parted from each other rather than a

chain. But if we have that one constant thought with us, and if we are,

through all the variety of occupations, true to the one purpose of

serving and keeping near God, then we have a charm against the

frittering away of our lives in distractions, and the misery of

multiplicity; and we enter into the blessedness of unity and singleness

of purpose; and our lives become, like the starry heavens in all the

variety of their motions, obedient to one impulse. For unity in a life

does not depend upon the monotony of its tasks, but upon the simplicity

of the motive which impels to all varieties of work. So it is possible

for a man harassed by multitudinous avocations, and drawn hither and

thither by sometimes apparently conflicting and always bewildering,

rapidly-following duties, to say, This one thing I do,' if all his

doings are equally acts of obedience to God.

III. So, lastly, note the method by which this desire is realised.

One thing have I desired, . . . that will I seek after' There are two

points to be kept in view to that end. A great many people say, One

thing have I desired,' and fail in persistent continuousness of the

desire. No man gets rights of residence in God's house for a longer

time than he continues to seek for them. The most advanced of us, and

those that have longest been like Anna, who departed not from the

Temple,' day nor night, will certainly eject ourselves unless, like the

Psalmist, we use the verbs in both tenses, and say, One thing have I

desired . . . that will I seek after.' John Bunyan saw that there was

a back door to the lower regions close by the gates of the Celestial

City. There may be men who have long lived beneath the shadow of the

sanctuary, and at the last will be found outside the gates.

But the words of the text not only suggest, by the two tenses of the

verbs, the continuity of the desire which is destined to be granted,

but also by the two verbs themselves--desire and seek after--the

necessity of uniting prayer and work. Many desires are unsatisfied

because conduct does not correspond to desires. Many a prayer remains

unanswered because its pray-ers never do anything to fulfil their

prayers. I do not say they are hypocrites; certainly they are not

consciously so, but I do say that there is a large measure of

conventionality that means nothing, in the prayers of average Christian

people for more holiness and likeness to Jesus Christ.

Dear friends! if we truly wish this desire of dwelling in the house of

the Lord to be fulfilled, the day's work must run in the same direction

as the morning's petition, and we must, like the Psalmist, say, I have

desired it of the Lord, so I, for my part, will seek after it.' Then,

whether or not we reach absolutely to the standard, which is none the

less to be aimed at, though it seems beyond reach, we shall arrive

nearer and nearer to it; and, God helping our weakness and increasing

our strength, quickening us to desire,' and upholding us to seek

after,' we may hope that, when the days of our life are past, we shall

but remove into an upper chamber, more open to the sunrise and flooded

with light; and shall go no more out, but dwell in the house of the

Lord for ever.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

SEEK YE'--I WILL SEEK'

When Thou saidst, Seek ye my face; My heart said unto Thee, Thy face,

Lord, will I seek. 9. Hide not Thy face far from me.' --PSALM xxvii. 8,

9.

We have here a report of a brief dialogue between God and a devout

soul. The Psalmist tells us of God's invitation and of his acceptance,

and on both he builds the prayer that the face which he had been bidden

to seek, and had sought, may not be hid from him. The correspondence

between what God said to him and what he said to God is even more

emphatically expressed in the original than in our version. In the

Hebrew the sentence is dislocated, at the risk of being obscure, for

the sake of bringing together the two voices. It runs thus, My heart

said to Thee,' and then, instead of going on with his answer, the

Psalmist interjects God's invitation 'Seek ye My face,' and then, side

by side with that, he lays his response, Thy face, Lord, will I seek.'

The completeness and swiftness of his answer could not be more vividly

expressed. To hear was to obey: as soon as God's merciful call sounded,

the Psalmist's heart responded, like a harp-string thrilled into music

by the vibration of another tuned to the same note. Without hesitation,

and in entire correspondence with the call, was his response. So

swiftly, completely, resolutely should we respond to God's voice, and

our ready I will' should answer His commandment, as the man at the

wheel repeats the captain's orders whilst he carries them out. Upon

such acceptance of such an invitation we, too, may build the prayer,

Hide not Thy face far from me.'

Now, there are three things here that I desire to look at--God's

merciful call to us all; the response of the devout soul to that call;

and the prayer which is built upon both.

I. We have God's merciful call to us all.

Thou saidst, Seek ye My face.' Now, that expression, the face of God,'

though highly metaphorical, is perfectly clear and defined in its

meaning. It corresponds substantially to what the Apostle Paul calls,

in speaking of the knowledge of God beyond the limits of revelation,

that which may be known of God'; or, in more modern language, the side

of the divine nature which is turned to man; or, in plainer words

still, God, in so far as He is revealed. It means substantially the

same thing as the other Scriptural expression, the name of the Lord.'

Both phrases draw a broad distinction between what God is, in the

infinite fulness of His incomprehensible being, and what He is as

revealed to man; and both imply that what is revealed is knowledge,

real and valid, though it may be imperfect.

This, then, being the meaning of the phrase, what is the meaning of the

invitation: Seek ye My face'? Have we to search for that, as if it were

something hidden, far off, lost, and only to be recovered by our

effort? No: a thousand times no! For the seeking, to which God

mercifully invites us, is but the turning of the direction of our

desires to Him, the recognition of the fact that His face is more than

all else to men, the recognition that whilst there are many that say,

Who will show us any good?' and put the question impatiently,

despairingly, vainly, they that turn the seeking into a prayer, and

ask, Lord! lift Thou the light of Thy countenance upon us,' will never

ask in vain. To seek is to desire, to turn the direction of thought and

will and affection to Him and to take heed that the ordering of our

daily lives is such as that no mist rising from them shall come between

us and that brightness of light, or hide from us the vision splendid.

They who seek God by desire, by the direction of thought and will and

love, and by the regulation of their daily lives in accordance with

that desire, are they who obey this commandment.

Next we come to that great thought that God is ever sounding out to all

mankind this invitation to seek His face. By the revelation of Himself

He bids us all sun ourselves in the brightness of His countenance. One

of the New Testament writers, in a passage which is mistranslated in

our Authorised Version, says that God calls us by His own glory and

virtue.' That is to say, the very manifestation of the divine Being is

such that there lies in it a summons to behold Him, and an attraction

to Himself. So fair is He, that He but needs to withdraw the veil, and

men's hearts rejoice in that countenance, which is as the sun shining

in his strength; nor know we anything more fair than is the smile upon

His face.' If we see Him as He really is, we cannot choose but love. By

all His works He calls us to seek Him, not only because the intellect

demands that there shall be a personal Will behind all these phenomena,

but because they in themselves proclaim His name, and the proclamation

of His name is the summons to behold.

By the very make of our own spirits He calls us to Himself. Our

restlessness, our yearnings, our movings about as aliens in the midst

of things seen and visible, all these bid us turn to Him in whom alone

our capacities can be satisfied, and the hunger of our souls appeased.

You remember the old story of the Saracen woman who came to England

seeking her lover, and passed through these foreign cities, with no

word upon her tongue that could be understood of those that heard her

except his name whom she sought. Ah! that is how men wander through the

earth, strangers in the midst of it. They cannot translate the cry of

their own hearts, but it means, God--my soul thirsteth for Thee'; and

the thirst bids us seek His face.

He summons us by all the providences and events of our changeful lives.

Our sorrows by their poignancy, our joys by their incompleteness and

their transiency, alike call us to Him in whom alone the sorrows can be

soothed and the joys made full and remain. Our duties, by their

heaviness, call us to turn ourselves to Him, in whom alone we can find

the strength to fill the role that is laid upon us, and to discharge

our daily tasks.

But, most of all, He summons us to Himself by Him who is the Angel of

His Face, the effulgence of His glory, and the express image of His

person.' In the face of Jesus Christ, the light of the knowledge of the

glory of God' beams out upon us, as it never shone on this Psalmist of

old. He saw but a portion of that countenance, through a thick veil

which thinned as faith gazed, but was never wholly withdrawn. The voice

that he heard calling him was less penetrating and less laden with love

than the voice that calls us. He caught some tones of invitation

sounding in providences and prophecies, in ceremonies and in law; we

hear them more full and clear from the lips of a Brother. They sound to

us from the cradle and the cross, and they are wafted down to us from

the throne. God's merciful invitation to us poor men never has taken,

nor will, nor can, take a sweeter and more attractive form than in

Christ's version of it: Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy

laden, and I will give you rest.' Friend! that summons comes to us; may

we deal with it as the Psalmist did!

II. That brings me to note, secondly, the devout soul's response to the

loving call from God.

I have already pointed out how beautifully and vividly the contrast

between the two is expressed in our text: Seek ye My face'--Thy face

will I seek.' The Psalmist takes the general invitation and converts it

into an individual one, to which he responds. God's ye' is met by his

I.' The Psalmist makes no hesitation or delay--When Thou saidst . . .

my heart said to Thee.' The Psalmist gathers himself together in a

concentrated resolve of a fixed determination--Thy face will I seek.'

That is how we ought to respond.

Make the general invitation thy very own. God summons all, because He

summons each. He does not cast His invitations out at random over the

heads of a crowd, as some rich man might fling coins to a mob, but He

addresses every one of us singly and separately, as if there were not

another soul in the universe to hear His voice but our very own selves.

It is for us not to lose ourselves in the crowd, since He has not lost

us in it; but to appropriate, to individualise, to make our very own,

the universality of His call to the world. It matters nothing to you

what other men may do; it matters not to you how many others may be

invited, and whether they may accept or may refuse. When that Seek ye'

comes to my heart, life or death depends on my answering, Whatsoever

others may do, as for me I will seek Thy face.' We preachers that have

to stand and address a multitude sound out the invitation, and it loses

in power, the more there are to listen to us. If I could get you one by

one, the poorest words would have more weight with you than the

strongest have when spoken to a crowd. Brother! God individualises us,

and God speaks to Thee, Wilt thou behold My face?' Answer, As for me, I

will.'

Again, the Psalmist made haste, and delayed not, but made haste' to

respond to the merciful summons. Ah! how many of us, in how many

different ways, fall into the snare by-and-by'! not now'; and all these

days, that slip away whilst we hesitate, gather themselves together to

be our accusers hereafter. Friend! why should you limit the blessedness

that may come into your life to the fag end of it when you have got

tired and satiated, or tired and disappointed with the world and its

good? Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He

is near.' It is poor courtesy to show to a merciful invitation from a

bountiful host if I say; After I have looked to the oxen I have bought,

and tested them, and measured the field that I have acquired; after I

have drunk the sweetness of wedded life with the wife that I have

married, then I will come. But, for the present, I pray thee, have me

excused.' And that is what many are doing, more or less.

The Psalmist gathered himself together in a fixed resolve, and said, I

will.' That is what we have to do. A languid seeker will not find; an

earnest one will not fail to find. But if half-heartedly, now and then,

when we are at leisure in the intervals of more important and pressing

daily business, we spasmodically bethink ourselves, and for a little

while seek for the light of God's felt presence to shine upon us, we

shall not get it. But if we lay a masterful hand, as we ought to do, on

these divergent desires that draw us asunder, and bind ourselves, as it

were, together, by the strong cord of a resolved purpose carried out

throughout our lives, then we shall certainly not seek in vain.

Alas! how strange and how sad is the reception which this merciful

invitation receives from so many of us! Some of you never hear it at

all. Standing in the very focus where the sounds converge, you are

deaf, as if a man behind the veil of the falling water of Niagara, on

that rocky shelf there, should hear nothing. From every corner of the

universe that voice comes; from all the providences and events of our

lives that voice comes; from the life and death of Jesus Christ that

voice comes; and not a sound reaches your ears. Having ears, they hear

not,' and some of us might take the Psalmist's answer, with one sad

word added, as ours--When Thou saidst, Seek ye My face, my heart said

unto Thee, Thy face, Lord, will I not seek.'

Brethren! it is heaven on earth to say, Thou dost call, and I answer.

Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.' Yet you shut yourselves up to,

and with, misery and vanity, if you so deal with God's merciful summons

as some of us are dealing with it, so that He has to say, I called, and

ye refused; I stretched out My hand, and no man regarded.'

III. Lastly, we have here a prayer built upon both the invitation and

the acceptance.

Hide not Thy face far from me.' That prayer implies that God will not

contradict Himself. His promises are commandments. If He bids us seek

He binds Himself to show. His veracity, His unchangeableness, are

pledged to this, that no man who yields to His invitation will be

balked of his desire. He does not hold out the gift in His hand, and

then twitch it away when we put out encouraged and stimulated hands to

grasp it. You have seen children flashing bright reflections from a

mirror on to a wall, and delighting to direct them away to another

spot, when a hand has been put out to touch them. That is not how God

does. The light that He reveals is steady, and whosoever turns his face

to it will be irradiated by its brightness.

The prayer builds itself on the assurance that, because God will not

contradict Himself, therefore every heart seeking is sure to issue in a

heart finding. There is only one region where that is true, brethren!

there is only one tract of human experience in which the promise is

always and absolutely fulfilled:--Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and

ye shall find.' We hunt after all other good, and at the best we get it

in part or for a time, and when possessed, it is not as bright as when

it shone in the delusive colours of hope and desire. If you follow

other good, and are drawn after the elusive lights that dance before

you, and only show how great is the darkness, you will not reach them,

but will be mired in the bog. If you follow after God's face, it will

make a sunshine in the shadiest places of life here. You will be

blessed because you walk all the day long in the light of His

countenance, and when you pass hence it will irradiate the darkness of

death, and thereafter, His servants shall serve Him, and shall see His

face,' and, seeing, shall be made like Him, for His name shall be in

their foreheads.'

Brethren! we have to make our choice whether we shall see His face here

on earth, and so meet it hereafter as that of a long-separated and

long-desired friend; or whether we shall see it first when He is on His

throne, and we at His bar, and so shall have to call on the rocks and

the hills to fall on us, and cover us from the face of Him who is our

Judge.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE TWO GUESTS

His anger endureth but a moment; in His favour is life: weeping may

endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.'--PSALM xxx. 5.

A word or two of exposition is necessary in order to bring out the

force of this verse. There is an obvious antithesis in the first part

of it, between His anger' and His favour.' Probably there is a similar

antithesis between a moment' and life.' For, although the word rendered

life' does not unusually mean a lifetime it may have that

signification, and the evident intention of contrast seems to require

it here. So, then, the meaning of the first part of my text is, the

anger lasts for a moment; the favour lasts for a lifetime.' The

perpetuity of the one, and the brevity of the other, are the Psalmist's

thought.

Then, if we pass to the second part of the text, you will observe that

there is there also a double antithesis. Weeping' is set over against

joy'; the night' against the morning.' And the first of these two

contrasts is the more striking if we observe that the word joy' means,

literally, a joyful shout,' so that the voice which was lifted in

weeping is conceived of as now being heard in exultant praise. Then,

still further, the expression may endure' literally means may come to

lodge.' So that Weeping and Joy are personified. Two guests come; one,

dark-robed and approaching at the fitting season for such, the night.'

The other bright, coming with all things fresh and sunny, in the dewy

morn. The guest of the night is Weeping; the guest that takes its place

in the morning is Gladness.

The two clauses, then, of my text suggest substantially the same

thought, and that is the persistence of joy and the transitoriness of

sorrow. The one speaks of the succession of emotions in the man; the

other, of the successive aspects of the divine dealings which occasion

these. The whole is a leaf out of the Psalmist's own experience. The

psalm commemorates his deliverance from some affliction, probably a

sickness. That is long gone past; and the tears that it caused have

long since dried up. But this shout of joy of his has lasted all these

centuries, and is like to be immortal. Well for us if we can read our

life's story with the same cheery confidence as he did his, and have

learned like him to discern what is the temporary and what the

permanent element in our experience!

I. Note, first, the proportion of joy and sorrow in an ordinary life.

The Psalmist expresses, as I have said, the same idea in both clauses.

In the former the anger' is contemplated not so much as an element in

the divine mind, as in its manifestations in the divine dealings. I

shall have a word or two, presently, to say about the Scriptural

conception of the anger' of God and its relation to the favour' of God;

but for the present I take the two clauses as being substantially

equivalent.

Now is it true--is it not true?--that if a man rightly regards the

proportionate duration of these two diverse elements in his life, he

must come to the conclusion that the one is continuous and the other is

but transitory? A thunderstorm is very short when measured against the

long summer day in which it crashes; and very few days have them. It

must be a bad climate where half the days are rainy. If we were to take

the chart and prick out upon it the line of our sailing, we should find

that the spaces in which the weather was tempestuous were brief and few

indeed as compared with those in which it was sunny and calm.

But then, man looks before and after, and has the terrible gift that by

anticipation and by memory he can prolong the sadness. The proportion

of solid matter needed to colour the Irwell is very little in

comparison with the whole of the stream. But the current carries it,

and half an ounce will stain miles of the turbid stream. Memory and

anticipation beat the metal thin, and make it cover an enormous space.

And the misery is that, somehow, we have better memories for sad hours

than for joyful ones, and it is easier to get accustomed to blessings,'

as we call them, and to lose the poignancy of their sweetness because

they become familiar, than it is to apply the same process to our

sorrows, and thus to take the edge off them. The rose's prickles are

felt in the flesh longer than its fragrance lives in the nostrils, or

its hue in the eye. Men have long memories for their pains as compared

with their remembrance of their sorrows.

So it comes to be a piece of very homely, well-worn, and yet always

needful, practical counsel to try not to magnify and prolong grief, nor

to minimise and abbreviate gladness. We can make our lives, to our own

thinking, very much what we will. We cannot directly regulate our

emotions, but we can regulate them, because it is in our own power to

determine which aspect of our life we shall by preference contemplate.

Here is a room, for instance, papered with a paper with a dark

background and a light pattern on it. Well, you can manoeuvre your eye

about so as either to look at the black background--and then it is all

black, with only a little accidental white or gilt to relieve it here

and there; or you can focus your eye on the white and gold, and then

that is the main thing, and the other is background. We can choose, to

a large extent, what we shall conceive our lives to be; and so we can

very largely modify their real character.

There's nothing either good or bad

But thinking makes it so.'

They who will can surround themselves with persistent gladness, and

they who will can gather about them the thick folds of an everbrooding

and enveloping sorrow. Courage, cheerfulness, thankfulness, buoyancy,

resolution, are all closely connected with a sane estimate of the

relative proportions of the bright and the dark in a human life.

II. And now consider, secondly, the inclusion of the moment' in the

life.'

I do not know that the Psalmist thought of that when he gave utterance

to my text, but whether he did it or not, it is true that the moment'

spent in anger' is a part of the life' that is spent in the favour.'

Just as within the circle of a life lies each of its moments, the same

principle of inclusion may be applied to the other contrast presented

here. For as the moment' is a part of the life,' the danger' is a part

of the love. The favour' holds the anger' within itself, for the true

Scriptural idea of that terrible expression and terrible fact, the

wrath of God,' is that it is the necessary aversion of a perfectly pure

and holy love from that which does not correspond to itself. So, though

sometimes the two may be set against each other, yet at bottom, and in

reality, they are one, and the anger' is but a mode in which the

favour' manifests itself. God's love is plastic, and if thrown back

upon itself, grieved and wounded and rejected, becomes the anger' which

ignorant men sometimes seem to think it contradicts. There is no more

antagonism between these two ideas when they are applied to God than

when they are applied to you parents in your relations to a disobedient

child. You know, and it knows, that if there were no love there would

be little anger.' Neither of you suppose that an irate parent is an

unloving parent. If ye, being evil, know how,' in dealing with your

children, to blend wrath and love, how much more shall your Father

which is in heaven' be one and the same Father when His love manifests

itself in chastisement and when it expands itself in blessings!

Thus we come to the truth which breathes uniformity and simplicity

through all the various methods of the divine hand, that howsoever He

changes and reverses His dealings with us, they are one and the same.

You may get two diametrically opposite motions out of the same machine.

The same power will send one wheel revolving from right to left, and

another from left to right, but they are co-operant to grind out at the

far end the one product. It is the same revolution of the earth that

brings blessed lengthening days and growing summer, and that cuts short

the sun's course and brings declining days and increasing cold. It is

the same motion which hurls a comet close to the burning sun, and sends

it wandering away out into fields of astronomical space, beyond the ken

of telescope, and almost beyond the reach of thought. And so one

uniform divine purpose, the favour' which uses the anger,' fills the

life, and there are no interruptions, howsoever brief, to the steady

continuous flow of His outpoured blessings. All is love and favour.

Anger is masked love, and sorrow has the same source and mission as

joy. It takes all sorts of weathers to make a year, and all tend to the

same issue, of ripened harvests and full barns. O brethren! if we

understand that God means something better for us than happiness, even

likeness to Himself, we should understand better how our deepest

sorrows and bitterest tears, and the wounds that penetrate deepest into

our bleeding hearts, all come from the same motive, and are directed to

the same end as their most joyful contraries. One thing the Lord

desires, that we may be partakers of His holiness, and so we may

venture to give an even deeper meaning to the Psalmist's words than he

intended, and recognise that the moment' is an integral part of the

life,' and the anger' a mode of the manifestation of the favour.'

III. Lastly, notice the conversion of the sorrow into joy.

I have already explained the picturesque image of the last part of my

text, which demands a little further consideration. There are two

figures presented before us, one dark robed and one bright garmented.

The one is the guest of the night, the other is the guest of the

morning. The verb which occurs in the first clause of the second half

of my text is not repeated in the second, and so the words may be taken

in two ways. They may either express how Joy, the morning guest, comes,

and turns out the evening visitant, or they may suggest how we took

Sorrow in when the night fell, to sit by the fireside, but when morning

dawned--who is this, sitting in her place, smiling as we look at her?

It is Sorrow transfigured, and her name is changed into Joy. Either the

substitution or the transformation may be supposed to be in the

Psalmist's mind.

Both are true. No human heart, however wounded, continues always to

bleed. Some gracious vegetation creeps over the wildest ruin. The

roughest edges are smoothed by time. Vitality asserts itself; other

interests have a right to be entertained and are entertained. The

recuperative powers come into play, and the pang departs and poignancy

is softened. The cutting edge gets blunt on even poisoned spears by the

gracious influences of time. The nightly guest, Sorrow, slips away, and

ere we know, another sits in her place. Some of us try to fight against

that merciful process and seem to think that it is a merit to continue,

by half artificial means, the first moment of pain, and that it is

treason to some dear remembrances to let life have its way, and to-day

have its rights. That is to set ourselves against the dealings of God,

and to refuse to forgive Him for what His love has done for us.

But the other thought seems to me to be even more beautiful, and

probably to be what was in the Psalmist's mind--viz. the transformation

of the evil, Sorrow itself, into the radiant form of Joy. A prince in

rags comes to a poor man's hovel, is hospitably received in the

darkness, and being received and welcomed, in the morning slips off his

rags and appears as he is. Sorrow is Joy disguised.

If it be accepted, if the will submit, if the heart let itself be

untwined, that its tendrils may be coiled closer round the heart of

God, then the transformation is sure to come, and joy will dawn on

those who have done rightly--that is, submissively and thankfully--by

their sorrows. It will not be a joy like what the world calls

joy--loud-voiced, boisterous, ringing with idiot laughter; but it will

be pure, and deep, and sacred, and permanent. A white lily is fairer

than a flaunting peony, and the joy into which sorrow accepted turns is

pure and refining and good.

So, brethren! remember that the richest vintages are grown on the rough

slopes of the volcano, and lovely flowers blow at the glacier's edge;

and all our troubles, big and little, may be converted into gladnesses

if we accept them as God meant them. Only they must be so accepted if

they are to be thus changed.

But there may be some hearts recoiling from much that I have said in

this sermon, and thinking to themselves, Ah! there are two kinds of

sorrows. There are those that can be cured, and there are those that

cannot. What have you got to say to me who have to bleed from an

immedicable wound till the end of my life?' Well, I have to say

this--look beyond earth's dim dawns to that morning when the Sun of

Righteousness shall arise, to them that love His name, with healing in

His wings.' If we have to carry a load on an aching back till the end,

be sure that when the night, which is far spent, is over, and the day

which is at hand hath broken, every raindrop will be turned into a

flashing rainbow when it is smitten by the level light, and every

sorrow rightly borne be represented by a special and particular joy.

Only, brother! if a life is to be spent in His favour, it must be spent

in His fear. And if our cares and troubles and sorrows and losses are

to be transfigured hereafter, then we must keep very near Jesus Christ,

who has promised to us that His joy will remain with us, and that our

sorrows shall be turned into joys. If we trust to Him, the voices that

have been raised in weeping will be heard in gladness, and earth's

minor will be transposed by the great Master of the music into the key

of Heaven's jubilant praise. If only we look not at the things seen,

but at the things which are not seen,' then our light affliction, which

is but for a moment, will work out for us a far more exceeding and

eternal weight of glory'; and the weight will be no burden, but will

bear up those who are privileged to bear it.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

BE . . . FOR THOU ART'

Be Thou to me a strong Rock, an house of defence to save me. 3. For

Thou art my Rock and my Fortress.'--PSALM xxxi. 2, 3 (R.V.).

It sounds strange logic, Be . . . for Thou art,' and yet it is the

logic of prayer, and goes very deep, pointing out both its limits and

its encouragements. The parallelism between these two clauses is even

stronger in the original than in our Version, for whilst the two words

which designate the Rock' are not identical, their meaning is

identical, and the difference between them is insignificant; one being

a rock of any shape or size, the other being a perpendicular cliff or

elevated promontory. And in the other clause, for a house of defence to

save me,' the word rendered defence' is the same as that which is

translated in the next clause fortress.' So that if we were to read

thus: Be Thou a strong Rock to me, for a house, a fortress, for Thou

art my Rock and my Fortress,' we should get the whole force of the

parallelism. Of course the main idea in that of the Rock,' and

Fortress' is only an exposition of one phase of the meaning of that

metaphor.

I. So let us look first at what God is.

A rock, a fortress-house.' Now, what is the force of that metaphor?

Stable being, as it seems to me, is the first thought in it, for there

is nothing that is more absolutely the type of unchangeableness and

steadfast continuance. The great cliffs rise up, and the river glides

at their base--it is a type of mutability, and of the fleeting

generations of men, who are as the drops and ripples in its course--it

eddies round the foot of the rocks to which the old man looks up, and

sees the same dints and streaks and fissures in it that he saw when he

was a child. The river runs onwards, the trees that root themselves in

the clefts of the rock bear their spring foliage, and drop their leaves

like the generations of men, and the Rock is the same yesterday, and

to-day, and for ever.' And God the Unchangeable rises, if I may so say,

like some majestic cliff, round the foot of which rolls for ever the

tide of human life, and round which are littered the successive layers

of the leaves of many summers.

Then besides this stable being, and the consequences of it, is the

other thought which is attached to the emblem in a hundred places in

Scripture, and that is defence. His place of defence shall be the

munitions of rocks.' When the floods are out, and all the plain is

being dissolved into mud, the dwellers on it fly to the cliffs. When

the enemy's banners appear on the horizon, and the open country is

being harried and burned, the peasants hurry to the defence of the

hills, and, sheltered there, are safe. And so for us this Name assures

us that in Him, whatever floods may sweep across the low levels, and

whatever foes may storm over the open land and the unwalled villages,

there is always the fortress up in the hills, and thither no flood can

rise, and there no enemy can come. A defence and a sure abode is his

who dwells in God, and thus folds over himself the warm wings that

stretch on either side, and shelter him from all assault. Lead me to

the Rock that is higher than I.'

But the Rock is a defence in another way. If a hard-pressed fugitive is

brought to a stand and can set his back against a rock, he can front

his assailants, secure that no unseen foe shall creep up behind and

deal a stealthy stab and that he will not be surrounded unawares. The

God of Israel shall be your rearward,' and he who has made the Most

High his habitation' is sheltered from the pestilence that walketh in

darkness,' as well as from the destruction that wasteth at noon-day,'

and will be cleansed from secret faults' if he keeps up unbroken his

union with God, for the faults' which are not recognised as faults by

his partially illuminated conscience are known to God. But the Rock is

a defence in yet another way, for it is a sure foundation for our

lives. Whoso builds on God need fear no change. When the floods rise,

and the winds blow, and the rain storms down, the house that is on the

Rock will stand.

And, then, in the Rock there is a spring, and round the spring there is

the light of laughing flowers,' amidst the stern majesty of the cliff.

Just as the Law-giver of old smote the rock, and there gushed out the

stream that satisfied the thirst of the whole travelling nation, so

Paul would have us Christians repeat the miracle by our faith. Of us,

too, it may be said, they drank of that Rock that followed them, and

that Rock was Christ.' Stable being, secure defence, a fountain of

refreshment and satisfaction: all these blessings lie in that great

metaphor.

II. Now, note our plea with God, from what He is.

Be Thou to me a Rock . . . for Thou art a Rock.' Is that not

illogical? No, for notice that little word, to me'--be Thou to me what

Thou art in Thyself, and hast been to all generations.' That makes all

the difference. It is not merely Be what Thou art,' although that would

be much, but it is be it to me,' and let me have all which is meant in

that great Name.

But then, beyond that, let me point out to you how this prayer suggests

to us that all true prayer will keep itself within God's revelation of

what He is. We take His promises, and all the elements which make up

His name or manifestation of His character to the world, whether by His

acts or by the utterances of this Book, or by the inferences to be

drawn from the life of Jesus Christ, the great Revealer, or by what we

ourselves have experienced of Him. The ways by which God has revealed

Himself to the world define the legitimate subjects, and lay down the

firm foundation, of our petitions. In all His acts God reveals Himself,

and if I may so say, when we truly pray, we catch these up, and send

them back again to heaven, like arrows from a bow. It is only when our

desires and prayers foot themselves upon God's revelation of Himself,

and in essence are, in various fashions, the repetition of this prayer

of my text: Be . . . for Thou art,' that we can expect to have them

answered. Much else may call itself prayer, but it is often but

petulant and self-willed endeavour to force our wishes upon Him, and no

answer will come to that. We are to pray about everything; but we are

to pray about nothing, except within the lines which are marked out for

us by what God has told us, in His words and acts, that He Himself is.

Catch these up and fling them back to Him, and for every utterance that

He has made of Himself, I am' so-and-so, let us go to Him and say Be

Thou that to me,' and then we may be sure of an answer.

So then two things follow. If we pray after the pattern of this prayer,

Be Thou to me what Thou art,' then a great many foolish and

presumptuous wishes will be stifled in the birth, and, on the other

hand, a great many feeble desires will be strengthened and made

confident, and we shall be encouraged to expect great things of God.

Have you widened your prayers, dear friend!--and I do not mean by that

only your outward ones, but the habitual aspiration and expectation of

your minds--have you widened these to be as wide as what God has shown

us that He is? Have you taken all God's revelation of Himself, and

translated it into petition? And do you expect Him to be to you all

that He has ever been to any soul of man upon earth? Oh! how such a

prayer as this, if we rightly understand it and feel it, puts to shame

the narrowness and the poverty of our prayers, the falterings of our

faith, and the absence of expectation in ourselves that we shall

receive the fulness of God.

God owns that plea: Be . . . what Thou art.' He cannot resist that.

That is what the Apostle meant when he said, He abideth faithful, He

cannot deny Himself.' He must be true to His character. He can never be

other than He always has been. And that is what the Psalmist meant when

he goes on, after the words that I have taken for my text, and says,

For Thy Name's sake lead me and guide me,' What is God's Name? The

collocation of letters by which we designate Him? Certainly not. The

Name of God is the sum total of what God has revealed Himself as being.

And for the sake of the Name,' that He may be true to that which He has

shown Himself to be, He will always endorse this bill that you draw

upon Him when you present Him with His own character, and say Be to me

what Thou art.'

III. Lastly, we have here the plea with God drawn from what we have

taken Him to be to us.

That is somewhat different from what I have already been dwelling upon.

Mark the words: Be Thou to me a strong Rock, for Thou art my Rock and

my Fortress.' What does that mean? It means that the suppliant has, by

his own act of faith, taken God for his; that he has appropriated the

great divine revelation, and made it his own. Now it seems to me that

that appropriation is, if not the point, at least one of the points, in

which real faith is distinguished from the sham thing which goes by

that name amongst so many people. A man by faith encloses a bit of the

common for his very own. When God says that He so loved the world that

He gave His . . . Son,' I should say, He loved me, and gave Himself

for me.' When the great revelation is made that He is the Rock of Ages,

my faith says: My Rock and my Fortress.' Having said that, and claimed

Him for mine, I can then turn round to Him and say, Be to me what I

have taken Thee to be.'

And that faith is expressed very beautifully and strikingly in one of

the Old Testament metaphors, which frequently goes along with this one

of the Rock. For instance, in a great chapter in Isaiah we find the

original of that phrase the Rock of Ages.' It runs thus, Trust ye in

the Lord for ever, for in the Lord JEHOVAH is the Rock of Ages.' Now

the word for trust there literally means, to flee into a refuge, and so

the true idea of faith is to fly for refuge,' as the Epistle to the

Hebrews has it, to the Hope set before us,'--that is (keeping to the

metaphor), to the cleft in the Rock.

That act of trust or flight will make it certain that God will be to us

for a house of defence, a fortress to save us. Other rock-shelters may

crumble. They may be carried by assault; they may be riven by

earthquakes. The mountains shall depart, and the hills shall be

removed,' but this Rock is impregnable, and all who take refuge in it

are safe for ever.

And so the upshot of the whole matter is that God will be to us what we

have faith to believe that He is, and our faith will be the measure of

our possession of the fulness of God. If we can only say in the fulness

of our hearts--and keep to the saying: Be Thou to me a Rock, for Thou

art my Rock,' then nothing shall ever hurt us; and dwelling in the

secret place of the Most High' we shall be kept in safety; our abode

shall be the munitions of rocks, our bread shall be given us, and our

water shall be made sure.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

INTO THY HANDS'

Into Thine hand I commit my spirit: Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God

of truth.'--PSALM xxxi. 5.

The first part of this verse is consecrated for ever by our Lord's use

of it on the Cross. Is it not wonderful that, at that supreme hour, He

deigned to take an unknown singer's words as His words? What an honour

to that old saint that Jesus Christ, dying, should find nothing that

more fully corresponded to His inmost heart at that moment than the

utterance of the Psalmist long ago! How His mind must have been

saturated with the Old Testament and with these songs of Israel! And do

you not think it would be better for us if ours were completely steeped

in those heart-utterances of ancient devotion?

But, of course, the Psalmist was not thinking about his death. It was

an act for his life that he expressed in these words:--Into Thine hands

I commit my spirit.' If you will glance over the psalm at your leisure,

you will see that it is the heart-cry of a man in great trouble,

surrounded by all sorts of difficulties, with his very life threatened.

He was down in the very depths of darkness, and ringed about by all

sorts of enemies at that moment, not sitting comfortably, as you and I

are here, but in the midst of the hurly-burly and the strife, when by a

dead lift of faith he flung himself clean out of his disasters, and, if

I might so say, pitched himself into the arms of God. Into Thine hands

I commit my spirit,' as a man standing in the midst of enemies, and

bearing some precious treasure in his hand might, with one strong cast

of his arm, fling it into the open hand of some mighty helper, and so

baulk the enemies of their prey. That is the figure.

I. Now, let me say a word as to where to lodge a soul for safe keeping.

Into Thine hands'--a banker has a strong room, and a wise man sends his

securities and his valuables to the bank and takes an acknowledgment,

and goes to bed at night, quite sure that no harm will come to them,

and that he will get them when he wants them. And that is exactly what

the Psalmist does here. He deposits his most precious treasure in the

safe custody of One who will take care of it. The great Hand is

stretched out, and the little soul is put into it. It closes, and no

man is able to pluck them out of My Father's hand.'

Now that is only a picturesque way of putting the most threadbare,

bald, commonplace of religious teaching. The word faith, when it has

any meaning at all in people's minds when they hear it from the pulpit,

is extremely apt, I fear, to create a kind of, if not disgust, at least

a revulsion of feeling, as if people said, Ah, there he is at the old

story again!' But will you freshen up your notions of what faith it

means by taking that picture of my text as I have tried to expand and

illuminate it a little by my metaphor? That is what is meant by Into

Thy hands I commit my spirit.' There are two or three ways in which

that is to be done, and one or two ways in which it is not to be done.

We do it when we trust Him for the salvation of our souls. There are a

great many good Christian people who go mourning all their days, or, at

least, sometimes mourning and sometimes indifferent. The most that they

venture to say is, But I cannot be sure.' Our grandfathers used to

sing:--

'Tis a point I long to know,

Oft it causes anxious thought.'

Why should it cause anxious thought? Take your own personal salvation

for granted, and work from that. Do not work towards it. If you have

gone to Christ and said, Lord, I cannot save myself; save me. I am

willing to be saved,' be sure that you have the salvation that you ask,

and that if you have put your soul in that fashion into God's hands,

any incredible thing is credible, and any impossible thing is possible,

rather than that you should fail of the salvation which, in the bottom

of your hearts, you desire. Take the burden off your backs and put it

on His. Do not be for ever questioning yourselves, Am I a saved man?'

You will get sick of that soon, and you will be very apt to give up all

thought about the matter at all. But take your stand on the fact, and

with emancipated and buoyant hearts, and grateful ones, work from it,

and because of it. And when sin rises up in your soul, and you say to

yourselves, If I were a Christian I could not have done that,' or, If I

were a Christian I could not be so-and-so'; remember that all sin is

inconsistent with being a Christian, but no sin is incompatible with

it; and that after all the consciousness of shortcomings and failure,

we have just to come back to the old point, and throw ourselves on

God's love. His arms are open to clasp us round. Into Thy hands I

commit my spirit.'

Further, the Psalmist meant, by committing himself to God, trusting Him

in reference to daily life, and all its difficulties and duties. Our

act of trust is to run through everything that we undertake and

everything that we have to fight with. Self-will wrenches our souls out

of God's hands. A man who sends his securities to the banker can get

them back when he likes. And if we undertake to manage our own affairs,

or fling ourselves into our work without recognition of our dependence

upon Him, or if we choose our work without seeking to know what His

will is, that is recalling our deposit. Then you will get it back

again, because God does not keep anybody's securities against his

will--you will get it back again, and much good it will do you when you

have got it! Self-will, self-reliance, self-determination--these are

the opposites of committing the keeping of our souls to God. And, as I

say, if you withdraw the deposit, you take all the burden and trouble

of it on your own shoulders again. Do not fancy that you are living

lives of faith in the Son of God,' if you are not looking to Him to

settle what you are to do. You cannot expect that He will watch over

you, if you do not ask Him where you are to go.

But now there is another thing that I would suggest, this committing of

ourselves to God which begins with the initial act of trust in Him for

the salvation of our souls, and is continued throughout life by the

continual surrender of ourselves to Him, is to be accompanied with

corresponding work. The Apostle Peter's memory is evidently hovering

round this verse, whether he is consciously quoting it or not, when he

says, Let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the

keeping of their souls to Him in welldoing,' which has to go along with

the act of trust and dependence. There must come the continual ordering

of the life in accordance with His will; for well-doing' does not mean

merely some works of beneficence and charity,' of the sort that have

monopolised to themselves the name in latter days, but it means the

whole of righteous conduct in accordance with the will of God.

So Peter tells us that it is vain for us to talk about committing the

keeping of our soul to God unless we back up the committing with

consistent, Christlike lives. Of course it is vain. How can a man

expect God to take care of him when he plunges himself into something

that is contrary to God's laws? There are many people who say, God will

take care of me; He will save me from the consequences.' Not a bit of

it--He loves us a great deal too well for that. If you take the bit

between your teeth, you will be allowed to go over the precipice and be

smashed to pieces. If you wish to be taken care of, keep within the

prescribed limits, and consult Him before you act, and do not act till

you are sure of His approval. God has never promised to rescue man when

he has got into trouble by his own sin. Suppose a servant had embezzled

his master's money through gambling, and then expected God to help him

to get the money to pay back into the till. Do you think that would be

likely to work? And how dare you anticipate that God will keep your

feet, if you are walking in ways of your own choosing? All sin takes a

man out from the shelter of the divine protection, and the shape the

protection has to take then is chastisement. And all sin makes it

impossible for a man to exercise that trust which is the committing of

his soul to God. So it has to be in welldoing,' and the two things are

to go together. What God hath joined let not man put asunder.' You do

not become a Christian by the simple exercise of trust unless it is

trust that worketh by love.

But let me remind you, further, that this committing of our souls into

God's hands does not mean that we are absolved from taking care of them

ourselves. There is a very false kind of religious faith, which seems

to think that it shuffles off all responsibility upon God. Not at all;

you lighten the responsibility, but you do not get rid of it. And no

man has a right to say He will keep me, and so I may neglect diligent

custody of myself.' He keeps us very largely by helping us to keep our

hearts with all diligence, and to keep our feet in the way of truth.

So let me now just say a word in regard to the blessedness of thus

living in an atmosphere of continual dependence on, and reference to,

God, about great things and little things. Whenever a man is living by

trust, even when the trust is mistaken, or when it is resting upon some

mere human, fallible creature like himself, the measure of his

confidence is the measure of his tranquillity. You know that when a

child says, I do not need to mind, father will look after that,' he may

be right or wrong in his estimate of his father's ability and

inclination; but as long as he says it, he has no kind of trouble or

anxiety, and the little face is scarred by no deep lines of care or

thought. So when we turn to Him and say, Why should I the burden bear?'

then there comes--I was going to say surging,' but trickling' is a

better word--into my heart a settled peacefulness which nothing else

can give. Look at this psalm. It begins, and for the first half

continues, in a very minor key. The singer was not a poet posing as in

affliction, but his words were wrung out of him by anguish. Mine eyes

are consumed with grief; my life is spent with grief'; I am . . . as a

dead man out of mind'; I am in trouble.' And then with a quick wheel

about, But I trusted in Thee, O Lord! I said, Thou art my God.' And

what comes of that? This--O how great is Thy goodness which Thou hast

laid up for them that fear Thee!' Blessed be the Lord, for He hath

showed me His marvellous kindness in a strong city.' And then, at the

end of all, his peacefulness is so triumphant that he calls upon all

His saints' to help him to praise. And the last words are Be of good

courage, and He shall strengthen your heart.' That is what you will get

if you commit your soul to God. There was no change in the Psalmist's

circumstances. The same enemy was round about him. The same net was

privily laid for him.' All that had seemed to him half an hour before

as wellnigh desperate, continued utterly unaltered. But what had

altered? God had come into the place, and that altered the whole aspect

of matters. Instead of looking with shrinking and tremulous heart along

the level of earth, where miseries were, he was looking up into the

heavens, where God was; and so everything was beautiful. That will be

our experience if we will commit the keeping of our souls to Him in

well doing. You can bring June flowers and autumn fruits into snowy

January days by the exercise of this trust in God. It does not need

that our circumstances should alter, but only that our attitude should

alter. Look up, and cast your souls into God's hands, and all that is

round you, of disasters and difficulties and perplexities, will suffer

transformation; and for sorrow there will come joy because there has

come trust.

I need not say a word about the other application of this verse, which,

as I have said, is consecrated to us by our Lord's own use of it at the

last. But is it not beautiful to think that the very same act of mind

and heart by which a man commits his spirit to God in life may be his

when he comes to die, and that death may become a voluntary act, and

the spirit may not be dragged out of us, reluctant, and as far as we

can, resisting, but that we may offer it up as a libation, to use one

metaphor of St. Paul's, or may surrender it willingly as an act of

faith? It is wonderful to think that life and death, so unlike each

other, may be made absolutely identical in the spirit in which they are

met. You remember how the first martyr caught up the words from the

Cross, and kneeling down outside the wall of Jerusalem, with the blood

running from the wounds that the stones had made, said, Lord Jesus!

receive my spirit.' That is the way to die, and that is the way to

live.

One word is all that time permits about the ground upon which this

great venture of faith may be made. Thou hast redeemed me, Lord God of

Truth.' The Psalmist, I think, uses that word redeemed' here, not in

its wider spiritual New Testament sense, but in its frequent Old

Testament sense, of deliverance from temporal difficulties and

calamities. And what he says is, in effect, this: I have had experience

in the past which makes me believe that Thou wilt extricate me from

this trouble too, because Thou art the God of Truth.' He thinks of what

God has done, and of what God is. And Peter, whom we have already found

echoing this text, echoes that part of it too, for he says, Let them

commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a

faithful Creator,' which is all but parallel to Lord God of Truth.' So

God will continue as He has begun, and finish what He has begun.

A faithful Creator--' He made us to need what we do need, and He is not

going to forget the wants that He Himself has incorporated with our

human nature. He is bound to help us because He made us. He is the God

of Truth, and He will help us. But if we take redeemed' in its highest

sense, the Psalmist, arguing from God's past mercy and eternal

faithfulness, is saying substantially what the Apostle said in the

triumphant words, Whom He did foreknow, them He also did predestinate

to be conformed to the image of His Son . . . and whom He did

predestinate them He also . . . justified, and whom He justified them

He also glorified.' Thou hast redeemed me.' Thou art the God of Truth;

Thou wilt not lift Thy hand away from Thy work until Thou hast made me

all that Thou didst bind Thyself to make me in that initial act of

redeeming me.'

So we can say, He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for

us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?' You

have experiences, I have no doubt, in your past, on which you may well

build confidence for the future. Let each of us consult our own hearts,

and our own memories. Cannot we say, Thou hast been my Help,' and ought

we not therefore to be sure that He will not leave us nor forsake us'

until He manifests Himself as the God of our salvation?

It is a blessed thing to lay ourselves in the hands of God, but the New

Testament tells us, It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the

living God.' The alternative is one that we all have to face,--either

into Thy hands I commit my spirit,' or into those hands to fall. Settle

which of the two is to be your fate.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

GOODNESS WROUGHT AND GOODNESS LAID UP

Oh how great is Thy goodness, which Thou hast laid up for them that

fear Thee; which Thou hast wrought for them that trust in Thee before

the sons of men!'--PSALM xxxi. 19.

The Psalmist has been describing, with the eloquence of misery, his own

desperate condition, in all manner of metaphors which he heaps

together--'sickness,' captivity,' like a broken vessel,' as a dead man

out of mind.' But in the depth of desolation he grasps at God's hand,

and that lifts him up out of the pit. I trusted in Thee, O Lord! Thou

art my God.' So he struggles up on to the green earth again, and he

feels the sunshine; and then he breaks out--Oh! how great is Thy

goodness which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee.' So the psalm

that began with such grief, ends with the ringing call, Be of good

courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the

Lord.'

Now these great words which I have read for my text, and which derive

even additional lustre from their setting, do not convey to the hasty

English reader the precise force of the antithesis which lies in them.

The contrast in the two clauses is between goodness laid up and

goodness wrought; and that would come out a little more clearly if we

transposed the last words of the text, and instead of reading, as our

Authorised Version does, which Thou hast wrought for them that trusted

in Thee before the sons of men,' read which Thou hast wrought before

the sons of men for them that trusted in Thee.'

So I think there are, as it were, two great masses of what the Psalmist

calls goodness'; one of them which has been plainly manifested before

the sons of men,' the other which is laid up' in store. There are a

great many notes in circulation, but there is far more bullion in the

strong-room. Much goodness' has been exhibited; far more lies

concealed.

If we take that antithesis, then, I think we may turn it in two or

three directions, like a light in a man's hand; and look at it as

suggesting--

I. First, the goodness already disposed--wrought before the sons of

men'; and that laid up,' yet to be manifested.

Now, that distinction just points to the old familiar but yet

never-to-be-exhausted thought of the inexhaustibleness of the divine

nature. That inexhaustibleness comes out most wondrously and

beautifully in the fundamental manifestation of God on which the Old

Testament revelation is built--I mean the vision given to Moses prior

to his call, and as the basis of his message, of the bush that burned

and was not consumed. That lowly shrub flaming and not burning out was

not, as has often been supposed, the symbol of Israel which in the

furnace of affliction was not destroyed. It meant the same as the

divine name, then proclaimed; I AM THAT I AM,' which is but a way of

saying that God's Being is absolute, dependent upon none, determined by

Himself, infinite, and eternal, burns and is not burned up, lives and

has no proclivity towards death, works and is unwearied, operates

unspent,' is revealed and yet hidden, gives and is none the poorer.

And as we look upon our daily lives, and travel back in thought, some

of us over the many years which have all been crowded with instances

and illustrations of divine faithfulness and favouring care, we have to

grasp both these exclamations of our text, Oh! how great is Thy

goodness which Thou hast wrought,' how much greater is Thy goodness

which is laid up!' The table has been spread in the wilderness, and the

verities of Christian experience more than surpass the legends of

hungry knights finding banquets prepared by unseen hands in desert

places. It is as when Jesus made the multitude sit down on the green

grass and feast to the full, and yet abundance remained undiminished

after satisfying all the hungry applicants. The bread that was broken

yielded more basketfuls for to-morrow than the original quantity in the

lad's hands. The fountain rises, and the whole camp, themselves and

their children and their cattle,' slake their thirst at it, and yet it

is full as ever. The goodness wrought is but the fringe and first

beginnings of the mass that is laid up. All the gold that has been

coined and put into circulation is as nothing compared with the wedges

and ingots of massive bullion that lie in the strong room. God's riches

are not like the world's wealth. You very soon get to the bottom of its

purse. Its goodness,' is very soon run dry; and nothing will yield an

unintermittent stream of satisfaction and blessing to a poor soul

except the river of the water of life that proceedeth out of the Throne

of God and of the Lamb.'

So, dear brethren! that contrast may suggest to us how quietly and

peacefully we may look forward to all the unknown future; and hold up

to it so as to enable us to scan its general outlines, the light of the

known and experienced past. Let our trustful prayer be; Thou hast been

my help: leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation!' and

the answer will certainly be: I will not leave thee, till I have done

unto thee that which I have spoken to thee of.' Our Memory ought to be

the mother of our Hope; and we should paint the future in the hues of

the past. Thou hast goodness laid up,' more than enough to match the

goodness Thou hast wrought.' God's past is the prophecy of God's

future; and my past, if I understand it aright, ought to rebuke every

fear and calm every anxiety. We, and only we, have the right to say,

To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.' That is

delusion if said by any but by those that fear and trust in the

Inexhaustible God.

II. Now let us turn our light in a somewhat different direction. The

contrast here suggests the goodness that is publicly given and that

which is experienced in secret.

If you will notice, in the immediate neighbourhood of my text there

come other words which evidently link themselves with the thought of

the goodness laid up: Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy

presence.' That is where also the goodness' is. Thou shalt keep them

secretly in a pavilion . . . blessed be the Lord! for He hath shewed

me His marvellous kindness in a strong city.' So, then, the goodness

which is wrought, and which can be seen by the sons of men, dwindles in

comparison with the goodness which lies in that secret place, and can

only be enjoyed and possessed by those who dwell there, and whose feet

are familiar with the way that leads to it. That is to say, if you wish

the Psalmist's thought in plain prose, all these visible blessings of

ours are but pale shadows and suggestions of the real wealth that we

can have only if we live in continual communion with God. The spiritual

blessings of quiet minds and strength for work, the joys of communion

with God, the sweetness of the hopes that are full of immortality, and

all these delights and manifestations of God's inmost love and

sweetness which are granted only to waiting hearts that shut themselves

off from the tumultuous delights of earth as the bases of their trust

or the sources of their gladness--these are fuller, better than the

selectest and richest of the joys that God's world can give. God does

not put His best gifts, so to speak, in the shop-windows; He keeps

these in the inner chambers. He does not arrange His gifts as dishonest

traders do their wares, putting the finest outside or on the top, and

the less good beneath. Thou hast kept the good wine until now.' It is

they who inhabit the secret place of the Most High,' and whose lives

are filled with communion with Him, realising His presence, seeking to

know His will, reaching out the tendrils of their hearts to twine round

Him, and diligently, for His dear sake, doing the tasks of life; who

taste the selected dainties from God's gracious hands.

How foolish, then, to order life on the principle upon which we are all

tempted to do it, and to yield to the temptation to which some of us

have yielded far too much, of fancying that the best good is the good

that we can touch and taste and handle and that men can see! No! no!

Deep down in our hearts a joy that strangers never intermeddle with nor

know, a peace that passes understanding, a present Christ and a Heaven

all but present, because Christ is present--these are the good things

for men, and these are the things which God does not, because He

cannot, fling broadcast into the world, but which He keeps, because He

must, for those that desire them, and are fit for them. He causeth His

sun to shine, and His rain to fall on the unthankful and on the

disobedient,' but the goodness laid up is better than the sunshine, and

more refreshing and fertilising and cleansing than the rain, and it

comes, and comes only, to them that trust Him, and live near Him.

III. And so, lastly, we may turn our light in yet another direction,

and take this contrast as suggesting the goodness wrought on earth, and

the goodness laid up in heaven.

Here we see, sometimes, the messengers coming with the one cluster of

grapes on the pole. There we shall live in the vineyard. Here we drink

from the river as it flows; there we shall be at the fountain-head.

Here we are in the vestibule of the King's house, there we shall be in

the throne room, and each chamber as we pass through it is richer and

fairer than the one preceding. Heaven's least goodness is more than

earth's greatest blessedness. All that life to come, all its conditions

and everything about it, are so strange to us, so incapable of being

bodied forth or conceived by us, and the thought of Eternity is, it

seems to me, so overwhelmingly awful that I do not wonder at even good

people finding little stimulus, or much that cheers, in the thought of

passing thither. But if we do not know anything more--and we know very

little more--let us be sure of this, that when God begins to compare

His adjectives He does not stop till He gets to the superlative degree

and that good begets better, and the better of earth ensures the best

of Heaven. And so out of our poor little experience here, we may gather

grounds of confidence that will carry our thoughts peacefully even into

the great darkness, and may say, What Thou didst work is much, what

Thou hast laid up is more.' And the contrast will continue for ever and

ever; for all through that strange Eternity that which is wrought will

be less than that which is laid up, and we shall never get to the end

of God, nor to the end of His goodness.

Only let us take heed to the conditions--them that fear Him, them that

trust in Him.' If we will do these things through each moment of the

experiences of a growing Christian life, and at the moment of the

experience of a Christian death, and through the eternities of the

experience of a Christian heaven, Jesus Christ will whisper to us, Thou

shalt see greater things than these.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

HID IN LIGHT

Thou shall hide them in the secret of Thy presence from the pride of

man; Thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of

tongues.'--PSALM xxxi. 20.

The word rendered presence' is literally face,' and the force of this

very remarkable expression of confidence is considerably marred unless

that rendering be retained. There are other analogous expressions in

Scripture, setting forth, under various metaphors, God's protection of

them that love Him. But I know not that there is any so noble and

striking as this. For instance, we read of His hiding His children in

the secret of His tabernacle,' or tent; as an Arab chief might do a

fugitive who had eaten of his salt, secreting him in the recesses of

his tent whilst the pursuers scoured the desert in vain for their prey.

Again, we read of His hiding them beneath the shadow of His wing';

where the divine love is softened into the likeness of the maternal

instinct which leads a hen to gather her chickens beneath the shelter

of her own warm and outspread feathers. But the metaphor of my text is

more vivid and beautiful still. Thou shalt hide them in the secret of

Thy face.' The light that streams from that countenance is the

hiding-place for a poor man. These other metaphors may refer, perhaps,

the one to the temple, and the other to the outstretched wings of the

cherubim that shadowed the Mercy-seat. And, if so, this metaphor

carries us still more near to the central blaze of the Shekinah, the

glory that hovered above the Mercy-seat, and glowed in the dark

sanctuary, unseen but once a year by one trembling high priest, who had

to bear with him blood of sacrifice, lest the sight should slay. The

Psalmist says, into that fierce light a man may go, and stand in it,

bathed, hid, secure. Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy face.'

I. Now, then, let us notice, first, this hiding-place.

The face' of God is so strongly figurative an expression that its

metaphorical character cannot but be obvious to the most cursory

reader. The very frankness, and, we may say, the grossness of the

image, saves it from all misconception, and as with other similar

expressions in the Old Testament, at once suggests its meaning. We

read, for example, of the arm,' the hand,' the finger' of God, and

everybody feels that these mean His power. We read of the eye' of God,

and everybody knows that that means His omniscience. We read of the

ear' of God, and we all understand that that holds forth the blessed

thought that He hears and answers the cry of such as be sorrowful. And,

in like manner, the face' of God is the apprehensible part of the

divine nature which turns to men, and by which He makes Himself known.

It is roughly equivalent to the other Old and New Testament expression,

the name of the Lord,' the manifested and revealed side of the divine

nature. And that is the hiding-place into which men may go.

We have the other expression also in Scripture, the light of Thy

countenance,' and that helps us to apprehend the Psalmist's meaning.

The light of Thy face' is secret.' What a paradox! Can light conceal?

Look at the daily heavens--filled with blazing stars, all invisible

till the night falls. The effulgence of the face is such that they that

stand in it are lost and hid, like the lark in the blue sky. A glorious

privacy of light is Thine.' There is a wonderful metaphor in the New

Testament of a woman clothed with the sun,' and caught up into it from

her enemies to be safe there. And that is just an expansion of the

Psalmist's grand paradox, Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy

face.' Light conceals when the light is so bright as to dazzle. They

who are surrounded by God are lost in the glory, and safe in that

seclusion, the secret of Thy face.'

A thought may be suggested, although it is somewhat of a digression

from the main purpose of my text, but it springs naturally out of this

paradox, and may just deserve a word. Revelation is real, but

revelation has its limits. That which is revealed is the face of God,'

but we read, no man can see My face.' After all revelation He remains

hidden. After all pouring forth of His beams He remains the God that

dwelleth in the thick darkness,' and the light which is inaccessible is

also a darkness that can be felt. Apprehension is possible;

comprehension is impossible. What we know of God is valid and true, but

we never shall know all the depths that lie in that which we do know of

Him. His face is the secret'; and though men may malign Him when they

say, Verily, Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel!' and

He answers them, I have not spoken in secret' in a dark place of the

earth,' it still remains true that revelation has its mysteries born of

the greatness of its effulgence, and that all which we know of God is

dark with excess of light.'

But that is aside from our main purpose. Let me rather remind you of

how the thought of the secret of God's face being the secure

hiding-place of them that love Him points to this truth--that that

brightness of light has a repellent power which keeps far away from all

intermingling with it everything that is evil. The old Greek

mythologies tell us that the radiant arrows of Apollo shot forth from

his far-reaching bow, wounded to death the monsters of the slime and

unclean creatures that crawled and revelled in darkness. And the myth

has a great truth in it. The light of God's face slays evil, of

whatsoever kind it is; and just as the unlovely, loathsome creatures

that live in the dark and find themselves at ease there writhe and

wriggle in torment, and die when their shelter is taken away and they

are exposed to the light beating on their soft bodies, so the light of

God's face turned upon evil things smites them into nothingness. Thus

the secret of His countenance' is the shelter of all that is good.

Nor need I remind you how, in another aspect of the phrase, the light

of His face,' is the expression for His favour and loving regard, and

how true it is that in that favour and loving regard is the impregnable

fortress into which, entering, any man is safe. I said that the

expression the face of the Lord' roughly corresponded to the other one,

the name of the Lord,' inasmuch as both meant the revealed aspect of

the divine nature. You may remember how we read, The name of the Lord

is a strong tower into which the righteous runneth and is safe.' The

light' of the face of the Lord is His favour and loving regard falling

upon men. And who can be harmed with that lambent light--like sunshine

upon water, or upon a glittering shield--playing around Him?

Only let us remember that for us the face of God' is Jesus Christ. He

is the arm' of the Lord; He is the name' of the Lord; He is the face.'

All that we know of God we know through and in Him; all that we see of

God we see by the shining upon us of Him who is the eradiation of His

glory and the express image of His person.' So the open secret of the

face' of God is Jesus, the hiding-place of our souls.

II. Secondly, notice God's hidden ones.

My text carries us back, by that word them,' to the previous verse,

where we have a double description of those who are thus hidden in the

inaccessible light of His countenance. They are such as fear Thee,' and

such as trust in Thee.' Now, that latter expression is congruous with

the metaphor of my text, in so far as the words on which we are now

engaged speak about a hiding-place,' and the word which is translated

trust' literally means to flee to a refuge.' So they that flee to God

for refuge are those whom God hides in the secret of His face.' Let us

think of that for a moment.

I said, in the beginning of these remarks, that there was here an

allusion, possibly, to the Temple. All temples in ancient times were

asylums. Whosoever could flee to grasp the horns of the altar, or to

sit, veiled and suppliant, before the image of the god, was secure from

his foes, who could not pass within the limits of the Temple grounds,

in which strife and murder were not permissible. We too often flee to

other gods and other temples for our refuges. Ay! and when we get there

we find that the deity whom we have invoked is only a marble image that

sits deaf, dumb, motionless, whilst we cling to its unconscious skirts.

As one of the saddest of our modern cynics once said, looking up at

that lovely impersonation of Greek beauty, the Venus de Milo, Ah! she

is fair; but she has no arms,' so we may say of all false refuges to

which men betake themselves. The goddess is powerless to help, however

beautiful the presentment of her may have seemed to our eyes. The evils

from which we have fled to these false deities and shelterless

sanctuaries will pursue us across the threshold; and as Elijah did with

the priests of Baal upon Carmel, will slay us at the very foot of the

altar to which we have clung, and vexed with our vain prayers. There is

only one shrine where there is a sanctuary, and that is the shrine

above which shines the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'; into

the brightness of which poor men may pass and therein may hide

themselves. God hides us, and His hiding is effectual, in the secret of

the light and splendour of His face.

I said, too, that there was an allusion, as there is in all the psalms

that deal with men as God's guests, to the ancient customs of

hospitality, by which a man who has once entered the tent of the chief,

and partaken of food there, is safe, not only from his pursuers, but

from his host himself, even though that host should be the

kinsman-avenger. The red-handed murderer, who has eaten the salt of the

man whose duty it otherwise would have been to slay him where he stood,

is safe from his vengeance. And thus they who cast themselves upon God

have nothing to fear. No other hand can pluck them from the sanctuary

of His tent. He Himself, having admitted them to share His hospitality,

cannot and will not lift a hand against them. We are safe from God only

when we are safe in God.

But remember the condition on which this security comes. Thou shalt

hide them in the secret of Thy face.' Whom? Those that flee for refuge

to Thee. The act of simple faith is set forth there, by which a poor

man, with all his imperfections on his head, may yet venture to put his

foot across the boundary line that separates the outer darkness from

the beam of light that comes from God's face. Who among us shall dwell

with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting

burnings?' That question does not mean, as it is often taken to

mean--What mortal can endure the punishments of a future life? but, Who

can venture to be God's guests? and it is equivalent to the other

interrogation, Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord, or who shall

stand in His holy place?' The answer is, If you go to Him for refuge,

knowing your danger, feeling your impurity, you may walk amidst all

that light softened into lambent beauty, as those Hebrew children did

in the furnace of fire, being at ease there, and feeling it well with

themselves, and having nothing about them consumed except the bonds

that bound them.

Remember that Jesus Christ is the Hiding-place, and that to flee to Him

for refuge is the condition of security, and all they who thus, from

the snares of life, from its miseries, disappointments, and burdens,

from the agitation of their own hearts, from the ebullition of their

own passions, from the stings of their own conscience, or from other of

the ills that flesh is heir to, make their hiding-place--by the simple

act of faith in Jesus Christ--in the light of God's face, are thereby

safe for evermore.

But the initial act of fleeing to the refuge must be continued by

abiding in the refuge. It is of no use to take shelter in the light

unless we abide in the light. It is of no use to go to the Temple for

sanctuary unless we continue in it for sacrifice and worship. We must

walk in the light as God is in the light.' That is to say, the

condition of being hid in God is, first of all, to take refuge in Jesus

Christ, and then to abide in Him by continual communion. Your life is

hid with Christ in God.' Unless we have a hidden life, deep beneath,

and high above, and far beyond the life of sense, we have no right to

think that the shelter of the Face will be security for us. The very

essence of Christianity is the habitual communion of heart, mind, and

will with God in Christ. Do you live in the light, or have you only

gone there to escape what you are afraid of? Do you live in the light

by the continual direction of thought and heart to Him, cultivating the

habit of daily and hourly communion with Him amidst the distractions of

necessary duty, care, and changing circumstances?

But not only by communion, but also by conduct, must we keep in the

light. The fugitive found outside the city of refuge was fair game for

the avenger, and if he strayed beyond its bounds there was a sword in

his back before he knew where he was. Every Christian, by each sin,

whether it be acted or only thought, casts himself out of the light

into the darkness that rings it round, and out there he is a victim to

the beasts of prey that hunt in darkness. An eclipse of the sun is not

caused by any change in the sun, but by an opaque body, the offspring

and satellite of the earth, coming between the earth and sun. And so,

when Christian men lose the light of God's face, it is not because

there is any variableness or shadow of turning' in Him, but because

between Him and them has come the blackness--their own offspring--of

their own sin. You are not safe if you are outside the light of His

countenance. These are the conditions of security.

III. Lastly, note what the hidden ones find in the light.

This burst of confidence in my text comes from the Psalmist immediately

after plaintively pouring out his soul under the pressure of

afflictions. His experience may teach us the interpretation of his glad

assurance.

God will keep all real evil from us if we keep near Him; but He will

not keep the externals that men call evil from us. I do not know

whether there is such a thing as filtering any poisons or malaria by

means of light, but I am sure that the light of God filters our

atmosphere for us. Though it may leave the external form of evil it

takes all the poison out of it and turns it into a harmless minister

for our good. The arrows that are launched at us may be tipped with

venom when they leave the bow, but if they pass through the radiant

envelope of divine protection that surrounds us--and they must have

passed through that if they reach us--it cleanses all the venom from

the points though it leaves the sharpness there. The evil is not an

evil if it has got our length; and its having touched us shows that He

who lets it pass into the light where His children safely dwell, knows

that it cannot harm them.

But, again, we shall find if we live in continual communion with the

revealed Face of God, that we are elevated high above all the strife of

tongues and the noise of earth. We shall outsoar the shadow of the

night,' and be lifted to an elevation from which all the clamours of

earth will sound faint and poor, like the noises of the city to the

dwellers on the mountain peak. Nor do we find only security there, for

the word in the second clause of my text, Thou shalt keep them

secretly,' is the same as is employed in the previous verse in

reference to the treasures which God lays up for them that fear Him.

The poor men that trust in God, and the wealth which He has to lavish

upon them, are both hid, and they are hid in the same place. The

goodness wrought before the sons of men' has not emptied the reservoir.

After all expenditure the massy ingots of gold in God's storehouse are

undiminished. The mercy still to come is greater than that already

received. To-morrow shall be as this day and much more abundant.' This

river broadens as we mount towards its source.

Brethren! the Face of God must be either our dearest joy or our

greatest dread. There comes a time when you and I must front it, and

look into His eyes. It is for us to settle whether at that day we shall

call upon the rocks and the hills to hide us' from it, or whether we

shall say with rapture, Thou hast made us most blessed with Thy

countenance'! Which is it to be? It must be one or other. When He says,

Seek ye My Face,' may our hearts answer, Thy Face, Lord, will I seek,'

that when we see it hereafter, shining as the sun in his strength, its

light may not be darkness to our impure and horror-struck eyes.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A THREEFOLD THOUGHT OF SIN AND FORGIVENESS

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. 2.

Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in

whose spirit there is no guile.' --PSALM xxxii. 1, 2.

This psalm, which has given healing to many a wounded conscience, comes

from the depths of a conscience which itself has been wounded and

healed. One must be very dull of hearing not to feel how it throbs with

emotion, and is, in fact, a gush of rapture from a heart experiencing

in its freshness the new joy of forgiveness. It matters very little who

wrote it. If we accept the superscription, which many of those who

usually reject these ancient Jewish notes do in the present case, the

psalm is David's, and it fits into some of the specific details of his

great sin and penitence. But that is of very small moment. Whoever

wrote it, he sings because he must.

The psalm begins with an exclamation, for the clause would be better

translated, Oh! the blessedness of the man.' Then note the remarkable

accumulation of clauses, all expressing substantially the same thing,

but expressing it with a difference. The Psalmist's heart is too full

to be emptied by one utterance. He turns his jewel, as it were, round

and round, and at each turn it reflects the light from a different

angle. There are three clauses in my text, each substantially having

the same meaning, but which yet present that substantially identical

meaning with different shades. And that is true both in regard to the

three words which are employed to describe the fact of transgression,

and to the three which are employed to describe the fact of

forgiveness. It is mainly to these, and the large lessons which lie in

observing the shades of significance in them, that I wish to turn now.

I. Note the solemn picture which is here drawn of various phases of

sin.

There are three words employed--transgression,' sin,' iniquity.' They

all mean the same thing, but they mean it with a different association

of ideas and suggestions of its foulness. Let me take them in order.

The word translated transgression' seems literally to signify

separation, or rending apart, or departure, and hence comes to express

the notion of apostasy and rebellion.

So, then, here is this thought; all sin is a going away. From what?

Rather the question should be--from whom? All sin is a departure from

God. And that is its deepest and darkest characteristic. And it is the

one that needs to be most urged, for it is the one that we are most apt

to forget. We are all ready enough to acknowledge faults; none of us

have any hesitation in saying that we have done wrong, and have gone

wrong. We are ready to recognise that we have transgressed the law; but

what about the Lawgiver? The personal element in every sin, great or

small, is that it is a voluntary rending of a union which exists, a

departure from God who is with us in the deepest recesses of our being,

unless we drag ourselves away from the support of His enclosing arm,

and from the illumination of His indwelling grace.

So, dear brethren! this was the first and the gravest aspect under

which the penitent and the forgiven man in my text thought of his past,

that in it, when he was wildly and eagerly rushing after the low and

sensuous gratification of his worst desires, he was rebelling against,

and wandering far away from, the ever-present Friend, the

all-encircling support and joy, the Lord, his life. You do not

understand the gravity of the most trivial wrong act when you think of

it as a sin against the order of Nature, or against the law written on

your heart, or as the breach of the constitution of your own nature, or

as a crime against your fellows. You have not got to the bottom of the

blackness until you see that it is flat rebellion against God Himself.

This is the true devilish element in all our transgression, and this

element is in it all. Oh! if once we do get the habit formed and

continued until it becomes almost instinctive and spontaneous, of

looking at each action of our lives in immediate and direct relation to

God, there would come such an apocalypse as would startle some of us

into salutary dread, and make us all feel that it is an evil and a

bitter thing' (and the two characteristics must always go together), to

depart from the living God.' The great type of all wrongdoers is in

that figure of the Prodigal Son, and the essence of his fault was,

first, that he selfishly demanded for his own his father's goods; and,

second, that he went away into a far country. Your sins have separated

between you and God. And when you do those little acts of selfish

indulgence which you do twenty times a day, without a prick of

conscience, each of them, trivial as it is, like some newly-hatched

poisonous serpent, a finger-length long, has in it the serpent nature,

it is rebellion and separation from God.

Then another aspect of the same foul thing rises before the Psalmist's

mind. This evil which he has done, which I suppose was the sin in the

matter of Bathsheba, was not only rebellion against God, but it was,

according to this text, in the second clause, a sin,' by which is meant

literally missing an aim. So this word, in its pregnant meaning,

corresponds with the signification of the ordinary New Testament word

for sin, which also implies error, or missing that which ought to be

the goal of our lives. That is to say, whilst the former word regarded

the evil deed mainly in its relation to God, this word regards it

mainly in its relation to ourselves, and that which before Him is

rebellion, the assertion of my own individuality and my own will, and

therefore in separation from His will, is, considered in reference to

myself, my fatally missing the mark to which my whole energy and effort

ought to be directed. All sin, big or little, is a blunder. It never

hits what it aims at, and if it did, it is aiming at the wrong thing.

So doubly, all transgression is folly, and the true name for the doer

is Thou fool!' For every evil misses the mark which, regard being had

to the man's obvious destiny, he ought to aim at. Man's chief end is to

glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever'; and whosoever in all his

successes fails to realise that end is a failure through and through,

in whatever smaller matters he may seem to himself and to others to

succeed. He only strikes the target in the bull's eye who lets his

arrows be deflected by no gusts of passion, nor aimed wrong by any

obliquity of vision; but with firm hand and clear eye seeks and secures

the absolute conformity of his will to the Father's will, and makes God

his aim and end in all things. Thou hast created us for Thyself, and

only in Thee can we find rest.' O brother! whatever be your aims and

ends in life, take this for the surest verity, that you have fatally

misunderstood the purpose of your being, and the object to which you

should strain, if there is anything except God, who is the supreme

desire of your heart and the goal of your life. All sin is missing the

mark which God has set up for man.

Therefore let us press to the mark where hangs the prize which whoso

possesses succeeds, whatsoever other trophies may have escaped his

grasp.

But there is another aspect of this same thought, and that is that

every piece of evil misses its own shabby mark. A rogue is a

round-about fool.' No man ever gets, in doing wrong, the thing he did

the wrong for, or if he gets it, he gets something else along with it

that takes all the sweet taste out of it. The thief secures the booty,

but he gets penal servitude besides. Sin tempts us with glowing tales

of the delight to be found in drinking stolen waters and eating her

bread in secret; but sin lies by suppression of the truth, if not by

suggestions of the false, because she says never a word about the

sickness and the headache that come after the debauch, nor about the

poison that we drink down along with her sugared draughts. The

paltering fiend keeps the word of promise to the ear, and breaks it to

the hope. All sin, great or little, is a blunder, and missing of the

mark.

And lastly, yet another aspect of the ugly thing rises before the

Psalmist's eye. In reference to God, evil is separation and rebellion;

in reference to myself, it is an error and missing of my true goal; and

in reference to the straight standard and law of duty, it is, according

to the last of the three words for sin in the text, iniquity,' or,

literally, something twisted or distorted. It is thus brought into

contrast with the right line of the plain, straight path in which we

ought to walk. We have the same metaphor in our own language. We talk

about things being right and wrong, by which we mean, in the one case,

parallel with the rigid law of duty, and in the other case, wrung,' or

wavering, crooked and divergent from it. There is a standard as well as

a Judge, and we have not only to think of evil as being rebellion

against God and separation from Him, and as, for ourselves, issuing in

fatal missing of the mark, but also as being divergent from the one

manifest law to which we ought to be conformed. The path to God is a

right line; the shortest road from earth to Heaven is absolutely

straight. The Czar of Russia, when railways were introduced into that

country, was asked to determine the line between St. Petersburg and

Moscow. He took a ruler and drew a straight line across the map, and

said, There!' Our Autocrat has drawn a line as straight as the road

from earth to Heaven, and by the side of it are the crooked, wandering

ways in which we live.'

Take these three thoughts then--as for law, divergence; as for the aim

of my life, a fatal miss; as for God, my Friend and my Life, rebellion

and separation--and you have, if not the complete physiognomy of evil,

at least grave thoughts concerning it, which become all the graver when

we think that they are true about us and about our deeds.

II. And so let me ask you to look secondly at the blessed picture drawn

here of the removal of the sin.

There are three words here for forgiveness, each of which adds its

quota to the general thought. It is forgiven,' covered,' not imputed.'

The accumulation of synonyms not only sets forth various aspects of

pardon, but triumphantly celebrates the completeness and certainty of

the gift.

As to the first, it means literally to lift and bear away a load or

burden. As to the second, it means, plainly enough, to cover over, as

one might do some foul thing, that it may no longer offend the eye or

smell rank to Heaven. Bees in their hives, when there is anything

corrupt and too large for them to remove, fling a covering of wax over

it, and hermetically seal it, and no foul odour comes from it. And so a

man's sin is covered over and ceases to be in evidence, as it were

before the divine Eye that sees all things. He Himself casts a merciful

veil over it and hides it from Himself. A similar idea, though with a

modification in metaphor, is included in that last word, the sin is not

reckoned. God does not write it down in His Great Book on the debit

side of the man's account. And these three things, the lifting up and

carrying away of the load, the covering over of the obscene and ugly

thing, the non-reckoning in the account of the evil deed; these three

things taken together do set forth before us the great and blessed

truth that a man's transgressions may become, in so far as the divine

heart and the divine dealings with him are concerned, as if

nonexistent.

Men tell us that that is not possible and that it is immoral to preach

a doctrine of forgiveness. O dear brethren! there is no gospel to

preach that will touch a man's heart except the gospel that begins with

this--God bears away, covers over, does not reckon to a man, his

rebellions, his errors, his departures from the law of right. Sin is

capable of forgiveness, and, blessed be God! every sin He is ready to

forgive. I should be ashamed of myself to stand here, and not preach a

gospel of pardon. I know not anything else that will touch consciences

and draw hearts except this gospel, which I am trying in my poor way to

lay upon your hearts.

Notice how my text includes also a glance at the condition on our part

on which this absolute and utter annihilation of our wicked past is

possible. That last clause of my text, In whose spirit there is no

guile,' seems to me to refer to the frank sincerity of a confession,

which does not try to tell lies to God, and, attempting to deceive Him,

really deceives only the self-righteous sinner. Whosoever opens his

heart to God, makes a clean breast of it, and without equivocation or

self-deception or the palliations which self-love teaches, says, I have

played the fool and erred exceedingly,' to that man the Psalmist thinks

pardon is sure to come.

Now remember that the very heart and centre of that Jewish system was

an altar, and that on that altar was sacrificed the expiatory victim. I

am not going to insist upon any theory of an atonement, but I do want

to urge this, that Christianity is nothing, if it have not explained

and taken up into itself that which was symbolised in that old ritual.

The very first words from human lips which proclaimed Christ's advent

to man were, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the

world,' and amongst the last words which Christ spoke upon earth, in

the way of teaching His disciples, were these, This is My blood, shed

for many for the remission of sins.' The Cross of Christ explains my

psalm, the Cross of Christ answers the confidence of the Psalmist,

which was fed upon the shadow of the good things to come. He has died,

the Just for the unjust, that the sins which were laid upon Him might

be taken away, covered, and not reckoned to us.

Brethren! unless my sins are taken away by the Lamb of God they remain.

Unless they are laid upon Christ, they crush me. Unless they are

covered by His expiation, they lie there before the Throne of God, and

cry for punishment. Unless His blood has wiped out the record that is

against us, the black page stands for ever. And to you and me there

will be said one day, in a voice which we dare not dispute, Pay Me that

thou owest!' The blacker the sin the brighter the Christ. I would that

I could lay upon all your hearts this belief, the blood of Jesus

Christ,' and nothing else, cleanses from all sin!'

III. I will touch in a word only upon the last thought suggested by the

text, and that is the blessedness of this removal of sin.

As I said, my text is really an exclamation, a gush of rapture from a

heart that is tasting the fresh-drawn blessedness of pardon. And the

rest of the psalm is little more than an explanation of the various

aspects and phases of that blessedness. Let me just run over them in

the briefest possible manner.

If we receive this forgiveness through Jesus Christ and our faith in

Him, then we have manifold blessedness in one. There is the blessedness

of deliverance from sullen remorse and of the dreadful pangs of an

accusing conscience. How vividly, and evidently as a transcript from a

page in his own autobiography, the Psalmist describes that condition,

When I kept silence my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day

long'! When a man's heart is locked against confession he hears a

tumult of accusing voices within himself, and remorse and dread creep

over his heart. The pains of sullen remorse were never described more

truly and more dreadfully than in this context. Day and night Thy hand

was heavy upon me, my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.'

Some of us may know something of that. But there is a worse state than

that, and one or other of the two states belongs to us. If we have not

found our way into the liberty of confession and forgiveness, we have

but a choice between the pains of an awakened conscience and the

desolation of a dead one. It is worse to have no voice within than to

have an accusing one. It is worse to feel no pressure of a divine Hand

than to feel it. And they whose consciences are seared as with a hot

iron have sounded the lowest depths. They are perfectly comfortable,

quite happy; they say all these feelings that I am trying to suggest to

you seem to them to be folly. They make a solitude and call it peace.'

It is an awful thing when a man has come to this point, that he has got

past the accusations of conscience, and can swallow down the fiercest

draughts without feeling them burn. Dear brethren! there is only one

deliverance from an accusing conscience which does not murder the

conscience, and that is that we should find our way into the peace of

God which is through Christ Jesus and His atoning death.

Then, again, my psalm goes on to speak about the blessedness of a close

clinging to God in peaceful trust, which will ensure security in the

midst of all trials, and a hiding-place against every storm. The

Psalmist uses a magnificent figure. God is to him as some rocky island,

steadfast and dry, in the midst of a widespread inundation; and taking

refuge there in the clefts of the rock, he looks down upon the tossing,

shoreless sea of troubles and sorrows that breaks upon the rocky

barriers of his Patmos, and stands safe and dry. Only through

forgiveness do we come into that close communion with God which ensures

safety in all disasters.

And then there follows the blessedness of a gentle guidance and of a

loving obedience. Thou shalt guide me with Thine eye.' No need for

force, no need for bit and bridle, no need for anything but the glance

of the Father, which the child delights to obey. Docility, glad

obedience unprompted by fear, based upon love, are the fruits of pardon

through the blood of Christ.

And, lastly, there is the blessedness of exuberant gladness; the joy

that comes from the sorrow according to God is a joy that will last.

All other delights, in their nature, are perishable; all other

raptures, by the very necessity of their being and of ours, die down,

sometimes into vanity, always into commonplace or indifference. But the

joy that springs in the pardoned heart, and is fed by closeness of

communion with God, and by continual obedience to His blessed guidance,

has in it nothing that can fade, nothing that can burn out, nothing

that can be disturbed. The deeper the penitence the surer the rebound

into gladness. The more a man goes down into the depths of his own

heart and learns his own evil, the more will he, trusting in Christ,

rise into the serene heights of thankfulness, and live, if not in

rapture, at least in the calm joy of conscious communion and unending

fellowship. Every tear may be crystallised into a diamond that shall

flash in the light. And they, and only they, who begin in the valley of

weeping, confessing their sins and imploring forgiveness through the

merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Lord, will rise to heights of

a joy that remains, and remaining, is full.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE ENCAMPING ANGEL

The Angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and

delivereth them.'--PSALM xxxiv. 7.

If we accept the statement in the superscription of this psalm, it

dates from one of the darkest hours in David's life. His fortunes were

never lower than when he fled from Gath, the city of Goliath, to

Adullam. He never appears in a less noble light than when he feigned

madness to avert the dangers which he might well dread there. How

unlike the terror and self-degradation of the man who 'scrabbled on the

doors,' and let the spittle run down his beard,' is the heroic and

saintly constancy of this noble psalm! And yet the contrast is not so

violent as to make the superscription improbable, and the tone of the

whole well corresponds to what we should expect from a man delivered

from some great peril, but still surrounded with dangers. There, in the

safety of his retreat among the rocks, with the bit of level ground

where he had fought Goliath just at his feet in the valley, and Gath,

from which he had escaped, away down at the mouth of the glen (if

Conder's identification of Adullam be correct), he sings his song of

trust and praise; he hears the lions roar among the rocks where Samson

had found them in his day; he teaches his children,' the band of broken

men who there began to gather around him, the fear of the Lord; and

calls upon them to help him in his praise. What a picture of the outlaw

and his wild followers tamed into something like order, and lifted into

something like worship, rises before us, if we follow the guidance of

that old commentary contained in the superscription!

The words of our text gain especial force and vividness by thus

localising the psalm. Not only the clefts of the rock' but the presence

of God's Angel is his defence; and round him is flung, not only the

strength of the hills, but the garrison and guard of heaven.

It is generally supposed that the Angel of the Lord' here is to be

taken collectively, and that the meaning is--the bright-harnessed'

hosts of these divine messengers are as an army of protectors round

them who fear God. But I see no reason for departing from the simpler

and certainly grander meaning which results from taking the word in its

proper force of a singular. True, Scripture does speak of the legions

of ministering spirits, who in their chariots of fire were once seen by

suddenly opened eyes round about' a prophet in peril, and are ever

ministering to the heirs of salvation. But Scripture also speaks of

One, who is in an eminent sense the Angel of the Lord'; in whom, as in

none other, God sets His Name'; whose form, dimly seen, towers above

even the ranks of the angels that excel in strength'; whose offices and

attributes blend in mysterious fashion with those of God Himself. There

may be some little incongruity in thinking of the single Person as

encamping round about' us; but that does not seem a sufficient reason

for obliterating the reference to that remarkable Old Testament

doctrine, the retention of which seems to me to add immensely to the

power of the words.

Remember some of the places in which the Angel of the Lord' appears, in

order to appreciate more fully the grandeur of this promised

protection. At that supreme moment when Abraham took the knife to slay

his son,' the voice that called to him out of heaven' was the voice of

the Angel of the Lord.' He assumes the power of reversing a divine

command. He says, Thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from

Me,' and then pronounces a blessing, in the utterance of which one

cannot distinguish His voice from the voice of Jehovah. In like manner

it is the Angel of the Lord that speaks to Jacob, and says, I am the

God of Bethel.' The dying patriarch invokes in the same breath the God

which fed me all my life long,' the Angel which redeemed me from all

evil,' to bless the boys that stand before him, with their wondering

eyes gazing in awe on his blind face. It was that Angel's glory that

appeared to the outcast, flaming in the bush that burned unconsumed. It

was He who stood before the warrior leader of Israel, sword in hand,

and proclaimed Himself to be the Captain of the Lord's host, the Leader

of the armies of heaven, and the true Leader of the armies of Israel;

and His commands to Joshua, His lieutenant, are the commands of the

Lord.' And, to pass over other instances, Isaiah correctly sums up the

spirit of the whole earlier history in words which go far to lift the

conception of this Angel of the Lord out of the region of created

beings--In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His

face saved them,' It is this lofty and mysterious Messenger, and not

the hosts whom He commands, that our Psalmist sees standing ready to

help, as He once stood, sword-bearing by the side of Joshua. To the

warrior leader, to the warrior Psalmist, He appears, as their needs

required, armoured and militant. The last of the prophets saw that dim,

mysterious Figure, and proclaimed, The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly

come to His temple; even the Angel of the Covenant, whom ye delight

in'; and to his gaze it was wrapped in obscure majesty and terror of

purifying flame. But for us the true Messenger of the Lord is His Son,

whom He has sent, in whom He has put His name; who is the Angel of His

face, in that we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ;

who is the Angel of the Covenant, in that He has sealed the new and

everlasting covenant with His blood; and whose own parting promise, Lo!

I am with you always,' is the highest fulfilment to us Christians of

that ancient confidence: The Angel of the Lord encampeth round about

them that fear Him.'

Whatever view we adopt of the significance of the first part of the

text, the force and beauty of the metaphor in the second remain the

same. If this psalm were indeed the work of the fugitive in his rocky

hold at Adullam, how appropriate the thought becomes that his little

encampment has such a guard. It reminds one of the incident in Jacob's

life, when his timid and pacific nature was trembling at the prospect

of meeting Esau, and when, as he travelled along, encumbered with his

pastoral wealth, and scantily provided with means of defence, the

angels of God met him, and he named the place Mahanaim,' that is, two

camps--his own feeble company, mostly made up of women and children,

and that heavenly host that hovered above them. David's faith sees the

same defence encircling his weakness, and though sense saw no

protection for him and his men but their own strong arms and their

mountain fastness, his opened eyes beheld the mountain full of the

chariots of fire, and the flashing of armour and light in the darkness

of his cave.

The vision of the divine presence ever takes the form which our

circumstances most require. David's then need was safety and

protection. Therefore he saw the Encamping Angel; even as to Joshua the

leader He appeared as the Captain of the Lord's host; and as to Isaiah,

in the year that the throne of Judah was emptied by the death of the

earthly king, was given the vision of the Lord sitting on a throne, the

King Eternal and Immortal. So to us all His grace shapes its expression

according to our wants, and the same gift is Protean in its power of

transformation; being to one man wisdom, to another strength, to the

solitary companionship, to the sorrowful consolation, to the glad

sobering, to the thinker truth, to the worker practical force--to each

his heart's desire, if the heart's delight be God. So manifold are the

aspects of God's infinite sufficiency, that every soul, in every

possible variety of circumstance, will find there just what will suit

it. That armour fits every man who puts it on. That deep fountain is

like some of those fabled springs which give forth whatsoever precious

draught any thirsty lip asked. He takes the shape that our

circumstances most need. Let us see that we, on our parts, use our

circumstances to help us in anticipating the shapes in which God will

draw near for our help.

Learn, too, from this image, in which the Psalmist appropriates to

himself the experience of a past generation, how we ought to feed our

confidence and enlarge our hopes by all God's past dealings with men.

David looks back to Jacob, and believes that the old fact is repeated

in his own day. So every old story is true for us; though outward form

may alter, inward substance remains the same. Mahanaim is still the

name of every place where a man who loves God pitches his tent. We may

be wandering, solitary, defenceless, but we are not alone. Our feeble

encampment may lie open to assault, and we be all unfit to guard it,

but the other camp is there too, and our enemies must force their way

through it before they get at us. We are in its centre--as they put the

cattle and the sick in the midst of the encampment on the prairies when

they fear an assault from the Indians--because we are so weak. Jacob's

experience may be ours: The Lord of Hosts is with us: the God of Jacob

is our refuge.'

Only remember that the eye of faith alone can see that guard, and that

therefore we must labour to keep our consciousness of its reality fresh

and vivid. Many a man in David's little band saw nothing but cold gray

stone where David saw the flashing armour of the heavenly Warrior. To

the one all the mountain blazed with fiery chariots, to the other it

was a lone hillside, with the wind moaning among the rocks. We shall

lose the joy and the strength of that divine protection unless we

honestly and constantly try to keep our sense of it bright. Eyes that

have been gazing on earthly joys, or perhaps gloating on evil sights,

cannot see the Angel presence. A Christian man, on a road which he

cannot travel with a clear conscience, will see no angel, not even the

Angel with the drawn sword in His hand, that barred Balaam's path among

the vineyards. A man coming out of some room blazing with light cannot

all at once see into the violet depths of the mighty heavens, that lie

above him with all their shimmering stars. So this truth of our text is

a truth of faith, and the believing eye alone beholds the Angel of the

Lord.

Notice, too, that final word of deliverance. This psalm is continually

recurring to that idea. The word occurs four times in it, and the

thought still oftener. Whether the date is rightly given, as we have

assumed it to be, or not, at all events that harping upon this one

phrase indicates that some season of great trial was its birth-time,

when all the writer's thoughts were engrossed and his prayers summed up

in the one thing--deliverance. He is quite sure that such deliverance

must follow if the Angel presence be there. But he knows too that the

encampment of the Angel of the Lord will not keep away sorrows, and

trial, and sharp need. So his highest hope is not of immunity from

these, but of rescue out of them. And his ground of hope is that his

heavenly Ally cannot let him be overcome. That He will let him be

troubled and put in peril he has found; that He will not let him be

crushed he believes. Shadowed and modest hopes are the brightest we can

venture to cherish. The protection which we have is protection in, and

not protection from, strife and danger. It is a filter which lets the

icy cold water of sorrow drop numbing upon us, but keeps back the

poison that was in it. We have to fight, but He will fight with us; to

sorrow, but not alone nor without hope; to pass through many a peril,

but we shall get through them. Deliverance, which implies danger, need,

and woe, is the best we can hope for.

It is the least we are entitled to expect if we love Him. It is the

certain issue of His encamping round about us. Always with us, He will

strike for us at the best moment. The Lord God is in the midst of her

always; the Lord will help her, and that right early.' So like the

hunted fugitive in Adullam we may lift up our confident voices even

when the stress of strife and sorrow is upon us; and though Gath be in

sight and Saul just over the hills, and we have no better refuge than a

cave in a hillside; yet in prophecy built upon our consciousness that

the Angel of the Covenant is with us now, we may antedate the

deliverance that shall be, and think of it as even now accomplished. So

the Apostle, when within sight of the block and the headsman's axe,

broke into the rapture of his last words: The Lord shall deliver me

from every evil work, and will preserve me to His heavenly kingdom: to

whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.' Was he wrong?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

STRUGGLING AND SEEKING

The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger: but they that seek the Lord

shall not want any good thing.'--PSALM xxxiv. 10.

If we may trust the superscription of this psalm, it was written by

David at one of the very darkest days of his wanderings, probably in

the Cave of Adullam, where he had gathered around him a band of

outlaws, and was living, to all appearance, a life uncommonly like that

of a brigand chief, in the hills. One might have pardoned him if, at

such a moment, some cloud of doubt or despondency had crept over his

soul. But instead of that his words are running over with gladness, and

the psalm begins I will bless the Lord at all times, and His praise

shall continually be in my mouth.' Similarly here he avers, even at a

moment when he wanted a great deal of what the world calls good,' that

they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing.' There were

lions in Palestine in David's time. He had had a fight with one of

them, as you may remember, and his lurking place was probably not far

off the scene of Samson's exploits. Very likely they were prowling

about the rocky mouth of the cave, and he weaves their howls into his

psalm: The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger: but they that seek

the Lord shall not want any good.'

So, then, here are the two thoughts--the struggle that always fails and

the seeking that always finds.

I. The struggle that always fails.

The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger.' They are taken as the type

of violent effort and struggle, as well as of supreme strength, but for

all their teeth and claws, and lithe spring, they lack, and suffer

hunger.' The suggestion is, that the men whose lives are one long fight

to appropriate to themselves more and more of outward good, are living

a kind of life that is fitter for beasts than for men. A fierce

struggle for material good is the true description of the sort of life

that hosts of us live. What is the meaning of all this cry that we hear

about the murderous competition going on round us? What is the true

character of the lives of, I am afraid, the majority of people in a

city like Manchester, but a fight and a struggle, a desire to have, and

a failure to obtain? Let us remember that that sort of existence is for

the brutes, and that there is a better way of getting what is good; the

only fit way for man. Beasts of prey, naturalists tell us, are always

lean. It is the graminivorous order that meekly and peacefully crop the

pastures that are well fed and in good condition--which things are an

allegory.'

The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger'--and that, being

interpreted, just states the fact to which every man's experience, and

the observation of every man that has an eye in his head, distinctly

say, Amen, it is so.' For there is no satisfaction or success ever to

be won by this way of fighting and struggling and scheming and

springing at the prey. For if we do not utterly fail, which is the lot

of so many of us, still partial success has little power of bringing

perfect satisfaction to a human spirit. One loss counterbalances any

number of gains. No matter how soft is the mattress, if there is one

tiny thorn sticking up through it all the softness goes for nothing.

There is always a Mordecai sitting at the gate when Haman goes prancing

through it on his white horse; and the presence of the unsympathetic

and stiff-backed Jew, sitting stolid at the gate, takes the gilt off

the gingerbread, and embitters the enjoyment. So men count up their

disappointments, and forget all their fulfilled hopes, count up their

losses and forget their gains. They think less of the thousands that

they have gained than of the half-crown that they were cheated of.

In every way it is true that the little annoyances, like a grain of

dust in the sensitive eye, take all the sweetness out of mere material

good, and I suppose that there are no more bitterly disappointed men in

this world than the perfectly successful men,' as the world counts

them. They have been disillusionised in the process of acquisition.

When they were young and lusted after earthly good things, these seemed

to be all that they needed. When they are old, and have them, they find

that they are feeding on ashes, and the grit breaks their teeth, and

irritates their tongues. The young lions do lack' even when their roar

and their spring have secured the prey,' and they suffer hunger' even

when they have fed full. Ay! for if the utmost possible measure of

success were granted us, in any department in which the way of getting

the thing is this fighting and effort, we should be as far away from

being at rest as ever we were.

You remember the old story of the Arabian Nights, about the wonderful

palace that was built by magic, and all whose windows were set in

precious stones, but there was one window that remained unadorned, and

that spoiled all for the owner. His palace was full of treasures, but

an enemy looked on all the wealth and suggested a previously unnoticed

defect by saying, You have not a roc's egg.' He had never thought about

getting a roc's egg, and did not know what it was. But the

consciousness of something lacking had been roused, and it marred his

enjoyment of what he had and drove him to set out on his travels to

secure the missing thing. There is always something lacking, for our

desires grow far faster than their satisfactions, and the more we have,

the wider our longing reaches out, so that as the wise old Book has it,

He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that

loveth abundance with increase.' You cannot fill a soul with the whole

universe, if you do not put God in it. One of the greatest works of

fiction of modern times ends, or all but ends, with a sentence

something like this, Ah! who of us has what he wanted, or having it, is

satisfied?' The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger'--and the

struggle always fails--but they that seek the Lord shall not want any

good thing.'

II. The seeking which always finds.

Now, how do we seek the Lord'? It is a metaphorical expression, of

course, which needs to be carefully interpreted in order not to lead us

into a great mistake. We do not seek Him as if He had not sought us, or

was hiding from us. But our search of Him is search after one who is

near every one of us, and who delights in nothing so much as in pouring

Himself into every heart and mind, and will and life, if only heart,

mind, will, life, are willing to accept Him. It is a short search that

the child by her mother's skirts, or her father's side, has to make for

mother or father. It is a shorter search that we have to make for God.

We seek Him by desire. Do you want Him? A great many of us do not. We

seek Him by communion, by turning our thoughts to Him, amidst all the

rush of daily life, and such a turning of thought to Him, which is

quite possible, will prevent our most earnest working upon things

material from descending to the likeness of the lions' fighting for it.

We seek Him by desire, by communion, by obedience. And they who thus

seek Him find Him in the act of seeking Him, just as certainly as if I

open my eye I see the sun, or as if I dilate my lungs the atmosphere

rushes into them. For He is always seeking us. That is a beautiful word

of our Lord's to which we do not always attach all its value, The

Father seeketh such to worship Him.' Why put the emphasis upon the

such,' as if it was a definition of the only kind of acceptable

worship? It is that. But we might put more emphasis upon the seeketh'

without spoiling the logic of the sentence; and thereby we should come

nearer the truth of what God's heart to us is, so that if we do seek

Him, we shall surely find. In this region, and in this region only,

there is no search that is vain, there is no effort that is foiled,

there is no desire unaccomplished, there is no failure possible. We

each of us have, accurately and precisely, as much of God as we desire

to have. If there is only a very little of the Water of Life in our

vessels, it is because we did not care to possess any more. Seek, and

ye shall find.'

We shall be sure to find everything in God. Look at the grand

confidence, and the utterance of a life's experience in these great

words: Shall not want any good.' For God is everything to us, and

everything else is nothing; and it is the presence of God in anything

that makes it truly able to satisfy our desires. Human love, sweet and

precious, dearest and best of all earthly possessions as it is, fails

to fill a heart unless the love grasps God as well as the beloved dying

creature. And so with regard to all other things. They are good when

God is in them, and when they are ours in God. They are nought when

wrenched away from Him. We are sure to find everything in Him, for this

is the very property of that infinite divine nature that is waiting to

impart itself to us, that, like water poured into a vessel, it will

take the shape of the vessel into which it is poured. Whatever is my

need, the one God will supply it all.

You remember the old Rabbinical tradition which speaks a deep truth,

dressed in a fanciful shape. It says that the manna in the wilderness

tasted to every man just what he desired, whatever dainty or nutriment

he most wished; that the manna became like the magic cup in the old

fairy legends, out of which could be poured any precious liquor at the

pleasure of the man who was to drink it. The one God is everything to

us all, anything that we desire, and the thing that we need; Protean in

His manifestations, one in His sufficiency. With Him, as well as in

Him, we are sure to have all that we require. Seek ye first the Kingdom

. . . and all these things shall be added unto you.'

Let us begin, dear brethren! with seeking, and then our struggling will

not be violent, nor self-willed, nor will it fail. If we begin with

seeking, and have God, be sure that all we need we shall get, and that

what we do not get we do not need. It is hard to believe it when our

vehement wishes go out to something that His serene wisdom does not

send. It is hard to believe it when our bleeding hearts are being

wrenched away from something around which they have clung. But it is

true for all that. And he that can say, Whom have I in heaven but Thee,

and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee,' will find that

the things which he enjoys in subordination to his one supreme good are

a thousand times more precious when they are regarded as second than

they ever could be when our folly tried to make them first. Seek first

the Kingdom,' and be contented that the other things' shall be

appendices, additions, over and above the one thing that is needful.

Now, all that is very old-fashioned, threadbare truth. Dear brethren!

if we believed it, and lived by it, the peace of God which passes

understanding' would keep our hearts and minds.' And, instead of

fighting and losing, and desiring to have and howling out because we

cannot obtain, we should patiently wait before Him, submissively ask,

earnestly seek, immediately find, and always possess and be satisfied

with, the one good for body, soul, and spirit, which is God Himself.

There be many that cry, Oh! that one would show as any good.' The wise

do not cry to men, but pray to God. Lord! lift Thou the light of Thy

countenance upon us.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

NO CONDEMNATION

None of them that trust in Him shall be desolate.' --PSALM xxxiv. 22.

These words are very inadequately represented in the translation of the

Authorised Version. The Psalmist's closing declaration is something

very much deeper than that they who trust in God shall not be

desolate.' If you look at the previous clause, you will see that we

must expect something more than such a particular blessing as

that:--The Lord redeemeth the soul of His servants.' It is a great drop

from that thought, instead of being a climax, to follow it with nothing

more than, None of them that trust in Him shall be desolate.' But the

Revised Version accurately renders the words: None of them that trust

in Him shall be condemned.' There we have something that is worthy to

follow The Lord redeemeth the soul of His servants,' and we have a most

striking anticipation of the clearest and most Evangelical teaching of

the New Testament.

The entirely New Testament tone of these words of the psalm comes out

still more clearly, if we recognise that, not only in the latter, but

in the former, part of the clause, we have one of the very keynotes of

New Testament teaching. When we read in the New Testament that we are

justified by faith,' the meaning is precisely the same as that of our

text. Thus, however it came about, here is this Psalmist, David or

another, standing away back amidst the shadows and symbols and

ritualisms of that Old Covenant, and rising at once above all the

mists, right up into the sunshine, and seeing, as clearly as we see it

nineteen centuries after Jesus Christ, that the way to escape

condemnation is simple faith. Let us look at both of the parts of these

great words. We consider--

I. The people that are spoken of here.

None of them that trust in Him'--I need not, I suppose, further dwell

upon the absolute identity shown by this phrase between the Old and the

New Testament conceptions; but I should like to make a remark, which I

dare say I have often made before--it cannot be made too often--that,

whatever be the differences between the Old and the New, this is not

the difference, that they present two different ways of approaching

God. There are a great many differences; the conception of the divine

nature is no doubt infinitely deepened, made more tender and more

lofty, by the thought of the Fatherhood of God. The contents of the

revelation which our faith is to grasp are brought out far more

definitely and articulately and fully in the New Testament. But in the

Old, the road to God was the same as it is to-day; and from the

beginning there has only been, and through all Eternity there will only

be, one path by which men can have access to the Father, and that is by

faith. Trust' is the Old Testament word, faith' is the New. They are

absolutely identical, and there would have been a flood of

light--sorely needed by a great many good people--cast upon the

relations between those two complementary and harmonious halves of a

consistent whole, if our translators had not been influenced by their

unfortunate love for varying translations of the same word, but had

contented themselves with choosing one of these two words trust' or

faith,' and had used that one consistently and uniformly throughout the

Old and New books. Then we should have understood, what anybody who

will open his eyes can see now, that what the New Testament magnifies

as faith' is identical with what the Old Testament sets forth as

trust.' None of them that trust in Him shall be condemned.'

But there is one more remark to make on this matter, and that is that a

great flood of light, and of more than light, of encouragement and of

stimulus, is cast upon that saving exercise of trust by noticing the

literal meaning of the word that is rightly so rendered here. All those

words, especially in the Old Testament, that express emotions or acts

of the mind, originally applied to corporeal acts or material things. I

suppose that is so in all language. It is very conspicuously so in the

Hebrew. And the word that is here translated, rightly, trust,' means

literally to fly to a refuge, or to betake oneself to some defence in

order to get shelter there.

There is a trace of both meanings, the literal and the metaphorical, in

another psalm, where we read, amidst the Psalmist's rapturous heaping

together of great names for God: My Rock, in whom I will trust.' Now

keep to the literal meaning there, and you see how it flashes up the

whole into beauty: My Rock, to whom I will flee for refuge,' and put my

back against it, and stand as impregnable as it; or get myself well

into the clefts of it, and then nothing can touch me.

Rock of Ages! cleft for me,

Let me hide myself in Thee.'

Then we find the same words, with the picture of flight and the reality

of faith, used with another set of associations in another psalm, which

says: He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt

thou trust.' That grates, one gets away from the metaphor too quickly;

but if we preserve the literal meaning, and read, under His wings shalt

thou flee for refuge,' we have the picture of the chicken flying to the

mother-bird when kites are in the sky, and huddling close to the warm

breast and the soft downy feathers, and so with the spread of the great

wing being sheltered from all possibility of harm. This psalm is

ascribed to David when he was in hiding. The superscription says that

it is a psalm of David, when he changed his behaviour before Abimelech;

who drove him away, and he departed.' And where did he go? To the cave

in the rock. And as he sat in the mouth of it, with the rude arch

stretching above him, like the wings of some great bird, feeling

himself absolutely safe, he said, None of them that take refuge in Thee

shall be condemned.'

Does not that metaphor teach us a great deal more of what faith is, and

encourage us far more to exercise it, than much theological

hair-splitting? What lies in the metaphor? Two things, the earnest

eagerness of the act of flight, and the absolute security which comes

when we have reached the shadow of the great Rock in a weary land.

But there is one thing more that I would notice, and that is that this

designation of the persons as them that trust in Him' follows last of

all in a somewhat lengthened series of designations for good people.

They are these: the righteous'--them that are of a broken heart'--'such

as be of a contrite spirit'--His servants,' and then, lastly, comes, as

basis of all, as, so to speak, the keynote of all, none of them that

trust in Him.' That is to say--righteousness, true and blessed

pulverising of the obstinate insensibility of self alienated from God,

true and blessed consciousness of sin, joyful surrender of self to

loving and grateful submission to God's will, are all connected with or

flow from that act of trust in Him. And if you are trusting in Him, in

anything more than the mere formal, dead way in which multitudes of

nominal Christians in all our congregations are doing so, your trust

will produce all these various fruits of righteousness, and lowliness,

and joyful service. Faith' or trust' is the mother of all graces and

virtues, and it produces them all because it directly kindles the

creative flame of an answering love to Him in whom we trust. So much,

then, for the first part of my remarks. Consider, next--

II. The blessing here promised.

None of them that trust in Him shall be condemned.' The word which is

inadequately rendered desolate,' and more accurately condemned,'

includes the following varying shades of meaning, which, although they

are various, are all closely connected, as you will see--to incur

guilt, to feel guilty, to be condemned, to be punished. All these four

are inextricably blended together. And the fact that the one word in

the Old Testament covers all that ground suggests some very solemn

thoughts.

First of all, it suggests this, that guilt, or sin, and condemnation

and punishment, are, if not absolutely identical, inseparable. To be

guilty is to be condemned. That is to say, since we live, as we do,

under the continual grip of an infinitely wise and all-knowing law, and

in the presence of a Judge who not only sees us as we are, but treats

us as He sees us--sin and guilt go together, as every man knows that

has a conscience. And sin and guilt and condemnation and punishment go

together, as every man may see in the world, and experience in himself.

To be separated from God, which is the immediate effect of sin, is to

pass into hell here. Every transgression and disobedience,' not only

shall receive its just recompense,' away out yonder, in some misty,

far-off, hypothetical future, but down here to-day. All sin works

automatically, and to do wrong is to be punished for doing it.

Then my text suggests another solemn thought, and that is that this

judgment, this condemnation, is not only present, according to our

Lord's own great words, which perhaps are an allusion to these: He that

believeth not is condemned already'; but it also suggests the

universality of that condemnation. Our Psalmist says that only through

trusting Him can a man be taken and lifted away, as it were, from the

descent of the thundercloud, and its bolt that lies above his head.

They that trust Him are not condemned,' every one else is; not shall

be,' but is, to-day, here and now. If there is a man or woman in my

audience now who is not exercising trust in God through Jesus Christ,

on that man or woman, young or old, cultivated or uncultivated,

professing Christian or not, there is bound the burden of their sin,

which is the crushing weight of their condemnation.

So my text suggests, that the sole deliverance from this universal

pressure of the condemnatory influence of universal sin lies in that

fleeing for refuge to God. And then comes in the Christian addition, to

God, as manifested in Jesus Christ.' The Psalmist did not know that.

All the more wonderful is it that without the knowledge he should have

risen to the great thought of our text--all the more inexplicable

unless you believe that holy men of old spake as they were moved by the

Holy Ghost.'

Wonderful it is still, but not unintelligible, if you believe that. But

you and I know more than this singer did; for we can listen to the

Master, who says, He that believeth on Him is not condemned'; and to

the servant who echoes--and perhaps both of them are alluding to our

psalm--There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in

Christ Jesus.' My faith, if it knits me to Jesus Christ, unties the

bonds by which my sin is bound upon me, for it makes me to share in His

Spirit, in His righteousness, in His glory.

And so, dear brethren! the Psalmist, though he did not know it, may

point us away to the truth hidden from him, but sunlight clear for us,

that by simple trust we may receive the Saviour through whom all our

condemnation will pass away, and may be found in Him having the

righteousness which is of God by faith.'

Not condemned'--Is that all? Are the blessings of the Gospel all to be

reduced to this mere negative expression? Certainly not. The Psalmist

could have said a great deal more, and in the previous context he does

say a great deal more. But to that restrained and moderate statement of

the case, which is far less than the facts of the case, he that

trusteth is not condemned,' let us add Paul's expansion, whom He called

them He also justified, and whom He justified them He also glorified.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

SKY, EARTH, AND SEA: A PARABLE OF GOD

Thy mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens; and Thy faithfulness reacheth

unto the clouds. 6. Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; Thy

judgments are a great deep: O Lord, Thou preservest man and beast. 7.

How excellent is Thy loving-kindness, O God! therefore the children of

men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings.' --PSALM xxxvi. 5-7.

This wonderful description of the manifold brightness of the divine

nature is introduced in this psalm with singular abruptness. It is set

side by side with a vivid picture of an evildoer, a man who mutters in

his own heart his godlessness, and with obstinate determination plans

and plots in forgetfulness of God. Without a word to break the violence

of the transition, side by side with that picture, the Psalmist sets

before us these thoughts of the character of God. He seems to feel that

that character was the only relief in the contemplation of the

miserable sights of which the earth is only too full. We should go mad

when we think of man's wickedness unless we could look up and see, with

one quick turn of the eye, the heaven opened and the throned Love that

sits up there gazing on all the chaos, and working to soothe sorrow,

and to purify evil.

Perhaps there is another reason for this dramatic and striking

swiftness of contrast between the godless man and the revealed God. The

true test of a life is its power to bear the light of God being

suddenly let in upon it. How would yours look, my friend! if all at

once a window in heaven was opened, and God glared in upon you? Set

your lives side by side with Him. They always are side by side with Him

whether you know it or not; but you had better bring your deeds to the

light that they may be made manifest' now, than to have to do it as

suddenly, and a great deal more sorrowfully, when you are dragged out

of the shows and illusions of time, and He meets you on the threshold

of another world. Would a beam of light from God, coming in upon your

life, be like a light falling upon a gang of conspirators, that would

make them huddle all their implements under their cloaks, and scuttle

out of the way as fast as possible? Or would it be like a gleam of

sunshine upon the flowers, opening out their petals and wooing from

them fragrance? Which?

But I turn from such considerations as these to the more immediate

subject of my contemplations in this discourse. I have ventured to take

so great words for my text, though each clause would be more than

enough for many a sermon, because my aim now is a very modest one. I

desire simply to give, in the briefest way, the connection and mutual

relation of these wonderful words; not to attempt any adequate

treatment of the great thoughts which they contain, but only to set

forth the meaning and interdependence of these manifold names for the

beams of the divine light, which are presented here. The chief part of

our text sets before us God in the variety and boundlessness of His

loving nature, and the close of it shows us man sheltering beneath

God's wings. These are the two main themes for our present

consideration.

I. We have, first, God in the boundlessness of His loving nature.

The one pure light of the divine nature is broken up, in the prism of

the psalm, into various rays, which theologians call, in their hard,

abstract way, divine attributes. These are mercy, faithfulness,

righteousness.' Then we have two sets of divine acts--judgments,' and

the preservation' of man and beast; and finally we have again

lovingkindness,' as our version has unfortunately been misled, by its

love for varying its translation, to render the same word which begins

the series and is there called mercy.'

Now that mercy' or lovingkindness' of which my text thus speaks, is

very nearly equivalent to the New Testament love'; or, perhaps, still

more nearly equivalent to the New Testament grace.' Both the one and

the other mean substantially this--active love communicating itself to

creatures that are inferior and that might have expected something else

to befall them. Mercy is a modification of love, inasmuch as it is love

to an inferior. The hand is laid gently upon the man, because if it

were laid with all its weight it would crush him. It is the stooping

goodness of a king to a beggar. And mercy is likewise love in its

exercise to persons that might expect something else, being guilty. As

a general coming to a body of mutineers with pardon and favour upon his

lips, instead of with condemnation and death; so God comes to us

forgiving and blessing. All His goodness is forbearance, and His love

is mercy, because of the weakness, the lowliness, and the ill desert of

us on whom the love falls.

Now notice that this same quality of mercy' stands here at the

beginning and at the end. All the attributes of the divine nature, all

the operations of the divine hand lie within the circle of His

mercy--like diamonds set in a golden ring. Mercy, or love flowing out

in blessings to inferior and guilty creatures, is the root and ground

of all God's character; it is the foundation and impulse of all His

acts. Modern science reduces all modes of physical energy to one, for

which it has no name but--energy. We are taught by God's own revelation

of Himself--and most especially by His final and perfect revelation of

Himself in Jesus Christ--to trace all forms of divine energy back to

one which David calls mercy,' which John calls love.'

It is last as well as first, the final upshot of all revelation. The

last voice that speaks from Scripture has for its special message God

is Love.' The last voice that sounds from the completed history of the

world will have the same message, and the ultimate word of all

revelation, the end of the whole of the majestic unfolding of God's

purposes will be the proclamation to the four corners of the universe,

as from the trump of the Archangel, of the name of God as Love. The

northern and the southern poles of the great sphere are one and the

same, a straight axle through the very heart of it, from which the

bounding lines swell out to the equator, and towards which they

converge again on the opposite side of the world. So mercy is the

strong axletree, the northern pole and the southern, on which the whole

world of the divine perfections revolves and moves. The first and last,

the Alpha and Omega of God, beginning and crowning and summing up all

His being and His work, is His mercy, His lovingkindness.

But next to mercy comes faithfulness. Thy faithfulness reacheth unto

the clouds.' God's faithfulness is in its narrowest sense His adherence

to His promises. It implies, in that sense, a verbal revelation, and

definite words from Him pledging Him to a certain line of action. He

hath said, and shall He not do it?' He will not alter the thing that is

gone out of His lips.' It is only a God who has actually spoken to men

who can be a faithful God.' He will not palter with a double sense,

keeping His word of promise to the ear, and breaking it to the hope.'

But not only His articulate promises, but also His own past actions,

bind Him. He is always true to these; and not only continues to do as

He has done, but discharges every obligation which His past imposes on

Him. The ostrich was said to leave its eggs to be hatched in the sand.

Men bring men into positions of dependence, and then lightly shake

responsibility from careless shoulders. But God accepts the cares laid

upon Him by His own acts, and discharges them to the last jot. He is a

faithful Creator.' Creation brings obligations with it; obligations for

the creature; obligations for the Creator. If God makes a being, God is

bound to take care of the being that He has made. If He makes a being

in a given fashion, He is bound to provide for the necessities that He

has created. According to the old proverb, if He makes mouths it is His

business to feed them. And He recognises the obligation. His past binds

Him to certain conduct in His future. We can lay hold on the former

manifestation, and we can plead it with Him. Thou hast been, and

therefore Thou must be.' Thou hast taught me to trust in Thee;

vindicate and warrant my trust by Thy unchangeableness.' So His word,

His acts, and His own nature, bind God to bless and help. His

faithfulness is the expression of His unchangeableness. Because He

could swear by no greater, He sware by Himself.'

Take, then, these two thoughts of God's lovingkindness and of God's

faithfulness and weave them together, and see what a strong cord they

are to which a man may cling, and in all His weakness be sure that it

will never give nor break. Mercy might be transient and arbitrary, but

when you braid in faithfulness' along with it, it becomes fixed as the

pillars of heaven, and immutable as the throne of God. Only when we are

sure of God's faithfulness can we lift up thankful voices to Him,

because His mercy endureth for ever.' A despotic monarch may be all

full of tenderness at this moment, and all full of wrath and sternness

the next. He may have a whim of favour to-day, and a whim of severity

to-morrow, and no man can say, What doest thou?' But God is not a

despot. He has, so to speak, decreed a constitution.' He has limited

Himself. He has marked out His path across the great wide region of

possibilities of the divine action; He has buoyed out His channel on

that ocean, and declared to us His purposes. So we can reckon on God,

as astronomers can foretell the motions of the stars. We can plead His

faithfulness along with His love, and feel that the one makes sure that

the other shall be from everlasting to everlasting.

The next beam of the divine brightness is righteousness. Thy

righteousness is like the great mountains.' Righteousness is not to be

taken here in its narrow sense of stern retribution which gives to the

evildoer the punishment that he deserves. There is no thought here,

whatever there may be in other places in Scripture, of any opposition

between mercy and righteousness, but the notion of righteousness here

is a broader and greater one. It is just this, to put it into other

words, that God has a law for His being to which He conforms; and that

whatsoever things are fair and lovely, and good, and pure down here,

those things are fair, and lovely, and good, and pure up there; that He

is the Archetype of all excellence, the Ideal of all moral

completeness: that we can know enough of Him to be sure of this that

what we call right He loves, and what we call right He practises.

Brethren! unless we have that for the very foundation of our thoughts

of God, we have no foundation to rest on. Unless we feel and know that

the Judge of all the earth doeth right,' and is right, and law and

righteousness have their home and seat in His bosom, and are the

expression of His inmost being, then I know not where our confidence

can be built. Unless Thy righteousness, like the great mountains,'

surrounds and guards the low plain of our lives, they will lie open to

all foes.

Then, next, we pass from the divine character to the divine acts.

Mercy, faithfulness, and righteousness all converge and flow into the

great river of the divine judgments.'

By judgments are not meant merely the acts of God's punitive

righteousness, the retributions that destroy evildoers, but all God's

decisions and acts in regard to man. Or, to put it into other and

briefer words, God's judgments are the whole of the ways,' the methods

of the divine government. So Paul, alluding to this very passage when

he says How unsearchable are Thy judgments!' adds, as a parallel

clause, meaning the same thing, and Thy ways past finding out.' That

includes all which men call, in a narrower sense, judgments, but it

includes, too, all acts of kindness and loving gifts. God's judgments

are the expressions of His thoughts, and these thoughts are thoughts of

good and not of evil.

But notice, in the next place, the boundlessness of all these

characteristics of the divine nature.

Thy mercy is in the heavens,' towering up above the stars, and dwelling

there, like some divine ether filling all space. The heavens are the

home of light, the source of every blessing, arching over every head,

rimming every horizon, holding all the stars, opening into abysses as

we gaze, with us by night and by day, undimmed by the mist and smoke of

earth, unchanged by the lapse of centuries; ever seen, never reached,

bending over us always, always far above us. So the mercy of God towers

above us, and stoops down towards us, rims us all about and arches over

us all, sheds down its dewy benedictions by night and by day; is filled

with a million stars and light-points of duty and of splendour; is near

us ever to bless and succour and help, and holds us all in its blue

round.

Thy faithfulness reacheth to the clouds.' Strange that God's fixed

faithfulness should be compared to the very emblems of mutation. The

clouds are unstable, they whirl and melt and change. Strange to think

of the unalterable faithfulness as reaching to them! May it not be that

the very mutability of the mutable may be the means of manifesting the

unalterable sameness of God's faithful purpose, of His unchangeable

love, and of His ever consistent dealings? May not the apparent

incongruity be a part of the felicity of the bold words? Is it not true

that earthly things, as they change their forms and melt away, leaving

no track behind, phantomlike as they are, do still obey the behests of

that divine faithfulness, and gather and dissolve and break in brief

showers of blessing, or short, sharp crashes of storm, at the bidding

of that steadfast purpose which works out one unalterable design by a

thousand instruments, and changeth all things, being in itself

unchanged? The thing that is eternal, even the faithfulness of God,

dwells amid, and shows itself through, the things that are temporal,

the flying clouds of change.

Again, Thy righteousness is like the great mountains.' Like these, its

roots are fast and stable; like these, it stands firm for ever; like

these, its summits touch the fleeting clouds of human circumstance;

like these, it is a shelter and a refuge, inaccessible in its steepest

peaks, but affording many a cleft in its rocks, where a man may hide

and be safe. But, unlike these, it knew no beginning, and shall know no

end. Emblems of permanence as they are, though Olivet looks down on

Jerusalem as it did when Melchizedek was its king, and Tabor and Hermon

stand as they did before human lips had named them, they are wearing

away by winter storms and summer heats. But, as Isaiah has taught us,

when the earth is old, God's might and mercy are young; for the

mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall

not depart from thee.' The earth shall wax old like a garment, but My

righteousness shall not be abolished.' It is more stable than the

mountains, and firmer than the firmest things upon earth.

Then, with wonderful poetical beauty and vividness of contrast, there

follows upon the emblem of the great mountains of God's righteousness

the emblem of the mighty deep' of His judgments. Here towers Vesuvius;

there at its feet lie the waters of the bay. So the righteousness

springs up like some great cliff, rising sheer from the water's edge,

while its feet are laved by the sea of the divine judgments,

unfathomable and shoreless. The mountains and the sea are the two

grandest things in nature, and in their combination sublime; the one

the home of calm and silence, the other in perpetual motion. But the

mountain's roots are deeper than the depths of the sea, and though the

judgments are a mighty deep, the righteousness is deeper, and is the

bed of the ocean.

The metaphor, of course, implies obscurity, but what sort of obscurity?

The obscurity of the sea. And what sort of obscurity is that? Not that

which comes from mud, or anything added, but that which comes from

depth. As far as a man can see down into its blue-green depths they are

clear and translucent; but where the light fails and the eye fails,

there comes what we call obscurity. The sea is clear, but our sight is

limited.

And so there is no arbitrary obscurity in God's dealings, and we know

as much about them as it is possible for us to know; but we cannot see

to the bottom. A man on the cliff can look much deeper into the ocean

than a man on the level beach. The higher you climb the further you

will see down into the sea of glass mingled with fire' that lies placid

before God's throne. Let us remember that it is a hazardous thing to

judge of a picture before it is finished; of a building before the

scaffolding is pulled down, and it is as hazardous for us to say about

any deed or any revealed truth that it is inconsistent with the divine

character. Wait a bit; wait a bit! Thy judgments are a great deep.' The

deep will be drained off one day, and you will see the bottom of it.

Judge nothing before the time.'

But as an aid to patience and faith hearken how the Psalmist finishes

up his contemplations: O Lord! Thou preservest man and beast.' Very

well then, all this mercy, faithfulness, righteousness, judgment, high

as the heavens, deep as the ocean, firm as the hills, it is all working

for this--to keep the millions of living creatures round about us, and

ourselves, in life and well-being. The mountain is high, the deep is

profound. Between the mountain and the sea there is a strip of level

land. God's righteousness towers above us; God's judgments go down

beneath us; we can scarcely measure adequately the one or the other.

But upon the level where we live there are the green fields where the

cattle browse, and the birds sing, and men live and till and reap and

are fed. That is to say, we all have enough in the plain, patent facts

of creation and preservation of man and animal life in this world to

make us quite sure of what is the principle that prevails up to the

very top of the inaccessible mountains, and down to the very bottom of

the unfathomable deep. What we know of Him, in the blessings of His

love and providence, ought to interpret for us all that is perplexing.

What we understand is good and loving. Let us be sure that what we do

not yet understand is good and loving too. The web is of one texture

throughout. The least educated ear can catch the music of the simpler

melodies which run through the Great Composer's work. We shall one day

be able to appreciate the yet fuller music of the more recondite parts,

which to us at present seem only jangling and discord. It is not His

melody but our ears that are at fault. But we may well accept the

obscurity of the mighty deep of God's judgment, when we can see plainly

that, after all, the earth is full of His mercy, and that the eyes of

all things wait on God, and He giveth them their meat in due season.'

II. So much, then, for the great picture here of these boundless

characteristics of the divine nature. Now let us look for a moment at

the picture of man sheltering beneath God's wings.

How excellent is Thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of

men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings.' God's

lovingkindness, or mercy, as I explained the word might be rendered, is

precious, for that is the true meaning of the word translated

excellent.' We are rich when we have that for ours; we are poor without

it. Our true wealth is to possess God's love, and to know in thought

and realise in feeling and reciprocate in affection His grace and

goodness, the beauty and perfectness of His wondrous character. That

man is wealthy who has God on his side; that man is a pauper who has

not God for his.

How precious is Thy lovingkindness, therefore the children of men put

their trust.' There is only one thing that will ever win a man's heart

to love God, and that is that God should love him first, and let him

see it. We love Him because He first loved us,' is the New Testament

teaching. Is it not all adumbrated and foretold in these words: How

precious is Thy loving-kindness, O God! therefore the children of men

put their trust'?

We may be driven to worship after a sort by power; we may be smitten

into some cold admiration, into some kind of reluctant subjection and

trembling reverence, by the manifestation of divine perfections. But

there is only one thing that wins a man's heart, and that is the sight

of God's heart; and it is only when we know how precious His

lovingkindness is that we shall be drawn towards Him.

And then this last verse tells us how we can make God our own: They put

their trust under the shadow of Thy wings.' The word here rendered, and

accurately rendered, put their trust,' has a very beautiful literal

meaning. It means to flee for refuge, as the manslayer might flee into

the strong city, or as Lot did out of Sodom to the little city on the

hill, or as David did into the cave from his enemies. So, with such

haste, with such intensity, staying for nothing, and with the effort of

your whole will and nature, flee to God. That is trust. Go to Him for

refuge from all evil, from all harm, from your own souls, from all sin,

from hell, and death, and the devil.

Put your trust under the shadow of His wings.' That is a beautiful

image, drawn, probably, from the grand words of Deuteronomy, where God

is likened to the eagle stirring up her nest, fluttering over her

young,' with tenderness in her fierce eye, and protecting strength in

the sweep of her mighty pinion. So God spreads the covert of His wing,

strong and tender, beneath which we may all gather ourselves and

nestle.

And how can we do that? By the simple process of fleeing unto Him, as

made known to us in Christ our Saviour; to hide ourselves there. For

let us not forget how even the tenderness of this metaphor was

increased by its shape on the tender lips of the Lord: How often would

I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathereth her chickens

under her wings!' The Old Testament took the emblem of the eagle,

sovereign, and strong, and fierce; the New Testament took the emblem of

the domestic fowl, peaceable, and gentle, and affectionate. Let us flee

to that Christ, by humble faith with the plea on our lips--

Cover my defenceless head

With the shadow of Thy wing';

and then all the Godhead in its mercy, its faithfulness, its

righteousness, and its judgments will be on our side; and we shall know

how precious is the lovingkindness of the Lord, and find in Him the

home and hiding-place of our hearts for ever.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

WHAT MEN FIND BENEATH THE WINGS OF GOD

They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of Thy house; and

Thou shalt make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures. 9. For with

Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy light shall we see light.' --PSALM

xxxvi. 8, 9.

In the preceding verses we saw a wonderful picture of the boundless

perfections of God; His lovingkindness, faithfulness, righteousness,

and of His twofold act, the depths of His judgments and the plainness

of His merciful preservation of man and beast. In these verses we have

an equally wonderful picture of the blessedness of the godly, the

elements of which consist in four things: satisfaction, represented

under the emblem of a feast; joy, represented under the imagery of full

draughts from a flowing river of delight; life, pouring from God as a

fountain; light, streaming from Him as source.

And this picture is connected with the previous one by a very simple

link. Who are they who shall be abundantly satisfied'? The men who put

their trust beneath the shadow of Thy wings.' That is to say, the

simple exercise of confidence in God is the channel through which all

the fulness of divinity passes into and fills our emptiness.

Observe, too, that the whole of the blessings here promised are to be

regarded as present and not future. They shall be abundantly satisfied'

would be far more truly rendered in consonance with the Hebrew: They

are satisfied'; and so also we should read Thou dost make them drink of

the river of Thy pleasures; in Thy light do we see light.' The Psalmist

is not speaking of any future blessedness, to be realised in some

far-off, indefinite day to come, but of what is possible even in this

cloudy and sorrowful life. My text was true on the hills of Palestine,

on the day when it was spoken; it may be true amongst the alleys of

Manchester to-day. My purpose at this time is simply to deal with the

four elements in which this blessedness consists--satisfaction, joy,

life, light.

I. Satisfaction: They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of

Thy house.'

Now, I suppose, there is a double metaphor in that. There is an

allusion, no doubt, to the festal meal of priests and worshippers in

the Temple, on occasion of the peace-offering, and there is also the

simpler metaphor of God as the Host at His table, at which we are

guests. Thy house' may either be, in the narrower sense, the Temple;

and then all life is represented as being a glad sacrificial meal in

His presence, of which the meek shall eat and be satisfied,' or Thy

house' may be taken in a more general sense; and then all life is

represented as the gathering of children round the abundant board which

their Father's providence spreads for them, and as glad feasting in the

mansions' of the Father's house.

In either case the plain teaching of the text is, that by the might of

a calm trust in God the whole mass of a man's desires are filled and

satisfied. What do we want to satisfy us? It is something almost awful

to think of the multiplicity, and the variety, and the imperativeness

of the raging desires which every human soul carries about within it.

The heart is like a nest of callow fledglings, every one of them a

great, wide open, gaping beak, that ever needs to have food put into

it. Heart, mind, will, appetites, tastes, inclinations, weaknesses,

bodily wants--the whole crowd of these are crying for their meat. The

Book of Proverbs says there are three things that are never satisfied:

the grave, the earth that is not filled with water, and the fire that

never says, It is enough.' And we may add a fourth, the human heart,

insatiable as the grave; thirsty as the sands, on which you may pour

Niagara, and it will drink it all up and be ready for more; fierce as

the fire that licks up everything within reach and still hungers.

So, though we be poor and weak creatures, we want much to make us

restful. We want no less than that every appetite, desire, need,

inclination shall be filled to the full; that all shall be filled to

the full at once, and that by one thing; that all shall be filled to

the full at once, by one thing that shall last for ever. Else we shall

be like men whose store of provision gives out before they are half-way

across the desert. And we need that all our desires shall be filled at

once by one thing that is so much greater than ourselves that we shall

grow up towards it, and towards it, and towards it, and yet never be

able to exhaust or surpass it.

Where are you going to get that? There is only one answer, dear

brethren! to the question, and that is--God, and God alone is the food

of the heart; God, and God alone, will satisfy your need. Let us bring

the full Christian truth to bear upon the illustration of these words.

Who was it that said, I am the Bread of Life. He that cometh unto Me

shall never hunger'? Christ will feed my mind with truth if I will

accept His revelation of Himself, of God, and of all things. Christ

will feed my heart with love if I will open my heart for the entrance

of His love. Christ will feed my will with blessed commands if I will

submit myself to His sweet and gentle, and yet imperative, authority.

Christ will satisfy all my longings and desires with His own great

fulness. Other food palls upon man's appetite, and we wish for change;

and physiologists tell us that a less wholesome and nutritious diet, if

varied, is better for a man's health than a more nutritious one if

uniform and monotonous. But in Christ there are all constituents that

are needed for the building up of the human spirit, and so we never

weary of Him if we only know His sweetness. After a world of hungry men

have fed upon Him, He remains inexhaustible as at the beginning; like

the bread in His own miracles, of which the pieces that were broken and

ready to be given to the eaters were more than the original stock, as

it appeared when the meal began, or like the fabled feast in the Norse

Walhalla, to which the gods sit down to-day, and to-morrow it is all

there on the board, as abundant and full as ever. So if we have Christ

to live upon, we shall know no hunger; and in the days of famine we

shall be satisfied.'

O brethren! have you ever known what it is to feel that your hungry

heart is at rest? Did you ever know what it is to say, It is enough'?

Have you anything that satisfies your appetite and makes you blessed?

Surely, men's eager haste to get more of the world's dainties shows

that there is no satisfaction at its table. Why will you spend your

money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which

satisfieth not,' as Indians in famine eat clay which fills their

stomachs, but neither stays hunger, nor ministers strength? Eat and

your soul shall live.

II. Now, turn to the next of the elements of blessedness here--Joy.

Thou makest them drink of the river of Thy pleasures.'

There may be a possible reference here, couched in the word pleasures,'

to the Garden of Eden, with the river that watered it parting into four

heads; for Eden' is the singular of the word which is here translated

pleasures' or delight.' If we take that reference, which is very

questionable, there would be suggested the thought that amidst all the

pain and weariness of this desert life of ours, though the gates of

Paradise are shut against us, they who dwell beneath the shadow of the

divine wing really have a paradise blooming around them; and have

flowing ever by their side, with tinkling music, the paradisaical river

of delights, in which they may bathe and swim, and of which they may

drink. Certainly the joys of communion with God surpass any which

unfallen Eden could have boasted.

But, at all events, the plain teaching of the text is that the simple

act of trusting beneath the shadow of God's wings brings to us an ever

fresh and flowing river of gladness, of which we may drink. The whole

conception of religion in the Bible is gladsome. There is no

puritanical gloom about it. True, a Christian man has sources of

sadness which other men have not. There is the consciousness of his own

sin, and the contest that he has daily to wage; and all things take a

soberer colouring to the eye that has been accustomed to look, however

dimly, upon God. Many of the sources of earthly felicity are dammed up

and shut off from us if we are living beneath the shadow of God's

wings. Life will seem to be sterner, and graver, and sadder than the

lives that ring with idiot laughter solely,' and have no music because

they have no melancholy in them. That cannot be helped. But what does

it matter though two or three surface streams, which are little better

than drains for sewage, be stopped up, if the pure river of the water

of life' is turned into your hearts? Surely it will be a gain if the

sadness which has joy for its very foundation is yours, instead of the

laughter which is only a mocking mask for a death's head, and of which

it is true that even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of

that mirth is heaviness.' Better to be sorrowful, yet always

rejoicing,' than to be glad on the surface, with a perpetual sorrow and

unrest gnawing at the root of your life.

And if it be true that the whole Biblical conception of religion is of

a glad thing, then, my brother! it is your duty, if you are a Christian

man, to be glad, whatever temptations there may be in your way to be

sorrowful. It is a hard lesson, and one which is not always insisted

upon. We hear a great deal about other Christian duties. We do not hear

so much as we ought about the Christian duty of gladness. It takes a

very robust faith to say, Though the fig-tree shall not blossom,

neither shall fruit be in the vine, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I

will joy in the God of my salvation,' but unless we can say it, there

is an attainment of Christian life yet unreached, to which we have to

aspire.

But be that as it may, my point is simply this--that all real and

profound possession of, and communion with, God in Christ will make us

glad; glad with a gladness altogether unlike that of the world round

about us, far deeper, far quieter, far nobler, the sister and the ally

of all great things, of all pure life, of all generous and lofty

thought. And where is it to be found? Only in fellowship with Him. The

river of Thy pleasures' may mean something yet more solemn and

wonderful than pleasures of which He is the Author. It may mean

pleasures which He shares, the very delights of the divine nature

itself. The more we come into fellowship with Him, the more shall we

share in the very joy of God Himself. And what is His joy? He delights

in mercy; He delights in self-communication: He is the blessed, the

happy God, because He is the giving God. He delights in His love. He

rejoices over' His penitent child with singing,' In that blessedness we

may share; or if that be too high and mystical a thought, may we not

remember who it was that said: These things speak I unto you that My

joy may remain in you'; and who it is that will one day say to the

faithful servant: Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord'? Christ makes us

drink of the river of His pleasures. The Shepherd and the sheep drink

from the same stream, and the gladness which filled the heart of the

Man of Sorrows, and lay deeper than all His sorrows, He imparts to all

them that put their trust in Him.

So, dear brethren! what a blessing it is for us to have, as we may

have, a source of joy, frozen by no winter, dried up by no summer,

muddied and corrupted by no iridescent scum of putrefaction which ever

mantles over the stagnant ponds of earthly joys! Like some citadel that

has an unfailing well in its courtyard, we may have a fountain of

gladness within ourselves which nothing that touches the outside can

cut off. We have but to lap a hasty mouthful of earthly joys as we run,

but we cannot drink too full draughts of this pure river of water which

makes glad the city of God.

III. We have the third element of the blessedness of the godly

represented under the metaphor of Life, pouring from the fountain,

which is God. With Thee is the fountain of life.'

The words are true in regard to the lowest meaning of life'--physical

existence--and they give a wonderful idea of the connection between God

and all living creatures. The fountain rises, the spray on the summit

catches the sunlight for a moment, and then falls into the basin, jet

after jet springing up into the light, and in its turn recoiling into

the darkness. The water in the fountain, the water in the spray, the

water in the basin, are all one. Wherever there is life there is God.

The creature is bound to the Creator by a mystic bond and tie of

kinship, by the fact of life. The mystery of life knits all living

things with God. It is a spark, wherever it burns, from the central

flame. It is a drop, wherever it is found, from the great fountain. It

is in man the breath of God's nostrils. It is not a gift given by a

Creator who dwells apart, having made living things, as a watchmaker

might a watch, and then seeing them go.' But there is a deep mystic

union between the God who has life in Himself and all the living

creatures who draw their life from Him, which we cannot express better

than by that image of our text, With Thee is the fountain of life.'

But my text speaks about a blessing belonging to the men who put their

trust under the shadow of God's wing, and therefore it does not refer

merely to physical existence, but to something higher than that,

namely, to that life of the spirit in communion with God, which is the

true and the proper sense of life'; the one, namely, in which the word

is almost always used in the Bible.

There is such a thing as death in life; living men may be dead in

trespasses and sins,' dead in pleasure,' dead in selfishness. The awful

vision of Coleridge in the Ancient Mariner, of dead men standing up and

pulling at the ropes, is only a picture of the realities of life;

where, as on some Witches' Sabbath, corpses move about and take part in

the activities of this dead world. There are people full of energy in

regard of worldly things, who yet are all dead to that higher region,

the realities of which they have never seen, the actions of which they

have never done, the emotions of which they have never felt. Am I

speaking to such living corpses now? There are some of my audience

alive to the world, alive to animalism, alive to lust, alive to

passion, alive to earth, alive perhaps to thought, alive to duty, alive

to conduct of a high and noble kind, but yet dead to God, and,

therefore, dead to the highest and noblest of all realities. Answer for

yourselves the question--do you belong to this class?

There is life for you in Jesus Christ, who is the Life.' Like the great

aqueducts that stretch from the hills across the Roman Campagna, His

Incarnation brings the waters of the fountain from the mountains of God

into the lower levels of our nature, and the fetid alleys of our sins.

The cool, sparkling treasure is carried near to every lip. If we drink,

we live. If we will not, we die in our sins, and are dead whilst we

live. Stop the fountain, and what becomes of the stream? It fades there

between its banks, and is no more. You cannot even live the animal life

except that life were joined to Him. If it could be broken away from

God it would disappear as the clouds melt in the sky, and there would

be nobody, and you would be nowhere. You cannot break yourself away

from God physically so completely as to annihilate yourself. You can do

so spiritually, and some of you do it, and the consequence is that you

are dead, dead, DEAD! You can be made alive from the dead,' if you will

lay hold on Jesus Christ, and get His life-giving Spirit into your

hearts.

IV. Light. In Thy light shall we see light.'

God is the Father of lights.' The sun and all the stars are only lights

kindled by Him. It is the very crown of revelation that God is light,

and in Him is no darkness at all.' Light seems to the unscientific eye,

which knows nothing about undulations of a luminiferous ether, to be

the least material of material things. All joyous things come with it.

It brings warmth and fruit, fulness and life. Purity, and gladness, and

knowledge have been symbolised by it in all tongues. The Scripture uses

light, and the sun, which is its source, as an emblem for God in His

holiness, and blessedness, and omniscience. This great word here seems

to point chiefly to light as knowledge.

This saying is true, as the former clause was, in relation to all the

light which men have. The inspiration of the Almighty giveth him

understanding.' The faculties by which men know, and all the exercise

of those faculties, are His gift. It is in the measure in which God's

light comes to the eye that the eye beholds. Light' may mean not only

the faculty, but the medium of vision. It is in the measure in which

God's light comes, and because His light comes, that all light of

reason in human nature sees the truth which is its light. God is the

Author of all true thoughts in all mankind. The spirit of man is a

candle kindled by the Lord.

But as I said about life, so I say about light. The material or

intellectual aspects of the word are not the main ones here. The

reference is to the spiritual gift which belongs to the men who put

their trust beneath the shadow of Thy wings.' In communion with Him who

is the Light as well as the Life of men, we see a whole universe of

glories, realities, and brightnesses. Where other eyes see only

darkness, we behold the King in His beauty, and the land that is very

far off.' Where other men see only cloudland and mists, our vision will

pierce into the unseen, and there behold the things which are,' the

only real things, of which all that the eye of sense sees are only the

fleeting shadows, seen as in a dream, while these are the true, and the

sight of them is sight indeed. They who see by the light of God, and

see light therein, have a vision which is more than imagination, more

than opinion, more than belief. It is certitude. Communication with God

does not bring with it superior intellectual perspicuity, but it does

bring a perception of spiritual realities and relations, which, in

respect of clearness and certainty, may be called sight. Many of us

walk in darkness, who, if we were but in communion with God, would see

the lone hillside blazing with chariots and horses of fire. Many of us

grope in perplexity, who, if we were but hiding under the shadow of

God's wings, would see the truth and walk at liberty in the light,

which is knowledge and purity and joy.

In communication with God, we see light upon all the paths of duty. It

is wonderful how, when a man lives near God, he gets to know what he

ought to do. That great Light, which is Christ, is like the star that

hung over the Magi, blazing in the heavens, and yet stooping to the

lowly task of guiding three wayfaring men along a muddy road upon

earth. So the highest Light of God comes down to be a lantern for our

paths and a light for our feet.'

And in the same communion with God, we get light in all seasons of

darkness and of sorrow. To the upright there ariseth light in the

darkness'; and the darkest hours of earthly fortune will be like a

Greenland summer night, when the sun scarcely dips below the horizon,

and even when it is absent, all the heaven is aglow with a calm

twilight.

All these great blessings belong to-day to those who take refuge under

the shadow of His wings. But blessed as the present experience is, we

have to look for the perfecting of it when we pass from the forecourt

to the inner sanctuary, and in that higher house sit with Christ at His

table and feast at the marriage supper of the Lamb.' Here we drink from

the river, but there we shall be carried up to the source. The life of

God in the soul is here often feeble in its flow, a fountain sealed'

and all but shut up in our hearts, but there it will pour through all

our being, a fountain springing up into everlasting life. The darkness

is scattered even here by beams of the true light, but here we are only

in the morning twilight, and many clouds still fill the sky, and many a

deep gorge lies in sunless shadow, but there the light shall be a broad

universal blaze, and there shall be nothing hid from the heat thereof.'

Now, dear brethren! the sum of the whole matter is, that all this

fourfold blessing of satisfaction, joy, life, light, is given to you,

if you will take Christ. He will feed you with the bread of God; He

will give you His own joy to drink; He will be in you the life of your

lives, and the master-light of all your seeing.' And if you will not

have Him, you will starve, and your lips will be cracked with thirst;

and you will live a life which is death, and you will sink at last into

outer darkness.

Is that the fate which you are going to choose? Choose Christ, and He

will give you satisfaction, and joy, and life, and light.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE SECRET OF TRANQUILLITY

Delight thyself also in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of

thine heart 5. Commit thy way unto the Lord. . . . 7. Rest in the Lord,

and wait patiently for Him.'--PSALM xxxvii. 4, 5, 7.

I have been young, and now am old,' says the writer of this psalm. Its

whole tone speaks the ripened wisdom and autumnal calm of age. The dim

eyes have seen and survived so much, that it seems scarcely worth while

to be agitated by what ceases so soon. He has known so many bad men

blasted in all their leafy verdure, and so many languishing good men

revived, that--

Old experience doth attain

To something of prophetic strain';

and is sure that to trust in the Lord and do good' ever brings peace

and happiness. Life with its changes has not soured but quieted him. It

does not seem to him an endless maze, nor has he learned to despise it.

He has learned to see God in it all, and that has cleared its

confusion, as the movements of the planets, irregular and apparently

opposite, when viewed from the earth, are turned into an ordered whole,

when the sun is taken for the centre. What a contrast between the

bitter cynicism put into the lips of the son, and the calm cheerful

godliness taught, according to our psalm, by the father! To Solomon,

old age is represented as bringing the melancholy creed, All is

vanity'; David believes, Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give

thee the desires of thine heart.' Which style of old age is the nobler?

what kind of life will lead to each?

These clauses, which I have ventured to isolate from their context,

contain the elements which secure peace even in storms and troubles. I

think that, if we consider them carefully, we shall see that there is a

well-marked progress in them. They do not cover the same ground by any

means; but each of the later flows from the former. Nobody can commit

his way unto the Lord' who has not begun by delighting in the Lord';

and nobody can rest in the Lord' who has not committed his way to the

Lord.' These three precepts, then, the condensed result of the old

man's lifelong experience, open up for our consideration the secret of

tranquillity. Let us think of them in order.

I. Here is the secret of tranquillity in freedom from eager, earthly

desires--Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the

desires of thine heart.'

The great reason why life is troubled and restless lies not without,

but within. It is not our changing circumstances, but our unregulated

desires, that rob us of peace. We are feverish, not because of the

external temperature, but because of the state of our own blood. The

very emotion of desire disturbs us; wishes make us unquiet; and when a

whole heart, full of varying, sometimes contradictory longings, is

boiling within a man, how can he but tremble and quiver? One desire

unfulfilled is enough to banish tranquillity; but how can it survive a

dozen dragging different ways? A deep lesson lies in that word

distraction, which has come to be so closely attached to desires; the

lesson that all eager longing tears the heart asunder. Unbridled and

varying wishes, then, are the worst enemies of our repose.

And, still further, they destroy tranquillity by putting us at the

mercy of externals. Whatsoever we make necessary for our contentment,

we make lord of our happiness. By our eager desires we give perishable

things supreme power over us, and so intertwine our being with theirs,

that the blow which destroys them lets out our life-blood. And,

therefore, we are ever disturbed by apprehensions and shaken by fears.

We tie ourselves to these outward possessions, as Alpine travellers to

their guides, and so, when they slip on the icy slopes, their fall is

our death. If we were not eager to stand on the giddy top of fortune's

rolling wheel, we should not heed its idle whirl; but we let our

foolish hearts set our feet there, and thenceforward every lurch of the

glittering instability threatens to lame or kill us. He who desires

fleeting joys is sure to be restless always, and to be disappointed at

the last. For, even at the best, the heart which depends for peace on

the continuance of things subjected to a thousand accidents, can only

know quietness by forcibly closing its eyes against the inevitable;

and, even at the best, such a course must end on the whole in failure.

Disappointment is the law for all earthly desires; for appetite

increases with indulgence, and as it increases, satisfaction decreases.

The food remains the same, but its power to appease hunger diminishes.

Possession bring indifference. The dose that lulls into delicious

dreams to-day must be doubled to-morrow, if it is to do anything; and

there is soon an end of that. Each of your earthly joys fills but a

part of your being, and all the other ravenous longings either come

shrieking at the gate of the soul's palace, like a mob yelling for

bread, or are starved into silence; but either way there is disquiet.

And then, if a man has fixed his happiness on anything lower than the

stars, less stable than the heavens, less sufficient than God, there

does come, sooner or later, a time when it passes from him, or he from

it. Do not venture the rich freightage of your happiness in crazy

vessels. If you do, be sure that, somewhere or other, before your life

is ended, the poor frail craft will strike on some black rock rising

sheer from the depths, and will grind itself to chips there. If your

life twines round any prop but God your strength, be sure that, some

time or other, the stay to which its tendrils cling will be plucked up,

and the poor vine will be lacerated, its clusters crushed, and its sap

will bleed out of it.

If, then, our desires are, in their very exercise, a disturbance, and

in their very fruition prophesy disappointment, and if that certain

disappointment is irrevocable and crushing when it comes, what shall we

do for rest? Dear brethren! there is but one answer--Delight thyself in

the Lord.' These eager desires, transfer to Him; on Him let the

affections fix and fasten; make Him the end of your longings, the food

of your spirits. This is the purest, highest form of religious

emotion--when we can say, Whom have I but Thee? possessing Thee I

desire none beside.' And this glad longing for God is the cure for all

the feverish unrest of desires unfulfilled, as well as for the ague

fear of loss and sorrow. Quietness fills the soul which delights in the

Lord, and its hunger is as blessed and as peaceful as its satisfaction.

Think how surely rest comes with delighting in God. For that soul must

needs be calm which is freed from the distraction of various desires by

the one master-attraction. Such a soul is still as the great river

above the falls, when all the side currents and dimpling eddies and

backwaters are effaced by the attraction that draws every drop in the

one direction; or like the same stream as it nears its end, and,

forgetting how it brawled among rocks and flowers in the mountain

glens, flows with a calm and equable motion to its rest in the central

sea. Let the current of your being set towards God, then your life will

be filled and calmed by one master-passion which unites and stills the

soul.

And for another reason there will be peace: because in such a case

desire and fruition go together. He shall give thee the desires of

thine heart.' Only do not vulgarise that great promise by making it out

to mean that, if we will be good, He will give us the earthly blessings

which we wish. Sometimes we shall get them, and sometimes not; but our

text goes far deeper than that. God Himself is the heart's desire of

those who delight in Him; and the blessedness of longing fixed on Him

is that it ever fulfils itself. They who want God have Him. Your truest

joy is in His fellowship and His grace. If, set free from creatural

delights, our wills reach out towards God, as a plant growing in

darkness to the light--then we shall wish for nothing contrary to Him,

and the wishes which run parallel to His purposes, and embrace Himself

as their only good, cannot be vain. The sunshine flows into the opened

eye, the breath of life into the expanding lung--so surely, so

immediately the fulness of God fills the waiting, wishing soul. To

delight in God is to possess our delight. Heart! lift up thy gates:

open and raise the narrow, low portals, and the King of Glory will

stoop to enter.

Once more: desire after God will bring peace by putting all other

wishes in their right place. The counsel in our text does not enjoin

the extinction, but the subordination, of other needs and

appetites--'Seek ye first the kingdom of God.' Let that be the dominant

desire which controls and underlies all the rest. Seek for God in

everything, and for everything in God. Only thus will you be able to

bridle those cravings which else tear the heart. The presence of the

king awes the crowd into silence. When the full moon is in the nightly

sky, it sweeps the heavens bare of flying cloud-rack, and all the

twinkling stars are lost in the peaceful, solitary splendour. So let

delight in God rise in our souls, and lesser lights pale before it--do

not cease to be, but add their feebleness, unnoticed, to its radiance.

The more we have our affections set on God, the more shall we enjoy,

because we subordinate, His gifts. The less, too, shall we dread their

loss, the less be at the mercy of their fluctuations. The capitalist

does not think so much of the year's gains as does the needy

adventurer, to whom they make the difference between bankruptcy and

competence. If you have God for your enduring substance,' you can face

all varieties of condition, and be calm, saying--

Give what Thou canst, without Thee I am poor,

And with Thee rich, take what Thou wilt away.'

The amulet that charms away disquiet lies here. Still thine eager

desires, arm thyself against feverish hopes, and shivering fears, and

certain disappointment, and cynical contempt of all things; make sure

of fulfilled wishes and abiding joys. Delight thyself in the Lord, and

He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.'

II. But this is not all. The secret of tranquillity is found, secondly,

in freedom from the perplexity of choosing our path.

Commit thy way unto the Lord'--or, as the margin says, roll' it upon

God; leave to Him the guidance of thy life, and thou shalt be at peace

on the road.

This is a word for all life, not only for its great occasions. Twice,

or thrice, perhaps in a lifetime, a man's road leads him up to a high

dividing point, a watershed as it were, whence the rain runs from the

one side of the ridge to the Pacific, and from the other to the

Atlantic. His whole future may depend on his bearing the least bit to

the right hand or to the left, and all the slopes below, on either

side, are wreathed in mist. Powerless as he is to see before him, he

has yet to choose, and his choice determines the rest of his days.

Certainly he needs some guidance then. But he needs it not less in the

small decisions of every hour. Our histories are made up of a series of

trifles, in each of which a separate act of will and choice is

involved. Looking to the way in which character is made, as coral reefs

are built up, by a multitude of tiny creatures whose united labours are

strong enough to breast the ocean; looking to the mysterious way in

which the greatest events in our lives have the knack of growing out of

the smallest; looking to the power of habit to make any action of the

mind almost instinctive: it is of far more importance that we should

become accustomed to apply this precept of seeking guidance from God to

the million trifles than to the two or three decisions which, at the

time of making them, we know to be weighty. Depend upon it that, if we

have not learned the habit of committing the daily-recurring monotonous

steps to Him, we shall find it very, very hard to seek His help, when

we come to a fork in the road. So this is a command for all life, not

only for its turning-points.

What does it prescribe? First, the subordination--not the

extinction--of our own inclinations. We must begin by ceasing from

self. Not that we are to cast out of consideration our own wishes.

These are an element in every decision, and often are our best helps to

the knowledge of our powers and of our duties. But we have to take

special care that they never in themselves settle the question. They

are second, not first. Thus I will, and therefore thus I decide; my

wish is enough for a reason,' is the language of a tyrant over others,

but of a slave to himself. Our first question is to be, not What should

I like?' but What does God will, if I can by any means discover it?'

Wishes are to be held in subordination to Him. Our will is to be master

of our passions, and desires, and whims, and habits, but to be servant

of God. It should silence all their cries, and itself be silent, that

God may speak. Like the lawgiver-captain in the wilderness, it should

stand still at the head of the ordered rank, ready for the march, but

motionless, till the Pillar lifts from above the sanctuary. Yes! Commit

thy way'--unto whom? Conscience? No: unto Duty? No: but unto

God'--which includes all these lower laws, and a whole universe

besides. Hold the will in equilibrium, that His finger may incline the

balance.

Then the counsel of our text prescribes the submission of our judgment

to God, in the confidence that His wisdom will guide us. Committing our

way unto the Lord does not mean shifting the trouble of patient thought

about our duty off our own shoulders. It is no cowardly abnegation of

the responsibility of choice which is here enjoined; nor is there any

sanction of lazily taking the first vagrant impulse, wafted we know not

whence, that rises in the mind, for the voice of God. But, just because

we are to commit our way to Him, we are bound to the careful exercise

of the best power of our own brains, that we may discover what the will

of God is. He does not reveal that will to people who do not care to

know it. I suppose the precursor of all visions of Him, which have

calmed His servants' souls with the peace of a clearly recognised duty,

has been their cry, Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' God counsels

men who use their own wits to find out His counsel. He speaks to us

through our judgments when they take all the ordinary means of

ascertaining our course. The law is: Do your best to find out your

duty; suppress inclination, and desire to do God's will, and He will

certainly tell you what it is. I, for my part, believe that the

Psalmist spoke a truth when he said, In all thy ways acknowledge Him,

and He shall direct thy steps.' Only let the eye be fixed on Him, and

He will guide us in the way. If we chiefly desire, and with patient

impartiality try, to be directed by Him, we shall never want for

direction.

But all this is possible only if we delight in the Lord.' Nothing else

will still our desires--the voice within, and the invitations without,

which hinder us from hearing the directions of our Guide. Nothing else

will so fasten up and muzzle the wild passions and lusts that a little

child may lead them. To delight in Him is the condition of all wise

judgment. For the most part, it is not hard to discover God's will

concerning us, if we supremely desire to know and do it; and such

supreme desire is but the expression of this supreme delight in Him.

Such a disposition wonderfully clears away mists and perplexities; and

though there will still remain ample scope for the exercise of our best

judgment, and for reliance on Him to lead us, yet he whose single

object is to walk in the way that God points, will seldom have to stand

still in uncertainty as to what that way is. If thine eye be single,

thy whole body shall be full of light.'

Thus, dear brethren! these two keys--joy in God, and trust in His

guidance--open for us the double doors of the secret place of the Most

High'; where all the roar of the busy world dies upon the ear, and the

still small voice of the present God deepens the silence, and hushes

the heart. Be quiet, and you will hear Him speak--delight in Him, that

you may be quiet. Let the affections feed on Him, the will wait mute

before Him, till His command inclines it to decision, and quickens it

into action; let the desires fix upon His all-sufficiency; and then the

wilderness will be no more trackless, but the ruddy blaze of the

guiding pillar will brighten on the sand a path which men's hands have

never made, nor human feet trodden into a road. He will guide us with

His eye,' if our eyes be fixed on Him, and be swift to discern and

eager to obey the lightest glance that love can interpret. Shall we be

like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding,' and need to

be pulled with bridles and beaten with whips before they know how to

go; or shall we be like some trained creature that is guided by the

unseen cord of docile submission, and has learned to read the duty,

which is its joy, in the glance of its master's eye, or the wave of his

hand? Delight thyself in the Lord: commit thy way unto Him.'

III. Our text takes one more step. The secret of tranquillity is found,

thirdly, in freedom from the anxiety of an unknown future. Best in the

Lord, and wait patiently for Him.'

Such an addition to these previous counsels is needful, if all the

sources of our disquiet are to be dealt with. The future is dim, after

all our straining to see into its depths. The future is threatening,

after all our efforts to prepare for its coming storms. A rolling

vapour veils it all; here and there a mountain peak seems to stand out;

but in a moment another swirl of the fog hides it from us. We know so

little, and what we do know is so sad, that the ignorance of what may

be, and the certainty of what must be, equally disturb us with hopes

which melt into fears, and forebodings which consolidate into

certainties. We are sure that in that future are losses, and sorrows,

and death; thank God! we are sure too, that He is in it. That certainty

alone, and what comes of it, makes it possible for a thoughtful man to

face to-morrow without fear or tumult. The only rest from apprehensions

which are but too reasonable is rest in the Lord.' If we are sure that

He will be there, and if we delight in Him, then we can afford to say,

As for all the rest, let it be as He wills, it will be well.' That

thought alone, dear friends! will give calmness. What else is there,

brethren! for a man fronting that vague future, from whose weltering

sea such black, sharp-toothed rocks protrude? Shall we bow before some

stern Fate, as its lord, and try to be as stern as It? Shall we think

of some frivolous Chance, as tossing its unguided waves, and try to be

as frivolous as It? Shall we try to be content with an animal

limitation to the present, and heighten the bright colour of the little

to-day by the black background that surrounds it, saying, Let us eat

and drink, for to-morrow we die'? Is it not better, happier, nobler,

every way truer, to look into that perilous uncertain future, or rather

to look past it to the loving Father who is its Lord and ours, and to

wait patiently for Him? Confidence that the future will but evolve

God's purposes, and that all these are enlisted on our side, will give

peace and power. Without it all is chaos, and we flying atoms in the

anarchic mass; or else all is coldblooded impersonal law, and we

crushed beneath its chariot-wheels. Here, and here alone, is the secret

of tranquillity.

But remember, brethren! that the peaceful confidence of this final

counsel is legitimate only when we have obeyed the other two. I have no

business, for instance, to expect God to save me from the natural

consequences of my own worldliness or folly. If I have taken up a

course from eager desires for earthly good, or from obedience to any

inclination of my own without due regard to His will, I have no right,

when things begin to go awry, to turn round to God and say, Lord! I

wait upon Thee to save me.' And though repentance, and forsaking of our

evil ways at any point in a man's course, do ensure, through Jesus

Christ, God's loving forgiveness, yet the evil consequences of past

folly are often mercifully suffered to remain with us all our days. He

who has delighted in the Lord, and committed his way unto Him, can

venture to front whatever may be coming; and though not without much

consciousness of sin and weakness, can yet cast upon God the burden of

taking care of him, and claim from his faithful Father the protection

and the peace which He has bound Himself to give.

And O dear friends! what a calm will enter our souls then, solid,

substantial, the peace of God,' gift and effluence from the God of

peace'! How blessed then to leave all the possible to-morrow with a

very quiet heart in His hands! How easy then to bear the ignorance, how

possible then to face the certainties, of that solemn future! Change

and death can only thin away and finally remove the film that separates

us from our delight. Whatever comes here or yonder can but bring us

blessing; for we must be glad if we have God, and if our wills are

parallel with His, whose Will all things serve. Our way is traced by

Him, and runs alongside of His. It leads to Himself. Then rest in the

Lord, and judge nothing before the time.' We cannot criticise the Great

Artist when we stand before His unfinished masterpiece, and see dim

outlines here, a patch of crude colour there. But wait patiently for

Him, and so, in calm expectation of a blessed future and a finished

work, which will explain the past, in honest submission of our way to

God, in supreme delight in Him who is the gladness of our joy, the

secret of tranquillity will be ours.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE BITTERNESS AND BLESSEDNESS OF THE BREVITY OF LIFE

'Surely every man walketh in a vain shew. . . . 12. I am a stranger

with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.' --PSALM xxxix. 6,

12.

These two sayings are two different ways of putting the same thing.

There is a common thought underlying both, but the associations with

which that common thought is connected in these two verses are

distinctly different. The one is bitter and sad--a gloomy half truth.

The other, out of the very same fact, draws blessedness and hope. The

one may come from no higher point of view than the level of worldly

experience; the other is a truth of faith. The former is at best

partial, and without the other may be harmful; the latter completes,

explains, and hallows it.

And that this progress and variety in the thought is the key to the

whole psalm is, I think, obvious to any one who will examine it with

care. I cannot here enter on that task but in the hastiest fashion, by

way of vindicating the connection which I trace between the two verses

of our text. The Psalmist begins, then, with telling how at some time

recently passed--in consequence of personal calamity not very clearly

defined, but apparently some bodily sickness aggravated by mental

sorrow and anxiety--he was struck dumb with silence, so that he held

his peace even from good.' In that state there rose within him many sad

and miserable thoughts, which at last forced their way through his

locked lips. They shape themselves into a prayer, which is more

complaint than petition--and which is absorbed in the contemplation of

the manifest melancholy facts of human life--Thou hast made my days as

an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before Thee.' And then, as

that thought dilates and sinks deeper into his soul, he looks out upon

the whole race of man--and in tones of bitterness and hopelessness,

affirms that all are vanity, shadows, disquieted in vain. The blank

hopelessness of such a view brings him to a standstill. It is true--but

taken alone is too dreadful to think of. That way madness lies,'--so he

breaks short off his almost despairing thoughts, and with a swift

turning away of his mind from the downward gaze into blackness that was

beginning to make him reel, he fixes his eyes on the throne above--And

now, Lord! what wait I for? my hope is in Thee.' These words form the

turning-point of the psalm. After them, the former thoughts are

repeated, but with what a difference--made by looking at all the

blackness and sorrow, both personal and universal, in the bright light

of that hope which streams upon the most lurid masses of opaque cloud,

till their gloom begins to glow with an inward lustre, and softens into

solemn purples and reds. He had said, I was dumb with silence--even

from good.' But when his hope is in God, the silence changes its

character and becomes resignation and submission. I opened not my

mouth; because Thou didst it.' The variety of human life and its

transiency is not less plainly seen than before; but in the light of

that hope it is regarded in relation to God's paternal correction, and

is seen to be the consequence, not of a defect in His creative wisdom

or love, but of man's sin. Thou with rebukes dost correct man for

iniquity.' That, to him who waits on the Lord, is the reason and the

alleviation of the reiterated conviction, Every man is vanity.' Not any

more does he say every man at his best state,' or, as it might be more

accurately expressed, even when most firmly established,'--for the man

who is established in the Lord is not vanity, but only the man who

founds his being on the fleeting present. Then, things being so, life

being thus in itself and apart from God so fleeting and so sad, and yet

with a hope that brightens it like sunshine through an April

shower--the Psalmist rises to prayer, in which that formerly expressed

conviction of the brevity of life is reiterated, with the addition of

two words which changes its whole aspect, I am a stranger with Thee.'

He is God's guest in his transient life. It is short, like the stay of

a foreigner in a strange land; but he is under the care of the King of

the Land--therefore he need not fear nor sorrow. Past generations,

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--whose names God is not ashamed' to appeal to

in His own solemn designation of Himself--have held the same relation,

and their experience has sealed His faithful care of those who dwell

with Him. Therefore, the sadness is soothed, and the vain and fleeting

life of earth assumes a new appearance, and the most blessed and wisest

issue of our consciousness of frailty and insufficiency is the fixing

of our desires and hopes on Him in whose house we may dwell even while

we wander to and fro, and in whom our life being rooted and established

shall not be vain, howsoever it may be brief.

If, then, we follow the course of contemplation thus traced in the

psalm, we have these three points brought before us--first, the thought

of life common to both clauses; second, the gloomy, aimless hollowness

which that thought breathes into life apart from God; third, the

blessedness which springs from the same thought when we look at it in

connection with our Father in heaven.

I. Observe the very forcible expression which is given here to the

thought of life common to both verses.

Every man walketh in a vain show.' The original is even more striking

and strong. And although one does not like altering words so familiar

as those of our translation, which have sacredness from association and

a melancholy music in their rhythm--still it is worth while to note

that the force of the expression which the Psalmist employs is

correctly given in the margin, in an image'--or in a shadow.' The

phrase sounds singular to us, but is an instance of a common enough

Hebrew idiom, and is equivalent to saying--he walks in the character or

likeness of a shadow, or, as we should say, he walks as a shadow. That

is to say, the whole outward life and activity of every man is

represented as fleeting and unsubstantial, like the reflection of a

cloud which darkens leagues of the mountains' side in a moment, and ere

a man can say, Behold!' is gone again for ever.

Then, look at the other image employed in the other clause of our text

to express the same idea, I am a stranger and a sojourner, as all my

fathers.' The phrase has a history. In that most pathetic narrative of

an old-world sorrow long since calmed and consoled, when Abraham stood

up from before his dead,' and craved a burying-place for his Sarah from

the sons of Heth, his first plea was, I am a stranger and a sojourner

with you.' In his lips it was no metaphor. He was a stranger, a visitor

for a brief time to an alien land; he was a sojourner, having no rights

of inheritance, but settled among them for a while, and though dwelling

among them, not adopted into their community. He was a foreigner, not

naturalised. And such is our relation to all this visible frame of

things in which we dwell. It is alien to us; though we be in it, our

true affinities are elsewhere; though we be in it, our stay is brief,

as that of a wayfaring man that turns aside to tarry for a night.'

And there is given in the context still another metaphor setting forth

the same fact in that dreary generalisation which precedes my text,

Every man at his best state'--or as the word means, established,'--

with his roots most firmly struck in the material and visible--is only

a breath.' It appears for a moment, curling from lip and nostril into

the cold morning air, and vanishes away, so thus vaporous, filmy, is

the seeming solid fact of the most stable life.

These have been the commonplaces of poets and rhetoricians and

moralists in all time. But threadbare as the thought is, I may venture

to dwell on it for a moment. I know I am only repeating what we all

believe--and all forget. It is never too late to preach commonplaces,

until everybody acts on them as well as admits them--and this old

familiar truth has not yet got so wrought into the structure of our

lives that we can afford to say no more about it.

'Surely every man walketh in a shadow.' Did you ever stand upon the

shore on some day of that uncertain weather, when gloom and glory meet

together,' and notice how swiftly there went, racing over miles of

billows, a darkening that quenched all the play of colour in the waves,

as if all suddenly the angel of the waters had spread his broad wings

between sun and sea, and then how in another moment as swiftly it flits

away, and with a burst the light blazes out again, and leagues of ocean

flash into green and violet and blue. So fleeting, so utterly

perishable are our lives for all their seeming solid permanency.

Shadows in a career, as George Herbert has it--breath going out of the

nostrils. We think of ourselves as ever to continue in our present

posture. We are deceived by illusions. Mental indolence, a secret

dislike of the thought, and the impostures of sense, all conspire to

make us blind to, or at least oblivious of, the plain fact which every

beat of our pulses might preach, and the slow creeping hands of every

parish clock confirm. How awful that silent, unceasing footfall of

receding days is when once we begin to watch it! Inexorable,

passionless--though hope and fear may pray, Sun! stand thou still on

Gibeon; and thou moon! in the valley of Ajalon,'--the tramp of the

hours goes on. The poets paint them as a linked chorus of rosy forms,

garlanded, and clasping hands as they dance onwards. So they may be to

some of us at some moments. So they may seem as they approach; but

those who come hold the hands of those who go, and that troop has no

rosy light upon their limbs, their garlands are faded, the sunshine

falls not upon the grey and shrouded shapes, as they steal ghostlike

through the gloom--and ever and ever the bright and laughing sisters

pass on into that funereal band which grows and moves away from us

unceasing. Alas! for many of us it bears away with it our lost

treasures, our shattered hopes, our joys from which all the bright

petals have dropped! Alas! for many of us there is nothing but sorrow

in watching how all things become part and parcel of the dreadful

past.'

And how strangely sometimes even a material association may give new

emphasis to that old threadbare truth. Some more permanent thing may

help us to feel more profoundly the shadowy fleetness of man. The

trifles are so much more lasting than their owners. Or, as the

Preacher' puts it, with such wailing pathos, One generation passeth

away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever.'

This material is perishable--but yet how much more enduring than we

are! The pavements we walk upon, the coals in our grates--how many

millenniums old are they? The pebble you kick aside with your foot--how

many generations will it outlast? Go into a museum and you will see

hanging there, little the worse for centuries, battered shields,

notched swords, and gaping helmets--aye, but what has become of the

bright eyes that once flashed the light of battle through the bars,

what has become of the strong hands that once gripped the hilts? The

knights are dust,' and their good swords are' not rust.' The material

lasts after its owner. Seed corn is found in a mummy case. The poor

form beneath the painted lid is brown and hard, and more than half of

it gone to pungent powder, and the man that once lived has faded

utterly: but the handful of seed has its mysterious life in it, and

when it is sown, in due time the green blade pushes above English soil,

as it would have done under the shadow of the pyramids four thousand

years ago--and its produce waves in a hundred harvest fields to-day.

The money in your purses now, will some of it bear the head of a king

that died half a century ago. It is bright and useful--where are all

the people that in turn said they owned' it? Other men will live in our

houses, will preach from this pulpit, and sit in these pews, when you

and I are far away. And other June days will come, and the old

rose-trees will flower round houses where unborn men will then be

living, when the present possessor is gone to nourish the roots of the

roses in the graveyard!

Our days are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.' So said David on

other occasions. We know, dear brethren! how true it is, whether we

consider the ceaseless flux and change of things, the mystic march of

the silent-footed hours, or the greater permanence which attaches to

the things which perish,' than to our abode among them. We know it, and

yet how hard it is not to yield to the inducement to act and feel as if

all this painted scenery were solid rock and mountain. By our own

inconsiderateness and sensuousness, we live in a lie, in a false dream

of permanence, and so in a sadder sense we walk in a vain

show,'--deluding ourselves with the conceit of durability, and refusing

to see that the apparent is the shadowy, and the one enduring reality

God. It is hard to get even the general conviction vivified in men's

minds, hardest of all to get any man to reflect upon it as applying to

himself. Do not think that you have said enough to vindicate neglect of

my words now, when you call them commonplace. So they are. But did you

ever take that well-worn old story, and press it on your own

consciousness--as a man might press a common little plant, whose juice

is healing, against his dim eye-ball--by saying to yourself, It is true

of me. I walk as a shadow. I am gliding onwards to my doom. Through my

slack hands the golden sands are flowing, and soon my hour-glass will

run out, and I shall have to stop and go away.' Let me beseech you for

one half-hour's meditation on that fact before this day closes. You

will forget my words then, when with your own eyes you have looked upon

that truth, and felt that it is not merely a toothless commonplace, but

belongs to and works in thy life, as it ebbs away silently and

incessantly from thee.

II. Let me point, in the second place, to the gloomy, aimless

hollowness which that thought, apart from God, infuses into life.

There is, no doubt, a double idea in the metaphor which the Psalmist

employs. He desires to set forth, by his image of a shadow, not only

the transiency, but the unsubstantialness of life. Shadow is opposed to

substance, to that which is real, as well as to that which is enduring.

And we may further say that the one of these characteristics is in

great part the occasion of the other. Because life is fleeting,

therefore, in part, it is so hollow and unsatisfying. The fact that men

are dragged away from their pursuits so inexorably makes these pursuits

seem, to any one who cannot see beyond that fact, trivial and not worth

the following. Why should we fret and toil and break our hearts, and

scorn delights, and live laborious days' for purposes which will last

so short a time, and things which we shall so soon have to leave? What

is all our bustle and business, when the sad light of that thought

falls on it, but labouring for the wind'? Were it not better to lie

still?' Such thoughts have at least a partial truth in them, and are

difficult to meet as long as we think only of the facts and results of

man's life that we can see with our eyes, and our psalm gives emphatic

utterance to them. The word rendered walketh' in our text is not merely

a synonym for passing through life, but has a very striking meaning. It

is an intensive frequentative form of the word--that is, it represents

the action as being repeated over and over again. For instance, it

might be used to describe the restless motion of a wild beast in a

cage, raging from side to side, never still, and never getting any

farther for all the racing backward and forward. So here it signifies

walketh to and fro,' and implies hurry and bustle, continuous effort,

habitual unrest. It thus comes to be parallel with the stronger words

which follow,-- Surely they are disquieted in vain'; and one reason why

all this effort and agitation are purposeless and sad, is because the

man who is straining his nerves and wearying his legs is but a shadow

in regard to duration--He heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall

gather them.'

Yes! if we have said all, when we have said that men pass as a fleeting

shadow--if my life has no roots in the Eternal, nor any consciousness

of a life that does not pass, and a light that never perishes, if it is

derived from, directed to, cribbed, cabined, and confined' within this

visible diurnal sphere, then it is all flat and unprofitable, an

illusion while it seems to last, and all its pursuits are folly, its

hopes dreams, its substances vapours, its years a lie. For, if life be

thus short, I who live it am conscious of, and possess whether I be

conscious of them or no, capacities and requirements which, though they

were to be annihilated to-morrow, could be satisfied while they lasted

by nothing short of the absolute ideal, the all-perfect, the

infinite--or, to put away abstractions, My soul thirsteth for God, the

living God!' He hath put eternity in their heart,' as the book of

Ecclesiastes says. Longings and aspirations, weaknesses and woes, the

limits of creature helps and loves, the disproportion between us and

the objects around us--all these facts of familiar experience do

witness, alike by blank misgivings and by bright hopes, by many

disappointments and by indestructible expectations surviving them all,

that nothing which has a date, a beginning, or an end, can fill our

souls or give us rest. Can you fill up the swamps of the Mississippi

with any cartloads of faggots you can fling in? Can you fill your souls

with anything which belongs to this fleeting life? Has a flying shadow

an appreciable thickness, or will a million of them pressed together

occupy a space in your empty, hungry heart?

And so, dear brethren! I come to you with a message which may sound

gloomy, and beseech you to give heed to it. No matter how you may get

on in the world--though you may fulfil every dream with which you began

in your youth--you will certainly find that without Christ for your

Brother and Saviour, God for your Friend, and heaven for your hope,

life, with all its fulness, is empty. It lasts long, too long as it

sometimes seems for work, too long for hope, too long for endurance;

long enough to let love die, and joys wither and fade, and companions

drop away, but without God and Christ, you will find it but as a watch

in the night.' At no moment through the long weary years will it

satisfy your whole being; and when the weary years are all past, they

will seem to have been but as one troubled moment breaking the eternal

silence. At every point so profitless, and all the points making so

thin and short a line! The crested waves seem heaped together as they

recede from the eye till they reach the horizon, where miles of storm

are seen but as a line of spray. So when a man looks back upon his

life, if it have been a godless one, be sure of this, that he will have

a dark and cheerless retrospect over a tossing waste, with a white rim

of wandering barren foam vexed by tempest, and then, if not before, he

will sadly learn how he has been living amidst shadows, and, with a

nature that needs God, has wasted himself upon the world. O life! as

futile then as frail'; surely,' in such a case, every man walketh in a

vain show.'

III. But note, finally, how our other text in its significant words

gives us the blessedness which springs from this same thought of life,

when it is looked at in connection with God.

The mere conviction of the brevity and hollowness of life is not in

itself a religious or a helpful thought. Its power depends upon the

other ideas which are associated with it. It is susceptible of the most

opposite applications, and may tend to impel conduct in exactly

opposite directions. It may be the language of despair or of bright

hope. It may be the bitter creed of a worn-out debauchee, who has

wasted his life in hunting shadows, and is left with a cynical spirit

and a barbed tongue. It may be the passionless belief of a retired

student, or the fanatical faith of a religious ascetic. It may be an

argument for sensuous excess, Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we

die'; or it may be the stimulus for noble and holy living, I must work

the works of Him that sent me while it is day. The night cometh.' The

other accompanying beliefs determine whether it shall be a blight or a

blessing to a man.

And the one addition which is needed to incline the whole weight of

that conviction to the better side, and to light up all its blackness,

is that little phrase in this text, I am a stranger with Thee, and a

sojourner.' There seems to be an allusion here to remarkable words

connected with the singular Jewish institution of the Jubilee. You

remember that by the Mosaic law, there was no absolute sale of land in

Israel, but that every half century the whole returned to the

descendants of the original occupiers. Important economical and social

purposes were contemplated in this arrangement, as well as the

preservation of the relative position of the tribes as settled at the

Conquest. But the law itself assigns a purely religious purpose--the

preservation of the distinct consciousness of the tenure on which the

people held their territory, namely, obedience to and dependence on

God. The land shall not be sold for ever, for the land is Mine, for ye

are strangers and sojourners with Me.' Of course, there was a special

sense in which that was true with regard to Israel, but David thought

that the words were as true in regard to his whole relation to God, as

in regard to Israel's possession of its national inheritance.

If we grasp these words as completing all that we have already said,

how different this transient and unsubstantial life looks! You must

have the light from both sides to stereoscope and make solid the flat

surface picture. Transient! yes--but it is passed in the presence of

God. Whether we know it or no, our brief days hang upon Him, and we

walk, all of us, in the light of His countenance. That makes the

transient eternal, the shadowy substantial, the trivial heavy with

solemn meaning and awful yet vast possibilities. In our embers is

something that doth live.' If we had said all, when we say We are as a

shadow,' it would matter very little, though even then it would matter

something, how we spent our shadowy days; but if these poor brief hours

are spent in the great Taskmaster's eye,'--if the shadow cast on earth

proclaims a light in the heavens--if from this point there hangs an

unending chain of conscious being--Oh! then, with what awful solemnity

is the brevity, with what tremendous magnitude is the minuteness, of

our earthly days invested! With Thee'--then I am constantly in the

presence of a sovereign Law and its Giver; with Thee'--then all my

actions are registered and weighed yonder; with Thee'--then Thou, God,

seest me.' Brethren! it is the prismatic halo and ring of eternity

round this poor glass of time that gives it all its dignity, all its

meaning. The lives that are lived before God cannot be trifles.

And if this relation to time be recognised and accepted and held fast

by our hearts and minds, then what calm blessedness will flow into our

souls!

A stranger with Thee,'--then we are the guests of the King. The Lord of

the land charges Himself with our protection and provision; we journey

under His safe conduct. It is for His honour and faithfulness that no

harm shall come to us travelling in His territory, and relying on His

word. Like Abraham with the sons of Heth, we may claim the protection

and help which a stranger needs. He recognises the bond and will fulfil

it. We have eaten of His salt, and He will answer for our safety.--He

that toucheth you toucheth the apple of Mine eye.'

A stranger with Thee,'--then we have a constant Companion and an

abiding Presence. We may be solitary and necessarily remote from the

polity of the land. We may feel amid all the visible things of earth as

if foreigners. We may not have a foot of soil, not even a grave for our

dead. Companionships may dissolve and warm hands grow cold and their

close clasp relax--what then? He is with us still. He will join us as

we journey, even when our hearts are sore with loss. He will walk with

us by the way, and make our chill hearts glow. He will sit with us at

the table--however humble the meal, and He will not leave us when we

discern Him. Strangers we are indeed here--but not solitary, for we are

strangers with Thee.' As in some ancestral home in which a family has

lived for centuries--son after father has rested in its great chambers,

and been safe behind its strong walls--so, age after age, they who love

Him abide in God.--Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all

generations.'

'Strangers with Thee,'--then we may carry our thoughts forward to the

time when we shall go to our true home, nor wander any longer in a land

that is not ours. If even here we come into such blessed relationships

with God, that fact is in itself a prophecy of a more perfect communion

and a heavenly house. They who are strangers with Him will one day be

at home with the Lord,' and in the light of that blessed hope the

transiency of this life changes its whole aspect, loses the last trace

of sadness, and becomes a solemn joy. Why should we be pensive and

wistful when we think how near our end is? Is the sentry sad as the

hour for relieving guard comes nigh? Is the wanderer in far-off lands

sad when he turns his face homewards? And why should not we rejoice at

the thought that we, strangers and foreigners here, shall soon depart

to the true metropolis, the mother-country of our souls? I do not know

why a man should be either regretful or afraid, as he watches the

hungry sea eating away this bank and shoal of time' upon which he

stands--even though the tide has all but reached his feet--if he knows

that God's strong hand will be stretched forth to him at the moment

when the sand dissolves from under him, and will draw him out of many

waters, and place him high above the floods in that stable land where

there is no more sea.'

Lives rooted in God through faith in Jesus Christ are not vanity. Let

us lay hold of Him with a loving grasp--and we shall live also' because

He lives, as He lives, so long as He lives. The brief days of earth

will be blessed while they last, and fruitful of what shall never pass.

We shall have Him with us while we journey, and all our journeyings

will lead to rest in Him. True, men walk in a vain show; true, the

world passeth away and the lust thereof,' but, blessed be God! true,

also, He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

TWO INNUMERABLE SERIES

Many, O Lord my God, are Thy wonderful works which Thou hast done, and

Thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they cannot be reckoned up in order

unto Thee: if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can

be numbered . . . 12. Innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine

iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up;

they are more than the hairs of mine head; therefore my heart faileth

me.'--PSALMS xl. 5, 12.

So then, there are two series of things which cannot be numbered, God's

mercies, man's sins. This psalm has for its burden a cry for

deliverance; but the Psalmist begins where it is very hard for a

struggling man to begin, but where we always should begin, with

grateful remembrance of God's mercy. His wondrous dealings seem to the

Psalmist's thankful heart as numberless as the blades of grass which

carpet the fields, or as the wavelets which glance in the moonlight and

break in silver upon the sand. They come pouring out continuously, like

the innumerable undulations of the ether which make upon the eyeballs

the single sensation of light. He thinks not only of God's wonderful

works, His realised purposes of mercy, but of His thoughts which are to

us-ward,' the purposes, still more wonderful, of a yet greater mercy

which wait to be realised. He thinks not only of God's lovingkindness

to Him, but his contemplations embrace God's goodness to his

brethren--Thy thoughts which are to us-ward.' And as he thinks of all

this multitude of His tender mercies,' his lips break into this

rapturous exclamation of my text.

But there is a wonderful change in tone, in the two halves of the

psalm. The deliverance that seems so complete in the earlier part is

but partial. The triumph and the trust seem both to be clouded over. A

frowning mass lifts itself up against the immense mass of God's

mercies. The Psalmist sees himself ringed about by numberless evils, as

a man tied to a stake might be by a circle of fire. Innumerable evils

have compassed me about.' His conscience tells him that the evils are

deserved; they are his iniquities transformed which have come back to

him in another shape, and have laid their hands upon him as a constable

does upon a thief. Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me'--they hem

him in so that his vision is interrupted, the smoke from the circle of

flame blinds his eyes--I cannot see.' His roused conscience and his

quivering heart conceive of them as more than the hairs of his head,'

and so courage and confidence have ebbed away from him. My heart

faileth me----,' and there is nothing left for him but to fling himself

in his misery out of himself and on to God.

Now what I wish to do in this sermon is not so much to deal with these

two verses separately as to draw some of the lessons from the very

remarkable juxtaposition of these two innumerable things--God's tender

mercies, and man's iniquity and evil.

I. To begin with, let me remind you how, if we keep these two things

both together in our contemplations, they suggest for us very forcibly

the greatest mystery in the universe, and throw a little light upon it.

The difficulty of difficulties, the one insoluble problem is----, given

a good and perfect God, where does sorrow come from, and why is there

any pain? Men have fumbled at that knot for all the years that there

have been men in the world, and they have not untied it yet. They have

tried to cut it and it has resisted all their knives and all their

ingenuity. And there the question stands before us, grim, insoluble,

the despair of all thinkers and often the torture of our own hearts, in

the hours of our personal experience. Is it true that God's mercies are

innumerable'? If it be, what is the meaning of all this that makes me

writhe and weep? Nobody has answered that question, and nobody ever

will.

Only let us beware of the temptation of blinking half of the facts by

reason of the clearness of our confidence or the depth of our feeling

of the other half. That is always our temptation. You must have had a

singularly unruffled life if there has never come to you some moment

when, in the depth of your agony, you have ground your teeth together,

as you said to yourself, Is there a God then at all? And does He care

for me at all? And can He help me at all? And if there is, why in the

name of pity does He not?' Well, my brother! when such moments come to

us, and they come to us all sooner or later--and I was going to add a

parenthesis, which you will think strange, and say that they come to us

all sooner or later, blessed be God!--when such moments come to us, do

not let the black mass hide the light one from you, but copy this

Psalmist, and in the energy of your faith, even though it be the

extremity of your pain, grasp and grip them both; and though you have

to say and to wail: Innumerable evils have compassed me about,' be sure

that you do not let that prevent you from saying, Many, O Lord my God!

are Thy wonderful works which are to us-ward. They are more than can be

numbered.'

I do not enter upon this as a mere matter of philosophical speculation.

It is far too serious and important a matter to be so dealt with, in a

pulpit at any rate, but I would also add in one sentence that the mere

thinker, who looks at the question solely from an intellectual point of

view, has need to take the lesson of my two texts, and to be sure that

he keeps clear before him both halves of the facts--though they seem to

be as unlike each other as the eclipsed and the uneclipsed silver half

of the moon--with which he has to deal.

Remember, the one does not contradict the other; but let us ask

ourselves if the one does not explain the other. If it be that these

mercies are so innumerable as my first text says, may it not be that

they go deep down beneath, and include in their number, the experience

that seems most opposite to them, even the sorrow that afflicts our

lives? Must it not be, that the innumerable sum of God's mercies has

not to have subtracted from it, but has to have added to it, the sum

which also at intervals appears to us innumerable, of our sorrows and

our burdens? Perhaps the explanation does not go to the bottom of the

bottomless, but it goes a long way down towards it. Whom the Lord

loveth, He chasteneth' makes a bridge across the gulf which seems to

part the opposing cliffs, these two sets effect, and turn the darker

into a form in which the brighter reveals itself. All things work

together for good.' And God's innumerable mercies include the whole sum

total of my sorrows.

II. So, again, notice how the blending of these two thoughts together

heightens the impression of each.

All artists, and all other people know the power of contrast. White

never looks so white as when it is relieved against black; black never

so intense as when it is relieved against white. A white flower in the

twilight gleams out in spectral distinctness, paler and fairer than it

looked in the blazing sunshine. So, if we take and put these two things

together--the dark mass of man's miseries and the radiant brightness of

God's mercies, each heightens the colour of the other.

Only, let me observe, as I have already suggested that, in the second

of my two texts, whilst the Psalmist starts from the innumerable evils'

that have compassed him about, he passes from these to the earlier

evils which he had done. It is pain that says, Innumerable evils have

compassed me about.' It is conscience that says, Mine iniquities have

taken hold upon me.' His wrong-doing has come back to him like the

boomerang that the Australian savage throws, which may strike its aim

but returns to the hand that flung it. It has come back in the shape of

a sorrow. And so Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me' is the

deepening of the earliest word of my text. Therefore, I am not reading

a double meaning into it, but the double meaning is in it when I see

here a reference both to a man's manifold sorrows and to a man's

multiplied transgressions. Taking the latter into consideration, the

contrast between these two heightens both of them.

God's mercies never seem so fair, so wonderful, as when they are looked

at in conjunction with man's sin. Man's sin never seems so foul and

hideous as when it is looked at close against God's mercies. You cannot

estimate the conduct of one of two parties to a transaction unless you

have the conduct of the other before you. You cannot understand a

father's love unless you take into account the prodigal son's sullen

unthankfulness, or his unthankfulness without remembering his father's

love. You cannot estimate the clemency of a patient monarch unless you

know the blackness and persistency of the treason of his rebellious

subjects, nor their treason, except when seen in connection with his

clemency. You cannot estimate the long-suffering of a friend unless you

know the crimes against friendship of which his friend has been guilty,

nor the blackness of his treachery without the knowledge of the other's

loyalty to him. So we do not see the radiant brightness of God's

loving-kindness to us until we look at it from the depth of the

darkness of our own sin. The stars are seen from the bottom of the

well. The loving-kindness of God becomes wonderful when we think of the

sort of people on whom it has been lavished. And my evil is never

apprehended in its true hideousness until I have set it black and ugly,

but searched through and through, and revealed in every deformed

outline, and in every hideous lineament, by the light against which I

see it. You must take both in order to understand either.

And not only so, but actually these two opposites, which are ever

warring with one another in a duel, most merciful, patient, and

long-suffering on His part--these two elements do intensify one

another, not only in our estimation but in reality. For it is man's sin

that has drawn out the deepest and most wonderful tenderness of the

divine heart; and it is God's love partly recognised and rejected,

which leads men to the darkest evil. Man's sin has heightened God's

love to this climax and consummation of all tenderness, that He has

sent us His Son. And God's love thus heightened has darkened and

deepened man's sin. God's chiefest gift is His Son. Man's darkest sin

is the rejection of Christ. The clearest light makes the blackest

shadow, the tenderer the love, the more criminal the apathy and

selfishness which oppose it.

My brother! let us put these two great things together, and learn how

the sin heightens the love, and how the love aggravates the sin.

III. That leads me to another point, that the keeping of these two

thoughts together should lead us all to conscious penitence.

The Psalmist's words are not the mere complaint of a soul in

affliction, they are also the acknowledgment of a conscience repenting.

The contemplation of these two numberless series should affect us all

in a like manner.

Now there is a superficial kind of popular religion which has a great

deal to say about the first of these texts; and very little or next to

nothing about the second. It is a very defective kind of religion that

says:--Many, O Lord my God! are Thy thoughts which are to us-ward,' but

has never been down on its knees with the confession Mine iniquities

have taken hold upon me.' But defective as it is, it is all the

religion which many people have, and I doubt not, some of my hearers

have no more. I would press on you all this truth, that there is no

deep personal religion without a deep consciousness of personal

transgression. Have you got that, my brother? Have you ever had it?

Have you ever known what it is so to look at God's love that it smites

you into tears of repentance when you think of the way you have

requited Him? If you have not, I do not think the sense of God's love

has gone very deeply into you, notwithstanding all that you say; and

sure I am that you have never got to the point where you can understand

it most clearly and most deeply. The sense of sin, the consciousness of

personal demerit, the feeling that I have gone against Him and His

loving law,--that is as important and as essential an element in all

deep personal religion as the clear and thankful apprehension of the

love of God. Nay, more; there never has been and there never will be in

a man's heart, a worthy adequate apprehension of, and response to, the

wonderful love of God, except it be accompanied with a sense of sin. I,

therefore, urge this upon you that, for the vigour of your own personal

religion, you must keep these two things well together. Beware of such

a shallow, easy-going, matter-of-course, taking for granted God's

infinite love, that it makes you think very little of your own sins

against that love.

And remember, on the other hand, that the only way, or at least by far

the surest way, to learn the depth and the darkness of my own

transgression is by bringing my heart under the influence of that great

love of God in Jesus Christ. It is not preaching hell that will break a

man's heart down into true repentance. It is not thundering over him

with the terrors of law and trying to prick his conscience that will

bring him to a deep real knowledge of his sin. These may be subordinate

and auxiliary, but the real power that convinces of sin is the love of

God. The one light which illuminates the dark recesses of one's own

heart, and makes us feel how dark they are, and how full of creeping

unclean things, is the light of the love of God that shines in Jesus

Christ, the light that shines from the Cross of Calvary. Oh, dear

friends! if we are ever to know the greatness of God's love we must

feel our personal sin which that great love has forgiven and purged

away, and if we are ever to know the depth of our own evil, we must

measure it by His wonderful tenderness. We must set our sins in the

light of His countenance,' and contrast that supreme sacrifice with our

own selfish loveless lives, that the contrast may subdue us to

penitence and melt us to tears.

IV. Lastly, looking at these two numberless series together will bring

into the deepest penitence a joyful confidence.

There are regions of experience the very opposite of that error of

which I have just been speaking. There are some of us, perhaps, who

have so profound a sense of their own shortcomings and sins that the

mists rising from these have blurred the sky to us and shut out the

sun. Some of you, perhaps, may be saying to yourselves that you cannot

get hold of God's love because your sin seems to you to be so great, or

may be saying to yourselves that it is impossible that you should ever

get the victory over this evil of yours, because it has laid hold upon

you with so tight a grasp. If there be in any heart listening to me now

any inclination to doubt the infinite love of God, or the infinite

possibility of cleansing from all sin, let me come with the simple

word, Bind these two texts together, and never so look at your own evil

as to lose sight of the infinite mercy of God. It is safe to say--ay!

it is blessed to say--Mine iniquities are more than the hairs of mine

head,' when we can also say, Thy thoughts to me are more than can be

numbered.'

There are not two innumerable series, there is only one. There is a

limit and a number to my sins and to yours, but God's mercies are

properly numberless. They overlap all our sins, they stretch beyond our

sins in all dimensions. They go beneath them, they encompass them, and

they will thin them away and cause them to disappear. My sins may be

many, God's mercies are more. My sins may be inveterate, God's mercy is

from everlasting. My sins may be strong, God's mercy is omnipotent. My

sins may seem to have laid upon me,' God can rescue me from their grip.

They are a film on the surface of the deep ocean of His love. My sins

may be as the sand which is by the seashore, innumerable, the love of

God in Jesus Christ is like the great sea which rolls over the sands

and buries them. My sins may rise mountains high, but His mercies are a

great deep which will cover the mountains to their very summit. Ah! my

sin is enormous, God's mercy is inexhaustible. With Thee is plenteous

redemption, and He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THIRSTING FOR GOD

My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.'--PSALM xiii. 2.

This whole psalm reads like the sob of a wounded heart. The writer of

it is shut out from the Temple of his God, from the holy soil of his

native land. One can see him sitting solitary yonder in the lonely

wilderness (for the geographical details that occur in one part of the

psalm point to his situation as being on the other side of the Jordan,

in the mountains of Moab)--can see him sitting there with long wistful

gaze yearning across the narrow valley and the rushing stream that lay

between him and the land of God's chosen people, and his eye resting

perhaps on the mountaintop that looked down upon Jerusalem. He felt

shut out from the presence of God. We need not suppose that he believed

all the rest of the world to be profane and God-forsaken, except only

the Temple. Nor need we wonder, on the other hand, that his faith did

cling to form, and that he thought the sparrows beneath the eaves of

the Temple blessed birds! He was depressed, because he was shut out

from the tokens of God's presence; and because he was depressed, he

shut himself out from the reality of the presence. And so he cried with

a cry which never is in vain, My soul thirsteth for God, for the living

God!' Taken, then, in its original sense, the words of our text apply

only to that strange phenomenon which we call religious depression. But

I have ventured to take them in a wider sense than that. It is not only

Christian men who are cast down, whose souls thirst for God.' It is not

only men upon earth whose souls thirst for God. All men, everywhere,

may take this text for theirs. Every human heart may breathe it out, if

it understands itself. The longing for the living God' belongs to all

men. Thwarted, stifled, it still survives. Unconscious, it is our

deepest misery. Recognised, yielded to, accepted, it is the foundation

of our highest blessings. Filled to the full, it still survives

unsatiated and expectant. For all men upon earth, Christian or not

Christian, for Christians here below, whether in times of depression or

in times of gladness, and for the blessed and calm spirits that in

ecstasy of longing, full of fruition, stand around God's throne--it is

equally true that their souls thirst for God, for the living God.' Only

with this difference, that to some the desire is misery and death, and

to some the desire is life and perfect blessedness. So that the first

thought I would suggest to you now is, that there is an unconscious and

unsatisfied longing after God, which is what we call the state of

nature; secondly, that there is an imperfect longing after God, fully

satisfied, which is what we call the state of grace; and lastly, that

there is a perfect longing, perfectly satisfied, which is what we call

the state of glory. Nature; religion upon earth; blessedness in

heaven--my text is the expression, in divers senses, of them all.

I. In the first place, then, there is in every man an unconscious and

unsatisfied longing after God, and that is the state of nature.

Experience is the test of that assertion. And the most superficial

examination of the facts of daily life, as well as the questioning of

our own souls, will tell us that this is the leading feature of them--a

state of unrest. What is it that one of those deistic poets of our own

land says, about Man never is, but always to be blest'? What is the

meaning of the fact that all round about us, and we partaking of it,

there is ceaseless, gigantic activity going on? The very fact that men

work, the very fact of activity in the mind and life, noble as it is,

and root of all that is good, and beautiful as it is, is still the

testimony of nature to this fact that I by myself am full of passionate

longings, of earnest desires, of unsupplied wants. I thirst,' is the

voice of the whole world.

No man is made to be satisfied from himself. For the stilling of our

own hearts, for the satisfying of our own nature, for the strengthening

and joy of our being, we need to go beyond ourselves, and to fix upon

something external to ourselves. We are not independent. None of us can

stand by himself. No man carries within him the fountain from which he

can draw. If a heart is to be blessed, it must go out of the narrow

circle of its own individuality; and if a man's life is to be strong

and happy, he must get the foundation of his strength somewhere else

than in his own soul. And, my friends! especially you young men, all

that modern doctrine of self-reliance, though it has a true side to it,

has also a frightfully false side. Though it may he quite true that a

man ought to be, in one sense, sufficient for himself, and that there

is no real blessedness of which the root does not lie within the nature

and heart of the man; though all that be quite true, yet, if the

doctrine means (as on the lips of many a modern eloquent and powerful

teacher of it, it does mean) that we can do without God, that we may be

self-reliant and self-sufficient, and proudly neglectful of all the

divine forces that come down into life to brighten and gladden it, it

is a lie, false and fatal; and of all the falsehoods that are going

about this world at present, I know not one that is varnished over with

more apparent truth, that is smeared over with more of the honey that

catches young, ardent, ingenuous hearts, than that half-truth, and

therefore most deceptive error, which preaches independence, and

self-reliance, and which means--a man's soul does not thirst for the

living God.' Take care of it! We are made not to be independent.

We are made, next, to need, not things, but living beings. My soul

thirsteth'--for what? An abstraction, a possession, riches, a thing?

No! my soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.' Yes, hearts want

hearts. The converse of Christ's saying is equally true; He said, God

is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit'; man

has a spirit, and man must have Spirit to worship, to lean upon, to

live by, or all will be inefficient and unsatisfactory. Oh, lay this to

heart, my brother!--no things can satisfy a living soul. No

accumulation of dead matter can become the life of an immortal being.

The two classes are separated by the whole diameter of the

universe--matter and spirit, thing and person; and you cannot feed

yourself upon the dead husks that lie there round about you--wealth,

position, honour. Books, thoughts, though they are nobler than these

other, are still inefficient. Principles, causes,' emotions springing

from truth, these are not enough. I want more than that, I want

something to love, something to lay a hand upon, that shall return the

grasp of the hand. A living man must have a living God, or his soul

will perish in the midst of earthly plenty, and will thirst and die

whilst the water of earthly delights is running all around him. We are

made to need persons, not things.

Then again, we need one Being who shall be all-sufficient. There is no

greater misery than that which may ensue from the attempt to satisfy

our souls by the accumulation of objects, each of them imperfect and

finite, which yet we fancy, woven together, will make an adequate

whole. When a heart is diverted from its one central purpose, when a

life is split up in a hundred different directions and into a hundred

different emotions, it is like a beam of light passed through some

broken surface where it is all refracted and shivered into fragments;

there is no clear vision, there is no perfect light. If a man is to be

blessed, he must have one source to which he can go. The merchantman

that seeks for many goodly pearls, may find the many; but until he has

bartered them all for the one, there is something lacking. Not only

does the understanding require to pass through the manifold, up and up

in ever higher generalisations, till it reaches the One from whom all

things come; but the heart requires to soar, if it would be at rest,

through all the diverse regions where its love may legitimately tarry

for a while, until it reaches the sole and central throne of the

universe, and there it may cease its flight, and fold its weary wings,

and sleep like a bird within its nest. We want a Being, and we want one

Being in whom shall be sphered all perfection, in whom shall abide all

power and blessedness; beyond whom thought cannot pass, out of whose

infinite circumference love does not need to wander; besides whose

boundless treasures no other riches can be required; who is light for

the understanding, power for the will, authority for the practical

life, purpose for the efforts, motive for the doings, end and object

for the feelings, home of the affections, light of our seeing, life of

our life, the love of our heart, the one living God, infinite in

wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth; who is all in

all, and without whom everything else is misery. My soul thirsteth for

God, for the living God.'

Brother! let me ask you the question, before I pass on--the question

for the sake of which I am preaching this sermon: Do you know that

Father? I know this much, that every heart here now answers an Amen'

(if it will be honest) to what I have been saying. Unrest; panting,

desperate thirst, deceiving itself as to where it should go; slaking

itself at the gilded puddles that the beasts would cough at,' instead

of coming to the water of life!--that is the state of man without God.

That is nature. That is irreligion. The condition in which every man is

that is not trusting in Jesus Christ, is this--thirsting for God, and

not knowing whom he is thirsting for, and so not getting the supply

that he wants.

II. There is a conscious longing, imperfect, but answered; and that is

the state of grace--the beginning of religion in a man's soul.

If it be true that there are, as part of the universal human

experience, however overlaid and stifled, these necessities of which I

have been speaking, the very existence of the necessities affords a

presumption, before all evidence, that, somehow and somewhere, they

shall be supplied. There can be no deeper truth--none, I think, that

ought to have more power in shaping some parts of our Christian creed,

than this, that God is a faithful Creator; and where He makes men with

longings, it is a prophecy that those longings are going to be

supplied. The same ground which avails to defend doctrines that cannot

be so well defended by any other argument--the same ground on which we

say that there is an immortality, because men long for it and believe

in it; that there is a God because men cannot get rid of the

instinctive conviction that there is; that there is a retribution,

because men's consciences do ask for it, and cry out for it--the very

same process which may be applied to the buttressing and defending of

all the grandest truths of the Gospel, applies also in this practical

matter. If I, made by God who knew what He was doing when He made me,

am formed with these deep necessities, with these passionate

longings--then it cannot but be that it is intended that they should be

to me a means of leading me to Him, and that there they should be

satisfied. For He is the faithful Creator,' and He remembers the

conditions under which His making of us has placed us. He knoweth our

frame,' and He remembereth what He has implanted within us. And the

presumption is, of course, turned into an actual certainty when we let

in the light of the Gospel upon the thing. Then we can say to every man

that thus is yearning after a goodness dimly perceived, and does not

know what it is that he wants, and we say to you now, Brother! betake

yourself to the cross of Christ go with those wants of yours to the

Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world': He will interpret

them to you. He will explain to you, as you do not now know, what they

mean; and, better than that, He will supply them all. Your souls are

thirsting; and you look about, here and there, and everywhere, for

springs of water. There is the fountain--go to Christ. Your souls are

thirsting for God. The unfathomed ocean of the Godhead lies far beyond

my lip; but here is the channel through which there flows that river of

water of life. Here is the manifested God, here is the granted God,

here is the Godhead coming into connection and union with man, his

wants and his sins--the living God' and His living Son, His everlasting

Word. He that believeth upon Him shall never hunger, and he that cometh

unto Him shall never thirst.' God is the divine and unfathomable ocean;

Christ the Son is the stream that brings salvation to every man's lips.

All wants are supplied there. Take it as a piece of the simplest prose,

with no rhetorical exaggeration about it, that Christ is everything,

everything that a man can want. We are made to require, and to be

restless until we possess, perfect truth--there it is! We are made to

want, and to be restless until we get, perfect, infinite unchangeable

love--there it is! We must have, or the burden of our own self-will

will be a misery to us, a hand laid upon the springs of our conduct,

authoritative and purifying, and have the blessedness of some voice to

say to us, I bid thee, and that is enough'--there it is! We must have

rest, purity, hope, gladness, life in our souls--there they all are!

Whatever form of human nature and character be yours, my

brother!--whatever exigencies of life you may be lying under the

pressure of--man or woman, adult or child, father or son, man of

business or man of thought, struggling with difficulties or bright with

joy--Oh! believe us, the perfecting of your character may be got in the

Lamb of God, and without Him it never can be possessed. Christ is

everything, and out of His fulness all we receive grace for grace.'

Not only in Christ is there the perfect supply of all these

necessities, but also that fulness becomes ours on the simple condition

of desiring it. The thirst for the living God in a man who has faith in

Christ Jesus, is not a thirst which amounts to pain, or arises from a

sense of non-possession. But in this divine region the principle of the

giving is this--to desire is to have; to long for is to possess. There

is no wide interval between the sense of thirst and the trickling of

the stream over the parched lip; but ever it is flowing, flowing past

us, and the desire is but the opening of the lips to receive the limpid

and life-giving waters. No one ever desired the grace of God, really

and truly desired it; but just in proportion as he desired it, he got

it--just in proportion as he thirsted, he was satisfied. Therefore we

have to preach that grand gospel that faith, simple, conscious longing,

turned to Christ, avails to bring down the full and perfect supply.

But some Christian people here may reply, Ah! I wish it were so: what

was that you were saying at the beginning of your sermon, about men

having religious depression, about Christians longing and not

possessing?' Well, I have only this to say about that matter. Wherever

in a heart that really believes on God in Christ, there is a thirst

that amounts to pain, and that has with it a sense of non-possession,

that is not because Christ's fulness has become shrunken; that is not

because there is a change in God's law, that the measure of the desire

is the measure of the reception; but it is only because, for some

reason or other that belongs to the man alone, the desire is not deep,

genuine, simple, but is troubled and darkened. What we ask, we get. If

I am a Christian, however feeble I may be, the feebleness of my faith

and the feebleness of my desire may make my supplies of grace feeble;

but if I am a Christian, there is no such thing as an earnest longing

unsatisfied, no such thing as a thirst accompanied with a pain and

sense of want, except in consequence of my own transgression.

And thus there is a longing imperfect in this life, but fully supplied

according to the measure of its intensity, a longing after the living

God'; and that is the state of a Christian man. And O my friend! that

is a widely different desire from the other that I have been speaking

about. It is blessed thus to say, My soul thirsteth for God.' It is

blessed to feel the passionate wish for more light, more grace, more

peace, more wisdom, more of God. That is joy, that is peace! Is that

your experience in this present life?

III. Lastly, there is a perfect longing perfectly satisfied; and that

is heaven.

We shall not there be independent, of course, of constant supplies from

the great central Fulness, any more than we are here. One may see in

one aspect, that just as the Christian life here on earth is in a very

true sense a state of never thirsting any more, because we have Christ,

and yet in another sense is a state of continual longing and desire--so

the Christian and glorified life in heaven, in one view of it, is the

removal of all that thirst which marked the condition of man upon

earth, and in another is the perfecting of all those aspirations and

desires. Thirst, as longing, is eternal; thirst, as aspiration after

God, is the glory of heaven; thirst, as desire for more of Him, is the

very condition of the celestial world, and the element of all its

blessedness.

That future life gives us two elements, an infinite God, and an

indefinitely expansible human spirit: an infinite God to fill, and a

soul to be filled, the measure and the capacity of which has no limit

set to it that we can see. What will be the consequence of the contact

of these two? Why this, for the first thing, that always, at every

moment of that blessed life, there shall be a perpetual fruition, a

perpetual satisfaction, a deep and full fountain filling the whole soul

with the refreshment of its waves and the music of its flow. And yet,

and yet--though at every moment in heaven we shall be satisfied, filled

full of God, full to overflowing in all our powers--yet the very fact

that the God who dwells in us, and fills our whole natures with

unsullied and perfect blessedness, is an infinite God; and that we in

whom the infinite Father dwells, are men with souls that can grow, and

can grow for ever--will result in this, that at every moment our

capacities will expand; that at every moment, therefore, the desire

will grow and spring afresh; that at every moment God will be seen

unveiling undreamed-of beauties, and revealing hitherto unknown heights

of blessedness before us; and that the sight of that transcendent,

unapproached, unapproachable, and yet attracting and transforming

glory, will draw us onward as by an impulse from above, and the

possession of some portion of it will bear us upward as by a power from

within; and so, nearer, nearer, ever nearer to the throne of light, the

centre of blessedness, the growing, and glorifying, and greatening

souls of the perfectly and increasingly blessed shall mount up with

wings as eagles.' Heaven is endless longing, accompanied with an

endless fruition--a longing which is blessedness, a longing which is

life!

My brother! let me put two sayings of Scripture side by side, My soul

thirsteth for God, for the living God,'--Father Abraham! send Lazarus,

that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue.'

There be two thirsts, one, the longing for God, which, satisfied, is

heaven; one, the longing for quenching of self-lit fires, and for one

drop of the lost delights of earth to cool the thirsty throat, which,

unsatisfied, is hell. Then hearken to the final vision on the page of

Scripture, He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as

crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.' To us it

is showed, and to us the whole revelation of God converges to that last

mighty call, Let him that is athirst come, and whosoever will, let him

take the water of life freely!'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE PSALMIST'S REMONSTRANCE WITH HIS SOUL

Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within

me? Hope in God: for I shall yet praise Him, the health of my

countenance, and my God.'--PSALM xliii. 5.

This verse, which closes this psalm, occurs twice in the previous one.

It is a kind of refrain. Obviously this little psalm, of which my text

is a part, was originally united with the preceding one. That the two

made one is clear to anybody that will read them, by reason of

structure, and tone, and similarity of the singer's situation, and the

recurrence of many phrases, and especially of these significant words

of my text.

The Psalmist is in circumstances of trouble and sorrow. We need not

enter upon them particularly, but the thing that I desire to point out

is that three times does the Psalmist take himself to task and question

himself as to the reasonableness of the emotions that are surging in

his soul, and checks these by higher considerations. Thrice he does it;

twice in vain, for the trouble and anxiety come rolling back upon him

in spite of the moment's respite, but the third time he triumphs.

I. We note, then, first, that moods and emotions should be examined and

governed by a higher self.

In the Psalmist's case, his gloom and despondency, which could plead

good reasons for their existence, had everything their own way at

first, and swept over his soul like the first rush of waters which have

burst their bounds. But, presently, the ruling part of his nature

wakes, and brings the feebler lower soul to its tribunal, and says, in

effect, Now! now that I am here, what hast thou to say about these

sorrows that thou hast been complaining about? Why art thou cast down,

O my soul? Why art thou disquieted? . . . Hope in God!'

I shall have a word or two to say presently about the details of this

remonstrance, but the main point that I make, to begin with, is just

this, that however strong and reasonably occasioned by circumstances a

man's emotions and feelings, either of the bright or the dark kind, may

be, they are not to be indulged, unless they have passed muster and

examination by that higher and better self. It is necessary to keep a

very tight hand upon all our feelings, whether they be the natural

desires of the sensuous part of our nature, or whether they be the

sentiments of sadness, or doubt, or anxiety, or perplexity, which are

the natural results of outward circumstances of trial; or whether, on

the contrary, they be the bright and buoyant ones which come, like

angels, along with prosperous hours. But that necessity, commonplace as

it is of all morals and all religion, is yet a thing which, day by day,

we so forget that we need to be ever and anon reminded of it.

There are hosts of people who, making profession of being Christians,

do not habitually put the brake on their moods and tempers, and who

seem to think that it is a sufficient vindication of gloom and sadness

to say that things are going badly with them in the outer world, and

who act as if they supposed that no joy can be too exuberant and no

elation too lofty if, on the other hand, things are going rightly. It

is a miserable travesty of the Christian faith to suppose that its

prime purpose is anything else than to put into our hands the power of

ruling ourselves because we let Christ rule us.

And so, dear brethren! though it be the A B C of Christian teaching,

suffer this word of exhortation. It is only milk for babes,' but it is

milk that the babes are very unwilling to take. Learn from this verse

before us the solemn duty of rigid control, by the higher self, of the

tremulous, emotional lower self which responds so completely to every

change of temperature or circumstances in the world without. And

remember that there should be a central heat which keeps the

temperature substantially the same, whatever be the weather outside. As

the wheel-house, and the steering gear, and the rudder of the ship

proclaim their purpose of guidance and direction, so eloquently and

unmistakably does the make of our inward selves tell us that emotions

and moods and tempers are meant to be governed, often to be crushed,

always to be moderated, by sovereign will and reason. In the Psalmist's

language, My soul' has to give account of its tremors and flutterings

to Me,' the ruling Self, who should be Lord of temperament, and control

the fluctuations of feeling.

II. Note that there are two ways of looking at causes of dejection and

disquiet.

The whole preceding parts of both the psalms, before this refrain, are

an answer to the question which my text puts. Why art thou cast down, O

my soul?' My soul' has been talking two whole psalms, to explain why it

is cast down. And after all the eloquent torrent of words to vindicate

and explain its reasons for sadness--separation from the sanctuary,

bitter remembrances of bright days, which the poet tells us are a

sorrow's crown of sorrow,' taunts of enemies and the like--after all

these have been said over and over again, the Psalmist says to himself:

Come now, let us hear it all once more. Why art thou cast down? Why art

thou disquieted within me? Thou hast been telling the reasons

abundantly. Speak them once again, and let us have a look at them.'

There is a court of appeal in each man, which tests and tries his

reasons for his moods; and these, which look very sufficient to the

flesh, turn out to be very insufficient when investigated and tested by

the higher spirit or self. We should appeal from Philip drunk to Philip

sober.' And if a man will be honest with himself, and tell himself why

he is in such a pucker of terror, or why he is in such a rapture of

joy, nine times out of ten the attempt to tell the reasons will be the

condemnation of the mood which they are supposed to justify. If men

would only bring the causes or occasions of the tempers and feelings

which they allow to direct them, to the bar of common sense, to say

nothing of religious faith, half the furious boilings in their hearts

would stop their ebullition. It would be like pouring cold water into a

kettle on the fire. It would end its bubbling. Everything has two

handles. The aspect of any event depends largely on the beholder's

point of view. There's nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes

it so.' Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted

within me?' The answer is often very hard to give; the question is

always very salutary to ask.

III. Note that no reasons for being cast down are so strong as those

for elation and calm hope.

Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my

countenance and my God.' I need not deal here with the fact that the

first of the three occurrences of this refrain is, in our Bible, a

little different from the other two. That is probably a mistake in the

text. In all three cases the words ought to stand the same.

Try to realise what God is to yourselves--My God' and the health of my

countenance.' That will stimulate sluggish feeling; that will calm

disturbed emotion. He that can say My God!' and in that possession can

repose, will not be easily moved, by the trivialities and

transitorinesses of this life, to excessive disquiet, whether of the

exuberant or of the woful sort. There is a wonderful calming power in

realising our possession of God as our portion--not stagnating, but

quieting. I am quite sure that the troubles of our lives, and the

gladnesses of our lives, which often distract, would be far less

operative in disturbing, if we felt more that God was ours and that we

were God's.

Brethren! there is no joy but calm.' To be at rest is better than

rapture. And there is no way of getting and keeping a fixed temper of

still tranquillity unless we go into that deep and hidden chamber, in

the secret place of the Most High, where we cannot hear the loud winds

when they call,' but dwell in security, whatever storms harass the

land. Why art thou cast down,' or lifted up,' and, in either case,

disquieted'? Hope in God,' and be at rest.

IV. Note that the effort to lay hold on the truth which calms is to be

repeated in spite of failures.

The words of our text are thrice repeated in these two psalms. In the

two former instances they are followed by a fresh burst of pained

feeling. A moment of tranquillity interrupts the agitation of the

Psalmist's soul, but is soon followed by the recurrence of the horrible

storm' that begins afresh.' A tiny island of blue appears in his sky,

and then the pale, ugly, grey rack drives across it once more. But the

guiding self keeps the hand firm on the tiller, notwithstanding the

wash of the water and the rolling of the ship, and the dominant will

conquers at last, and at the third time the yielding soul obeys and is

quiet, because the Psalmist's will resolved that it should be quiet,

and it hopes in God because He, by a dead lift of effort, lifts it up

to hope.

No effort at tranquillising our hearts is wholly lost; and no attempt

to lay hold upon God is wholly in vain. Men build a dam to keep out the

sea, and the winter storms make a breach in it, but it is not washed

away altogether, and next season they will not need to begin to build

from quite so low down; but there will be a bit of the former left, to

put the new structure upon, and so by degrees it will rise above the

tide, and at last will keep it out.

Did you ever see a child upon a swing, or a gymnast upon a trapeze?

Each oscillation goes a little higher; each starts from the same lowest

point, but the elevation on either side increases with each renewed

effort, until at last the destined height is reached and the daring

athlete leaps on to a solid platform. So we may, if I might say so, by

degrees, by reiterated efforts, swing ourselves up to that steadfast

floor on which we may stand high above all that breeds agitation and

gloom. It is possible, in the midst of change and circumstances that

excite sad emotions, anxieties, and fears--it is possible to have this

calmness of hope in God. The rainbow that spans the cataract rises

steadfast above the white, tortured water beneath, and persists whilst

all is hurrying change below, and there are flowers on the grim black

rocks by the side of the fall, whose verdure is made greener and whose

brightness is made brighter, by the freshening of the spray of the

waterfall. So we may be as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,' and may

bid dejected and disquieted souls to hope in God and be still.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE KING IN HIS BEAUTY

Thou art fairer than the children of men; grace is poured into Thy

lips: therefore God hath blessed Thee forever. 3. Gird Thy sword upon

Thy thigh, O mighty one, Thy glory and Thy majesty. 4. And in Thy

majesty ride on prosperously, because of truth and meekness and

righteousness: and Thy right hand shall teach Thee terrible things. 5.

Thine arrows are sharp; the peoples fall under Thee; they are in the

heart of the King's enemies. 6. Thy throne, O God, is for ever and

ever: a sceptre of equity is the sceptre of Thy kingdom. 7. Thou hast

loved righteousness, and hated wickedness: therefore God, Thy God, hath

anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows.' --PSALM xlv.

2-7 (R.V.).

There is no doubt that this psalm was originally the marriage hymn of

some Jewish king. All attempts to settle who that was have failed, for

the very obvious reason that neither the history nor the character of

any of them correspond to the psalm. Its language is a world too wide

for the diminutive stature and stained virtues of the greatest and best

of them, and it is almost ludicrous to attempt to fit its glowing

sentences even to a Solomon. They all look like little David in Saul's

armour. So, then, we must admit one of two things. Either we have here

a piece of poetical exaggeration far beyond the limits of poetic

license, or a greater than Solomon is here.' Every Jewish king, by

virtue of his descent and of his office, was a living prophecy of the

greatest of the sons of David, the future King of Israel. And the

Psalmist sees the ideal Person who, as he knew, was one day to be real,

shining through the shadowy form of the earthly king, whose very

limitations and defects, no less than his excellences and his glories,

forced the devout Israelite to think of the coming King in whom the

sure mercies' promised to David should be facts at last. In plainer

words, the psalm celebrates Christ, not only although, but because, it

had its origin and partial application in a forgotten festival at the

marriage of some unknown king. It sees Him in the light of the

Messianic hope, and so it prophesies of Christ. My object is to study

the features of this portrait of the King, partly in order that we may

better understand the psalm, and partly in order that we may with the

more reverence crown Him as Lord of all.

I. The Person of the King.

The old-world ideal of a monarch put special emphasis upon two

things--personal beauty and courtesy of address and speech. The psalm

ascribes both of these to the King of Israel, and from both of them

draws the conclusion that one so richly endowed with the most eminent

of royal graces is the object of the special favour of God. Thou art

fairer than the children of men, grace is poured into Thy lips:

therefore God hath blessed Thee for ever.'

Here, at the very outset, we have the keynote struck of superhuman

excellence; and though the reference is, on the surface, only to

physical perfection, yet beneath that there lies the deeper reference

to a character which spoke through the eloquent frame, and in which all

possible beauties and sovereign graces were united in fullest

development, in most harmonious co-operation and unstained purity.

Thou art fairer than the children of men.' Put side by side with that,

words which possibly refer to, and seem to contradict it. A later

prophet, speaking of the same Person, said: His visage was so marred,

more than any man, and His form than the sons of men. . . . There is no

form nor comeliness, and when we shall see Him there is no beauty that

we should desire Him.' We have to think, not of the outward form,

howsoever lovely with the loveliness of meekness and transfigured with

the refining patience of suffering it may have been, but of the beauty

of a soul that was all radiant with a lustre of loveliness that shames

the fragmentary and marred virtues of the best of us, and stands before

the world for ever as the supreme type and high-water mark of the grace

that is possible to a human spirit. God has lodged in men's nature the

apprehension of Himself, and of all that flows from Him, as true, as

good, as beautiful; and to these three there correspond wisdom,

morality, and art. The latter, divorced from the other two, becomes

earthly and devilish. This generation needs the lesson that beauty

wrenched from truth and goodness, and pursued for its own sake, by

artist or by poet or by dilettante, leads by a straight descent to

ugliness and to evil, and that the only true satisfying of the deep

longing for whatsoever things are lovely' is to be found when we turn

to Christ and find in Him, not only wisdom that enlightens the

understanding, and righteousness that fills the conscience, but beauty

that satisfies the heart. He is altogether lovely.' Nor let us forget

that once on earth the fashion of His countenance was altered, and His

raiment did shine as the light,' as indicative of the possibilities

that lay slumbering in His lowly Manhood, and as prophetic of that to

which we believe that the ascended Christ hath now attained--viz. the

body of His glory, wherein He reigns, filled with light and undecaying

loveliness on the Throne of the Heaven. Thus He is fairer in external

reality now, as He is, by the confession of an admiring, though not

always believing, world, fairer in inward character than the children

of men.

Another personal characteristic is Grace is poured into Thy lips.'

Kingly courtesy, and kingly graciousness of word, must be the

characteristic of the Sovereign of men. The abundance of that

bestowment is expressed by that word, poured.' We need only remember,

All wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth,'

or how even the rough instruments of authority were touched and

diverted from their appointed purpose, and came back and said, Never

man spake like this Man.' To the music of Christ's words all other

eloquence is harsh, poor, shallow--like the piping of a shepherd boy

upon some wretched oaten straw as compared with the full thunder of the

organ. Words of unmingled graciousness came from His lips. That

fountain never sent forth sweet waters and bitter.' He satisfies the

canon of St. James: If any man offend not in word, the same is a

perfect man.' Words of wisdom, of love, of pity, of gentleness, of

pardon, of bestowment, and only such, came from Him. Daughter! be of

good cheer.' Son! thy sins be forgiven thee.' Come unto Me all ye that

labour and are heavy-laden.'

Grace is poured into Thy lips'; and, withal, it is the grace of a King.

For His language is authoritative even when it is most tender, and

regal when it is most gentle. His lips, sweet as honey and the

honeycomb, are the lips of an Autocrat. He speaks, and it is done: He

commands, and it stands fast.' He says to the tempest, Be still!' and

it is quiet; and to the demons, Come out of him!' and they disappear;

and to the dead, Come forth!' and he stumbles from the tomb.

Another personal characteristic is--God hath blessed Thee for ever.' By

which we are to understand, not that the two preceding graces are the

reasons for the divine benediction, but that the divine benediction is

the cause of them; and therefore they are the signs of it. It is not

that because He is lovely and gracious therefore God hath blessed Him;

but it is that we may know that God has blessed Him, since He is lovely

and gracious. These endowments are the results, not the causes; the

signs or the proofs, not the reasons of the divine benediction. That is

to say, the humanity so fair and unique shows by its beauty that it is

the result of the continual and unique operation and benediction of a

present God. We understand Him when we say, On Him rests the Spirit of

God without measure or interruption.' The explanation of the perfect

humanity is the abiding Divinity.

II. We pass from the person of the King, in the next place, to His

warfare.

The Psalmist breaks out in a burst of invocation, calling upon the King

to array Himself in His weapons of warfare, and then in broken clauses

vividly pictures the conflict. The Invocation runs thus: Gird on thy

sword upon thy thigh, O mighty hero! gird on thy glory and thy majesty,

and ride on prosperously on behalf (or, in the cause) of truth and

meekness and righteousness.' The King, then, is the perfection of

warrior strength as well as of beauty and gentleness--a combination of

qualities that speaks of old days when kings were kings, and reminds us

of many a figure in ancient song, as well as of a Saul and a David in

Jewish history.

The singer calls upon Him to bind on His side His glittering sword, and

to put on, as His armour, glory and majesty.' These two words, in the

usage of the psalms, belong to Divinity, and they are applied to the

monarch here as being the earthly representative of the divine

supremacy, on whom there falls some reflection of the glory and the

majesty of which He is the vice-regent and representative. Thus

arrayed, with His weapon by His side and glittering armour on His

limbs, He is called upon to mount His chariot or His warhorse and ride

forth.

But for what? On behalf of truth, meekness, righteousness.' If He be a

warrior, these are the purposes for which the true King of men must

draw His sword, and these only. No vulgar ambition or cruel lust of

conquest, earth-hunger, or glory' actuates Him. Nothing but the spread

through the world of the gracious beauties which are His own can be the

end of the King's warfare. He fights for truth; He fights--strange

paradox--for meekness; He fights for righteousness. And He not only

fights for them, but with them, for they are His own, and by reason of

them He rides prosperously,' as well as rides prosperously' in order to

establish them.

In two or three swift touches the Psalmist next paints the tumult and

hurry of the fight. Thy right hand shall teach Thee terrible things.'

There are no armies or allies, none to stand beside Him. The one mighty

figure of the Kingly Warrior stands forth, as in the Assyrian

sculptures of conquerors, erect and solitary in His chariot, crashing

through the ranks of the enemy, and owing victory to His own strong arm

alone.

Then follow three short, abrupt clauses, which, in their hurry and

fragmentary character, reflect the confusion and swiftness of battle.

Thine arrows are sharp. . . . The people fall under Thee.' . . . In

the heart of the King's enemies.' The Psalmist sees the bright arrow on

the string; it flies; he looks--the plain is strewed with prostrate

forms, the King's arrow in the heart of each.

Put side by side with that this picture:--A rocky road; a great city

shining in the morning sunlight across a narrow valley; a crowd of

shouting peasants waving palm branches in their rustic hands; in the

centre the meek carpenter's Son, sitting upon the poor robes which

alone draped the ass's colt, the tears upon His cheeks, and His

lamenting heard above the Hosannahs, as He looked across the glen and

said, If thou hadst known the things that belong to thy peace!' That is

the fulfilment, or part of the fulfilment, of this prophecy. The

slow-pacing, peaceful beast and the meek, weeping Christ are the

reality of the vision which, in such strangely contrasted and yet true

form, floated before the prophetic eye of this ancient singer, for

Christ's humiliation is His majesty, and His sharpest weapon is His

all-penetrating love, and His cross is His chariot of victory and

throne of dominion.

But not only in His earthly life of meek suffering does Christ fight as

a King, but all through the ages the world-wide conflict for truth and

meekness and righteousness is His conflict; and wherever that is being

waged, the power which wages it is His, and the help which is done upon

earth He doeth it all Himself. True, He has His army, willing in the

day of His power, and clad in priestly purity and armour of light, but

all their strength, courage, and victory are from Him; and when they

fight and conquer, it is not they, but He in them who struggles and

overcomes. We have a better hope than that built on a stream of

tendency that makes for righteousness.' We know a Christ crucified and

crowned, who fights for it, and what He fights for will hold the field.

This prophecy of our psalm is not exhausted yet. I have set side by

side with it one picture--the Christ on the ass's colt. Put side by

side with it this other. I beheld the heaven opened; and lo! a white

horse. And He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True; and in

righteousness He doth judge and make war.' The psalm waits for its

completion still, and shall be fulfilled on that day of the true

marriage supper of the Lamb, when the festivities of the marriage

chamber shall be preceded by the last battle and crowning victory of

the King of kings, the Conqueror of the world.

III. Lastly, we have the royalty of the King.

Thy throne, O God! is for ever and ever.' This is not the place nor

time to enter on the discussion of the difficulties of these words. I

must run the risk of appearing to state confident opinions without

assigning reasons, when I venture to say that the translation in the

Authorised Version is the natural one. I do not say that others have

been adopted by reason of doctrinal prepossessions; I know nothing

about that; but I do say that they are not by any means so natural a

translation as that which stands before us. What it may mean is another

matter; but the plain rendering of the words, I venture to assert, is

what our English Bible makes it--Thy throne, O God! is for ever and

ever.'

Then it is to be remembered that, throughout the Old Testament, we have

occasional instances of the use of that great and solemn designation in

reference to persons in such place and authority as that they are

representatives of God. So kings and judges and lawyers and the like

are spoken of more than once. Therefore there is not, in the language,

translated as in our English Bible, necessarily the implication of the

unique divinity of the persons so addressed. But I take it that this is

an instance in which the prophet was wiser than he knew,' and in which

you and I understand him better than he understood himself, and know

what God, who spoke through him, meant, whatsoever the prophet, through

whom He spoke, did mean. That is to say, I take the words before us as

directly referring to Jesus Christ, and as directly declaring the

divinity of His person, and therefore the eternity of His kingdom.

We live in days when that perpetual sovereignty is being questioned. In

a revolutionary time like this it is well for Christian people, seeing

so many venerable things going, to tighten their grasp upon the

conviction that, whatever goes, Christ's kingdom will not go; and that,

whatever may be shaken by any storms, the foundation of His Throne

stands fast. For our personal lives, and for the great hopes of the

future beyond the grave, it is all-important that we should grasp, as

an elementary conviction of our faith, the belief in the perpetual rule

of that Saviour whose rule is life and peace. In the great mosque of

Damascus, which was a Christian church once, there may still be read,

deeply cut in the stone, high above the pavement where now Mohammedans

bow, these words, Thy kingdom, O Christ! is an everlasting kingdom.' It

is true, and it shall yet be known that He is for ever and ever the

Monarch of the world.

Then, again, this royalty is a royalty of righteousness. The sceptre of

Thy kingdom is a right sceptre. Thou lovest righteousness and hatest

wickedness.' His rule is no arbitrary sway, His rod is no rod of iron

and tyrannical oppression, His own personal character is righteousness.

Righteousness is the very life-blood and animating principle of His

rule. He loves righteousness, and, therefore, puts His broad shield of

protection over all who love it and seek after it. He hates wickedness,

and therefore He wars against it wherever it is, and seeks to draw men

out of it. And thus His kingdom is the hope of the world.

And, lastly, this dominion of perennial righteousness is the dominion

of unparalleled gladness. Therefore God, even Thy God, hath anointed

Thee with the oil of joy above Thy fellows.' Set side by side with that

the other words, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.' And

remember how, near the very darkest hour of the Lord's earthly

experiences, He said:--These things have I spoken unto you that My joy

may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.' Christ's gladness

flowed from Christ's righteousness. Because His pure humanity was ever

in touch with God, and in conscious obedience to Him, therefore, though

darkness was around, there was light within. He was sorrowful, yet

always rejoicing,' and the saddest of men was likewise the gladdest,

and possessed the oil of joy above His fellows.'

Brother! that kingdom is offered to us; participation in that joy of

our Lord may belong to each of us. He rules that He may make us like

Himself, lovers of righteousness, and so, like Himself, possessors of

unfading joy. Make Him your King, let His arrow reach your heart, bow

in submission to His power, take for your very life His words of

graciousness, lovingly gaze upon His beauty till some reflection of it

shall shine from you, fight by His side with strength drawn from Him

alone, own and adore Him as the enthroned God-man, Jesus Christ, the

Son of God. Crown Him with the many crowns of supreme trust,

heart-whole love, and glad obedience. So shall you be honoured to share

in His warfare and triumph. So shall you have a throne close to His and

eternal as it. So shall His sceptre be graciously stretched out to you

to give you access with boldness to the presence-chamber of the King.

So shall He give you too, the oil of joy for mourning,' even in the

valley of weeping,' and the fulness of His gladness for evermore, when

He sets you at His right hand.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE PORTRAIT OF THE BRIDE

Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also

thine own people, and thy father's house; 11. So shall the King desire

thy beauty: for He is thy Lord; and worship thou Him. 12. And the

daughter of Tyre shall be there with a gift; even the rich among the

people shall entreat thy favour. 13. The King's daughter within the

palace is all glorious: her clothing is inwrought with gold. 14. She

shall be led unto the King in broidered work: the virgins, her

companions, that follow her shall be brought unto thee. 15. With

gladness and rejoicing shall they be led; they shall enter into the

King's palace.'--PSALM xlv. 10-15 (R.V.).

The relation between God and Israel is constantly represented in the

Old Testament under the emblem of a marriage. The tenderest promises of

protection and the sharpest rebukes of unfaithfulness are based upon

this foundation. Thy Maker is thy Husband'; or, I am married unto thee,

saith the Lord.' The emblem is transferred in the New Testament to

Christ and His Church. Beginning with John the Baptist's designation of

Him as the Bridegroom, it reappears in many of our Lord's sayings and

parables, is frequent in the writings of the Apostle Paul, and reaches

its height of poetic splendour and terror in that magnificent

description in Revelation of the Bride, the Lamb's wife,' and the

marriage supper of the Lamb.'

Seeing, then, the continual occurrence of this metaphor, it is

unnatural and almost impossible to deny its presence in this psalm. In

a former sermon I have directed attention to the earlier portion of it,

which presents us, in its portraiture of the King, a shadowy and

prophetic outline of Jesus Christ. I desire, in a similar fashion, to

deal now with the latter portion, which, in its portrait of the bride,

presents us with truths having their real fulfilment in the Church

collectively and in the individual soul.

Of course, inasmuch as the consort of a Jewish monarch was not an

incarnate prophecy as her husband was, the transference of the

historical features of this wedding-song to a spiritual purpose is not

so satisfactory, or easy, in the latter part as in the former. There is

a thicker rind of prose fact, as it were, to cut through, and certain

of the features cannot be applied to the relation between Christ and

His Church without undue violence. But, whilst we admit that, it is

also clear that the main, broad outlines of this picture do require as

well as permit its higher application. Therefore I turn to them to try

to bring out what they teach us so eloquently and vividly of Christ's

gifts to, and requirements from, the souls that are wedded to Him.

I. Now the first point is this--the all-surrendering Love that must

mark the Bride.

The language of the tenth verse is the voice of prophecy or

inspiration; speaking words of fatherly counsel to the princess--Forget

also thine own people and thy father's house.' Historically I suppose

it points to the foreign birth of the queen, who is called upon to

abandon all old ties, and to give herself with wholehearted

consecration to her new duties and relations.

In all real wedded life, as those who have tasted it know, there comes,

by sweet necessity, the subordination, in the presence of a purer and

more absorbing love, brought close by a will itself ablaze with the

sacred glow.

Therefore, while giving all due honour to other forms of Christian

opposition to the prevailing unbelief, I urge the cultivation of a

quickened spiritual life as by far the most potent. Does not history

bear me out in that view? What, for instance, was it that finished the

infidelity of the eighteenth century? Whether had Butler's Analogy or

Charles Wesley's hymns, Paley's Evidences or Whitefield's sermons, most

to do with it? A languid Church breeds unbelief as surely as a decaying

oak does fungus. In a condition of depressed vitality, the seeds of

disease, which a full vigour would shake off, are fatal. Raise the

temperature, and you kill the insect germs. A warmer tone of spiritual

life would change the atmosphere which unbelief needs for its growth.

It belongs to the fauna of the glacial epoch, and when the rigours of

that wintry time begin to melt, and warmer days to set in, the

creatures of the ice have to retreat to arctic wildernesses, and leave

a land no longer suited for their life. A diffused unbelief, such as we

see around us to-day, does not really arise from the logical basis on

which it seems to repose. It comes from something much deeper,--a

certain habit and set of mind which gives these arguments their force.

For want of a better name, we call it the spirit of the age. It is the

result of very subtle and complicated forces, which I do not pretend to

analyse. It spreads through society, and forms the congenial soil in

which these seeds of evil, as we believe them to be, take root. Does

anybody suppose that the growth of popular unbelief is owing to the

logical force of certain arguments? It is in the air; a wave of it is

passing over us. We are in a condition in which it becomes shall drop

the toys of earth as easily and naturally as a child will some trinket

or plaything, when it stretches out its little hand to get a better

gift from its loving mother. Love will sweep the heart clean of its

antagonists; and there is no real union between Jesus Christ and us

except in the measure in which we joyfully, and not as a reluctant

giving up of things that we would much rather keep if we durst, count

all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus

our Lord.'

Have the terms of wedded life changed since my psalm was written? Is

there less need now than there used to be that, if we are to possess a

heart, we should give a whole heart? And have the terms of Christian

living altered since the old days, when He said, Whosoever he be of you

that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be My disciple'? Ah! I

fear me that it is no uncharitable judgment to say that the bulk of

so-called Christians are playing at being Christians, and have never

penetrated into the depths either of the sweet all-sufficiency of the

love which they say that they possess, or the constraining necessity

that is in it for the surrender of all besides. Many happy husbands and

wives, if they would only treat Jesus Christ as they treat one another,

would find out a power and a blessedness in the Christian life that

they know nothing about at present. Daughter! forget thine own people

and thy father's house!'

II. Again, the second point here is that which directly follows--the

King's love and the Bride's reverence. So shall the King greatly desire

thy beauty: for He is thy Lord; and worship thou Him.'

The King is drawn, in the outgoings of His affection, by the sweet

trust and perfect love which has surrendered everything for him and

happily followed him from the far-off land. And then, in accordance

with Oriental ideas, and with His royal rank, the bride is exhorted, in

the midst of the utter trust and equality born of love, to remember, He

is thy Lord, and reverence thou Him.' So, then, here are two thoughts

that go, as I take it, very deep into the realities of the Christian

life. The first is that, in simple literal fact, Jesus Christ is

affected, in His relation to us, by the completeness of our dependence

upon Him, and surrender of all else for Him. We do not believe that

half vividly enough. We have surrounded Jesus Christ with a halo of

mystery and of remoteness which neither lets us think of Him as being

really man or really God. And I press on you this as a plain fact, no

piece of pulpit rhetoric, that His relation to us as Christians hinges

upon our surrender to Him. Of course, there is a love with which He

pours Himself out over the unworthy and the sinful--blessed be His

name!--and the more sinful and the more unworthy, the deeper the

tenderness and the more yearning the pity and pathos of invitation

which He lavishes upon us. But that is a different thing from this

other, which is that He is pleased or displeased, actually drawn to or

repelled from us, in the measure of the completeness and gladness of

our surrender of ourselves to Him. That is what Paul means when he says

that he labours that whether present or absent he may be pleasing to

Christ.' And this is the highest and strongest motive that I know for

all holy and noble living, that we shall bring a smile into our

Master's face and draw Him nearer to ourselves thereby. So shall the

King greatly desire thy beauty.'

Again, in the measure in which we live out our Christianity, in

whole-hearted and thorough surrender, in that measure shall we be

conscious of His nearness and feel His love.

There are many Christian people that have only religion enough to make

them uncomfortable, only enough to make religion to them a system of

regulations, negative and positive, the reasonableness and sweetness of

which they but partially apprehend. They must not do this because it is

forbidden; they ought to do that because it is commanded. They would

much rather do the forbidden thing, and they have no wish to do the

commanded thing, and so they live in twilight, and when they come

beside a man who really has been walking in the light of Christ's face,

the language of his experience, though it be but a transcript of facts,

sounds to them all unreal and fanatical. They miss the blessing that is

waiting for them, just because they have not really given up

themselves. If by resolute and continual opening of our hearts to

Christ's real love and presence, and by consequent casting off of our

false and foolish self-dependence, we were to blow away the clouds that

come between us and Him, we should feel the sunshine. But as it is, a

miserable multitude of professing Christians walk in the darkness, and

have no light,' or, at the most, but some wintry sunshine that

struggles through the thick mist, and does little more than reveal the

barrenness that lies around. Brethren! if you want to be happy

Christians, be out-and-out ones; and if you would have your hands and

your hearts filled with Christ, empty them of the trash that they grip

so closely now.

Then, on the other side, there is the reminder and exhortation: He is

thy Lord, worship thou Him.' The beggar-maid that, in the old ballad,

married the king, in all her love was filled with reverence; and the

ragged, filthy souls, whom Jesus Christ stoops to love, and wash, and

make His own, are never to forget, in the highest rapture of their joy,

their lowly adoration, nor in the glad familiarity of their loving

approach to Him, cease to remember that the test of love is, Keep My

commandments.'

There are types of emotional and sentimental religion that have a great

deal more to say about love than about obedience; that are full of half

wholesome apostrophes to a dear Lord,' and almost forget the Lord' in

the emphasis which they put on the dear.' And I want you to remember

this, as by no means an unnecessary caution, and of especial value in

some quarters to-day, that the test of the reality of Christian love is

its lowliness, and that all that which indulges in heated emotion, and

forgets practical service, is rotten and spurious. Though the King

desire her beauty, still, when He stretches out the golden sceptre,

Esther must come to Him with lowly guise and a reverent heart. He is

thy Lord, worship thou Him.'

III. The next point in this portraiture is the reflected honour and

influence of the bride.

There are difficulties about the translation of the 12th verse of our

psalm with which I do not need to trouble you. We may take it for our

purpose as it stands before us. The daughter of Tyre' (representing the

wealthy, outside nations) shall be there with a gift; even the rich

among the people shall entreat thy favour.'

The bride being thus beloved by the King, thus standing by His side,

those around recognise her dignity and honour, and draw near to secure

her intercession. Translate that out of the emblem into plain words,

and it comes to this--if Christian people, and communities of such, are

to have influence in the world, they must be thorough-going Christians.

If they are, they will get hatred sometimes; but men know honest people

and religious people when they see them, and such Christians will win

respect and be a power in the world. If Christian men and Christian

communities are despised by outsiders, they very generally earn the

contempt and deserve it, both from men and from heaven. The true

evangelist is Christian character. They that manifestly live with the

sunshine of the Lord's love on their faces, and whose hands are plainly

clear from worldly and selfish graspings, will have the world

recognising the fact and honouring them accordingly. The sons of them

that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee, and all they that

despised thee shall bow themselves down to the soles of thy feet.' When

the Church has cast the world out of its heart, it will conquer the

world--and not till then.

IV. The next point in this picture is the fair adornment of the bride.

The language is in part ambiguous; and if this were the place for

commenting would require a good deal of comment. But we take it as it

stands in our Bible, The King's daughter is all glorious within'--not

within her nature, but within the innermost recesses of the palace--her

clothing is of wrought gold. She shall be brought unto the King in

raiment of needlework.'

It is an easy and well-worn metaphor to talk about people's character

as their dress. We speak about the habits' of a man, and we use that

word to express both his customary manners and his costume. Custom and

costume, again, are the same word. So here, without any departure from

the well-trodden path of Scriptural emblem, we cannot but see in the

glorious apparel the figure of the pure character with which the bride

is clothed. The Book of the Revelation dresses her in the fine linen

clean and white, which symbolises the lustrous radiance and snowy

purity of righteousness. The psalm describes her dress as partly

consisting in garments gleaming with gold, which suggests splendour and

glory, and partly in robes of careful and many-coloured embroidery,

which suggests the patience with which the slow needle has been worked

through the stuff, and the variegated and manifold graces and beauties

with which she is adorned.

So, putting all the metaphors together, the true Christian character,

which will be ours if we really are the subjects of that divine love,

will be lustrous and snowy as the snows on Hermon, or as was the

garment whose whiteness outshone the neighbouring snows when He was

transfigured before them.' Our characters will be splendid with a

splendour far above the tawdry beauties and vulgar conspicuousness of

the heroic' and worldly ideals, and will be endowed with a purity and

harmony of colouring in richly various graces, such as no earthly looms

can ever weave.

We are not told here how the garment is attained. It is no part of the

purpose of the psalm to tell us that, but it is part of its purpose to

insist that there is no marriage between Christ and the soul except

that soul be pure, none except it be robed in the beauty of

righteousness and the splendour of consecration, and the various gifts

of an all-giving Spirit. The man that came into the wedding-feast, with

his dirty, every-day clothes on, was turned out as a rude insulter. But

what of the queen that should come foully dressed? There would be no

place for her amidst its solemnities. You will never stand at the right

hand of Christ, unless jour souls here are clothed in the fine linen

clean and white, and over it the flashing wealth and the harmonised

splendour of the gold and embroidery of Christlike graces. We know how

to get the garment. Faith strips the rags and puts the best robe on us;

and effort based upon faith enables us day by day to put off the old

man with his deeds and to put on the new man. The bride made herself

ready,' and to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine

linen, clean and white.'

V. Lastly, we have the picture of the homecoming of the bride. 'She

shall be brought unto the King. . . . with gladness and rejoicing shall

they be brought; they shall enter into the King's palace.'

The presence of virgin companions waiting on the bride is no more

difficult to understand here than it is in Christ's parable of the Ten

Virgins. It is a characteristic of all parabolical representation to be

elastic, and sometimes to duplicate its emblems for the same thing; and

that is the case here. But the main point to be insisted upon is this,

that, according to the perspective of Scripture, the life of the

Christian Church here on earth is, if I may so say, a betrothal in

righteousness and loving-kindness; and that the betrothal waits for its

consummation in that great future when the bride shall pass into the

presence of the King. The whole collective body of sinful souls

redeemed by His blood, and who know the sweetness of His partially

received love, shall be drawn within the curtains of that upper house,

and enter into a union with Christ Jesus ineffable, incomprehensible

till experienced; and of which the closest union of loving souls on

earth is but a dim shadow. He that is joined to the Lord is one

spirit'; and the reality of our union with Him rises above the emblem

of a marriage, as high as spirit rises above flesh.

The psalm stops at the palace-gate. Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard,

neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath

prepared for them that love Him.' But there is a solemn prelude to that

completed union and its deep rapture. Before it there comes the last

campaign of the conquering King on the white horse, who wars in

righteousness. Dear friends! you must choose now whether you will be of

the company of the Bride or of the company of the enemy. They that were

ready went in with Him unto the marriage, and the door was shut.'

Which side of the door do you mean to be on?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE CITY AND RIVER OF GOD

There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God,

the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. 5. God is in the

midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that

right early. 6. The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: He uttered

His voice, the earth melted. 7. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God

of Jacob is our refuge.'--PSALM xlvi 4-7.

There are two remarkable events in the history of Israel, one or other

of which most probably supplied the historical basis upon which this

psalm rests. One is that wonderful deliverance of the armies of

Jehoshaphat from the attacking forces of the bordering nations, which

is recorded in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Chronicles. There

you will find that, by a singular arrangement, the sons of Korah,

members of the priestly order, were not only in the van of the battle,

but celebrated the victory by hymns of gladness. It is possible that

this may be one of those hymns; but I think rather that the more

ordinary reference is the correct one, which sees in this psalm and in

the two succeeding ones, echoes of that supernatural deliverance of

Israel in the time of Hezekiah, when

The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,'

and Sennacherib and all his army were, by the blast of the breath of

His nostrils, swept into swift destruction.

The reasons for that historical reference may be briefly stated. We

find, for instance, a number of remarkable correspondences between

these three psalms and portions of the Book of the prophet Isaiah, who,

as we know, lived in the period of that deliverance. The comparison,

for example, which is here drawn with such lofty, poetic force between

the quiet river which makes glad the city of God,' and the tumultuous

billows of the troubled sea, which shakes the mountain and moves the

earth, is drawn by Isaiah in regard to the Assyrian invasion, when he

speaks of Israel refusing the waters of Shiloah, which go softly,' and,

therefore, having brought upon them the waters of the river--the power

of Assyria--which shall fill the breadth of Thy land, O Immanuel!'

Notice, too, that the very same consolation which was given to Isaiah,

by the revelation of that significant appellation, Immanuel, God with

us,' appears in this psalm as a kind of refrain, and is the foundation

of all its confident gladness, The Lord of Hosts is with us.' Besides

these obvious parallelisms, there are others to which I need not refer,

which, taken together, seem to render it at least probable that we have

in this psalm the devotional echo of the great deliverance of Israel

from Assyria in the time of Hezekiah.

Now, these verses are the cardinal central portion of the song. We may

call them The Hymn of the Defence and Deliverance of the City of God.

We cannot expect to find in poetry the same kind of logical accuracy in

the process of thought which we require in treatises; but the lofty

emotion of devout song obeys laws of its own: and it is well to

surrender ourselves to the flow, and to try to see with the Psalmist's

eyes for a moment his sources of consolation and strength.

I take the four points which seem to be the main turning-points of

these verses--first, the gladdening river; second, the indwelling

Helper; third, the conquering voice; and fourth, the alliance of

ourselves by faith with the safe dwellers in the city of God.

I. First, we have the gladdening river--an emblem of many great and

joyous truths.

The figure is occasioned by, or at all events derives much of its

significance from, a geographical peculiarity of Jerusalem. Alone among

the great cities and historical centres of the world, it stood upon no

broad river. One little perennial stream, or rather rill of living

water, was all which it had; but Siloam was mightier and more blessed

for the dwellers in the rocky fortress of the Jebusites than the

Euphrates, Nile, or Tiber for the historical cities which stood upon

their banks. One can see the Psalmist looking over the plain eastward,

and beholding in vision the mighty forces which came against them,

symbolised and expressed by the breadth and depth and swiftness of the

great river upon which Nineveh sat as a queen, and then thinking upon

the little tiny thread of living water that flowed past the base of the

rock upon which the temple was perched. It seems small and

unconspicuous--nothing compared to the dash of the waves and the rise

of the floods of those mighty secular empires, still, There is a river

the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God.' Its waters shall

never fail, and thirst shall flee whithersoever this river comes.

It is also to be remembered that the psalm is running in the track of a

certain constant symbolism that pervades all Scripture. From the first

book of Genesis down to the last chapter of Revelation, you can hear

the dashing of the waters of the river. It went out from the garden and

parted into four heads.' Thou makest them drink of the river of Thy

pleasures.' Behold, waters issued out from under the threshold of the

house eastward,' and everything shall live whithersoever the river

cometh.' He that believeth on me, out of His belly shall flow rivers of

living water.' And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as

crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.' Isaiah,

who has already afforded some remarkable parallels to the words of our

psalm, gives another very striking one to the image now under

consideration, when he says, The glorious Lord will be unto us a place

of broad rivers and streams, wherein shall go no galley with oars.' The

picture in that metaphor is of a stream lying round Jerusalem, like the

moated rivers which girdle some of the cities in the plains of Italy,

and are the defence of those who dwell enclosed in their flashing

links.

Guided, then, by the physical peculiarity of situation which I have

referred to, and by the constant meaning of Scriptural symbolism, I

think we must conclude that this river, the streams whereof make glad

the city of God,' is God Himself in the outflow and self-communication

of His own grace to the soul. The stream is the fountain in flow. The

gift of God, which is living water, is God Himself, considered as the

ever-imparting Source of all refreshment, of all strength, of all

blessedness. This spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe

should receive.'

We must dwell for a moment or two still further upon these words, and

mark how this metaphor, in a most simple and natural way, sets forth

very grand and blessed spiritual truths with regard to this

communication of God's grace to them that love Him and trust Him.

First, I think we may see here a very beautiful suggestion of the

manner, and then of the variety, and then of the effects of that

communication of the divine love and grace.

We have only to read the previous verses to see what I mean. God is our

refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not

we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be

carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and

be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.'

There you can hear the wild waves dashing round the base of the firm

hills, sapping their strength, and toppling their crests down in the

bubbling, yeasty foam. Remember how, not only in Scripture but in all

poetry, the sea has been the emblem of endless unrest. Its waters,

those barren, wandering fields of foam, going moaning round the world

with unprofitable labour, how they have been the emblem of unbridled

power, of tumult and strife, and anarchy and rebellion! Then mark how

our text brings into sharpest contrast with all that hurly-burly of the

tempest, and the dash and roar of the troubled waters, the gentle,

quiet flow of the river, the streams whereof make glad the city of

God'; the translucent little ripples purling along beds of golden

pebbles, and the enamelled meadows drinking the pure stream as it

steals by them. Thus, says our psalm, not with noise, not with tumult,

not with conspicuous and destructive energy, but in silent, secret

underground communication, God's grace, God's love, His peace, His

power, His almighty and gentle Self flow into men's souls. Quietness

and confidence on our sides correspond to the quietness and serenity

with which He glides into the heart. Instead of all the noise of the

sea you have within the quiet impartations of the voice that is still

and small, wherein God dwells. The extremest power is silent. The

mightiest force in all the universe is the force which has neither

speech nor language. The parent of all physical force, as astronomers

seem to be more and more teaching us, is the great central sun which

moveth all things, which operates all physical changes, whose beams are

all but omnipotent, and yet fall so quietly that they do not disturb

the motes that dance in their path. Thunder and lightning are child's

play compared with the energy that goes to make the falling dews and

quiet rains. The power of the sunshine is the root power of all force

which works in material things. And so we turn, with the symbol in our

hands, to the throne of God, and when He says, Not by might, nor by

power, but by My Spirit,' we are aware of an energy, the signature of

whose might is its quietness, which is omnipotent because it is gentle

and silent. The seas may roar and be troubled, the tiny thread of the

river is mightier than them all.

And then, still further, in this first part of our text there is also

set forth very distinctly the number and the variety of the gifts of

God. The streams whereof,' literally, the divisions whereof,'--that is

to say, going back to Eastern ideas, the broad river is broken up into

canals that are led off into every man's little bit of garden ground;

coming down to modern ideas, the water is carried by pipes into every

man's household and chamber. The stream has its divisions; listen to

words that are a commentary upon the meaning of this verse, All these

worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing unto every man

severally as He will'--an infinite variety, an endless diversity,

according to all the petty wants of each that is supplied thereby. As

you can divide water all but infinitely, and it will take the shape of

every containing vessel, so into every soul according to its

capacities, according to its shape, according to its needs, this great

gift, this blessed presence of the God of our strength, will come. The

varieties of His gifts are as much the mark of His omnipotence as the

gentleness and stillness of them.

And then I need only touch upon the last thought, the effects of this

communicated God. The streams make glad'--with the gladness which comes

from refreshment, with the gladness which comes from the satisfying of

all thirsty desires, with the gladness which comes from the contact of

the spirit with absolute completeness; of the will, with perfect

authority; of the heart, with changeless love; of the understanding,

with pure incarnate truth; of the conscience, with infinite peace; of

the child, with the Father; of my emptiness, with His fulness; of my

changeableness, with His immutability; of my incompleteness, with His

perfectness. They to whom this stream passes shall know no thirst; they

who possess it from them it shall come. Out of him shall flow rivers of

living water.' That all-sufficient Spirit not only becomes to its

possessor the source of individual refreshment, and slakes his own

thirst, but flows out from him for the gladdening of others.

The least flower with a brimming cup may stand,

And share its dew-drop with another near.'

The city thus supplied may laugh at besieging hosts. With the deep

reservoir in its central fortress, the foe may do as they list to all

surface streams, its water shall be sure, and no raging thirst shall

ever drive it to surrender. The river breaks from the threshold of the

Temple, within its walls, and when all beyond that safe enclosure is

cracked and parched in the fierce heat, and no green thing can be seen

in the dry and thirsty land, that stream shall make glad the city of

our God,' and everything shall live whithersoever the river cometh.'

Thou shalt be as a well-watered garden, and as a river whose streams

fail not.'

II. Then notice, secondly, substantially the same general thought, but

modified and put in plain words--the indwelling Helper.

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved: God shall help her,

and that right early,' or, as the latter clause had better be

translated, as it is given in the margin of some of our Bibles, God

shall help her at the appearance of the morning.' There are two

promises here: first of all, the constant presence; and second, help at

the right time. Whether there be actual help or no, there is always

with us the potential help of God, and it flashes into energy at the

moment that He knows to be the right one. The appearing of the morning'

He determines; not you or I. Therefore, we may be confident that we

have God ever by our sides. Not that that Presence is meant to avert

outward or inward trouble and trial, and painfulness and weariness; but

in the midst of these, and while they last, here is the assurance, She

shall not be moved'; and that it will not always last, here is the

ground of the confidence, God shall help her when the morning dawns.'

I need not point out to you the contrast here between the tranquillity

of the city which has for its central Inhabitant and Governor the

omnipotent God, and the tumult of all that turbulent earth. The waves

of the troubled waters break everywhere,--they run over the flat plains

and sweep over the mountains of secular strength and outward might, and

worldly kingdoms, and human polities and earthly institutions, acting

on them all either by slow corrosive action at the base, or by the

tossing floods swirling against them, until they shall be lost in the

ocean of time. For the history of the world is the judgment of the

world.' When He wills the plains are covered and mountains disappear,

but one rock stands fast--The mountain of the Lord's house is exalted

above the top of the mountains'; and when everything is rocking and

swaying in the tempests, here is fixity and tranquillity. She shall not

be moved.' Why? Because of her citizens? No. Because of her guards and

gates? No! Because of her polity? No! Because of her orthodoxy? No! But

because God is in her, and she is safe, and where He dwells no evil can

come. Thou carriest Caesar and his fortunes.' The ship of Christ

carries the Lord and His fortunes; and, therefore, whatsoever becomes

of the other little ships in the wild dash of the tempest, this with

the Lord on board arrives at its desired haven--God is in the midst of

her, she shall not be moved.'

Then, still further, that Presence which is always the pledge of

stability, and unmoved calm, even while causes of agitation are

storming around, will, as I said, flash into energy, and be a Helper

and a Deliverer at the right moment. And when will that right moment

be? At the appearing of the morning. And when they arose early in the

morning, they were all dead corpses'; in the hour of greatest

extremity, but ere the foe has executed his purposes; not too soon for

fear and faith, not too late for hope and help; when the morning dawns,

when the appointed hour of deliverance, which He alone determines, has

struck. It is not for you to know the times and seasons'; but this we

may know, that He who is the Lord of time will ever save at the best

possible moment. He will not come so quickly as to prevent us from

feeling our need; He will not tarry so long as to make us sick with

hope deferred, or so long as to let the enemy fulfil his purposes of

destruction. Lord, behold! he whom Thou lovest is sick. Now Jesus loved

Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When He had heard therefore that

he was sick, He abode two days still in the same place where He

was. . . . Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.

Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. . . . And he that

was dead came forth.'

The Lord may seem to sleep on His hard wooden pillow in the stern of

the little fishing boat, and even while the frail craft begins to fill

may show no sign of help. But ere the waves have rolled over her, the

cry of fear that yet trusts, and of trust that yet fears, wakes Him who

knew the need, even while He seemed to slumber, and one mighty word, as

of a master to some petulant slave, Peace! be still,' hushes the

confusion, and rebukes the fear, and rewards the faith.

The Lord is in the midst of her'--that is the perennial fact. The Lord

shall help her, and that right early'--that is the grace for seasonable

help.'

III. The psalm having set forth these broad grounds of confidence, goes

on to tell the story of actual deliverance which confirms them, and of

which they are indeed but the generalised expression.

The condensed narrative moves to its end by a series of short crashing

sentences like the ring of the destructive axe at the roots of trees.

We see the whole sequence of events as by lightning flashes, which give

brief glimpses and are quenched. The grand graphic words seem to pant

with haste, as they record Israel's deliverance. That deliverance comes

from the Conquering Voice. The heathen raged' (the same word, we may

note, as is found a verse or two back, Though the waters thereof

roar'), the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth

melted.' With what vigour these hurried sentences describe, first, the

wild wrath and formidable movements of the foe, and then the One

Sovereign Word which quells them all, as well as the instantaneous

weakness that dissolves the seeming solid substance when the breath of

His lips smites it!

And where will you find a grander or loftier thought than this, that

the simple word--the utterance of the pure will of God conquers all

opposition, and tells at once in the sphere of material things? He

speaks, and it is done. At the sound of that thunder-voice, hushed

stillness and a pause of dread fall upon all the wide earth, deeper and

more awe-struck than the silence of the woods with their huddling

leaves, when the feebler peals roll through the sky. The depths are

congealed in the heart of the sea'--as if you were to lay hold of

Niagara in its wildest plunge, and were with a word to freeze all its

descending waters and stiffen them into immovableness in fetters of

eternal ice. So He utters His voice, and all meaner noises are hushed.

The lion hath roared, who shall not fear?' He speaks--no weapon, no

material vehicle is needed. The point of contact between the pure

divine will and the material creatures which obey its behests is ever

wrapped in darkness, whether these be the settled ordinances which men

call nature, or the less common which the Bible calls miracle. In all

alike there is, to every believer in a God at all, an incomprehensible

action of the spiritual upon the material, which allows of no

explanations to bridge over the gulf recognised in the broken

utterances of our psalm, He uttered His voice: the earth melted.'

How grandly, too, these last words give the impression of immediate and

utter dissolution of all opposition! All the Titanic brute forces are,

at His voice, disintegrated, and lose their organisation and solidity.

The hills melted like wax'; The mountains flowed down at Thy presence.'

The hardness and obstinacy is all liquefied and enfeebled, and parts

with its consistency and is lost in a fluid mass. As two carbon points

when the electric stream is poured upon them are gnawed to nothingness

by the fierce heat, and you can see them wasting before your eyes, so

the concentrated ardour of His breath falls upon the hostile evil, and

lo! it is not.

The Psalmist is generalising the historical fact of the sudden and

utter destruction of Sennacherib's host into a universal law. And it is

a universal law--true for us as for Hezekiah and the sons of Korah,

true for all generations. Martin Luther might well make this psalm the

battle cry of the Reformation, and we may well make our own the rugged

music and dauntless hope of his rendering of these words:--

And let the Prince of Ill

Look grim as e'er he will,

He harms us not a whit.

For why? His doom is writ.

A word shall quickly slay him.'

IV. Then note, finally, how the psalm shows us the act by which we

enter the City of God.

The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.' It is

not enough to lay down general truths, however true and however

blessed, about the safe and sacred city of God--not enough to be

theoretically convinced of the truth of the supreme governance and

ever-present aid of God. We must take a further step that will lead us

far beyond the regions of barren intellectual apprehension of the great

truths of God's love and care. These truths are nothing to us,

brethren! unless, like the Psalmist here, we make them our own, and

losing the burden of self in the very act of grasping them by faith,

unite ourselves with the great multitude who are joined together in

Him, and say, He is my God: He is our refuge.' That living act of

appropriating faith' presupposes, indeed, the presence of these truths

in our understandings, but in the very act they are changed into powers

in our lives. They pass into the affections and the will. They are no

more empty generalities. Bread nourishes, not when it is looked at, but

when it is eaten. He that eateth Me, even he shall live by Me.' We feed

on Christ when we make Him ours by faith, and each of us is sustained

and blessed by Him when we can say, My Lord and my God!' Mark, too, how

there is here set forth the twofold ground for our calmest confidence

in these two mighty names of God.

The Lord of Hosts is with us.' That majestic name includes all the

deepest and most blessed thoughts of God which the earlier revelation

imparted. That name of Jehovah' proclaims at once His Eternal Being and

His covenant relation--manifesting Him by its mysterious meaning as He

who dwells above time, the tideless sea of absolute unchanging

existence, from whom all the stream of creatural life flows forth

many-coloured and transient, to whom it all returns, who, Himself

unchanging, changeth all things, and declaring Him, by the historical

associations connected with it, as having unveiled His purposes in firm

words, to which men may trust, and as having entered into that solemn

league with Israel which underlay their whole national life. He is the

Lord the Eternal,--the covenant name.

He is the Lord of Hosts, the Imperator,' absolute Master and Commander,

Captain and King of all the combined forces of the universe, whether

they be personal or impersonal, spiritual or material, who, in serried

ranks, wait on Him, and move harmonious, obedient to His will. And this

Eternal Master of the legions of the universe is with us, weak and

poor, and troubled and sinful as we are. Therefore, we will not fear:

what can man do unto us?

Again, when we say, The God of Jacob is our refuge,' we reach back into

the past, and lay hold of the mercies promised to, and received by, the

long vanished generations who trusted in Him and were lightened. As, by

the one name, we appeal to His own Being and uttered pledge, so, by the

other, we appeal to His ancient deeds--past as we call them, but

present with Him, who lives and loves in the undivided eternity above

the low fences of time. All that He has been, He is; all that He has

done, He is doing. We on whom the ends of the earth are come have the

same Helper, the same Friend that the world's grey fathers' had. They

that go before do not prevent them that come after. The river is full

still. The van of the pilgrim host did, indeed, long, long ago drink

and were satisfied, but the bright waters are still as pellucid, still

as near, still as refreshing, still as abundant as they ever were. Nay,

rather, they are fuller and more accessible to us than to patriarch and

Psalmist, God having provided some better thing for us, that they

without us should not be made perfect.'

For we, brethren! have a fuller revelation of that mighty name, and a

more wondrous and closer divine presence by our sides. The psalm

rejoices in that The Lord of Hosts is with us'; and the choral answer

of the Gospel swells into loftier music, as it tells of the fulfilment

of psalmists' hopes and prophets' visions in Him who is called

Immanuel,' which is, being interpreted, God with us.' The psalm is

confident in that God dwelt in Zion, and our confidence has the more

wondrous fact to lay hold of, that even now the Word who dwelt among us

makes His abode in every believing heart, and gathers them all together

at last in that great city, round whose flashing foundations no tumult

of ocean beats, whose gates of pearl need not be closed against any

foes, with whose happy citizens God will dwell, and they shall be His

people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE LORD OF HOSTS, THE GOD OF JACOB

The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our Refuge.' --PSALM

xlvi. 11.

Some great deliverance, the details of which we do not know, had been

wrought for Israel, and this psalmist comes forth, like Miriam with her

choir of maidens, to hymn the victory. The psalm throbs with

exultation, but no human victor's name degrades the singer's lips.

There is only one Conqueror whom he celebrates. The deliverance has

been the work of the Lord'; the desolations' that have been made on the

earth' He has made.' This great refrain of the song, which I have

chosen for my text, takes the experience of deliverance as a proof in

act of an astounding truth, and as a hope for the future. The Lord of

hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our Refuge.'

There is in these words a significant duplication of idea, both in

regard to the names which are given to God, and to that which He is

conceived as being to us; and I desire now simply to try to bring out

the force of the consolation and strength which lie in these two

epithets of His, and in the double wonder of His relation to us men.

I. First, then, I ask you to look at the twin thoughts of God that are

here. The Lord of hosts . . . The God of Jacob.'

Now, with regard to the former of these grand names, it may be observed

that it does not occur in the earliest stages of Revelation as recorded

in the Old Testament. The first instance in which we find it is in the

song of Hannah in the beginning of the first Book of Samuel; and it

re-appears in the Davidic psalms and in psalms and prophecies of later

date.

What hosts' are they of which God is the Lord? Is that great title a

mere synonym for the half-heathenish idea of the God of battles'? By no

means. True! He is the Lord of the armies of Israel, but the hosts

which the Psalmist sees ranged in embattled array, and obedient to the

command of the great Captain, are far other and grander than any

earthly armies. If we would understand the whole depth and magnificent

sweep of the idea enshrined in this name, we cannot do better than

recall one or two other Scripture phrases. For instance, the account of

the Creation in the Book of Genesis is ended by, Thus the heavens and

the earth were finished, and all the host of them.' Then, remember

that, throughout the Old Testament, we meet constantly with the idea of

the celestial bodies as being the hosts of heaven.' And, still further,

remember how, in one of the psalms, we hear the invocation to all ye

His hosts, ye ministers of His that do His pleasure,' the angels that

excel in strength,' to praise and bless Him. If we take account of all

these and a number of similar passages, I think we shall come to this

conclusion, that by that title, the Lord of hosts,' the prophets and

psalmists meant to express the universal dominion of God over the whole

universe in all its battalions and sections, which they conceived of as

one ranked army, obedient to the voice of the great General and Ruler

of them all.

So the idea contained in the name is precisely parallel with that to

which the heathen centurion in the Gospels had come, by reflecting upon

the teaching of the legion in which he himself commanded, when he said,

I am a man under authority, having servants under me; and I say to this

one, Go, and he goeth; to another, Come, and he cometh; to another, Do

this, and he doeth it--speak Thou the word!' To him Jesus Christ was

Captain of the Lord's hosts, and Ruler of all the ordered forces of the

universe. The Old Testament name enshrines the same idea. The universe

is an ordered whole. Science tells us that. Modern thought emphasises

it. But how cruel, relentless, crushing, that conception may be unless

we grasp the further thought which is presented in this great Name, and

see, behind all the play of phenomena, the one Will which is the only

power in the universe, and sways and orders all besides! The armies of

heaven and every creature in the great Cosmos are the servants of this

Lord. Then we can stand before the dreadful mysteries and the all but

infinite complications of this mighty Whole, and say, These are His

soldiers, and He is their Captain, the Lord of hosts.'

Next we turn, by one quick bound, from the wide sweep of that mighty

Name to the other, The God of Jacob.' The one carries us out among the

glories of the universe, and shows us, behind them all, the personal

Will of which they are the servants, and the Character of which they

are the expressions. The other brings us down to the tent of the

solitary wanderer, and shows us that that mighty Commander and Emperor

enters into close, living, tender, personal relations with one poor

soul, and binds Himself by that great covenant, which is rooted in His

love alone, to be the God who cares for and keeps and blesses the man

in all his wanderings. Neither does the command of the mighty Whole

hinder the closest relation to the individual, nor does the care of the

individual interfere with the direction of the Whole. The single soul

stands out clear and isolated, as if there were none in the universe

but God and himself; and the whole fulness of the divine power, and all

the tenderness of the God-heart, are lavished upon the individual, even

though the armies of the skies wait upon His nod.

So, if we put the two names together, we get the completion of the

great idea; and whilst the one speaks to us of infinite power, of

absolute supremacy, of universal rule, and so delivers us from the fear

of nature, and from the blindness which sees only the material

operations and not the working Hand that underlies them, the other

speaks to us of gentle and loving and specific care, and holds out the

hope that, between man and God, there may be a bond of friendship and

of mutual possession so sweet and sacred that nothing else can compare

with it. The God of Jacob is the Lord of hosts. More wondrous still,

the Lord of hosts is the God of Jacob.

II. Note, secondly, the double wonder of our relation to this great

God.

There is almost a tone of glad surprise, as well as of triumphant

confidence, in this refrain of our psalm, which comes twice in it, and

possibly ought to have come three times--at the end of each of its

sections. The emphasis is to be laid on the us' and the our,' as if

that was the miracle, and the fact which startled the Psalmist into the

highest rapture of astonished thankfulness.

The Lord of hosts is with us.' What does that say? It proclaims that

wondrous truth that no gulf between the mighty Ruler of all and us, the

insignificant little creatures that creep upon the face of this tiny

planet, has any power of separating us from Him. It is always hard to

believe that. It is harder to-day than it was when our Psalmist's heart

beat high at the thought. It is hard by reason of our sense-bound

blindness, by reason of our superficial way of looking at things, which

only shows us the nearest, and veils with their insignificances the

magnitude of the furthest. Jupiter is blazing in our skies every night

now; he is not one-thousandth part as great or bright as any one of the

little needle-points of light, the fixed stars, that are so much

further away; but he is nearer, and the intrusive brightness of the

planet hides the modest glories of the distant and shrouded suns. Just

so it is hard for us ever to realise, and to walk in the light of the

realisation of, the fact that the Lord of hosts, the Emperor of all

things, is of a truth with each of us.

It is harder to-day than ever it was; for we have learned to think

rightly--or at least more rightly and approximately rightly--of the

position and age of man upon this earth. The Psalmist's ancient

question of devout thankfulness is too often travestied to-day into a

question of scoffing or of melancholy unbelief: When I consider the

heavens, the work of Thy hands; what is man? Art Thou mindful of him?'

This psalm comes to answer that. The Lord of hosts is with us.' True,

we are but of yesterday, and know nothing. True, earth is but a

pin-point amidst the universe's glories. True, we are crushed down by

sorrow and by care; and in some moods it seems supremely incredible

that we should be of such worth in the scale of Creation as that the

Lord of all things should, in a deeper sense than the Psalmist knew,

have dwelt with us and be with us still. But bigness is not greatness,

and there is nothing incredible in the belief that men, lower than the

angels, and needing God more because of their sin, do receive His

visitations in an altogether special sense, and that, passing by the

lofty and the great that may inhabit His universe, His chariot wheels

stoop to us, and that, because we are sinners, God is with us.

Let me remind you, dear brethren! of how this great thought of my text

is heightened and transcended by the New Testament teaching. We believe

in One whose name is Immanuel, God with us.' Jesus Christ has come to

be with men, not only during the brief years of His earthly ministry,

in corporeal reality, but to be with all who love Him and trust Him, in

a far closer, more real, more deep, more precious, more operative

Presence than when He dwelt here. Through all the ages Christ Himself

is with every soul that loves Him; and He will dwell beside us and

bless us and keep us. God's presence means God's sympathy, God's

knowledge, God's actual help, and these are ours if we will. Instead of

staggering at the apparent improbability that so transcendent and

mighty a Being should stoop from His throne, where He lords it over the

universe, and enter into the narrow room of our hearts, let us rather

try to rise to the rapture of the astonished Psalmist when, looking

upon the deliverance that had been wrought, this was the leading

conviction that was written in flame upon his heart, The Lord of hosts

is with us.'

And then the second of the wonders that are here set forth in regard to

our relations to Him is, the God of Jacob is our Refuge.'

That carries for us the great truth that, just as the distance between

us and God makes no separation, and the gulf is one that is bridged

over by His love, so distance in time leads to no exhaustion of the

divine faithfulness and care, nor any diminution of the resources of

His grace. The God of Jacob is our Refuge.' The story of the past is

the prophecy of the future. What God has been to any man He will be to

every man, if the man will let Him. There is nothing in any of these

grand narratives of ancient days which is not capable of being

reproduced in our lives. God drew near to Jacob when he was lying on

the stony ground, and showed him the ladder set upon earth, with its

top in the heavens, and the bright-winged soldiers and messengers of

His will ascending and descending upon it, and His own face at the top.

God shows you and me that vision to-day. It was no vanishing splendour,

no transient illumination, no hallucination of the man's own thoughts

seeking after a helper, and the wish being father to the vision. But it

was the unveiling for a moment, in supernatural fashion, of the abiding

reality. The God of Jacob is our Refuge'; and whatever He was to His

servant of old He is to-day to you and me.

We say that miracle has ceased. Yes. But that which the miracle

effected has not ceased; and that from which the miracle came has not

ceased. The realities of a divine protection, of a divine supply, of a

divine guidance, of a divine deliverance, of a divine discipline, and

of a divine reward at the last, are as real to-day as when they were

mediated by signs and wonders, by an open heaven and by an outstretched

hand. They who went before have not emptied the treasures of the

Father's house, nor eaten all the bread that He spreads upon the table.

God has no stepchildren, and no favourite and spoiled ones. All that

the elder brethren have had, we, on whom the ends of the dispensation

are come, may have just as really; and whatever God has been to the

patriarch He is to us to-day.

Remember the experience of the man of whom our text speaks. The God of

Jacob manifested Himself to him as being a God who would draw near to,

and care for, and help, a very unworthy and poor creature. Jacob was no

saint at the beginning. Selfishness and cunning and many a vice clung

very close to his character; but for all that, God drew near to him and

cared for him and guided him, and promised that He would not leave him

till He had done that which He had spoken to him of. And He will do the

same for us--blessed be His name!--with all our faults and weaknesses

and craftiness and worldliness and sins. If He cared for that

huckstering Jew, as He did, even in his earlier days, He will not put

us away because He finds faults in us. The God of Jacob,' the

supplanter, the trickster, is our Refuge.'

But remember how the divine Presence with that man had to be, because

of his faults, a Presence that wrought him sorrows and forced him to

undergo discipline. So it will be with us. He will not suffer sin upon

us; He will pass us through the fire and the water; and do anything

with us short of destroying us, in order to destroy the sin that is in

us. He does not spare His rod for His child's crying, but smites with

judgment, and sends us sorrows for our profit, that we should be

partakers of His holiness.' We may write this as the explanation over

most of our griefs--the God of Jacob is our Refuge,' and He is

disciplining us as He did him.

And remember what the end of the man was. Thy name shall no more be

called Jacob, but Israel; for as a prince thou hast power with God, and

hast prevailed.' So if we have God, who out of such a sow's ear made a

silk purse, out of such a stone raised up a servant for Himself, we may

be sure that His purpose in all discipline will be effected on us

submissive, and we shall end where His ancient servant ended, and shall

be in our turn princes with God.

Let me recall to you also the meaning which Jesus Christ found in this

name. He quoted the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob' as being

the great guarantee and proof to us of immortality. The God of Jacob is

our Refuge.' If so, what can the grim and ghastly phantom of death do

to us? He may smite upon the gate, but he cannot enter the fortress.

The man who has knit himself to God by saying to God, Lo! I am Thine,

and Thou art mine,' in that communion has a proof and a pledge that

nothing shall ever break it, and that death is powerless. The fact of

religion--true, heartfelt religion, with its communion, its prayer, its

consciousness of possessing and of being possessed, makes the idea that

death ends a man's conscious existence an absurdity and an

impossibility.

The God of Jacob is our Refuge,' and so we may say to the storms of

life, and after them to the last howling tornado of death--Blow winds

and crack your cheeks, and do your worst, you cannot touch me in the

fortress where I dwell. The wind will hurtle around the stronghold, but

within there shall be calm.

Dear brethren! make sure that you are in the refuge. Make sure that you

have fled for Refuge to the hope set before you in the Gospel.' The

Lord of hosts is with us,' but you may be parted from Him. He is our

Refuge, but you may be standing outside the sanctuary, and so be

exposed to all the storms. Flee thither, cast yourselves on Him, trust

in that great Saviour who has given Himself for us, and who says to us,

Lo! I am with you always.' Take Christ for your hiding-place by simple

faith in Him and loving obedience born of faith, and then the

experience of our Psalmist will be yours. Your life will not want for

deliverances which will thrill your heart with thankfulness, and turn

the truth of faith into a truth of experience. So you may set to your

seals the great saying of our psalm, which is fresh to-day, though

centuries have passed since it came glowing fiery from the lips of the

ancient seer, and may take up as yours the great words in which Luther

has translated it for our times, the Marseillaise' of the Reformation--

A safe stronghold our God is still;

A trusty shield and weapon;

He'll help us clear from all the ill

That hath us now o'ertaken.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A SONG OF DELIVERANCE

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in

the mountain of His holiness. 2. Beautiful for situation, the joy of

the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of

the great King. 3. God is known in her palaces for a refuge. 4. For,

lo, the kings were assembled, they passed by together. 5. They saw it,

and so they marvelled; they were troubled, and hasted away. 6. Fear

took hold upon them there, and pain, as of a woman in travail. 7. Thou

breakest the ships of Tarshish with an east wind. 8. As we have heard,

so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our

God: God will establish it for ever. 9. We have thought of Thy

loving-kindness, O God, in the midst of Thy temple. 10. According to

Thy name, O God, so is Thy praise unto the ends of the earth: Thy right

hand is full of righteousness. 11. Let mount Zion rejoice, let the

daughters of Judah be glad, because of Thy judgments. 12. Walk about

Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof. 13. Mark ye well

her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the

generation following. 14. For this God is our God for ever and ever: He

will be our guide even unto death.'--PSALM xlviii. 1-14.

The enthusiastic triumph which throbs in this psalm, and the specific

details of a great act of deliverance from a great peril which it

contains, sufficiently indicate that it must have had some historical

event as its basis. Can we identify the fact which is here embalmed?

The psalm gives these points--a formidable muster before Jerusalem of

hostile people under confederate kings, with the purpose of laying

siege to the city; some mysterious check which arrests them before a

sword is drawn, as if some panic fear had shot from its towers and

shaken their hearts; and a flight in wild confusion from the

impregnable dwelling-place of the Lord of hosts. The occasion of the

terror is vaguely hinted at, as if some solemn mystery brooded over it.

All that is clear about it is that it was purely the work of the divine

hand--Thou breakest the ships of Tarshish with an east wind'; and that

in this deliverance, in their own time, the Levite minstrels recognised

the working of the same protecting grace which, from of old, had

commanded deliverances for Jacob.'

Now there is one event, and only one, in Jewish history, which

corresponds, point for point, to these details--the crushing

destruction of the Assyrian army under Sennacherib. There, there was

the same mustering of various nations, compelled by the conqueror to

march in his train, and headed by their tributary kings. There, there

was the same arrest before an arrow had been shot, or a mound raised

against the city. There, there was the same purely divine agency coming

in to destroy the invading army.

I think, then, that from the correspondence of the history with the

requirements of the psalm, as well as from several similarities of

expression and allusion between the latter and the prophecies of

Isaiah, who has recorded that destruction of the invader, we may, with

considerable probability, regard this psalm as the hymn of triumph over

the baffled Assyrian, and the marvellous deliverance of Israel by the

arm of God.

Whatever may be thought, however, of that allocation of it to a place

in the history, the great truths that it contains depend upon no such

identification. They are truths for all time; gladness and consolation

for all generations. Let us read it over together now, if, perchance,

some echo of the confidence and praise that is found in it may be

called forth from our hearts! If you will look at your Bibles you will

find that it falls into three portions. There is the glory of Zion, the

deliverance of Zion, and the consequent grateful praise and glad trust

of Zion.

I. There is the glory of Zion.

Hearken with what triumph the Psalmist breaks out: Great is the Lord,

and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of

His holiness. Beautiful for situation (or rather elevation), the joy of

the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of

the great King.' Now these words are something more than mere patriotic

feeling. The Jew's glory in Jerusalem was a different thing altogether

from the Roman's pride in Rome. To the devout men amongst them, of whom

the writer of this psalm was one, there was one thing, and one only,

that made Zion glorious. It was beautiful indeed in its elevation,

lifted high upon its rocky mountain. It was safe indeed, isolated from

the invader by the precipitous ravines which enclosed and guarded the

angle of the mountain plateau on which it stood; but the one thing that

gave it glory was that in it God abode. The name even of that earthly

Zion was Jehovah-Shammah, the Lord is there.' And the emphasis of these

words is entirely pointed in that direction. What they celebrate

concerning Him is not merely the general thought that the Lord is

great, but that the Lord is great in Zion. What they celebrate

concerning it is that it is His city, the mountain of His holiness,

where He dwells, where He manifests Himself. Because there is His

self-manifestation, therefore He is there greatly to be praised. And

because the clear voice of His praise rings out from Zion, therefore is

she the joy of the whole earth.' The glory of Zion, then, is that it is

the dwelling-place of God.

Now, remember, that when the Old Testament Scripture speaks about God

abiding in Jerusalem, it means no heathenish or material localising of

the Deity, nor does it imply any depriving of the rest of the earth of

the sanctity of His presence. The very psalm which most distinctly

embodies the thought of God's abode protests against that narrowness,

for it begins, The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof: the

world and they that dwell therein.' The very ark which was the symbol

of His presence, protests by its name against all such localising, for

the name of it was the ark of the covenant of the God of the whole

earth.' When the Bible speaks of Zion as the dwelling-place of God, it

is but the expression of the fact that there, between the cherubim, was

the visible sign of His presence--that there, in the Temple, as from

the centre of the whole land, He ruled, and out of Zion, the perfection

of beauty, God shone.'

We are, then, not spiritualising,' or forcing a New Testament meaning

into these words, when we see in them an Eternal Truth. We are but

following in the steps of history and prophecy, and of Christ and His

Apostles, and of that last vision of the Apocalypse. We are but

distinguishing between an idea and the fact which more or less

perfectly embodies it. An idea may have many garments, may transmigrate

into many different material forms. The idea of the dwelling of God

with men had its less perfect embodiment, has its more perfect

embodiment, will have its absolutely perfect embodiment. It had its

less perfect in that ancient time. It has its real but partial

embodiment in this present time, when, in the midst of the whole

community of believing and loving souls, which stretches wider than any

society that calls itself a Church, the living God abides and energises

by His Spirit and by His Son in the souls of them that believe upon

Him. Ye are come unto Mount Zion and unto the city of the living God.'

And we wait for the time when, filling all the air with its light,

there shall come down from God a perfect and permanent form of that

dwelling; and that great city, the New Jerusalem, having the glory of

God,' shall appear, and He will dwell with men and be their God.

But in all these stages of the embodiment of that great truth the glory

of Zion rests in this, that in it God abides, that from it He flames in

the greatness of His manifestations, which are His praise in all the

earth.' It is that presence which makes her fair, as it is that

presence which keeps her safe. It is that light shining within her

palaces--not their own opaque darkness, which streams out far into the

waste night with ruddy glow of hospitable invitation. It is God in her,

not anything of her own, that constitutes her the joy of the whole

earth.' Thy beauty was perfect, through My comeliness, which I had put

upon thee, saith the Lord.' Zion is where hearts love and trust and

follow Christ. The city of the great King' is a permanent reality in a

partial form upon earth--and that partial form is itself a prophecy of

the perfection of the heavens.

II. Still further, there is a second portion of this psalm which,

passing beyond these introductory thoughts of the glory of Zion,

recounts with wonderful power and vigour the process of the deliverance

of Zion.

It extends from the fourth to the eighth verses. Mark the dramatic

vigour of the description of the deliverance. There is, first, the

mustering of the armies--The kings were assembled.' Some light is

thrown upon that phrase by the proud boast which the prophet Isaiah

puts into the lips of the Assyrian invader, Are not my princes

altogether kings?' The subject-monarchs of the subdued nationalities

that were gathered round the tyrant's standard were used, with the

wicked craft of conquerors in all ages, to bring still other lands

under the same iron dominion. The kings were assembled'--we see them

gathering their far-reaching and motley army, mustered from all corners

of that gigantic empire. They advance together against the rocky

fortress that towers above its girdling valleys. They saw it, they

marvelled'--in wonder, perhaps, at its beauty, as they first catch

sight of its glittering whiteness from some hill crest on their march;

or, perhaps, stricken by some strange amazement, as if, basilisk-like,

its beauty were deadly, and a beam from the Shechinah had shot a

nameless awe into their souls--they were troubled, they hasted away.'

I need not dilate on the power of this description, nor do more than

notice how the abruptness of the language, huddled together, as it

were, without connecting particles, conveys the impression of hurry and

confusion, culminating in the rush of fugitives fleeing under the

influence of panic-terror. They are like the well-known words, I came,

I saw, I conquered,' only that here we have to do with swift

defeat--they came, they saw, they were conquered. They are, in regard

to vivid picturesqueness, arising from the broken construction,

singularly like other words which refer to the same event in the

forty-sixth psalm, The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved; He

uttered His voice, the earth melted.' In their scornful emphasis of

triumph they remind us of Isaiah's description of the end of the same

invasion--'So Sennacherib, king of Assyria, departed, and went and

returned, and dwelt at Nineveh.'

Mark, still further, the eloquent silence as to the cause of the panic

and the flight. There is no appearance of armed resistance. This is no

battle of the warrior with garments rolled in blood,' and the shock of

contending hosts. But an unseen Hand smites once--and when the morning

dawned they were all dead corpses.' The impression of terror produced

by such a blow is increased by the veiled allusion to it here. The

silence magnifies the deliverance. If we might apply the grand words of

Milton to that night of fear--

The trumpet spake not to the armed throng,

But kings sat still, with awful eye,

As if they surely knew their sovereign Lord was by.'

The process of the deliverance is not told here, as there was no need

it should be in a hymn which is not history, but the lyrical echo of

what is told in history; one image explains it all--Thou breakest the

ships of Tarshish with an east wind.' The metaphor--one that does not

need expansion here--is that of a ship like a great unwieldy galleon,

caught in a tempest. However strong for fight, it is not fit for

sailing. It is like some of those turret ships of ours, if they venture

out from the coast and get into a storm, their very strength is their

destruction, their armour wherein they trusted ensures that they shall

sink. And so, this huge assailant of Israel, this great galley with

oars,' washing about there in the trough of the sea, as it were--God

broke it in two with the tempest, which is His breath. You remember how

on the medal that commemorated the destruction of the Spanish

Armada--our English deliverance--there were written the words of

Scripture: God blew upon them and they were scattered.' What was there

true, literally, is here true in figure. The Psalmist is not thinking

of any actual scattering of hostile fleets--from which Jerusalem was

never in danger; but is using the shipwreck of the ship of Tarshish' as

a picture of the utter, swift, God-inflicted destruction which ground

that invading army to pieces, as the savage rocks and wild seas will do

the strongest craft that is mangled between them.

And then, mark how from this dramatic description there rises a loftier

thought still. The deliverance thus described links the present with

the past. As we have heard so have we seen in the city of the Lord of

hosts, in the city of our God.' Yes, brethren! God's merciful

manifestation for ourselves, as for those Israelitish people of old,

has this blessed effect, that it changes hearsay and tradition into

living experience;--this blessed effect, that it teaches us, or ought

to teach us, the inexhaustibleness of the divine power, the constant

repetition in every age of the same works of love. Taught by it, we

learn that all these old narratives of His grace and help are ever new,

not past and gone, but ready to be reproduced in their essential

characteristics in our lives too. We have heard with our ears, O Lord,

our fathers have told us what work Thou didst in their days.' But is

the record only a melancholy contrast with our own experience? Nay,

truly. As we have heard so have we seen.' We are ever tempted to think

of the present as commonplace. The sky right above our heads is always

farthest from earth. It is at the horizon behind and the horizon in

front, where earth and heaven seem to blend. We think of miracles in

the past, we think of a manifest presence of God in the future, but the

present ever seems to our sense-bound understandings as beggared and

empty of Him, devoid of His light. But this verse suggests to us how,

if we mark the daily dealings of that loving Hand with us, we have

every occasion to say, Thy loving-kindness of old lives still. Still,

as of old, the hosts of the Lord encamp round about them that fear Him

to deliver them. Still, as of old, the voice of guidance comes from

between the cherubim. Still, as of old, the pillar of cloud and fire

moves before us. Still, as of old, angels walk with men. Still, as of

old, His hand is stretched forth, to bless, to feed, to guard. Nothing

in the past of God's dealings with men has passed away. The eternal

present embraces what we call the past, present, and future. They that

went before do not prevent us on whom the ends of the ages are come.

The table that was spread for them is as fully furnished for the latest

guests. The light, which was so magical and lustrous in the morning

beauty, for us has not faded away into the light of common day. The

river which flowed in these past ages has not been drunk up by the

thirsty sands. The fire that once blazed so clear has not died down

into grey ashes. The God of Jacob is our refuge.' As we have heard so

have we seen.'

And then, still further, the deliverance here is suggested as not only

linking most blessedly the present with the past, but also linking it

for our confidence with all the future. God will establish it for

ever.'

Old experience doth attain

To something of prophetic strain.'

In the strength of what that moment had taught of God and His power,

the singer looks onward, and whatever may be the future he knows that

the divine arm will be outstretched. God will establish Zion; or, as

the word might be translated, God will hold it erect, as if with a

strong hand grasping some pole or banner-staff that else would totter

and fall--He will keep it up, standing there firm and steadfast.

It would lead us too far to discuss the bearing of such a prophecy upon

the future history and restoration of Israel, but the bearing of it

upon the security and perpetuity of the Church is unquestionable. The

city is immortal because God dwells in it. For the individual and for

the community, for the great society and for each of the single souls

that make it up, the history of the past may seal the pledge which He

gives for the future. If it had been possible to destroy the Church of

the living God, it had been gone long, long ago. Its own weakness and

sin, the ever-new corruptions of its belief and paring of its creed,

the imperfections of its life and the worldliness of its heart, the

abounding evils that lie around it and the actual hostility of many

that look upon it and say, Raze it, even to the ground, would have

smitten it to the dust long since. It lives, it has lived in spite of

all, and therefore it shall live. God will establish it for ever.'

In almost every land there is some fortress or other, which the pride

of the inhabitants calls the maiden fortress,' and whereof the legend

is, that it has never been taken, and is inexpugnable by any foe. It is

true about the tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of

Zion. The grand words of Isaiah about this very Assyrian invader are

our answer to all fears within and foes without: 'Say unto him, the

virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee, and laughed thee to

scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee. . . . I

will defend this city to save it for My own sake, and for My servant

David's sake.' God will establish it for ever,' and the pledges of that

eternal stability are the deliverances of the past and of the present.

III. Then, finally, there is still another section of this psalm to be

looked at for a moment, which deals with the consequent grateful praise

and glad trust of Zion.

I must condense what few things I have to say about these closing

verses. The deliverance, first of all, deepens the glad meditation on

God's favour and defence. We have thought,' say the ransomed people, as

with a sigh of rejoicing, we have thought of Thy loving-kindness in the

midst of Thy temple.' The scene of the manifestation of His power is

the scene of their thankfulness, and the first issue of His mercy is

His servants' praise.

Then, the deliverance spreads His fame throughout the world. According

to Thy name, O God! so is Thy praise unto the ends of the earth. Thy

right hand is full of righteousness.' The name of God is God's own

making known of His character, and the thought of these words is

double. They most beautifully express the profoundest trust in that

blessed name that it only needs to be known in order to be loved. There

is nothing wanted but His manifestation of Himself for His praise and

glory to spread. Why is the Psalmist so sure that according to the

revelation of His character will be the revenue of His praise? Because

the Psalmist is so sure that that character is purely, perfectly,

simply good--nothing else but good and blessing--and that He cannot act

but in such a way as to magnify Himself. That great sea will cast up

nothing on the shores of the world but pearls and precious things. He

is all light, and in Him is no darkness at all.' There needs but the

shining forth in order that the light of His character shall bring

gladness and joy, and the song of birds, and opening flowers

wheresoever it falls.

Still further, there is the other truth in the words, that we

misapprehend the purpose of our own deliverances, and the purpose of

God's mercy to Zion, if we confine these to any personal objects or

lose sight of the loftier end of them all--that men may learn to know

and love Him. Brethren! we neither rightly thank Him for His gifts to

us nor rightly apprehend the meaning of His dealings, unless the

sweetest thought to us, even in the midst of our own personal joy for

deliverance, is not we are saved,' but God is exalted.'

And then, beyond that, the deliverance produces in Zion, the mother

city and her daughter villages, a triumph of rapture and gladness. Let

mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad because of Thy

judgments.' Yes, even though an hundred and four score and five

thousand dead men lay there, they were to be glad. Solemn and awful as

is the baring of His righteous sword, it is an occasion for praise. It

is right to be glad when men and systems that hinder and fight against

God are swept away as with the besom of destruction. When the wicked

perish there is shouting,' and the fitting epitaph for the oppressors

to whom the surges of the Red Sea are shroud and gravestone is, Sing ye

to the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously.'

The last verses set forth, more fully than even the preceding ones, the

height and perfectness of the confidence which the manifold mercies of

God ought to produce in men's hearts. The citizens who have been cooped

up during the invasion, and who, in the temple, as we have seen, have

been rendering the tribute of their meditation and thankful gratitude

to God for His loving-kindness, are now called upon to come forth from

the enclosure of the besieged city, and free from all fear of the

invading army, to walk about Zion, and go round about her and tell the

towers,' and mark her bulwarks and palaces.'

They look first at the defences, on which no trace of assault appears,

and then at the palaces guarded by them, that stand shining and

unharmed. The deliverance has been so complete that there is not a sign

of the peril or the danger left. It is not like a city besieged, and

the siege raised when the thing over which contending hosts have been

quarrelling has become a ruin, but not one stone has been smitten from

the walls, nor one agate chipped in the windows of the palaces. It is

unharmed as well as uncaptured.

Thus, we may say, no matter what tempests assail us, the wind will but

sweep the rotten branches out of the tree. Though war should arise,

nothing will be touched that belongs to Thee. We have a city which

cannot be moved; and the removal of the things which can be shaken but

makes more manifest its impregnable security, its inexpugnable peace.

As in war they will clear away the houses and the flower gardens that

have been allowed to come and cluster about the walls and fill up the

moat, yet the walls will stand; so in all the conflicts that befall

God's church and God's truth, the calming thought ought to be ours that

if anything perishes it is a sign that it is not His, but man's

excrescence on His building. Whatever is His will stand for ever.

And then, with wonderful tenderness and beauty, the psalm in its last

words drops, as one might say, in one aspect, and in another, rises

from its contemplations of the immortal city and the community to the

thought of the individuals that make it up: For this God is our God for

ever and ever; He will be our guide even unto death.' Prosaic

commentators have often said that these last two words are an

interpolation, that they do not fit into the strain of the psalm, and

have troubled themselves to find out what meaning to attach to them,

because it seemed to them so unlikely that, in a hymn that had only to

do with the community, we should find this expression of individual

confidence in anticipation of that most purely personal of all evils.

That seems to me the very reason for holding fast by the words as being

a genuine part of the psalm, because they express a truth, without

which the confident hope of the psalm, grand as it is, is but poor

consolation for each heart. It is not enough for passing, perishing men

to say, Never mind your own individual fate: the society, the

community, will stand fast and firm.'

I want something more than to know that God will establish Zion for

ever. What about me, my own individual self? And these last words

answer that question. Not merely the city abides, but He will be our

guide even unto death.' And surely, if so--if His loving hand will lead

the citizens of His eternal kingdom even to the edge of that great

darkness--He will not lose them even in its gloom. Surely there is here

the veiled hope that if the city be eternal and the gates of the grave

cannot prevail against it, the community cannot be eternal unless the

individuals be immortal.

Such a hope is vindicated by the blessed words of a newer revelation:

God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for

them a city.'

Dear brethren! remember the last words, or all but the last words of

Scripture which, in their true text and reading, tell us how, instead

of aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, we may become

fellow-citizens with the saints. Blessed are they that wash their robes

that they may have a right to the tree of life, and may enter in

through the gate into the city!'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

TWO SHEPHERDS AND TWO FLOCKS

Like sheep they are laid in the grave; Death shall feed on them.'

--PSALM xlix. 14.

The Lamb which is in the midst of the Throne shall feed them.' --REV.

vii. 17.

These two verses have a much closer parallelism in expression than

appears in our Authorised Version. If you turn to the Revised Version

you will find that it rightly renders the former of my texts, Death

shall be their shepherd,' and the latter, The Lamb which is in the

midst of the throne shall be their Shepherd.' The Old Testament

Psalmist and the New Testament Seer have fallen upon the same image to

describe death and the future, but with how different a use! The one

paints a grim picture, all sunless and full of shadow; the other dips

his pencil in brilliant colours, and suffuses his canvas with a glow as

of molten sunlight. The difference between the two is partly due to the

progress of revelation and the light cast on life and immortality by

Christ through the Gospel. But it is much more due to the fact that the

two writers have different classes in view. The one is speaking of men

whose portion is in this life, the other of men who have washed their

robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. And it is the

characters of the persons concerned, much more than the degree of

enlightenment possessed by the writers, that makes the difference

between these two pictures. Life and death and the future are what each

man makes of them for himself. We shall best deal with these two

pictures if we take them separately, and let the gloom of the one

enhance the glory of the other. They hang side by side, like a

Rembrandt beside a Claude or a Turner, each intensifying by contrast

the characteristics of the other. So let us look at the two--first, the

grim picture drawn by the Psalmist; second, the sunny one drawn by the

Seer. Now, with regard to the former,

I. The grim picture drawn by the Psalmist.

We too often forget that a psalmist is a poet, and misunderstand his

spirit by treating his words as matter-of-fact prose. His imagination

is at work, and our sympathetic imagination must be at work too, if we

would enter into his meaning. Death a shepherd--what a grim and bold

inversion of a familiar metaphor! If this psalm is, as is probable, of

a comparatively late date, then its author was familiar with many sweet

and tender strains of early singers, in which the blessed relation

between a loving God and an obedient people was set forth under that

metaphor. The Lord is my Shepherd' may have been ringing in his ears

when he said, Death is their shepherd.' He lays hold of the familiar

metaphor, and if I may so speak, turns it upside down, stripping it of

all that is beautiful, tender, and gracious, and draping it in all that

is harsh and terrible. And the very contrast between the sweet relation

which it was originally used to express, and the opposite kind of one

which he uses it to set forth, gives its tremendous force to the daring

metaphor.

Death is their shepherd.' Yes, but what manner of shepherd? Not one

that gently leads his flock, but one that stalks behind the huddled

sheep, and drives them fiercely, club in hand, on a path on which they

would not willingly go. The unwelcome necessity, by which men that have

their portion in this world are hounded and herded out of all their

sunny pastures and abundant feeding, is the thought that underlies the

image. It is accentuated, if we notice that in the former clause, like

sheep they are laid in the grave,' the word rendered in the Authorised

Version laid,' and in the Revised Version appointed,' is perhaps more

properly read by many, like sheep they are thrust down.' There you have

the picture--the shepherd stalking behind the helpless creatures, and

coercing them on an unwelcome path.

Now that is the first thought that I suggest, that to one type of man,

Death is an unwelcome necessity. It is, indeed, a necessity to us all,

but necessities accepted cease to be painful; and necessities

resisted--what do they become? Here is a man being swept down a river,

the sound of the falls is in his ears, and he grasps at anything on the

bank to hold by, but in vain. That is how some of us feel when we face

the thought, and will feel more when we front the reality, of that

awful must.' Death shall be their shepherd,' and coerce them into

darkness. Ask yourself the question, Is the course of my life such as

that the end of it cannot but be a grim necessity which I would do

anything to avoid?

This first text suggests not only a shepherd but a fold: Like sheep

they are thrust down to the grave.' Now I am not going to enter upon

what would be quite out of place here: a critical discussion of the Old

Testament conception of a future life. That conception varies, and is

not the same in all parts of the book. But I may, just in a word, say

that the grave' is by no means the adequate rendering of the thought of

the Psalmist, and that Hell' is a still more inadequate rendering of

it. He does not mean either the place where the body is deposited, or a

place where there is punitive retribution for the wicked, but he means

a dim region, or, if I might so say, a localised condition, in which

all that have passed through this life are gathered, where personality

and consciousness continue, but where life is faint, stripped of all

that characterises it here, shadowy, unsubstantial, and where there is

inactivity, absolute cessation of all the occupations to which men were

accustomed. But there may be restlessness along with inactivity; may

there not? And there is no such restlessness as the restlessness of

compulsory idleness. That is the main idea that is in the Psalmist's

mind. He knows little about retribution, he knows still less about

transmutation into a glorious likeness to that which is most glorious

and divine. But he conceives a great, dim, lonely land, wherein are

prisoned and penned all the lives that have been foamed away vainly on

earth, and are now settled into a dreary monotony and a restless

idleness. As one of the other books of the Old Testament puts it, it is

a land of the shadow of death, without order, and in which the light is

as darkness.'

I know, of course, that all that is but the imperfect presentation of

partially apprehended, and partially revealed, and partially revealable

truth. But what I desire to fix upon is that one dreary thought of this

fold, into which the grim shepherd has driven his flock, and where they

lie cribbed and huddled together in utter inactivity. Carry that with

you as a true, though incomplete thought.

Let me remind you, in the next place, with regard to this part of my

subject, of the kind of men whom the grim shepherd drives into that

grim fold. The psalm tells us that plainly enough. It is speaking of

men who have their portion in this life, who trust in their wealth, and

boast themselves in the multitude of their riches . . . whose inward

thought is that their house shall continue for ever . . . who call

their lands after their own names.' Of every such man it says: when he

dieth he shall carry nothing away'--none of the possessions, none of

the forms of activity which were familiar to him here on earth. He will

go into a state where he finds nothing which interests him, and nothing

for him to do.

Must it not be so? If we let ourselves be absorbed and entangled by the

affairs of this life, and permit our whole spirits to be bent in the

direction of these transient things, what is to become of us when the

things that must pass have passed, and when we come into a region where

there are none of them to occupy us any more? What would some

Manchester men do if they were in a condition of life where they could

not go on Change on Tuesdays and Fridays? What would some of us do if

the professions and forms of mental activity in which we have been

occupied as students and scholars were swept away? Whether there be

knowledge it shall cease; whether there be tongues they shall vanish

away,' and what are you going to do then, you men that have only lived

for intellectual pursuits connected with this transient state? We are

going to a world where there are no books, no pens nor ink, no trade,

no dress, no fashion, no amusements; where there is nothing but things

in which some of us have no interest, and a God who is not in all our

thoughts.' Surely we shall be fish out of water' there. Surely we shall

feel that we have been banned and banished from everything that we care

about. Surely men that boasted themselves in their riches, and in the

multitude of their wealth, will be necessarily condemned to inactivity.

Life is continuous, and all on one plane. Surely if a man knows that he

must some day, and may any day, be summoned to the other side of the

world, he would be a wise man if he got his outfit ready, and made some

effort to acquire the customs and the arts of the land to which he was

going. Surely life here is mainly given to us that we may develop

powers which will find their field of exercise yonder, and acquire

characters which shall be in conformity with the conditions of that

future life. Surely there can be no more tragic folly than the folly of

letting myself be so absorbed and entangled by this present world, as

that when the transient has passed, I shall feel homeless and desolate,

and have nothing that I can do or care about amidst the activities of

Eternity. Dear friend, should you feel homeless if you were taken, as

you will be taken, into that world?

Turn now to

II. The sunny landscape drawn by the Seer.

Note the contrast presented by the shepherds. Death shall be their

shepherd.' The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their

Shepherd.' I need not occupy your time in trying to show, what has

sometimes been doubted, that the radiant picture of the Apocalyptic

Seer is dealing with nothing in the present, but with the future

condition of certain men. I would just remind you that the words in

which it is couched are to a large extent a quotation from ancient

prophecy, a description of the divine watchfulness over the pilgrim's

return from captivity to the Land of Promise. But the quotation is

wonderfully elevated and spiritualised in the New Testament vision; for

instead of reading, as the Original does: He that hath mercy on them

shall lead them,' we have here, the Lamb which is in the midst of the

Throne shall be their Shepherd,' and instead of their being led merely

to the springs of water,' here we read that He leads them to the

fountains of the water of life.'

We have to think, first, of that most striking, most significant and

profound modification of the Old Testament words, which presents the

Lamb as the Shepherd.' All Christ's shepherding on earth and in heaven

depends, as do all our hopes for heaven and earth, upon the fact of His

sacrificial death. It is only because He is the Lamb that was slain'

that He is either the Lamb in the midst of the Throne,' or the Shepherd

of the flock. And we must make acquaintance with Him first in the

character of the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world,'

before we can either follow in His footsteps as our Guide, or be

compassed by His protection as our Shepherd.

He is the Lamb, and He is the Shepherd--that suggests not only that the

sacrificial work of Jesus Christ is the basis of all His work for us on

earth and in heaven, but the very incongruity of making One, who bears

the same nature as the flock to be the Shepherd of the flock, is part

of the beauty of the metaphor. It is His humanity that is our guide. It

is His continual manhood, all through eternity and its glories, that

makes Him the Shepherd of perfected souls. They follow Him because He

is one of themselves, and He could not be the Shepherd unless he were

the Lamb.

But then this Shepherd is not only gracious, sympathetic, kin to us by

participation in a common nature, and fit to be our Guide because He

has been our Sacrifice and the propitiation of our sins, but He is the

Lamb in the midst of the throne,' wielding therefore all divine power,

and standing--not as the rendering in our Bible leads an English reader

to suppose, on the throne, but--in the middle point between it and the

ring of worshippers, and so the Communicator to the outer circumference

of all the blessings that dwell in the divine centre. He shall be their

Shepherd, not coercing, not driving by violence, but leading to the

fountains of the waters of life, gently and graciously. It is not

compulsory energy which He exercises upon us, either on earth or in

heaven, but it is the drawing of a divine attraction, sweet to put

forth and sweet to yield to.

There is still another contrast. Death huddled and herded his reluctant

sheep into a fold where they lay inactive but struggling and restless.

Christ leads His flock into a pasture. He shall guide them to the

fountains of waters of life.' I need not dwell at any length on the

blessed particulars of that future, set forth here and in the context.

But let me suggest them briefly. There is joyous activity. There is

constant progression. He goeth before; they follow. The perfection of

heaven begins at entrance into it, but it is a perfection which can be

perfected, and is being perfected, through the ages of Eternity, and

the picture of the Shepherd in front and the flock behind, is the true

conception of all the progress of that future life. They shall follow

the Lamb whithersoever He goeth'--a sweet guidance, a glad following, a

progressive conformity! In the long years liker must they grow.'

Further, there is the communication of life more and more abundantly.

Therefore there is the satisfaction of all desire, so that they shall

hunger no more, neither thirst any more.' The pain of desire ceases

because desire is no sooner felt than it is satisfied, the joy of

desire continues, because its satisfaction enables us to desire more,

and so, appetite and eating, desire and fruition, alternate in

ceaseless reciprocity. To us, being every moment capable of more, more

will be given; and to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more

abundant.'

There is one point more in regard to that pasture into which the Lamb

leads the happy flock, and that is, the cessation of all pains and

sorrows. Not only shall they hunger no more, neither thirst any more';

but the sun shall not smite them, nor any heat, and God shall wipe away

all tears from their eyes.' Here the Shepherd carried rod and staff,

and sometimes had to strike the wandering sheep hard: there these are

needed no more. Here He had sometimes to move them out of green

pastures, and away from still waters, into valleys of the shadow of

death; but there,' as one of the prophets has it: they shall lie in a

good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed.'

But now, we must note, finally, the other kind of men whom this other

Shepherd leads into His pastures, They have washed their robes and made

them white in the blood of the Lamb.' Aye! that is it. That is why He

can lead them where He does lead them. Strange alchemy which out of two

crimsons, the crimson of our sins and the crimson of His blood, makes

one white! But it is so, and the only way by which we can ever be

cleansed, either with the initial cleansing of forgiveness, or with the

daily cleansing of continual purifying and approximation to the divine

holiness, is by our bringing the foul garment of our stained

personality and character into contact with the blood which, shed for

many,' takes away their sins, and infused into their veins, cleanses

them from all sin.

You have yourselves to bring about that contact. They have washed their

robes.' And how did they do it? By faith in the Sacrifice first, by

following the Example next. For it is not merely a forgiveness for the

past, but a perfecting, progressive and gradual, for the future, that

lies in that thought of washing their robes and making them white in

the blood of the Lamb.

Dear brethren, life here and life hereafter are continuous. They are

homogeneous, on one plane though an ascending one. The differences

there are great--I was going to say, and it would be true, that the

resemblances are greater. As we have been, we shall be. If we take

Christ for our Shepherd here, and follow Him, though from afar and with

faltering steps, amidst all the struggles and windings and rough ways

of life, then and only then, will He be our Shepherd, to go with us

through the darkness of death, to make it no reluctant expulsion from a

place in which we would fain continue to be, but a tranquil and willing

following of Him by the road which He has consecrated for ever, and

deprived for ever of its solitude, because Himself has trod it.

Those two possibilities are before each of us. Either of them may be

yours. One of them must be. Look on this picture and on this; and

choose--God help you to choose aright--which of the two will describe

your experience. Will you have Christ for your Shepherd, or will you

have Death for your shepherd? The answer to that question lies in the

answer to the other--have you washed your robes, and made them white in

the blood of the Lamb; and are you following Him? You can settle the

question which lot is to be yours, and only you can settle it. See that

you settle it aright, and that you settle it soon.

END OF VOL. I.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

VOLUME II: PSALMS LI to CXLV

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

CONTENTS

DAVID'S CRY FOR PARDON (Psalm li. 1, 2)

DAVID'S CRY FOR PURITY (Psalm li. 10-12)

FEAR AND FAITH (Psalm lvi. 3, 4)

A SONG OF DELIVERANCE (Psalm lvi. 13, R.V.)

THE FIXED HEART (Psalm lvii. 7)

WAITING AND SINGING (Psalm lix. 9, 17)

SILENCE TO GOD (Psalm lxii. 1-5)

THIRST AND SATISFACTION (Psalm lxiii. 1, 5, 8)

SIN OVERCOMING AND OVERCOME (Psalm lxv. 8)

THE BURDEN-BEARING GOD (Psalm lxviii. 19, A.V. and R.V.)

REASONABLE RAPTURE (Psalm lxxiii. 25, 26)

NEARNESS TO GOD THE KEY TO LIFE'S PUZZLE (Psalm lxxiii. 28)

MEMORY, HOPE, AND EFFORT (Psalm lxxviii. 7)

SPARROWS AND ALTARS (Psalm lxxxiv. 3)

HAPPY PILGRIMS (Psalm lxxxiv. 5-7)

BLESSED TRUST (Psalm lxxxiv. 12)

THE BRIDAL OF THE EARTH AND SKY' (Psalm lxxxv. 10-13)

A SHEAF OF PRAYER ARROWS (Psalm lxxxvi. 1-5)

CONTINUAL SUNSHINE (Psalm lxxxix. 15)

THE CRY OF THE MORTAL TO THE UNDYING (Psalm xc. 17)

THE SHELTERING WING (Psalm xci. 4)

THE HABITATION OF THE SOUL (Psalm xci. 9, 10)

THE ANSWER TO TRUST (Psalm xci. 14)

WHAT GOD WILL DO FOR US (Psalm xci. 15, 16)

FORGIVENESS AND RETRIBUTION (Psalm xcix. 8)

INVIOLABLE MESSIAHS AND PROPHETS (Psalm cv. 14, 15)

GOD'S PROMISES TESTS (Psalm cv. 19)

SOLDIER PRIESTS (Psalm cx. 3)

GOD AND THE GODLY (Psalms cxi. 3; cxii. 3)

EXPERIENCE, RESOLVE, AND HOPE (Psalm cxvi. 8, 9)

REQUITING GOD (Psalm cxvi. 12, 13)

A CLEANSED WAY (Psalm cxix. 9)

LIFE HID AND NOT HID (Psalm cxix. 11; xl. 10)

A STRANGER IN THE EARTH (Psalm cxix. 19, 64)

TIME FOR THEE TO WORK' (Psalm cxix. 126-128)

SUBMISSION AND PEACE (Psalm cxix. 165)

LOOKING TO THE HILLS (Psalm cxxi. 1, 2)

MOUNTAINS ROUND MOUNT ZION (Psalm cxxv. 1, 2)

THE CHARGE OF THE WATCHERS IN THE TEMPLE (Psalm cxxxiv. 1-3)

GOD'S SCRUTINY LONGED FOR (Psalm cxxxix. 23, 24)

THE INCENSE OF PRAYER (Psalm cxli. 2)

THE PRAYER OF PRAYERS (Psalm cxliii. 10)

THE SATISFIER OF ALL DESIRES (Psalm cxlv. 16, 19)

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

DAVID'S CRY FOR PARDON

. . . Blot out my transgressions. 2. Wash me throughly from mine

iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.'--PSALM li. 1, 2.

A whole year had elapsed between David's crime and David's penitence.

It had been a year of guilty satisfaction not worth the having; of

sullen hardening of heart against God and all His appeals. The

thirty-second Psalm tells us how happy David had been during that

twelvemonth, of which he says, My bones waxed old through my roaring

all the day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy on me.' Then

came Nathan with his apologue, and with that dark threatening that the

sword should never depart from his house,' the fulfilment of which

became a well-head of sorrow to the king for the rest of his days, and

gave a yet deeper poignancy of anguish to the crime of his spoiled

favourite Absalom. The stern words had their effect. The frost that had

bound his soul melted all away, and he confessed his sin, and was

forgiven then and there. I have sinned against the Lord' is the

confession as recorded in the historical books; and, says Nathan, The

Lord hath made to pass from thee the iniquity of thy sin.' Immediately,

as would appear from the narrative, that very same day, the child of

Bathsheba and David was smitten with fatal disease, and died in a week.

And it is after all these events--the threatening, the penitence, the

pardon, the punishment--that he comes to God, who had so freely

forgiven, and likewise so sorely smitten him, and wails out these

prayers: Blot out my transgressions, wash me from mine iniquity,

cleanse me from my sin.'

One almost shrinks from taking as the text of a sermon words like

these, in which a broken and contrite spirit groans for deliverance,

and which are, besides, hallowed by the thought of the thousands who

have since found them the best expression of their sacredest emotions.

But I would fain try not to lose the feeling that breathes through the

words, while seeking for the thoughts which are in them, and hope that

the light which they throw upon the solemn subjects of guilt and

forgiveness may not be for any of us a mere cold light.

I. Looking then at this triad of petitions, they teach us first how

David thought of his sin.

You will observe the reiteration of the same earnest cry in all these

clauses, and if you glance over the remainder of this psalm, you will

find that he asks for the gifts of God's Spirit, with a similar

threefold repetition. Now this characteristic of the whole psalm is

worth notice in the outset. It is not a mere piece of Hebrew

parallelism. The requirements of poetical form but partially explain

it. It is much more the earnestness of a soul that cannot be content

with once asking for the blessings and then passing on, but dwells upon

them with repeated supplication, not because it thinks that it shall be

heard for its much speaking,' but because it longs for them so eagerly.

And besides that, though the three clauses do express the same general

idea, they express it under various modifications, and must be all

taken together before we get the whole of the Psalmist's thought of

sin.

Notice again that he speaks of his evil as transgressions' and as sin,'

first using the plural and then the singular. He regards it first as

being broken up into a multitude of isolated acts, and then as being

all gathered together into one knot, as it were, so that it is one

thing. In one aspect it is my transgressions'--that thing that I did

about Uriah, that thing that I did about Bathsheba, those other things

that these dragged after them.' One by one the acts of wrongdoing pass

before him. But he does not stop there. They are not merely a number of

deeds, but they have, deep down below, a common root from which they

all came--a centre in which they all inhere. And so he says, not only

Blot out my transgressions,' but Wash me from mine iniquity.' He does

not merely generalise, but he sees and he feels what you and I have to

feel, if we judge rightly of our evil actions, that we cannot take them

only in their plurality as so many separate deeds, but that we must

recognise them as coming from a common source, and we must lament

before God not only our sins' but our sin'--not only the outward acts

of transgression, but that alienation of heart from which they all

come; not only sin in its manifold manifestations as it comes out in

the life, but in its inward roots as it coils round our hearts. You are

not to confess acts alone, but let your contrition embrace the

principle from which they come.

Further, in all the petitions we see that the idea of his own single

responsibility for the whole thing is uppermost in David's mind. It is

my transgression, it is mine iniquity, and my sin. He has not learned

to say with Adam of old, and with some so-called wise thinkers to-day:

I was tempted, and I could not help it.' He does not talk about

circumstances,' and say that they share the blame with him. He takes it

all to himself. It was I did it. True, I was tempted, but it was my

soul that made the occasion a temptation. True, the circumstances led

me astray, but they would not have led me astray if I had been right,

and where as well as what I ought to be.' It is a solemn moment when

that thought first rises in its revealing power to throw light into the

dark places of our souls. But it is likewise a blessed moment, and

without it we are scarcely aware of ourselves. Conscience quickens

consciousness. The sense of transgression is the first thing that gives

to many a man the full sense of his own individuality. There is nothing

that makes us feel how awful and incommunicable is that mysterious

personality by which every one of us lives alone after all

companionship, so much as the contemplation of our relations to God's

law. Every man shall bear his own burden.' Circumstances,' yes; bodily

organisation,' yes; temperament,' yes; the maxims of society,' the

conventionalities of the time,' yes,--all these things have something

to do with shaping our single deeds and with influencing our character;

but after we have made all allowances for these influences which affect

me, let us ask the philosophers who bring them forward as diminishing

or perhaps annihilating responsibility, And what about that me which

these things influence?' After all, let me remember that the deed is

mine, and that every one of us shall, as Paul puts it, give account of

himself unto God.

Passing from that, let me point for one moment to another set of ideas

that are involved in these petitions. The three words which the

Psalmist employs for sin give prominence to different aspects of it.

Transgression' is not the same as iniquity,' and iniquity' is not the

same as sin.' They are not aimless, useless synonyms, but they have

each a separate thought in them. The word rendered transgression'

literally means rebellion, a breaking away from and setting oneself

against lawful authority. That translated iniquity' literally means

that which is twisted, bent. The word in the original for sin'

literally means missing a mark, an aim. And this threefold view of sin

is no discovery of David's, but is the lesson which the whole Old

Testament system had laboured to print deep on the national

consciousness. That lesson, taught by law and ceremonial, by

denunciation and remonstrance, by chastisement and deliverance, the

penitent king has learned. To all men's wrongdoings these descriptions

apply, but most of all to his. Sin is ever, and his sin especially is,

rebellion, the deflection of the life from the straight line which

God's law draws so clearly and firmly, and hence a missing the aim.

Think how profound and living is the consciousness of sin which lies in

calling it rebellion. It is not merely, then, that we go against some

abstract propriety, or break some impersonal law of nature when we do

wrong, but that we rebel against a rightful Sovereign. In a special

sense this was true of the Jew, whose nation stood under the government

of a divine king, so that sin was treason, and breaches of the law acts

of rebellion against God. But it is as true of us all. Our theory of

morals will be miserably defective, and our practice will be still more

defective, unless we have learned that morality is but the garment of

religion, that the definition of virtue is obedience to God, and that

the true sin in sin is not the yielding to impulses that belong to our

nature, but the assertion in the act of yielding, of our independence

of God and of our opposition to His will. And all this has application

to David's sin. He was God's viceroy and representative, and he sets to

his people the example of revolt, and lifts the standard of rebellion.

It is as if the ruler of a province declared war against the central

authority of which he was the creature, and used against it the very

magazines and weapons with which it had intrusted him. He had rebelled,

and in an eminent degree, as Nathan said to him, given to the enemies

of God occasion to blaspheme.

Not less profound and suggestive is that other name for sin, that which

is twisted, or bent, mine iniquity.' It is the same metaphor which lies

in our own word wrong,' that which is wrung or warped from the straight

line of right. To that line, drawn by God's law, our lives should run

parallel, bending neither to the right hand nor to the left. But

instead of the firm directness of such a line, our lives show wavering

deformity, and are like the tremulous strokes in a child's copy-book.

David had the pattern before him, and by its side his unsteady purpose,

his passionate lust, had traced this wretched scrawl. The path on which

he should have trodden was a straight course to God, unbending like one

of these conquering Roman roads, that will turn aside for neither

mountain nor ravine, nor stream nor bog. If it had been thus straight,

it would have reached its goal. Journeying on that way of holiness, he

would have found, and we shall find, that on it no ravenous beast shall

meet us, but with songs and everlasting joy upon their lips the happy

pilgrims draw ever nearer to God, obtaining joy and gladness in all the

march, until at last sorrow and sighing shall flee away.' But instead

of this he had made for himself a crooked path, and had lost his road

and his peace in the mazes of wandering ways. The labour of the foolish

wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to come to the

city.'

Another very solemn and terrible thought of what sin is, lies in that

final word for it, which means missing an aim.' How strikingly that

puts a truth which siren voices are constantly trying to sing us out of

believing! Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. And that for two

reasons, because, first, God has made us for Himself, and to take

anything besides for our life's end or our heart's portion is to divert

ourselves from our true destiny; and because, second, that being so,

every attempt to win satisfaction or delight by such a course is and

must be a failure. Sin misses the aim if we think of our proper

destination. Sin misses its own aim of happiness. A man never gets what

he hoped for by doing wrong, or, if he seem to do so, he gets something

more that spoils it all. He pursues after the fleeing form that seems

so fair, and when he reaches her side, and lifts her veil, eager to

embrace the tempter, a hideous skeleton grins and gibbers at him. The

siren voices sing to you from the smiling island, and their white arms

and golden harps and the flowery grass draw you from the wet boat and

the weary oar; but when a man lands he sees the fair form end in a

slimy fish, and she slays him and gnaws his bones. He knows not that

the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depths of hell.'

Yes! every sin is a mistake, and the epitaph for the sinner is Thou

fool!'

II. These petitions also show us, in the second place, How David thinks

of forgiveness.

As the words for sin expressed a threefold view of the burden from

which the Psalmist seeks deliverance, so the triple prayer, in like

manner, sets forth that blessing under three aspects. It is not merely

pardon for which he asks. He is making no sharp dogmatic distinction

between forgiveness and cleansing.

The two things run into each other in his prayer, as they do, thank

God! in our own experience, the one being inseparable, in fact, from

the other. It is absolute deliverance from the power of sin, in all

forms of that power, whether as guilt or as habit, for which he cries

so piteously; and his accumulative petitions are so exhaustive, not

because he is coldly examining his sin, but because he is intensely

feeling the manifold burden of his great evil.

That first petition conceives of the divine dealing with sin as being

the erasure of a writing, perhaps of an indictment. There is a special

significance in the use of the word here, because it is also employed

in the description of the Levitical ceremonial of the ordeal, where a

curse was written on a scroll and blotted out by the priest. But apart

from that the metaphor is a natural and suggestive one. Our sin stands

written against us. The long gloomy indictment has been penned by our

own hands. Our past is a blurred manuscript, full of false things and

bad things. We have to spread the writing before God, and ask Him to

remove the stained characters from its surface, that once was fair and

unsoiled.

Ah, brethren! some people tell us that the past is irrevocable, that

the thing once done can never be undone, that the life's diary written

by our own hands can never be cancelled. The melancholy theory of some

thinkers and teachers is summed up in the words, infinitely sad and

despairing when so used, What I have written I have written.' Thank

God! we know better than that. We know who blots out the handwriting

that is against us, nailing it to His Cross.' We know that of God's

great mercy our future may copy fair our past,' and the past may be all

obliterated and removed. And as sometimes you will find in an old

monkish library the fair vellum that once bore lascivious stories of

ancient heathens and pagan deities turned into the manuscript in which

a saint has penned his Contemplations, an Augustine his Confessions, or

a Jerome his Translations, so our souls may become palimpsests. The old

wicked heathen characters that we have traced there may be blotted out,

and covered over by the writing of that divine Spirit who has said, I

will put My laws into their minds, and write them in their hearts.' As

you run your pen through the finished pages of your last year's

diaries, as you seal them up and pack them away, and begin a new page

in a clean book on the first of January, so it is possible for every

one of us to do with our lives. Notwithstanding all the influence of

habit, notwithstanding all the obstinacy of long-indulged modes of

thought and action, notwithstanding all the depressing effect of

frequent attempts and frequent failures, we may break ourselves off

from all that is sinful in our past lives, and begin afresh, saying,

God helping me! I will write another sort of biography for myself for

the days that are to come.'

We cannot erase these sad records from our past. The ink is indelible;

and besides all that we have visibly written in these terrible

autobiographies of ours, there is much that has sunk into the page,

there is many a secret fault,' the record of which will need the fire

of that last day to make it legible, Alas for those who learn the black

story of their own lives for the first time then! Learn it now, my

brother! and learn likewise that Christ can wipe it all clean off the

page, clean out of your nature, clean out of God's book. Cry to Him,

with the Psalmist, Blot out my transgressions!' and He will calm and

bless you with the ancient answer, I have blotted out as a thick cloud

thy transgressions, and as a cloud thy sins.'

Then there is another idea in the second of these prayers for

forgiveness: Wash me throughly from mine iniquity.' That phrase does

not need any explanation, except that the word expresses the antique

way of cleansing garments by treading and beating. David, then, here

uses the familiar symbol of a robe, to express the habit' of the soul,

or, as we say, the character. That robe is all splashed and stained. He

cries to God to make it a robe of righteousness and a garment of

purity.

And mark that he thinks the method by which this will be accomplished

is a protracted and probably a painful one. He is not praying for a

mere declaration of pardon, he is not asking only for the one complete,

instantaneous act of forgiveness, but he is asking for a process of

purifying which will be long and hard. I am ready,' says he, in effect,

to submit to any sort of discipline, if only I may be clean. Wash me,

beat me, tread me down, hammer me with mallets, dash me against stones,

rub me with smarting soap and caustic nitre--do anything, anything with

me, if only those foul spots melt away from the texture of my soul!' A

solemn prayer, my brethren! if we pray it aright, which will be

answered by many a sharp application of God's Spirit, by many a sorrow,

by much very painful work, both within our own souls and in our outward

lives, but which will be fulfilled at last in our being clothed like

our Lord, in garments which shine as the light.

We know, dear brethren! who has said, I counsel thee to buy of Me white

raiment, that the shame of thy nakedness may not appear.' And we know

well who were the great company before the throne of God, that had

washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though

they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.' Wash me throughly

from mine iniquity.'

The deliverance from sin is still further expressed by that third

supplication, Cleanse me from my sin.' That is the technical word for

the priestly act of declaring ceremonial cleanness--the cessation of

ceremonial pollution, and for the other priestly act of making, as well

as declaring, clean from the stains of leprosy. And with allusion to

both of these uses, the Psalmist employs it here. That is to say, he

thinks of his guilt not only as a blotted past record which he has

written, not only as a garment spotted by the flesh which his spirit

wears, but he thinks of it too as inhering in himself, as a leprosy and

disease of his own personal nature. He thinks of it as being, like

that, incurable, fatal, twin sister to and precursor of death; and he

thinks of it as capable of being cleansed only by a sacerdotal act,

only by the great High Priest and by His finger being laid upon it. And

we know who it was that--when the leper, whom no man in Israel was

allowed to touch on pain of uncleanness, came to His feet--put out His

hand in triumphant consciousness of power, and touched him, and said, I

will! be thou clean.' Let this be thy prayer, Cleanse me from my sin';

and Christ will answer, Thy leprosy hath departed from thee.'

III. These petitions likewise show us whence the Psalmist draws his

confidence for such a prayer.

According to the multitude of Thy tender mercies, blot out my

transgressions.' His whole hope rests upon God's own character, as

revealed in the endless continuance of His acts of love. He knows the

number and the greatness of his sins, and the very depth of his

consciousness of sin helps him to a corresponding greatness in his

apprehension of God's mercy. As he says in another of his psalms,

Innumerable evils have compassed me about; they are more than the hairs

of my head. . . . Many, O Lord my God! are Thy wonderful works. . . .

They are more than can be numbered.' This is the blessedness of all

true penitence, that the more profoundly it feels its own sore need and

great sinfulness, in that very proportion does it recognise the yet

greater mercy and all-sufficient grace of our loving God, and from the

lowest depths beholds the stars in the sky, which they who dwell amid

the surface-brightness of the noonday cannot discern.

God's own revealed character, His faithfulness and persistency,

notwithstanding all our sins, in that mode of dealing with men which

has blessed all generations with His tender mercies--these were David's

pleas. And for us who have the perfect love of God perfectly expressed

in His Son, that same plea is incalculably strengthened, for we can

say, According to Thy tender mercy in Thy dear Son, for the sake of

Christ, blot out my transgressions.' Is the depth of our desire, and is

the firmness of our confidence, proportioned to the increased clearness

of our knowledge of the love of our God? Does the Cross of Christ lead

us to as trustful a penitence as David had, to whom meditation on God's

providences and the shadows of the ancient covenant were chiefest

teachers of the multitude of His tender mercies?

Remember further that a comparison of the narrative in the historical

books seems to show, as I said, that this psalm followed Nathan's

declaration of the divine forgiveness, and that therefore these

petitions of our text are the echo and response to that declaration.

Thus we see that the revelation of God's love precedes, and is the

cause of, the truest penitence; that our prayer for forgiveness is

properly the appropriating, or the effort to appropriate, the divine

promise of forgiveness; and that the assurance of pardon, so far from

making a man think lightly of his sin, is the thing that drives it home

to his conscience, and first of all teaches him what it really is. As

long as you are tortured with thoughts of a possible hell because of

guilt, as long as you are troubled by the contemplation of consequences

affecting your happiness as ensuing upon your wrongdoing, so long there

is a foreign and disturbing element in even your deepest and truest

penitence. But when you know that God has forgiven--when you come to

see the multitude of Thy tender mercies,' when the fear of punishment

has passed out of your apprehension, then you are left with a heart at

leisure from dread, to look the fact and not the consequences in the

face, and to think of the moral nature, and not of the personal

results, of your sin. And so one of the old prophets, with profound

truth, says, Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy

mouth any more because of thy sin, when I am pacified towards thee for

all thou hast done.'

Dear friends! the wheels of God's great mill may grind us small,

without our coming to know or to hate our sin. About His chastisements,

about the revelation of His wrath, that old saying is true to a great

extent: If you bray a fool in a mortar, his folly will not depart from

him.' You may smite a man down, crush him, make his bones to creep with

the preaching of vengeance and of hell, and the result of it will often

be, if it be anything at all, what it was in the case of that poor

wretched Judas, who, because he only saw wrath, flung himself into

despair, and was lost, not because he had betrayed Christ, but because

he believed that there was no forgiveness for the man that had

betrayed.

But Love comes, and Love is Lord of all.' God's assurance, I have

forgiven,' the assurance that we do not need to plead with Him, to

bribe Him, to buy pardon by tears and amendment, but that it is already

provided for us--the blessed vision of an all-mighty love treasured in

a dying Saviour, the proclamation God was in Christ, reconciling the

world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them'--Oh! these

are the powers that break, or rather that melt, our hearts; these are

the keen weapons that wound to heal our hearts; these are the teachers

that teach a godly sorrow that needeth not to be repented of.' Think of

all the patient, pitying mercy of our Father, with which He has

lingered about our lives, and softly knocked at the door of our hearts!

Think of that unspeakable gift in which are wrapped up all His tender

mercies--the gift of Christ who died for us all! Let it smite upon your

heart with a rebuke mightier than all the thunders of law or terrors of

judgment. Let it unveil for you not only the depths of the love of God,

but the darkness of your own selfish rebellion from Him. Measure your

crooked lives by the perfect rightness of Christ's. Learn how you have

missed the aim which He reached, who could say, I delight to do Thy

will, O my God!' And let that same infinite love that teaches sin

announce frank forgiveness and prophesy perfect purity. Then, with

heart fixed upon Christ's Cross, let your cry for pardon be the echo of

the most sure promise of pardon which sounds from His dying lips; and

as you gaze on Him who died that we might be freed from all iniquity,

ask Him to blot out your transgressions, to wash you throughly from

your iniquity, and to cleanse you from your sins. Ask, for you cannot

ask in vain; ask earnestly, for you need it sorely; ask confidently,

for He has promised before you ask; but ask, for unless you do, you

will not receive. Ask, and the answer is sent already--The blood of

Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

DAVID'S CRY FOR PURITY

. . . Renew a right spirit within me. 11. . . . And take not Thy Holy

Spirit from me. 12. . . . And uphold me with Thy free Spirit.' --PSALM

li. 10-12.

We ought to be very thankful that the Bible never conceals the faults

of its noblest men. David stands high among the highest of these. His

words have been for ages the chosen expression for the devotions of the

holiest souls; and whoever has wished to speak longings after purity,

lowly trust in God, the aspirations of love, or the raptures of

devotion, has found no words of his own more natural than those of the

poet-king of Israel. And this man sins, black, grievous sin.

Self-indulgent, he stays at home while his army is in the field. His

moral nature, relaxed by this shrinking from duty, is tempted, and

easily conquered. The sensitive poet nature, to which all delights of

eye and sense appeal so strongly, is for a time too strong for the

devout soul. One sin drags on another. As self-indulgence opened the

door for lust, so lust, which dwells hard by hate, draws after it

murder. The king is a traitor to his subjects, the soldier untrue to

the chivalry of arms, the friend the betrayer of the friend. Nothing

can be blacker than the whole story, and the Bible tells the shameful

history in all its naked ugliness.

Many a precious lesson is contained in it. For instance, It is not

innocence which makes men good. This is your man after God's own heart,

is it?' runs the common, shallow sneer. Yes; not that God thought

little of his foul sin, nor that saints' make up for adultery and

murder by making or singing psalms; not that righteousness' as a

standard of conduct is lower than morality'; but that, having fallen,

he learned to abhor his sin, and with deepened trust in God's mercy,

and many tears, struggled out of the mire, and with unconquered resolve

and strength drawn from a divine source, sought still to press towards

the mark. It is not the attainment of purity, not the absence of sin,

but the presence and operation, though it be partial, of an energy

which is at war with all impurity, that makes a man righteous. That is

a lesson worth learning.

Again, David was not a hypocrite because of this fall of his. All sin

is inconsistent with a religious character. But it is not for us to say

what sin is incompatible with a religious character.

Again, the worst sin is not some outburst of gross transgression,

forming an exception to the ordinary tenor of a life, bad and dismal as

such a sin is; but the worst and most fatal are the small continuous

vices, which root underground and honeycomb the soul. Many a man who

thinks himself a Christian, is in more danger from the daily

commission, for example, of small pieces of sharp practice in his

business, than ever was David at his worst. White ants pick a carcase

clean sooner than a lion will.

Most precious of all is the lesson as to the possibility of all sin

being effaced, and of the high hopes which even a man sunk in

transgression has a right to cherish, as to the purity and beauty of

character to which he may come. What a prayer these clauses contain to

be offered by one who has so sinned! What a marvellous faith in God's

pardoning love, and what a boldness of hope in his own future, they

disclose! They set forth a profound ideal of a noble character; they

make of that ideal a prayer; they are the prayer of a great

transgressor, who is also a true penitent. In all these aspects they

are very remarkable, and lead to valuable lessons. Let us look at them

from these points of view successively.

I. Observe that here is a remarkable outline of a holy character.

It is to be observed that of these three gifts--a right spirit, Thy

Holy Spirit, a free spirit--the central one alone is in the original

spoken of as God's; the Thy' of the last clause of the English Bible

being an unnecessary supplement. And I suppose that this central

petition stands in the middle, because the gift which it asks is the

essential and fundamental one, from which there flow, and as it were,

diverge on the right hand and on the left, the other two. God's Holy

Spirit given to a man makes the human spirit holy, and then makes it

right' and free.' Look then at the petitions, not in the order in which

they stand in the text, but in the order which the text indicates as

the natural one.

Now as to that fundamental petition, Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me,'

one thing to notice is that David regards himself as possessing that

Spirit. We are not to read into this psalm the fully developed New

Testament teaching of a personal Paraclete, the Spirit whom Christ

reveals and sends. To do that would be a gross anachronism. But we are

to remember that it is an anointed king who speaks, on whose head there

has been poured the oil that designated him to his office, and in its

gentle flow and sweet fragrance, symbolised from of old the inspiration

of a divine influence that accompanied every divine call. We are to

remember, too, how it had fared with David's predecessor. Saul had been

chosen by God; had been for a while guided and upheld by God. But he

fell into sin, and--not because he fell into it, but because he

continued in it; not because he did wrong, but because he did not

repent--the solemn words are recorded concerning him, that the Spirit

of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord

troubled him.' The divine influence which came on the towering head of

the son of Kish, through the anointing oil that Samuel poured upon his

raven hair, left him, and he stood God-forsaken because he stood

God-forsaking. And so David looks back from the horrible pit and miry

clay' into which he had fallen, where, stained with blood and lust, he

lies, to that sad gigantic figure, remembered so well and loved by him

so truly--the great king who sinned away his soul, and bled out his

life on the heights of Gilboa. He sees in that blasted pine-tree,

towering above the forest but dead at the top, and barked and scathed

all down the sides by the lightning scars of passion, the picture of

what he himself will come to, if the blessing that was laid upon his

ruddy locks and his young head by the aged Samuel's anointing should

pass from him too as it had done from his predecessor. God had departed

from Saul, because Saul had refused His counsel and departed from Him;

and Saul's successor, trembling as he remembers the fate of the founder

of the monarchy, and of his vanished dynasty, prays with peculiar

emphasis of meaning, Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me!'

That Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, had descended upon him when he was

anointed king, but it was no mere official consecration which he had

thereby received. He had been fitted for regal functions by personal

cleansing and spiritual gifts. And it is the man as well as the king,

the sinful man much rather than the faulty king, that here wrestles

with God, and stays the heavenly Visitant whom his sin has made to seem

as if He would depart. What he desires most earnestly, next to that

pardon which he has already sought and found, is that his spirit should

be made holy by God's Spirit. That is, as I have said, the central

petition of his threefold prayer, from which the others come as natural

consequences.

And what is this holiness' which David so earnestly desires? Without

attempting any lengthened analysis of the various shades of meaning in

the word, our purpose will be served if I point out that in all

probability the primary idea in it is that of separation. God is

holy--that is, separated by all the glory of His perfect nature from

His creatures. Things are holy--that is, separated from common uses,

and appropriated to God's service. Whatever He laid His hand on and

claimed in any especial manner for His, became thereby holy, whether it

were a ceremony, or a place, or a tool. Men are holy when they are set

apart for God's service, whether they be officially consecrated for

certain offices, or have yielded themselves by an inward devotion based

on love to be His.

The ethical signification which is predominant in our use of the word

and has made it little more than a synonym for moral purity is

certainly not the original meaning, as is sufficiently clear from the

fact that the word is applied to material things which could have no

moral qualities, and sometimes to persons who were not pure, but who

were in some sense or other set apart for God's service. But gradually

that meaning becomes more and more completely attached to the word, and

holiness' is not only separation for God, but separation from sin. That

is what David longs for in this prayer; and the connection of these two

meanings of the word is worth pointing out in a sermon, for the sake of

the great truth which it suggests, that the basis of all rightness and

righteousness in a human spirit is its conscious and glad devotion to

God's service and uses. A reference to God must underlie all that is

good in men, and on the other hand, that consecration to God is a

delusion or a deception which does not issue in separation from evil.

Holiness' is a loftier and a truer word than morality,' virtue,' or the

like; it differs from these in that it proclaims that surrender to God

is the very essence of all good, while they seek to construct a

standard for human conduct, and to lay a foundation for human goodness,

without regard to Him. Hence, irreligious moralists dislike the very

word, and fall back upon pale, colourless phrases rather than employ

it. But these are inadequate for the purpose. Man's duties can never be

summed up in any expression which omits man's relation to God. How do I

stand to Him? Do I belong to Him by joyous yielding of myself to be His

instrument? That, my friends! is the question, the answer to which

determines everything about me. Rightly answered, there will come all

fruits of grace and beauty in the character as a natural consequence;

whatsoever things are lovely and of good report,' every virtue and

every praise grow from the root of consecration to God. Wrongly

answered, there will come only fruits of selfishness and evil, which

may simulate virtue, but the blossom shall go up in dust, and the root

in stubble. Do you seek purity, nobleness, strength, and beauty of

soul? Learn that all these inhere in and flow from the one act of

giving up yourself to God, and in their truest perfection are found

only in the spirit that is His. Holiness considered as moral excellence

is the result of holiness considered as devotion to God. And learn too

that holiness in both aspects comes from the operation and indwelling

in our spirits of a divine Spirit, who draws away our love from self to

fix it on Him, which changes our blindness into sight, and makes us by

degrees like Himself, holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from

sinners.' The Spirit of the Lord is the energy which produces all

righteousness and purity in human spirits.

Therefore, all our desires after what is good and true should shape

themselves into the desire for that Spirit. Our prayer should be, Make

me separate from evil, and that I may be so, claim and keep me for

Thine own. As Thou hast done with the Sabbath amongst the days, with

the bare summit of the hill of the Lord's house among the mountains,

with Israel amidst the nations, so do with me; lay Thine hand upon me

for Thine own. Let my spirit, O God! know its destination for Thee, its

union with Thee. Then being Thine, it will be clean. Dwell in me, that

I may know myself Thine. Seal me with that gracious influence which is

the proof that Thou possessest me, and the pledge that I possess Thee.

"Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me."' So much for the chief of these

petitions, which gives the ideal character in its deepest relations.

There follow two other elements in the character, which on either side

flow from the central source. The holy spirit in a man will be a right

spirit and a free spirit. Consider these further thoughts in turn.

A right spirit.' You will observe that our translators have given an

alternative rendering in the margin, and as is not seldom the case, it

is a better one than that adopted in the text. A constant or firm

spirit' is the Psalmist's meaning. He sees that a spirit which is

conscious of its relation to God, and set free from the perturbations

of sin, will be a spirit firm and settled, established and immovable in

its obedience and its faith. For Him, the root of all steadfastness is

in consecration to God.

And so this collocation of ideas opens the way for us to important

considerations bearing upon the practical ordering of our natures and

of our lives. For instance, there is no stability and settled

persistency of righteous purpose possible for us, unless we are made

strong because we lay hold on God's strength, and stand firm because we

are rooted in Him. Without that hold-fast, we shall be swept away by

storms of calamity or by gusts of passion. Without that to steady us,

our own boiling lusts and desires will make every fibre of our being

quiver and tremble. Without that armour, there will not be solidity

enough in our character to bear without breaking the steady pressure of

the world's weight, still less the fierce hammering of special

temptation. To stand erect, and in that sense to have a right

spirit--one that is upright and unbent--we must have sure footing in

God, and have His energy infused into our shrinking limbs. If we are to

be stable amidst earthquakes and storms, we must be built on the rock,

and build rock-like upon it. Build thy strength upon God. Let His Holy

Spirit be the foundation of thy life, and then thy tremulous and

vagrant soul will be braced and fixed. The building will become like

the foundation, and will grow into a tower of strength that stands

four-square to every wind.' Rooted in God, thou shalt be unmoved by the

loud winds when they call'; or if still the tremulous leaves are

huddled together before the blast, and the swaying branches creak and

groan, the bole will stand firm and the gnarled roots will not part

from their anchorage, though the storm-giant drag at them with a

hundred hands. The spirit of holiness will be a firm spirit.

But there is another phase of connection between these two points of

the ideal character--if my spirit is to be holy and to preserve its

holiness, it must be firm. That is to say, you can only get and keep

purity by resistance. A man who has not learned to say No!'--who is not

resolved that he will take God's way in spite of every dog that can bay

or bark at him, in spite of every silvery voice that woos him

aside--will be a weak and a wretched man till he dies. In such a world

as this, with such hearts as ours, weakness is wickedness in the long

run. Whoever lets himself be shaped and guided by anything lower than

an inflexible will, fixed in obedience to God, will in the end be

shaped into a deformity and guided to wreck and ruin. Dreams however

rapturous, contemplations however devout, emotions however deep and

sacred, make no man pure and good without hard effort, and that to a

large extent in the direction of resistance. Righteousness is not a

mere negative idea, and Scripture morality is something much deeper

than prohibitions. But there is no law for us without prohibitions, and

no righteousness without casting out evil that is strong in us, and

fighting against evil that is attractive around us. Therefore we need

firmness to guard holiness, to be the hard shell in which the rich

fruit matures. We need a wholesome obstinacy in the right that will

neither be bribed nor coaxed nor bullied, nor anyhow persuaded out of

the road in which we know that we should walk. Add to your faith manly

vigour.' Learn that an indispensable requisite of holiness is

prescribed in that command, Whom resist, steadfast in the faith.' And

remember that the ground of all successful resistance and the need for

it are alike taught in that series of petitions, which makes a holy

spirit the foundation of a constant spirit, and a constant spirit the

guard of a holy spirit.

Then consider, for a moment, the third element in the character which

David longs to possess--a free spirit. He who is holy because full of

God's Spirit, and constant in his holiness, will likewise be free.'

That is the same word which is in other places translated willing'--and

the scope of the Psalmist's desire is, Let my spirit be emancipated

from sin by willing obedience.' This goes very deep into the heart of

all true godliness. The only obedience which God accepts is that which

gladly, and almost as by an instinctive inward impulse, harmonises the

human will with the divine. Lo! I come: in the volume of the book it is

written of me, I delight to do Thy will, and Thy law is within my

heart.' That is a blessed thought, that we may come to do Him service

not because we must, but because we like; not as serfs, but as sons;

not thinking of His law as a slave-driver that cracks his whip over our

heads, but as a friend that lets us know how we may please Him whom it

is our delight to obey. And so the Psalmist prays, Let my obedience be

so willing that I had rather do what Thou wilt than anything besides.'

Then,' he thinks, I shall be free.' Of course--for the correlative of

freedom is lawful authority, and the definition of freedom is willing

submission. If for us duty is joy, and all our soul's desires flow with

an equable motion parallel to the will of God, then there is no sense

of restraint in keeping within the limits beyond which we do not seek

to go. The willing spirit sets us free, free from the ancient solitary

reign' of the despot Self, free from the mob rule of passions and

appetites, free from the incubus of evil habits, free from the

authority of men's voices and examples. Obedience is freedom to them

that have learned to love the lips that command. We are set free that

we may serve: O Lord! truly I am Thy servant; Thou hast loosed my

bonds.' We are set free in serving: I will walk at liberty, for I keep

Thy precepts.' Let a willing, free spirit uphold me.

II. Observe, too, that desires for holiness should become prayers.

David does not merely long for certain spiritual excellences; he goes

to God for them. And his reasons for doing so are plain. If you will

look at the former verses of this psalm, you will see that he had found

out two things about his sin, both of which make him sure that he can

only be what he should be by God's help. He had learned what his crimes

were in relation to God, and he had further learned what they indicated

about himself. The teaching of his bitter experience as to the former

of these two matters lies in that saying which some people have thought

strange. Against Thee only have I sinned.' What! Had he not committed a

crime against human law? had he not harmed Uriah and Bathsheba? were

not his deeds an offence to his whole kingdom? Yes, he knew all that;

but he felt that over and above all that was black in his deed,

considered in its bearing upon men, it was still blacker when it was

referred to God; and a sadder word than crime' or fault' had to be used

about it. I have done wrong as against my fellows, but worse than that,

I have sinned against God. The notion of sin implies the notion of God.

Sin is wilful transgression of the law of God. An atheist can have no

conception of sin. But bring God into human affairs, and men's faults

immediately assume the darker tint, and become men's sins. Therefore

the need of prayer if these evils are to be blotted out. If I had done

crime against man only, I should not need to ask God for pardon or

cleansing; but I have sinned against Him, and done this evil in His

sight, therefore my desires for deliverance address themselves to Him,

and my longings for purity must needs break into the cry of entreaty to

that God with whom are forgiveness and redemption from all iniquity.

And still further, looking at the one deed, he sees in it something

more than an isolated act. It leads him down to its motive; that motive

carries him to the state of mind in which it could have power; that

state of mind, in which the motive could have power, carries him still

deeper to the bias of his nature as he had received it from his

parents. And thinking of how he had fallen, how upon his terraced

palace roof there the eye had inflamed the heart, and the heart had

yielded so quickly to the temptations of the eye, he finds no

profounder explanation of the disastrous eclipse of goodness than this:

Behold! I was shapen in iniquity.'

Is that a confession or a palliation, do you think? Is he trying to

shuffle off guilt from his own shoulders? By no means, for these words

are the motive for the prayer, Purge me, and I shall be clean.' That is

to say, he has learned that isolated acts of sin inhere in a common

root, and that root a disposition inherited from generation to

generation to which evil is familiar and easy, to which good, alas! is

but too alien and unwelcome. None the less is the evil done his deed.

None the less has he to wail in full consciousness of his individual

responsibility: Against Thee have I sinned.' But the effect of this

second discovery, that sin has become so intertwisted with his being

that he cannot shake off the venomous beast into the fire and feel no

harm, is the same as that of the former--to drive him to God, who alone

can heal the nature and separate the poison from his blood.

Dear friends! there are some of you who are wasting your lives in

paroxysms of fierce struggle with the evil that you have partially

discovered in yourselves, alternating with long languor, fits of

collapse and apathy, and who make no solid advance, just because you

will not lay to heart these two convictions--your sin has to do with

God, and your sins come from a sinful nature. Because of the one fact,

you must go to God for pardon; because of the other, you must go to God

for cleansing. There, in your heart, like some black well-head in a

dismal bog, is the source of all the swampy corruption that fills your

life. You cannot stanch it, you cannot drain it, you cannot sweeten it.

Ask Him, who is above your nature and without it, to change it by His

own new life infused into your spirit. He will heal the bitter waters.

He alone can. Sin is against God; sin comes from an evil heart;

therefore, if your longings for that ideal perfectness are ever to be

fulfilled, you must make prayers of them, and cry to Him who hears,

Create in me a clean heart, O God! take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.'

III. Finally, observe that prayers for perfect cleansing are permitted

to the lips of the greatest sinners.

Such longings as these might seem audacious, when the atrocity of the

crime is remembered, and by man's standard they are so. Let the

criminal be thankful for escape, and go hide himself, say men's

pardons. But here is a man, with the evil savour of his debauchery

still tainting him, daring to ask for no mere impunity, but for God's

choicest gifts. Think of his crime, think of its aggravations from

God's mercies to him, from his official position, from his past

devotion. Remember that this cruel voluptuary is the sweet singer of

Israel, who had taught men songs of purer piety and subtler emotion

than the ruder harps of older singers had ever flung from their wires.

And this man, so placed, so gifted, set up on high to be the guiding

light of the nation, has plunged into the filth of these sins, and

quenched all his light there. When he comes back penitent, what will he

dare to ask? Everything that God can give to bless and gladden a soul.

He asks for God's Spirit, for His presence, for the joy of His

salvation; to be made once again, as he had been, the instrument that

shall show forth His praise, and teach transgressors God's ways. Ought

he to have had more humble desires? Does this great boldness show that

he is leaping very lightly over his sin? Is he presumptuous in such

prayers? God be thanked--no! But, knowing all his guilt, and broken and

contrite in heart (crushed and ground to powder, as the words mean),

utterly loathing himself, aware of all the darkness of his deserts, he

yet cherishes unconquerable confidence in the pitying love of God, and

believes that in spite of all his sin, he may yet be pure as the angels

of heaven--ay, even holy as God is holy.

Thank God we have such an example for our heartening! Lay it to heart,

brethren! You cannot believe too much in God's mercy. You cannot expect

too much at His hands. He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all

that we ask or think.' No sin is so great but that, coming straight

from it, a repentant sinner may hope and believe that all God's love

will be lavished upon him, and the richest of God's gifts be granted to

his desires. Even if our transgression is aggravated by a previous life

of godliness, and have given the enemies great occasion to blaspheme,

as David's did, yet David's penitence may in our souls lead on to

David's hope, and the answer will not fail us. Let no sin, however

dark, however repeated, drive us to despair of ourselves, because it

hides from us our loving Saviour. Though beaten back again and again by

the surge of our passions and sins, like some poor shipwrecked sailor

sucked back with every retreating wave and tossed about in the angry

surf, yet keep your face towards the beach, where there is safety, and

you will struggle through it all, and though it were but on some

floating boards and broken pieces of the ship, will come safe to land.

He will uphold you with His Spirit, and take away the weight of sin

that would sink you, by His forgiving mercy, and bring you out of all

the weltering waste of waters to the solid shore.

So whatever thy evil behaviour, come with it all, and cast thyself

before Him, with whom is plenteous redemption. Embrace in one act the

two truths, of thine own sin and of God's infinite mercy in Jesus

Christ. Let not the one blind you to the other; let not the one lead

you to a morbid despondency, which is blind to Christ, nor the other to

a superficial estimate of the deadliness of sin, which is blind to

thine own self. Let the Cross teach thee what sin is, and let the dark

background of thy sin bring into clear prominence the Cross that

bringeth salvation. Know that thou art utterly black and sinful.

Believe that God is eternally, utterly, inconceivably, merciful. Learn

both, in Him who is the Standard by which we can estimate our sin, and

the Proof and Medium of God's mercy. Trust thyself and all thy foulness

to Jesus Christ; and, so doing, look up from whatsoever horrible pit

and miry clay thou mayest have fallen into, with this prayer, Create in

me a clean heart, O God! and renew a right spirit within me, take not

Thy Holy Spirit from me, and uphold me with Thy free Spirit.' Then the

answer shall come to you from Him who ever puts the best robe upon His

returning prodigals, and gives His highest gifts to sinners who repent.

From all your filthiness will I cleanse you, a new heart also will I

give you, and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will put My

Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

FEAR AND FAITH

What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee. 4. . . . In God I have

put my trust: I will not fear.'--PSALM lvi. 3, 4.

It is not given to many men to add new words to the vocabulary of

religious emotion. But so far as an examination of the Old Testament

avails, I find that David was the first that ever employed the word

that is here translated, I will trust, with a religious meaning. It is

found occasionally in earlier books of the Bible in different

connections, never in regard to man's relations to God, until the

Poet-Psalmist laid his hand upon it, and consecrated it for all

generations to express one of the deepest relations of man to his

Father in heaven. And it is a favourite word of his. I find it occurs

constantly in his psalms; twice as often, or nearly so, in the psalms

attributed to David as in all the rest of the Psalter put together; and

as I shall have occasion to show you in a moment, it is in itself a

most significant and poetic word.

But, first of all, I ask you to notice how beautifully there comes out

here the occasion of trust. What time I am afraid, I will put my trust

in Thee.'

This psalm is one of those belonging to the Sauline persecution. If we

adopt the allocation in the superscription, it was written at one of

the very lowest points of David's fortunes. And there seem to be one or

two of its phrases which acquire new force, if we regard the psalm as

drawn forth by the perils of his wandering, hunted life. For

instance--Thou tellest my wanderings,' is no mere expression of the

feelings with which he regarded the changes of this early pilgrimage,

but is the confidence of the fugitive that in the doublings and

windings of his flight God's eye marked him. Put thou my tears into Thy

bottle'--one of the few indispensable articles which he had to carry

with him, the water-skin which hung beside him, perhaps, as he

meditated. So read in the light of his probable circumstances, how

pathetic and eloquent does that saying become--What time I am afraid, I

will trust in Thee.' That goes deep down into the realities of life. It

is when we are afraid' that we trust in God; not in easy times, when

things are going smoothly with us. Not when the sun shines, but when

the tempest blows and the wind howls about his ears, a man gathers his

cloak round him, and cleaves fast to his supporter. The midnight sea

lies all black; but when it is cut into by the oar, or divided and

churned by the paddle, it flashes up into phosphorescence, and so it is

from the tumults and agitation of man's spirit that there is struck out

the light of man's faith. There is the bit of flint and the steel that

comes hammering against it; and it is the contact of these two that

brings out the spark. The man never knew confidence who does not know

how the occasion that evoked and preceded it was terror and need. What

time I am afraid, I will trust.' That is no trust which is only fair

weather trust. This principle--first fear, and only then,

faith--applies all round the circle of our necessities, weaknesses,

sorrows, and sins.

There must, first of all, be the deep sense of need, of exposedness to

danger, of weakness, of sorrow, and only then will there come the

calmness of confidence. A victorious faith will

rise large and slow

From out the fluctuations of our souls,

As from the dim and tumbling sea

Starts the completed moon.'

And then, if so, notice how there is involved in that the other

consideration, that a man's confidence is not the product of outward

circumstances, but of his own fixed resolves. I will put my trust in

Thee.' Nature says, Be afraid!' and the recoil from that natural fear,

which comes from a discernment of threatening evil, is only possible by

a strong effort of the will. Foolish confidence opposes to natural fear

a groundless resolve not to be afraid, as if heedlessness were

security, or facts could be altered by resolving not to think about

them. True faith, by a mighty effort of the will, fixes its gaze on the

divine Helper, and there finds it possible and wise to lose its fears.

It is madness to say, I will not to be afraid!' it is wisdom and peace

to say, I will trust, and not be afraid.' But it is no easy matter to

fix the eye on God when threatening enemies within arm's-length compel

our gaze; and there must be a fixed resolve, not indeed to coerce our

emotions or to ignore our perils, but to set the Lord before us, that

we may not be moved. When war desolates a land, the peasants fly from

their undefended huts to the shelter of the castle on the hilltop, but

they cannot reach the safety of the strong walls without climbing the

steep road. So when calamity darkens round us, or our sense of sin and

sorrow shakes our hearts, we need effort to resolve and to carry into

practice the resolution, I flee unto Thee to hide me.' Fear, then, is

the occasion of faith, and faith is fear transformed by the act of our

own will, calling to mind the strength of God, and betaking ourselves

thereto. Therefore, do not wonder if the two things lie in your hearts

together, and do not say, I have no faith because I have some fear,'

but rather feel that if there be the least spark of the former it will

turn all the rest into its own bright substance. Here is the stifling

smoke, coming up from some newly-lighted fire of green wood, black and

choking, and solid in its coils; but as the fire burns up, all the

smoke-wreaths will be turned into one flaming spire, full of light and

warmth. Do you turn your smoke into fire, your fear into faith. Do not

be down-hearted if it takes a while to convert the whole of the lower

and baser into the nobler and higher. Faith and fear do blend, thank

God! They are as oil and water in a man's soul, and the oil will float

above, and quiet the waves. What time I am afraid'--there speak nature

and the heart; I will trust in Thee'--there speaks the better man

within, lifting himself above nature and circumstances, and casting

himself into the extended arms of God, who catches him and keeps him

safe.

Then, still further, these words, or rather one portion of them, give

us a bright light and a beautiful thought as to the essence and inmost

centre of this faith or trust. Scholars tell us that the word here

translated trust' has a graphic, pictorial meaning for its root idea.

It signifies literally to cling to or hold fast anything, expressing

thus both the notion of a good tight grip and of intimate union. Now,

is not that metaphor vivid and full of teaching as well as of impulse?

I will trust in Thee.' And he exhorted them all, that with purpose of

heart they should cleave unto the Lord.' We may follow out the metaphor

of the word in many illustrations. For instance, here is a strong prop,

and here is the trailing, lithe feebleness of the vine. Gather up the

leaves that are creeping all along the ground, and coil them around

that support, and up they go straight towards the heavens. Here is a

limpet in some pond or other, left by the tide, and it has relaxed its

grasp a little. Touch it with your finger and it grips fast to the

rock, and you will want a hammer before you can dislodge it. There is a

traveller groping along some narrow broken path, where the chamois

would tread cautiously, his guide in front of him. His head reels, and

his limbs tremble, and he is all but over, but he grasps the strong

hand of the man in front of him, or lashes himself to him by the rope,

and he can walk steadily. Or, take that story in the Acts of the

Apostles, about the lame man healed by Peter and John. All his life

long he had been lame, and when at last healing comes, one can fancy

with what a tight grasp the lame man held Peter and John.' The timidity

and helplessness of a lifetime made him hold fast, even while, walking

and leaping, he tried how the unaccustomed feet and ankle bones' could

do their work. How he would clutch the arms of his two supporters, and

feel himself firm and safe only as long as he grasped them! That is

faith, cleaving to Christ, twining round Him with all the tendrils of

our heart, as the vine does round its pole; holding to Him by His hand,

as a tottering man does by the strong hand that upholds.

And there is one more application of the metaphor, which perhaps may be

best brought out by referring to a passage of Scripture. We find this

same expression used in that wonderfully dramatic scene in the Book of

Kings, where the supercilious messengers from the king of Assyria came

up and taunted the king and his people on the wall. What confidence is

this wherein thou trustest? Now, on whom dost thou trust, that thou

rebellest against me? Now, behold, thou trustest upon the staff of this

bruised reed, even upon Egypt, on which, if a man lean, it will go into

his hand and pierce it: so is Pharaoh, king of Egypt, unto all that

trust on him,' The word of our text is employed there, and as the

phrase shows, with a distinct trace of its primary sense. Hezekiah was

leaning upon that poor paper reed on the Nile banks, that has no

substance, or strength, or pith in it. A man leans upon it, and it runs

into the palm of his hand, and makes an ugly festering wound. Such

rotten stays are all our earthly confidences. The act of trust, and the

miserable issues of placing it on man, are excellently described there.

The act is the same when directed to God, but how different the issues.

Lean all your weight on God as on some strong staff, and depend upon it

that your support will never yield nor crack and no splinters will run

into your palms from it.

If I am to cling with my hand I must first empty my hand. Fancy a man

saying, I cannot stand unless you hold me up; but I have to hold my

bank book, and this thing, and that thing, and the other thing; I

cannot put them down, so I have not a hand free to lay hold with, you

must do the holding.' That is what some of us are saying in effect. Now

the prayer, Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe,' is a right one; but

not from a man who will not put his possessions out of his hands that

he may lay hold of the God who lays hold of him.

Nothing in my hand I bring.'

Then, of course, and only then, when we are empty-handed, shall we be

free to grip and lay hold; and only then shall we be able to go on with

the grand words--

Simply to Thy Cross I cling,'

as some half-drowned, shipwrecked sailor, flung up on the beach, clasps

a point of rock, and is safe from the power of the waves that beat

around him.

And then one word more. These two clauses that I have put together give

us not only the occasion of faith in fear, and the essence of faith in

this clinging, but they also give us very beautifully the victory of

faith. You see with what poetic art--if we may use such words about the

breathings of such a soul--he repeats the two main words of the former

verse in the latter, only in inverted order--What time I am afraid, I

will trust in Thee.' He is possessed by the lower emotion, and resolves

to escape from its sway into the light and liberty of faith. And then

the next words still keep up the contrast of faith and fear, only that

now he is possessed by the more blessed mood, and determines that he

will not fall back into the bondage and darkness of the baser. In God I

have put my trust; I will not fear.' He has confidence, and in the

strength of that he resolves that he will not yield to fear. If we put

that thought into a more abstract form it comes to this: that the one

true antagonist and triumphant rival of all fear is faith, and faith

alone. There is no reason why any man should be emancipated from his

fears either about this world or about the next, except in proportion

as he has faith. Nay, rather it is far away more rational to be afraid

than not to be afraid, unless I have this faith in Christ. There are

plenty of reasons for dread in the dark possibilities and not less dark

certainties of life. Disasters, losses, partings, disappointments,

sicknesses, death, may any of them come at any moment, and some of them

will certainly come sooner or later. Temptations lurk around us like

serpents in the grass, they beset us in open ferocity like lions in our

path. Is it not wise to fear unless our faith has hold of that great

promise, Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder; there shall no evil

befall thee'? But if we have a firm hold of God, then it is wise not to

be afraid, and terror is folly and sin. For trust brings not only

tranquillity, but security, and so takes away fear by taking away

danger.

That double operation of faith in quieting and in defending is very

strikingly set forth by an Old Testament word, formed from the verb

here employed, which means properly confidence, and then in one form

comes to signify both in security and in safety, secure as being free

from anxiety, safe as being sheltered from peril. So, for instance, the

people of that secluded little town of Laish, whose peaceful existence

amidst warlike neighbours is described with such singular beauty in the

Book of Judges, are said to dwell careless, quiet, and secure.' The

former phrase is literally in trust,' and the latter is trusting.' The

idea sought to be conveyed by both seems to be that double one of quiet

freedom from fear and from danger. So again, in Moses' blessing, The

beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him,' we have the same

phrase to express the same twofold benediction of shelter, by dwelling

in God, from all alarm and from all attack:

As far from danger as from fear,

While love, Almighty love is near.'

This thought of the victory of faith over fear is very forcibly set

forth in a verse from the Book of Proverbs, which in our version runs

The righteous is bold as a lion.' The word rendered is bold' is that of

our text, and would literally be trusts,' but obviously the metaphor

requires such a translation as that of the English Bible. The word that

properly describes the act of faith has come to mean the courage which

is the consequence of the act, just as our own word confidence properly

signifies trust, but has come to mean the boldness which is born of

trust. So, then, the true way to become brave is to lean on God. That,

and that alone, delivers from otherwise reasonable fear, and Faith

bears in her one hand the gift of outward safety, and in her other that

of inward peace.

Peter is sinking in the water; the tempest runs high. He looks upon the

waves, and is ready to fancy that he is going to be swallowed up

immediately. His fear is reasonable if he has only the tempest and

himself to draw his conclusions from. His helplessness and the scowling

storm together strike out a little spark of faith, which the wind

cannot blow out, nor the floods quench. Like our Psalmist here, when

Peter is afraid, he trusts. Save, Lord! or I perish.' Immediately the

outstretched hand of his Lord grasps his, and brings him safety, while

the gentle rebuke, O thou of little faith! wherefore didst thou doubt?'

infuses courage into his beating heart. The storm runs as high as ever,

and the waves beat about his limbs, and the spray blinds his eyes. If

he leaves his hold for one moment down he will go. But, as long as he

clasps Christ's hand, he is as safe on that heaving floor as if his

feet were on a rock; and as long as he looks in Christ's face and leans

upon His upholding arm, he does not see the waves boisterous,' nor

tremble at all as they break around him. His fear and his danger are

both gone, because he holds Christ and is upheld by Him. In this sense,

too, as in many others, this is the victory that overcometh the world,

even our faith.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A SONG OF DELIVERANCE

For Thou hast delivered my soul from death: hast Thou not delivered my

feet from falling? that I may walk before God in the light of the

living.'--PSALM lvi. 13 (R.V.).

According to the ancient Jewish tradition preserved in the

superscription of this psalm, it was written at the lowest ebb of

David's fortunes, when the Philistines took him in Gath,' and as you

may remember, he saved himself by adding the fox's hide to the lion's

skin, and by pretending to be an idiot, degraded as well as delivered

himself. Yet immediately after, if we accept the date given by the

superscription, the triumphant confidence and devout hope of this psalm

animated his mind. How unlike the true man was to what he appeared to

be to Achish and his Philistines! It is strange that the inside and the

outside should correspond so badly; but yet, thank God! it is possible.

We note,

I. The deliverance realised by faith before it is accomplished in fact.

You will observe that I have made a slight alteration in the

translation of the words. In our Authorised Version they stand thus:

Thou hast delivered my soul from death; wilt Thou not deliver my feet

from falling?' as if some prior deliverance was the basis upon which

the Psalmist rested his expectation of that which was still to come.

But there is no authority in the original for that variation of tenses,

and both clauses obviously refer to the same period and the same

deliverance. Therefore we must read: Thou hast delivered my soul from

death: hast Thou not delivered,' etc.; the question being equivalent to

a strong affirmation, Yea, Thou hast delivered my feet from falling.'

This reference of both clauses to the same period and the same

delivering act, is confirmed by the quotation of these words in a very

much later psalm, the 116th, where we read, with an addition, Thou hast

delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from

falling.'

So, then, the Psalmist is so sure of the deliverance that is coming

that he sings of it as past. He is still in the very thick of the

trouble and the fight, and yet he says, It is as good as over. Thou

hast delivered.'

How does he come to that confidence? Simply because his future is God;

and whoever has God for his future can turn else uncertain hopes into

certain confidences, and make sure of this, that however Achish and his

giant Philistines of Gath, wielding Goliath's arms, spears like a

weaver's beam, and brazen armour, may compass him about, in the name of

the Lord he will destroy them. They are all as good as dead, though

they are alive and hostile at this moment. In the midst of trouble we

can fling ourselves into the future, or rather draw the future into the

present, and say, Thou hast delivered my soul from death.' It is safe

to reckon on to-morrow when we reckon on God. We to-day have the same

reasons for the same confidence; and if we will go the right way about

it, we, too, may bring June's sun into November's fogs, and bask in the

warmth of certain deliverance even when the chill mists of trouble

enfold us.

But then note, too, here, the substance of this future intervention

which, to the Psalmist's quiet faith, is present:--My soul from death,'

and after that he says, My feet from falling,' which looks very like an

anticlimax and bathos. But yet, just because to deliver the feet from

falling is so much smaller a thing than delivering a life from death,

it comes here to be a climax and something greater. The storm passes

over the man. What then? After the storm has passed, he is not only

alive, but he is standing upright. It has not killed him. No, it has

not even shaken him. His feet are as firm as ever they were, and just

because that is a smaller thing, it is a greater thing for the

deliverance to have accomplished than the other. God does not deliver

by halves; He does not leave the delivered man maimed, or thrown down,

though living.

Remember, too, the expansion of the text in the psalm to which I have

already referred, one of a much later date, which by quoting these

words really comments upon them. The later Psalmist adds a clause. Mine

eyes from tears,' and we may follow on in the same direction, and note

the three spheres in which the later poet hymns the delivering hand of

God as spiritualising for us all our deeper Christian experience. Thou

hast delivered my soul from death,' in that great redemption by which

the Son has died that we may never know either the intensest bitterness

of physical death, or the true death of which it is the shadow and the

emblem. Thou hast delivered mine eyes from tears'; God wipes away tears

here, even before we come to the time when He wipes away all tears from

off all faces, and no eyes are delivered from tears, except eyes that

have looked through tears to God. And my feet from falling'--redeeming

grace which saves the soul; comforting grace which lightens sorrow;

upholding grace which keeps us from sins--these are the elements of

what God has done for us all, if our poor feeble trust has rested on

Him.

How did David get to this confidence? Why, he prayed himself into it.

If you will read the psalm, you will see very clearly the process by

which a man comes to that serene, triumphant trust that the battle is

won even whilst it is raging around him. The previous portion of the

psalm falls into two parts, on which I need only make this one remark,

that in both we have first of all an obvious disquieting fact, and then

a flash of victorious confidence. Let me just read a word or two to

you. The Psalmist begins in a very minor key. Be merciful unto me, O

God! for man would swallow me up'--that is Achish and his Philistines.

He fighting daily oppresseth me; mine enemies daily would swallow me

up.' He reiterates the same thought with the dreary monotony of sorrow,

for there be many that fight against me, O Thou most High!' But swiftly

his note changes into What time I am afraid I will trust in Thee. In

God I will praise His word'; that is to say, His promise of

deliverance, in God I have put my trust.' He has climbed to the height,

but only for a moment, for down he drops again, and begins anew the old

miserable complaint. The sorrow is too clinging to be cast off at one

struggle. It has been dammed out for the moment, but the flood rushes

too heavily, and away goes the dam, and back pours the black water.

Every day they wrest my words; all their thoughts are against me for

evil.' And he goes on longer on his depressing key this second time

than he did the first, but he rises above it once more in the same

fashion, and the refrain with which he had closed the first part of the

psalm closes the second. In God will I praise His word; in the Lord

will I praise His word.' Now he has won the height and keeps it, and

breaks into a paean of victory in words of the text.

That is to say, pray yourselves into confidence, and if it does not

come at first, pray again. If the consolation seems to glide away, even

whilst you are laying hold of it, grasp it once more, and close your

fingers more tightly on it. Do not be afraid of going down into the

depths a second time, but be sure that you try to rise out of them at

the same point as before, by grasping the assurance that in God, in His

strength, and by His grace, you will be able to set your seal to the

truth of His great promise. Thus will you rise to this confidence which

calleth things that are not as though they were, and brings the

to-morrow that is sure to dawn with all its brightness and serenity

into the turbulent, tempestuous, and clouded atmosphere of to-day. We

shall one day escape from all that burdens, and tries, and tasks us;

and until then this blessed assurance, the fruit of prayer, is like the

food that the ravens brought to the prophet in the ravine, or the bread

and water that the angel awoke him to partake of when he was faint in

the wilderness. The true answer to David's prayer was the immediate

access of confidence unshaken, though the outward answer was a long

time in coming, and years lay between him and the cessation of his

persecutions and troubles. So we may have brooks by the way, in quiet

confidence of deliverance ere yet the deliverance comes. Then note,

II. The impulse to service which deliverance brings.

That I may walk before God in the light of the living'; that is God's

purpose in all His deliverances, that we may thereby be impelled to

trustful and grateful service. And David makes that purpose into a vow,

for the words might almost as well be translated, I will walk before

Him.' Let us see to it that God's purpose is our resolve, and that we

do not lose the good of any of the troubles or discipline through which

He passes us; for the worst of all sorrows is a wasted sorrow.

Thou hast delivered my feet that I may walk.' What are feet for?

Walking. Further, notice the precise force of that phrase, that I may

walk before God.' It is not altogether the same as the cognate one

which is used about Enoch, that he walked with God.' That expresses

communion as with a friend; this, the ordering of one's life before His

eye, and in the consciousness of His presence as Judge and as

Taskmaster. So you find the expression used in almost the only other

occasion where it occurs in the Old Testament, where God says to

Abraham, Walk before Me, and'--because thou dost order thy life in the

consciousness that I am looking at thee--be thou perfect.' So, to walk

before God is to live even in all the distracting activities of daily

life, with the clear realisation, and the continued thought burning in

our minds that we are doing them all in His presence. Think of what a

regiment of soldiers on parade does as each file passes in front of the

saluting point where the commanding officer is standing. How each man

dresses up, and they pull themselves together, keeping step, sloping

their rifles rightly. We are not on parade, but about business a great

deal more serious than that. We are doing our fighting with the Captain

looking at us, and that should be a stimulus, a joy and not a terror.

Realise God's eye watching you, and sin, and meanness, and negligence,

and selfishness, and sensuality, and lust, and passion, and all the

other devils that are in you will vanish like ghosts at cockcrow. Walk

before Me,' and if you feel that I am beside you, you cannot sin. Walk

before Me, and be thou perfect.' Notice,

III. The region in which that observance of the divine eye is to be

carried on.

In the light of the living,' says the Psalmist. That seems to

correspond to the first clause of his hope; just as the previous word

that I have been commenting upon, walking before Him,' corresponds to

the second, where he speaks about his feet. Thou hast delivered my soul

from death. . . . I will walk before Thee in the light of the

living'--where Thou dost still permit my delivered soul to be. And the

phrase seems to mean the sunshine of human life contrasted with the

darkness of Sheol.

The expression is varied in the 116th Psalm, which reads the land of

the living.' The really living are they who live in Jesus, and the real

light of the living is the sunshine that streams on those who thus

live, because they live in Him who not only pours His light upon their

hearts, but, by pouring it, turns themselves into light in the Lord.'

We, too, may have the brightness of His face irradiating our faces and

illuminating our paths, as with the beneficence of a better sunshine.

The Psalmist points us the way thus to walk in light. He vows that,

because his heart is full of the great mercies of his delivering God,

he will order all his active life as under the consciousness of God's

eye upon him, and then it will all be lightened as by a burst of

sunshine. Our brightest light is the radiance from the face of God whom

we try to love and serve, and the Psalmist's confidence is that a life

of observance of His commandments in which gratitude for deliverance is

the impelling motive to continual realisation of His presence, and an

accordant life, will be a bright and sunny career. You will live in the

sunshine if you live before His face, and however wintry the world may

be, it will be like a clear frosty day. There is no frost in the sky,

it does not go above the atmosphere, and high above, in serene and

wondrous blue, is the blaze of the sunshine. Such a life will be a

guided life. There will still remain many occasions for doubt in the

region of belief, and for perplexity as to duty. There will often be

need for patient and earnest thought as to both, and there will be no

lack of calls for strenuous effort of our best faculties in order to

apprehend what our Guide means us to do, and where He would have us go,

but through it all there will be the guiding hand. As the Master, with

perhaps a glance backwards to these words, said, He that followeth Me

shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.' If He is

in the light let us walk in the light, and to us it will be purity and

knowledge and joy.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE FIXED HEART

My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed; I will sing and give

praise.'--PSALM lvii. 7.

It is easy to say such things when life goes smoothly with us. But this

Psalmist, whether David or another, says this, and means it, when all

things are dark and frowning around him. The superscription attributes

the words to David himself, fleeing from Saul, and hiding in the cave.

Whether that be so or no, the circumstances under which the Psalmist

sings are obviously those of very great difficulty and oppression. But

he sings himself into confidence and good cheer. In the dark he

believes in the light. There are some flowers that give their perfumes

after sunset and are sweetest when the night dews are falling. The true

religious life is like these. A heart really based upon God, and at

rest in Him, never breathes forth such fragrant and strong perfume as

in the darkness of sorrow. The repetition of My heart is fixed' adds

emphasis to the expression of unalterable determination. The fixed

heart is resolved to sing and give praise' in spite of everything that

might make sobs and tears choke the song.

I. Note the fixed heart.

The Hebrew uses the metaphor of the heart' to cover a great deal more

of the inward self than we are accustomed to do. We mainly mean thereby

that in us which loves. But the Old Testament speaks of the thoughts

and intents' as well as the affections' of the heart. And so to this

Psalmist his heart' was not only that in him which loved, but that

which purposed and which thought. When he says My heart is fixed' he

does not merely mean that he is conscious of a steadfast love, but also

and rather of a fixed and settled determination, and of an abiding

communion of thought between himself and God. And he not only makes

this declaration as the expression of his experience for the moment,

but he mortgages the future, and in so far as any man dare, he ventures

to say that this temper of entire consecration, of complete communion,

of fixed resolve to cleave to God, which is his present mood, will be

his future whatever may wait his outward life then. The lesson from

that resolve is that our religion, if it is worth anything, must be a

continuous and uniformly acting force throughout our whole lives, and

not merely sporadic and spasmodic, by fits and starts. The lines that a

child's unsteady and untrained hand draws in its copy-book are too good

a picture of the crooked, wandering ways in which we live,' in so far

as our religion is concerned. The line should be firm and straight,

uniform in breadth, unvarying in direction, like a sunbeam, homogeneous

and equally tenacious like an iron rod. Unless it be thus strong and

uniform, it will scarcely sustain the weights that it must bear, or

resist the blows that it must encounter.

For a fixed heart I must have a fixed determination, and not a mere

fluctuating and soon broken intention. I must have a steadfast

affection, and not merely a fluttering love, that, like some butterfly,

lights now on this, now on that, sweet flower, but which has a flight

straight as a carrier pigeon to its cot, which shall bear me direct to

God. And I must have a continuous realisation of my dependence upon

God, and of God's sweet sufficiency, going with me all through the

dusty day. A firm determination, a steadfast love, a constant thought,

these at least are inculcated in the words of my text. My heart is

fixed, O God! my heart is fixed.'

Ah, brethren! how unlike the broken, interrupted, divergent lines that

we draw! Our religious moments are not knit together, and touching one

upon the other, but they are like the pools in the bed of a half dried

up Australian stream--a pond here, and a stretch of white, blistering

pebbles there, and then a little drop of water, and then another reach

of dryness. They should all be knit together by one continuous flow of

a fixed love, desire, and thought. Is our average Christianity fairly

represented by such words as these of my text? Do they not rather make

us burn with shame when we think that a man who lived in the twilight

of God's revelation, and was weighed upon by distresses such as wrung

this psalm out of him, should have poured out this resolve, which we

who live in the sunlight and are flooded with blessings find it hard to

echo with sincerity and truth? Fixed hearts are rare amongst the

Christians of this day.

II. Notice the manifold hindrances to such a uniformity of our

religious life.

They are formidable enough, God knows, we all know it, and I do not

need to dwell upon them. There is, for example, the tendency to

fluctuation which besets all our feelings, and especially our religious

emotions. What would happen to a steam-engine if the stoker now piled

on coals and then fell asleep by the furnace door? One moment the

boiler would be ready to burst; at another moment there would be no

steam to drive anything. That is the sort of alternation that goes on

amongst hosts of Christians to-day. Their springtime and summer are

followed certainly by an autumn and a bitter winter. Every moment of

elevation has a corresponding moment of depression. They never catch a

glimpse of God and of His love brighter and more sweet than ordinary

without its being followed by long weariness and depression and

darkness. That is the kind of life that many of you are contented to

live as Christian people.

But is there any necessity for such alternations? Some degree of

fluctuation there will always be. The very exercise of emotion tends to

its extinction. Varying conditions of health and other externals will

affect the buoyancy and clear-sightedness and vivacity of the spiritual

life. Only a barometer that is out of order will always stand at set

fair. The vane which never points but to south is rusty and means

nothing.

But while there cannot be absolute uniformity, there might and should

be a far nearer approach to an equable temperature of a much higher

range than the readings of most professing Christians give. There is,

indeed, a dismally uniform arctic temperature in many of them. Their

hearts are fixed, truly, but fixed on earth. Their frost is broken by

no thaw, their tepid formalism interrupted by no disturbing enthusiasm.

We do not now speak of these, but of those who have moments of

illumination, of communion, of submission of will, which fade all too

soon. To such we would earnestly say that these moments may be

prolonged and made more continuous. We need not be at the mercy of our

own unregulated feelings. We can control our hearts, and keep them

fixed, even if they should wish to wander. If we would possess the

blessing of an approximately uniform religious life, we must assert the

control of ourselves and use both bridle and spur. A great many

religious people seem to think that good times' come and go, and that

they can do nothing to bring or keep or banish them. But that is not

so. If the fire is burning low, there is such a thing on the hearth as

a poker, and coals are at hand. If we feel our faith falling asleep,

are we powerless to rouse it? Cannot we say I will trust'? Let us learn

that the variations in our religious emotions are largely subject to

our own control, and may, if we will govern ourselves, be brought far

nearer to uniformity than they ordinarily are.

Besides the fluctuations due to our own changes of mood, there are also

the distracting influences of even the duties which God lays upon us.

It is hard for a man with the material task of the moment that takes

all his powers, to keep a little corner of his heart clear, and to feel

that God is there. It is difficult in the clatter of the mill or in the

crowds on Change, to do our work as for and in remembrance of Christ.

It is difficult; but it is possible. Distractions are made distractions

by our own folly and weakness. There is nothing that it is our duty to

do which an honest attempt to do from the right motive could not

convert into a positive help to getting nearer God. It is for us to

determine whether the tasks of life, and this intrusive external and

material world, shall veil Him from us, or shall reveal Him to us. It

is for us to determine whether we shall make our secular avocation and

its trials, little and great, a means to get nearer to God, or a means

to shut Him out from us, and us from Him. There is nothing but sin

incompatible with the fixed heart, the resolved will, the continual

communion, nothing incompatible though there may be much that makes it

difficult to realise and preserve these.

And then, of course, the trials and sorrows which strike us all make

this fixed heart hard to keep. It is easy, as I said, to vow, I will

sing and give praise,' when flesh is comfortable and prosperity is

spreading its bright sky over our heads. It is harder to say it when

disappointment and bitterness are in the heart, and an empty place

there that aches and will never be filled. It is harder for a man to

say it when, like this Psalmist, his soul is amongst lions' and he lies

amongst them that are set on fire.' But still, rightly taken, sorrow is

the best ladder to God; and there is no such praise as comes from the

lips that, if they did not praise, must sob, and that praise because

they are beginning to learn that evil, as the world calls it, is the

stepping-stone to the highest good. My heart is fixed. I will sing and

give praise' may be the voice of the mourner as well as of the

prosperous and happy.

III. Lastly, let me say just a word as to the means by which such a

uniform character may be impressed upon our religious experience.

There is another psalm where this same phrase is employed with a very

important and illuminating addition, in which we read, His heart is

fixed, trusting in the Lord.' That is the secret of a fixed

heart--continuous faith rooted and grounded in Him. This fluttering,

changeful, unreliable, emotional nature of mine will be made calm and

steadfast by faith, and duties done in the faith of God will bind me to

Him; and sorrows borne and joys accepted in the faith of God will be

links in the chain that knits Him to me.

But then the question comes, how to get this continuous faith?

Brethren! I know no answer except the simple one, by continually making

efforts after it, and adopting the means which Christ enjoins to secure

it. A man climbing a hill, though he has to look to his feet when in

the slippery places, and all his energies are expended in hoisting

himself upwards by every projection and crag, will do all the better if

he lifts his eye often to the summit that gleams above him. So we, in

our upward course, shall make the best progress when we consciously and

honestly try to look beyond the things seen and temporal, even whilst

we are working in the midst of them, and to keep clear before us the

summit to which our faith tends. If we lived in the endeavour to

realise that great white throne, and Him that sits upon it, we should

find it easier to say, My heart is fixed, O God! my heart is fixed.'

But be sure of this, there will be no such uniformity of religious

experience throughout our lives unless there be frequent times in them

in which we go into our chambers and shut our doors about us, and hold

communion with our Father in secret. Everything noble and great in the

Christian life is fed by solitude, and everything poor and mean and

hypocritical and low-toned is nourished by continual absence from the

secret place of the Most High. There must be moments of solitary

communion, if there are to be hours of strenuous service and a life of

continual consecration.

We need not ask ourselves the question whether the realisation of the

ideal of this fixedness in its perfect completeness is possible for us

here on earth or not. You and I are a long way on this side of that

realisation yet, and we need not trouble ourselves about the final

stages until we have got on a stage or two more.

What would you think of a boy if, when he had just been taught to draw

with a pencil, he said to his master, Do you think I shall ever be able

to draw as well as Raphael?' His teacher would say to him, Whether you

will or not, you will be able to draw a good deal better than now, if

you try.' We need not trouble ourselves with the questions that disturb

some people until we are very much nearer to perfection than any of us

yet are. At any rate, we can approach indefinitely to that ideal, and

whether it is possible for us in this life ever to have hearts so

continuously fixed as that no attraction shall draw the needle aside

one point from the pole or not, it is possible for us all to have them

a great deal steadier than in that wavering, fluctuating vacillation

which now rules them.

So let us pray the prayer, Unite my heart to fear Thy name,' make the

resolve, My heart is fixed,' and listen obediently to the command, He

exhorted them all that with purpose of heart they should cleave unto

the Lord.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

WAITING AND SINGING

Because of his strength will I wait upon Thee: for God is my

defence. . . . 17. Unto Thee, O my strength, will I sing: for God is my

defence, and the God of my mercy.'--PSALM lix. 9, 17.

There is an obvious correspondence between these two verses even as

they stand in our translation, and still more obviously in the Hebrew.

You observe that in the former verse the words because of' are a

supplement inserted by our translators, because they did not exactly

know what to make of the bare words as they stood. His strength, I will

wait upon Thee,' is, of course, nonsense; but a very slight alteration

of a single letter, which has the sanction of several good authorities,

both in manuscripts and translations, gives an appropriate and

beautiful meaning, and brings the two verses into complete verbal

correspondence. Suppose we read, My strength,' instead of His

strength.' The change is only making the limb of one letter a little

shorter, and as you will perceive, we thereby get the same expressions

in both verses.

We may then read our two texts thus: Upon Thee, O my Strength! I will

wait. . . . Unto Thee, O my Strength, I will sing!' They are, word for

word, parallel, with the significant difference that the waiting in the

one passes into song, in the other, the silent expectation breaks into

music of praise. And these two words--wait and sing--are in the Hebrew

the same in every letter but one, thus strengthening the impression of

likeness as well as emphasising, with poetic art, that of difference.

The parallel, too, obviously extends to the second half of each verse,

where the reason for both the waiting and the praise is the same--For

God is my defence'--with the further eloquent variation that the song

is built not only on the thought that God is my defence,' but also on

this, that He is the God of my mercy.'

These two parallel verses, then, are a kind of refrain, coming in at

the close of each division of the psalm; and if you examine its

structure and general course of thought, you will see that the first

stands at the end of a picture of the Psalmist's trouble and danger,

and makes the transition to the second part, which is mainly a prayer

for deliverance, and finishes with the refrain altered and enlarged, as

I have pointed out.

The heading of the psalm tells us that its date is the very beginning

of Saul's persecution, when they watched the house to kill' David, and

he fled by night from the city. There is a certain correspondence

between the circumstances and some part of the picture of his foes here

which makes the date probable. If so, this is one of David's oldest

psalms, and is interesting as showing his faith and courage, even in

the first burst of danger. But whether that be so or not, we have here,

at any rate, the voice of a devout soul in sore sorrow, and we may well

learn the lesson of its twofold utterance. The man, overwhelmed by

calamity, betakes himself to God. Upon Thee, O my Strength! will I

wait, for God is my defence.' Then, by dint of waiting, although the

outward circumstances keep just the same, his temper and feelings

change. He began with, Deliver me from my enemies, O Lord! for they lie

in wait for my soul.' He passes through My Strength! I will wait upon

Thee,' and so ends with My Strength! I will sing unto Thee.' We may

then throw our remarks into two groups, and deal for a few moments with

these two points--the waiting on God, and the change of waiting into

praise.

Now, with regard to the first of these--the waiting on God--I must

notice that the expression here, I will wait,' is a somewhat remarkable

one. It means accurately, I will watch Thee,' and it is the word that

is generally employed, not about our looking up to Him, but about His

looking down to us. It would describe the action of a shepherd guarding

his flock; of a sentry keeping a city; of the watchers that watch for

the morning, and the like. By using it, the Psalmist seems as if he

would say--There are two kinds of watching. There is God's watching

over me, and there is my watching for God. I look up to Him that He may

bless; He looks down upon me that He may take care of me. As He guards

me, so I stand expectant before Him, as one in a besieged town, upon

the ramparts there, looks eagerly out across the plain to see the

coming of the long-expected succours. God waits to be

gracious'--wonderful words, painting for us His watchfulness of fitting

times and ways to bless us, and His patient attendance on our

unwilling, careless spirits. We may well take a lesson from His

attitude in bestowing, and on our parts, wait on Him to be helped. For

these two things--vigilance and patience--are the main elements in the

scriptural idea of waiting on God. Let me enforce each of them in a

word or two.

There is no waiting on God for help, and there is no help from God,

without watchful expectation on our parts. If ever we fail to receive

strength and defence from Him, it is because we are not on the outlook

for it. Many a proffered succour from heaven goes past us, because we

are not standing on our watch-tower to catch the far-off indications of

its approach, and to fling open the gates of our heart for its

entrance. He who expects no help will get none; he whose expectation

does not lead him to be on the alert for its coming will get but

little. How the beleaguered garrison, that knows a relieving force is

on the march, strain their eyes to catch the first glint of the

sunshine on their spears as they top the pass! But how unlike such

tension of watchfulness is the languid anticipation and fitful look,

with more of distrust than hope in it, which we turn to heaven in our

need! No wonder we have so little living experience that God is our

strength' and our defence,' when we so partially believe that He is,

and so little expect that He will be either. The homely old proverb

says, They that watch for providences will never want a providence to

watch for,' and you may turn it the other way and say, They that do not

watch for providence will never have a providence to watch for.' Unless

you put out your water-jars when it rains you will catch no water; if

you do not watch for God coming to help you, God's watching to be

gracious will be of no good at all to you. His waiting is not a

substitute for ours, but because He watches therefore we should watch.

We say, we expect Him to comfort and help us--well, are we standing, as

it were, on tiptoe, with empty hands upraised to bring them a little

nearer the gifts we look for? Are our eyes ever towards the Lord'? Do

we pore over His gifts, scrutinising them as eagerly as a gold-seeker

does the quartz in his pan, to detect every shining speck of the

precious metal? Do we go to our work and our daily battle with the

confident expectation that He will surely come when our need is the

sorest and scatter our enemies? Is there any clear outlook kept by us

for the help which we know must come, lest it should pass us

unobserved, and like the dove from the ark, finding no footing in our

hearts drowned in a flood of troubles, be fain to return to the calm

refuge from which it came on its vain errand? Alas, how many gentle

messengers of God flutter homeless about our hearts, unrecognised and

unwelcomed, because we have not been watching for them! Of what avail

is it that a strong hand from the beach should fling the safety-line

with true aim to the wreck, if no eye on the deck is watching for it?

It hangs there, useless and unseen, and then it drops into the sea, and

every soul on board is drowned. It is our own fault--and very largely

the fault of our want of watchfulness for the coming of God's help--if

we are ever overwhelmed by the tasks, or difficulties, or sorrows of

life. We wonder that we are left to fight out the battle ourselves. But

are we? Is it not rather, that while God's succours are hastening to

our side we will not open our eyes to see, nor our hearts to receive

them? If we go through the world with our hands hanging listlessly down

instead of lifted to heaven, or full of the trifles and toys of this

present, as so many of us do, what wonder is it if heavenly gifts of

strength do not come into our grasp?

That attitude of watchful expectation is vividly described for us in

the graphic words of another psalm, My soul waiteth for the Lord more

than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch

for the morning.' What a picture that is! Think of a wakeful, sick man,

tossing restless all the night on his tumbled bed, racked with pain

made harder to bear by the darkness. How often his heavy eye is lifted

to the window-pane, to see if the dawn has not yet begun to tint it

with a grey glimmer! How he groans, Would God it were morning!' Or

think of some unarmed and solitary man, benighted in the forest, and

hearing the wild beasts growl and scream and bark all round, while his

fire dies down, and he knows that his life depends on the morning

breaking soon. With yet more eager expectation are we to look for God,

whose coming is a better morning for our sick and defenceless spirits.

If we are not so looking for His help, we need never be surprised that

we do not get it. There is no promise and no probability that it will

come to men in their sleep, who neither desire it nor wait for it. And

such vigilant expectation will be accompanied with patience. There is

no impatience in it, but the very opposite. If we hope for that we see

not, then do we with patience wait for it.' If we know that He will

surely come, then if He tarry we can wait for Him. The measure of our

confidence is ever the measure of our patience. Being sure that He is

always in the midst of' Zion, we may be sure that at the right time He

will flame out into delivering might, helping her, and that right

early. So waiting means watchfulness and patience, both of which have

their roots in trust.

Further, we have here set forth not only the nature, but also the

object of this waiting. Upon Thee, O my Strength! will I wait, for God

is my Defence.'

The object to which faith is directed, and the ground on which it is

based, are both set forth in these two names here applied to God. The

name of the Lord is Strength, therefore I wait on Him in the confident

expectation of receiving of His power. The Lord is my Defence,'

therefore I wait on Him in the confident expectation of safety. The one

name has respect to our condition of feebleness and inadequacy for our

tasks, and points to God as infusing strength into us. The other points

to our exposedness to danger and to enemies, and points to God as

casting His shelter around us. The word translated defence' is

literally a high fortress,' and is the same as closes the rapturous

accumulation of the names of his delivering God, which the Psalmist

gives us when he vows to love Jehovah, who has been his Rock, and

Fortress, and Deliverer; his God in whom he will trust, his Buckler,

and the Horn of his salvation, and his High Tower. The first name

speaks of God dwelling in us, and His strength made perfect in our

weakness; the second speaks of our dwelling in God, and our

defencelessness sheltered in Him. The name of the Lord is a strong

tower; the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.' As some outnumbered

army, unable to make head against its enemies in the open, flees to the

shelter of some hill fortress, perched upon a crag, and taking up the

drawbridge, cannot be reached by anything that has not wings, so this

man, hard pressed by his foes, flees into God to hide him, and feels

secure behind these strong walls.

That is the God on whom we wait. The recognition of His character as

thus mighty and ready to help is the only thing that will evoke our

expectant confidence, and His character thus discerned is the only

object which our confidence can grasp aright. Trust Him as what He is,

and trust Him because of what He is, and see to it that your faith lays

hold on the living God Himself, and on nothing beside.

But waiting on God is not only the recognition of His character as

revealed, but it involves, too, the act of laying hold on all the power

and blessing of that character for myself. My strength, my defence,'

says the Psalmist. Think of what He is, and believe that He is that for

you, else there is no true waiting on Him. Make God thy very own by

claiming thine own portion in His might, by betaking thyself to that

strong habitation. We cannot wait on God in crowds, but one by one,

must say, My strength and my defence.'

And now turn to the second verse of our two texts: Unto Thee, O my

Strength! will I sing, for God is my defence and the God of my mercy.'

Here we catch, as it were, waiting expectation and watchfulness in the

very act of passing over into possession and praise. For remember the

aspect of things has not changed a bit between the first verse of our

text and the last. The enemies are all round about David just as they

were, making a noise like a dog,' as he says, and going round about the

city.' The evil that was threatening him and making him sad remains

entirely unlightened. What has altered? He has altered. And how has he

altered? Because his waiting on God has begun to work an inward change,

and he has climbed, as it were, out of the depths of his sorrow up into

the sunlight. And so it ever is, my friends! There is deliverance in

spirit before there is deliverance in outward fact. If our patient

waiting bring, as it certainly will bring, at the right time, an answer

in the removal of danger, and the lightening of sorrow, it will bring

first the better answer, the peace of God, which passeth all

understanding,' to keep your hearts and minds. That is the highest

blessing we have to seek for in our waiting on God, and that is the

blessing which we get as soon as we wait on Him. The outward

deliverance may tarry, but ever there come before it, as heralds of its

approach, the sense of a lightened burden and the calmness of a

strengthened heart. It may be long before the morning breaks, but even

while the darkness lasts, a faint air begins to stir among the sleeping

leaves, the promise of the dawn, and the first notes of half-awakened

birds prelude the full chorus that will hail the sunrise.

It is beautiful, I think, to see how in the compass of this one little

psalm the singer has, as it were, wrought himself clear, and sung

himself out of his fears. The stream of his thought, like some mountain

torrent, turbid at first, has run itself bright and sparkling. How all

the tremor and agitation have gone away, just because he has kept his

mind for a few minutes in the presence of the calm thought of God and

His love. The first courses of his psalm, like those of some great

building, are laid deep down in the darkness, but the shining summit is

away up there in the sunlight, and God's glittering glory is

sparklingly reflected from the highest point. Whoever begins with,

Deliver me--I will wait upon Thee,' will pass very quickly, even before

the outward deliverance comes, into--O my Strength! unto Thee will I

sing!' Every song of true trust, though it may begin with a minor, will

end in a burst of jubilant gladness. No prayer ought ever to deal with

complaints, as we know, without starting with thanksgiving, and,

blessed be God, no prayer need to deal with complaints without ending

with thanksgiving. So, all our cries of sorrow, and all our

acknowledgments of weakness and need, and all our plaintive

beseechings, should be inlaid, as it were, between two layers of

brighter and gladder thought, like dull rock between two veins of gold.

The prayer that begins with thankfulness, and passes on into waiting,

even while in sorrow and sore need, will always end in thankfulness,

and triumph, and praise.

If we regard this second verse of our text as the expression of the

Psalmist's emotion at the moment of its utterance, then we see in it a

beautiful illustration of the effect of faithful waiting to turn

complaining into praise. If we regard it rather as an expression of his

confidence, that I shall yet praise Him for the help of His

countenance,' we see in it an illustration of the power of patient

waiting to brighten the sure hope of deliverance, and to bring summer

into the heart of winter. As resolve, or as prophecy, it is equally a

witness of the large reward of quiet waiting for the salvation of the

Lord.

In either application of the words their almost precise correspondence

with those of the previous verse is far more than a mere poetic

ornament, or part of the artistic form of the psalm. It teaches us this

happy lesson--that the song of accomplished deliverance, whether on

earth, or in the final joy of heaven, will be but a sweeter, fuller

repetition of the cry that went up in trouble from our waiting hearts.

The object to which we shall turn with our thankfulness is He to whom

we betook ourselves with our prayers. There will be the same turning of

the soul to Him; only instead of wistful waiting in the longing look,

joy will light her lamps in our eyes, and thankfulness beam in our

faces as we turn to His light. We shall look to Him as of old, and name

Him what we used to name Him when we were in weakness and warfare,--our

Strength' and our Defence.' But how different the feelings with which

the delivered soul calls Him so, from those with which the sorrowful

heart tried to grasp the comfort of the names. Then their reality was a

matter of faith, often hard to hold fast. Now it is a matter of memory

and experience. I called Thee my strength when I was full of weakness;

I tried to believe Thou wast my defence when I was full of fear; I

thought of Thee as my fortress when I was ringed about with foes; I

know Thee now for that which I then trusted that Thou wast. As I waited

upon Thee that Thou mightest be gracious, I praise Thee now that Thou

hast been more gracious than my hopes.' Blessed are they whose loftiest

expectations were less than their grateful memories and their rich

experience, and who can take up in their song of praise the names by

which they called on God, and feel that they knew not half their depth,

their sweetness, or their power!

But the praise is not merely the waiting transformed. Experience has

not only deepened the conception of the meaning of God's name; it has

added a new name. The cry of the suppliant was to God, his strength and

defence; the song of the saved is to the God who is also the God of his

mercy. The experiences of life have brought out more fully the love and

tender pity of God. While the troubles lasted it was hard to believe

that God was strong enough to brace us against them, and to keep us

safe in them; it was harder still to think of them as coming from Him

at all; it was hardest to feel that they came from His love. But when

they are past, and their meaning is plainer, and we possess their

results in the weight of glory which they have wrought out for us, we

shall be able to look back on them all as the mercies of the God of our

mercy, even as when a man looks down from the mountain-top upon the

mists and the clouds through which he passed, and sees them all smitten

by the sunshine that gleams upon them from above. That which was thick

and damp as he was struggling through it, is irradiated into rosy

beauty; the retrospective and downward glance confirms and surpasses

all that faith dimly discerned, and found it hard to believe. Whilst we

are fighting here, brethren! let us say, I will wait for Thee,' and

then yonder we shall, with deeper knowledge of the love that was in all

our sorrows, sing unto Him who was our strength in earth's weakness,

our defence in earth's dangers, and is for ever more the God of our

mercy,' amidst the large and undeserved favours of heaven.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

SILENCE TO GOD

Truly my soul waiteth upon God. . . . 5. My soul, wait thou only upon

God.'--PSALM lxii. 1, 5.

We have here two corresponding clauses, each beginning a section of the

psalm. They resemble each other even more closely than appears from the

English version, for the truly' of the first, and the only' of the

second clause, are the same word; and in each case it stands in the

same place, namely, at the beginning. So, word for word, the two answer

to each other. The difference is, that the one expresses the Psalmist's

patient stillness of submission, and the other is his

self-encouragement to that very attitude and disposition which he has

just professed to be his. In the one he speaks of, in the other to, his

soul. He stirs himself up to renew and continue the faith and

resignation which he has, and so he sets before us both the temper

which we should have, and the effort which we should make to prolong

and deepen it, if it be ours. Let us look at these two points then--the

expression of waiting, and the self-exhortation to waiting.

Truly my soul waiteth upon God.' It is difficult to say whether the

opening word is better rendered truly,' as here, or only,' as in the

other clause. Either meaning is allowable and appropriate. If, with our

version, we adopt the former, we may compare with this text the opening

of another psalm (lxxiii.), Truly God is good to Israel,' and there, as

here, we may see in that vehement affirmation a trace of the struggle

through which it had been won. The Psalmist bursts into song with a

word, which tells us plainly enough how much had to be quieted in him

before he came to that quiet waiting, just as in the other psalm he

pours out first the glad, firm certainty which he had reached, and then

recounts the weary seas of doubt and bewilderment through which he had

waded to reach it. That one word is the record of conflict and the

trophy of victory, the sign of the blessed effect of effort and

struggle in a truth more firmly held, and in a submission more

perfectly practised. It is as if he had said, Yes! in spite of all its

waywardness and fears, and self-willed struggles, my soul waits upon

God. I have overcome these, and now there is peace within.'

It is to be further observed that literally the words run, My soul is

silence unto God.' That forcible form of expression describes the

completeness of the Psalmist's unmurmuring submission and quiet faith.

His whole being is one great stillness, broken by no clamorous

passions, by no loud-voiced desires, by no remonstrating reluctance.

There is a similar phrase in another psalm (cix. 4), which may help to

illustrate this: For my love they are my adversaries, but I am

prayer'--his soul is all one supplication. The enemies' wrath awakens

no flush of passion on his cheek, or ripple of vengeance in his heart.

He meets it all with prayer. Wrapped in devotion and heedless of their

rage, he is like Stephen, when he kneeled down among his yelling

murderers, and cried with a loud voice, Lord! lay not this sin to their

charge.' So here we have the strongest expression of the perfect

consent of the whole inward nature in submission and quietness of

confidence before God.

That silence is first a silence of the will. The plain meaning of this

phrase is resignation; and resignation is just a silent will. Before

the throne of the Great King, His servants are to stand like those long

rows of attendants we see on the walls of Eastern temples, silent, with

folded arms, straining their ears to hear, and bracing their muscles to

execute his whispered commands, or even his gesture and his glance. A

man's will should be an echo, not a voice; the echo of God, not the

voice of self. It should be silent, as some sweet instrument is silent

till the owner's hand touches the keys. Like the boy-prophet in the

hush of the sanctuary, below the quivering light of the dying lamps, we

should wait till the awful voice calls, and then answer, Speak, Lord!

for Thy servant heareth.' Do not let the loud utterances of your own

wills anticipate, nor drown, the still, small voice in which God

speaks. Bridle impatience till He does. If you cannot hear His whisper,

wait till you do. Take care of running before you are sent. Keep your

wills in equipoise till God's hand gives the impulse and direction.

Such a silent will is a strong will. It is no feeble passiveness, no

dead indifference, no impossible abnegation that God requires, when He

requires us to put our wills in accord with His. They are not slain,

but vivified, by such surrender; and the true secret of strength lies

in submission. The secret of blessedness is there, too, for our sorrows

come because there is discord between our circumstances and our wills,

and the measure in which these are in harmony with God is the measure

in which we shall feel that all things are blessings to be received

with thanksgiving. But if we will take our own way, and let our own

wills speak before God speaks, or otherwise than God speaks, nothing

can come of that but what always has come of it--blunders, sins,

misery, and manifold ruin.

We must keep our hearts silent too. The sweet voices of pleading

affections, the loud cry of desires and instincts that roar for their

food like beasts of prey, the querulous complaints of disappointed

hopes, the groans and sobs of black-robed sorrows, the loud hubbub and

Babel, like the noise of a great city, that every man carries within,

must be stifled and coerced into silence. We have to take the animal in

us by the throat, and sternly say, Lie down there and be quiet.' We

have to silence tastes and inclinations. We have to stop our ears to

the noises around, however sweet the songs, and to close many an avenue

through which the world's music might steal in. He cannot say, My soul

is silent unto God,' whose whole being is buzzing with vanities and

noisy with the din of the market-place. Unless we have something, at

least, of that great stillness, our hearts will have no peace, and our

religion no reality.

There must be the silence of the mind, as well as of the heart and

will. We must not have our thoughts ever occupied with other things,

but must cultivate the habit of detaching them from earth, and keeping

our minds still before God, that He may pour His light into them.

Surely if ever any generation needed the preaching--Be still and let

God speak'--we need it. Even religious men are so busy with spreading

or defending Christianity, that they have little time, and many of them

less inclination, for quiet meditation and still communion with God.

Newspapers, and books, and practical philanthropy, and Christian

effort, and business, and amusement, so crowd into our lives now, that

it needs some resolution and some planning to get a clear space where

we can be quiet, and look at God.

But the old law for a noble and devout life is not altered by reason of

any new circumstances. It still remains true that a mind silently

waiting before God is the condition without which such a life is

impossible. As the flowers follow the sun, and silently hold up their

petals to be tinted and enlarged by his shining, so must we, if we

would know the joy of God, hold our souls, wills, hearts, and minds

still before Him, whose voice commands, whose love warms, whose truth

makes fair, our whole being. God speaks for the most part in such

silence only. If the soul be full of tumult and jangling noises, His

voice is little likely to be heard. As in some kinds of deafness, a

perpetual noise in the head prevents hearing any other sounds, the rush

of our own fevered blood, and the throbbing of our own nerves, hinder

our catching His tones. It is the calm lake which mirrors the sun, the

least catspaw wrinkling the surface wipes out all the reflected glories

of the heavens. If we would mirror God our souls must be calm. If we

would hear God our souls must be silence.

Alas, how far from this is our daily life! Who among us dare to take

these words as the expression of our own experience? Is not the

troubled sea which cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt, a

truer emblem of our restless, labouring souls than the calm lake? Put

your own selves by the side of this Psalmist, and honestly measure the

contrast. It is like the difference between some crowded market-place

all full of noisy traffickers, ringing with shouts, blazing in

sunshine, and the interior of the quiet cathedral that looks down on it

all, where are coolness and subdued light, and silence and solitude.

Come, My people! enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about

thee.' Commune with your own heart and be still.' In quietness and

confidence shall be your strength.'

This man's profession of utter resignation is perhaps too high for us;

but we can make his self-exhortation our own. My soul! wait thou only

upon God.' Perfect as he ventures to declare his silence towards God,

he yet feels that he has to stir himself up to the effort which is

needed to preserve it in its purity. Just because he can say, My soul

waits,' therefore he bids his soul wait.

I need not dwell upon that self-stimulating as involving the great

mystery of our personality, whereby a man exalts himself above himself,

and controls, and guides, and speaks to his soul. But a few words may

be given to that thought illustrated here, of the necessity for

conscious effort and self-encouragement, in order to the preservation

of the highest religious emotion.

We are sometimes apt to forget that no holy thoughts or feelings are in

their own nature permanent, and the illusion that they are so, often

tends to accelerate their fading. It is no wonder if we in our

selectest hours of high communion with the living God' should feel as

if that lofty experience would last by virtue of its own sweetness, and

need no effort of ours to retain it. But it is not so. All emotion

tends to exhaustion, as surely as a pendulum to rest, or as an Eastern

torrent to dry up. All our flames burn to their extinction. There is

but one fire that blazes and is not consumed. Action is the destruction

of tissue. Life reaches its term in death. Joy and sorrow, and hope and

fear, cannot be continuous. They must needs wear themselves out and

fade into a grey uniformity like mountain summits when the sun has left

them.

Our religious experience too will have its tides, and even those high

and pure emotions and dispositions that bind us to God can only be

preserved by continual effort. Their existence is no guarantee of their

permanence, rather is it a guarantee of their transitoriness, unless we

earnestly stir up ourselves to their renewal. Like the emotions kindled

by lower objects, they perish while they glow, and there must be a

continual recurrence to the one Source of light and heat if the

brilliancy is to be preserved.

Nor is it only from within that their continuance is menaced. Outward

forces are sure to tell upon them The constant wash of the sea of life

undermines the cliffs and wastes the coasts. The tear and wear of

external occupations is ever acting upon our religious life. Travellers

tell us that the constant friction of the sand on Egyptian hieroglyphs

removes every trace of colour, and even effaces the deep-cut characters

from basalt rocks. So the unceasing attrition of multitudinous trifles

will take all the bloom off your religion, and efface the name of the

King cut on the tables of your hearts, if you do not counteract them by

constant earnest effort. Our devotion, our faith, our love are only

preserved by being constantly renewed.

That vigorous effort is expressed here by the very form of the phrase.

The same word which began the first clause begins the second also. As

in the former it represented for us, with an emphatic Truly,' the

struggle through which the Psalmist had reached the height of his

blessed experience, so here it represents in like manner the

earnestness of the self-exhortation which he addresses to himself. He

calls forth all his powers to the conflict, which is needed even by the

man who has attained to that height of communion, if he would remain

where he has climbed. And for us, brethren! who shrink from taking

these former words upon our lips, how much greater the need to use our

most strenuous efforts to quiet our souls. If the summit reached can

only be held by earnest endeavour, how much more is needed to struggle

up to it from the valleys below!

The silence of the soul before God is no mere passiveness. It requires

the intensest energy of all our being to keep all our being still and

waiting upon Him. So put all your strength into the task, and be sure

that your soul is never so intensely alive as when in deepest

abnegation it waits hushed before God.

Trust no past emotions. Do not wonder if they should fade even when

they are brightest. Do not let their evanescence tempt you to doubt

their reality. But always when our hearts are fullest of His love, and

our spirits stilled with the sweetest sense of His solemn presence,

stir yourselves up to keep firm hold of the else passing gleam, and in

your consciousness let these two words live in perpetual alternation:

Truly my soul waiteth upon God. My soul! wait thou only upon God.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THIRST AND SATISFACTION

My soul thirsteth for Thee. . . . 5. My soul shall be satisfied. . . .

8. My soul followeth hard after Thee.'--PSALM lxiii. 1, 5, 8.

It is a wise advice which bids us regard rather what is said than who

says it, and there are few regions in which the counsel is more

salutary than at present in the study of the Old Testament, and

especially the Psalms. This authorship has become a burning question

which is only too apt to shut out far more important things. Whoever

poured out this sweet meditation in the psalm before us, his tender

longings for, and his jubilant possession of, God remain the same. It

is either the work of a king in exile, or is written by some one who

tries to cast himself into the mental attitude of such a person, and to

reproduce his longing and his trust. It may be a question of literary

interest, but it is of no sort of spiritual or religious importance

whether the author is David or a singer of later date endeavouring to

reproduce his emotions under certain circumstances.

The three clauses which I have read, and which are so strikingly

identical in form, constitute the three pivots on which the psalm

revolves, the three bends in the stream of its thought and emotion. My

soul thirsts; my soul is satisfied; my soul follows hard after Thee.'

The three phases of emotion follow one another so swiftly that they are

all wrapped up in the brief compass of this little song. Unless they in

some degree express our experiences and emotions, there is little

likelihood that our lives will be blessed or noble, and we have little

right to call ourselves Christians. Let us follow the windings of the

stream, and ask ourselves if we can see our own faces in its shining

surface.

I. The soul that knows its own needs will thirst after God.

The Psalmist draws the picture of himself as a thirsty man in a

waterless land. That may be a literally true reproduction of his

condition, if indeed the old idea is correct, that this is a work of

David's; for there is no more appalling desert than that in which he

wandered as an exile. It is a land of arid mountains without a blade of

verdure, blazing in their ghastly whiteness under the fierce sunshine,

and with gaunt ravines in which there are no pools or streams, and

therefore no sweet sound of running waters, no shadow, no songs of

birds, but all is hot, dusty, glaring, pitiless; and men and beasts

faint, and loll out their tongues, and die for want of water. And, says

the Psalmist, such is life, if due regard be had to the deepest wants

of a soul, notwithstanding all the abundant supplies which are spread

in such rich and loving luxuriance around us--we are thirsty men in a

waterless land. I need not remind you how true it is that a man is but

a bundle of appetites, desires, often tyrannous, often painful, always

active. But the misery of it is--the reason why man's misery is great

upon him is--mainly, I suppose, that he does not know what it is that

he wants; that he thirsts, but does not understand what the thirst

means, nor what it is that will slake it. His animal appetites make no

mistakes; he and the beasts know that when they are thirsty they have

to drink, and when they are hungry they have to eat, and when they are

drowsy they have to sleep. But the poor instinct of the animal that

teaches it what to choose and what to avoid fails us in the higher

reaches; and we are conscious of a craving, and do not find that the

craving reveals to us the source from whence its satisfaction can be

derived. Therefore broken cisterns that can hold no water' are at a

premium, and the fountain of living waters' is turned away from, though

it could slake so many thirsts. Like ignorant explorers in an enemy's

country, we see a stream, and we do not stop to ask whether there is

poison in it or not before we glue our thirsty lips to it. There is a

great old promise in one of the prophets which puts this notion of the

misinterpretation of our thirsts, and the mistakes as to the sources

from which they can be slaked, into one beautiful metaphor which is

obscured in our English version. The prophet Isaiah says, according to

our reading, the parched land shall become a pool.' The word which he

uses is that almost technical one which describes the phenomenon known

only in Eastern lands, or at least known in them only in its

superlative degree; the mirage, where the dancing currents of ascending

air simulate the likeness of a cool lake, with palm-trees around it.

And, says he, the mirage shall become a pool,' the romance shall turn

into a reality, the mistakes shall be rectified, and men shall know

what it is that they want, and shall get it when they know. Brethren!

unless we have listened to the teaching from above, unless we have

consulted far more wisely and far more profoundly than many of us have

ever done the meaning of our own hearts when they cry out, we too shall

only be able to take for ours the plaintive cry of the half of this

first utterance of the Psalmist, and say despairingly, My soul

thirsteth.' Blessed are they who know where the fountain is, who know

the meaning of the highest unrests in their own souls, and can go on to

say with clear and true self-revelation, My soul thirsteth for God!'

That is religion. There is a great deal more in Christianity than

longing, but there is no Christianity worth the name without it. There

is moral stimulus to activity, a pattern for conduct, and so on, in our

religion, and if our religion is only this longing--well then, it is

worth very little; and I fancy it is worth a good deal less if there is

none of this felt need for God, and for more of God, in us.

And so I come to two classes of my hearers; and to the first of them I

say, Dear friends! do not mistake what it is that you need,' and see to

it that you turn the current of your longings from earth to God; and to

the second of them I say, Dear friends! if you have found out that God

is your supreme good, see to it that you live in the good, see to it

that you live in the constant attitude of longing for more of that good

which alone will slake your appetite.

The thirst that from the soul doth rise Doth ask a drink divine,' and

unless we know what it is to be drawn outwards and upwards, in strong

aspirations after something--afar from the sphere of our sorrow,' I

know not why we should call ourselves Christians at all.

But, dear friends! let us not forget that these higher aspirations

after the uncreated and personal good which is God have to be

cultivated very sedulously and with great persistence, throughout all

our changing lives, or they will soon die out, and leave us. There has

to be the clear recognition, habitual to us, of what is our good. There

has to be a continual meditation, if I may so say, upon the

all-sufficiency of that divine Lord and Lover of our souls, and there

has to be a vigilant and a continual suppression, and often excision

and ejection, of other desires after transient and partial

satisfactions. A man who lets all his longings go unchecked and untamed

after earthly good has none left towards heaven. If you break up a

river into a multitude of channels, and lead off much of it to irrigate

many little gardens, there will be no force in its current, its bed

will become dry, and it will never reach the great ocean where it loses

its individuality and becomes part of a mightier whole. So, if we

fritter away and divide up our desires among all the clamant and

partial blessings of earth, then we shall but feebly long, and feebly

longing, shall but faintly enjoy, the cool, clear, exhaustless gush

from the fountain of life--My soul thirsteth for God!'--in the measure

in which that is true of us, and not one hairsbreadth beyond it, in

spite of orthodoxy, and professions, and activities, are we Christian

people.

II. The soul that thirsts after God is satisfied.

The Psalmist, by the magic might of his desire, changes, as in a sudden

transformation scene in a theatre, all the dreariness about him. One

moment it is a dry and barren land where no water is'; the next moment

a flash of verdure has come over the yellow sand, and the ghastly

silence is broken by the song of merry birds. The one moment he is

hungering there in the desert; the next, he sees spread before him a

table in the wilderness, and his soul is satisfied as with marrow and

with fatness,' and his mouth praises God, whom he possesses, who has

come unto him swift, immediate, in full response to his cry. Now, all

that is but a picturesque way of putting a very plain truth, which we

should all be the happier and better if we believed and lived by, that

we can have as much of God as we desire, and that what we have of Him

will be enough.

We can have as much of God as we desire. There is a quest which finds

its object with absolute certainty, and which finds its object

simultaneously with the quest. And these two things, the certainty and

the immediateness with which the thirst of the soul after God passes

into a satisfied fruition of the soul in God, are what are taught us

here in our text; and what you and I, if we comply with the conditions,

may have as our own blessed experience. There is one search about which

it is true that it never fails to find. The certainty that the soul

thirsting after God shall be satisfied with God results at once from

His nearness to us, and His infinite willingness to give Himself, which

He is only prevented from carrying into act by our obstinate refusal to

open our hearts by desire. It takes all a man's indifference to keep

God out of his heart, for in Him we live, and move, and have our

being,' and that divine love, which Christianity teaches us to see on

the throne of the universe, is but infinite longing for

self-communication. That is the definition of true love always, and

they fearfully mistake its essence, and take the lower and spurious

forms of it for the higher and nobler, who think of love as being what,

alas! it often is, in our imperfect lives, a fierce desire to have for

our very own the thing or person beloved. But that is a second-rate

kind of love. God's love is an infinite desire to give Himself. If only

we open our hearts--and nothing opens them so wide as longing--He will

pour in, as surely as the atmosphere streams in through every chink and

cranny, as surely as if some great black rock that stands on the margin

of the sea is blasted away, the waters will flood over the sands behind

it. So unless we keep God out, by not wishing Him in, in He will come.

The certitude that we possess Him when we desire Him is as absolute. As

swift as Marconi's wireless message across the Atlantic and its answer;

so immediate is the response from Heaven to the desire from earth. What

a contrast that is to all our experiences! Is there anything else about

which we can say I am quite sure that if I want it I shall have it. I

am quite sure that when I want it I have it'? Nothing! There may be

wells to which a man has to go, as the Bedouin in the desert has to go,

with empty water-skins, many a day's journey, and it comes to be a

fight between the physical endurance of the man and the weary distance

between him and the spring. Many a man's bones, and many a camel's, lie

on the track to the wells, who lay down gasping and black-lipped, and

died before they reached them. We all know what it is to have longing

desires which have cost us many an effort, and efforts and desires have

both been in vain. Is it not blessed to be sure that there is One whom

to long for is immediately to possess?

Then there is the other thought here, too, that when we have God we

have enough. That is not true about anything else. God forbid that one

should depreciate the wise adaptation of earthly goods to human needs

which runs all through every life! but all that recognised, still we

come back to this, that there is nothing here, nothing except God

Himself, that will fill all the corners of a human heart. There is

always something lacking in all other satisfactions. They address

themselves to sides, and angles, and facets of our complex nature; they

leave all the others unsatisfied. The table that is spread in the

world, at which, if I might use so violent a figure, our various

longings and capacities seat themselves as guests, always fails to

provide for some of them, and whilst some, and those especially of the

lower type, are feasting full, there sits by their side another guest,

who finds nothing on the table to satisfy his hunger. But if my soul

thirsts for God, my soul will be satisfied when I get Him. The prophet

Isaiah modifies this figure in the great word of invitation which

pealed out from him, where he says, Ho! everyone that thirsteth, come

ye to the waters.' But that figure is not enough for him, that

metaphor, blessed as it is, does not exhaust the facts; and so he goes

on, yea, come, buy wine'--and that is not enough for him, that does not

exhaust the facts, therefore he adds, and milk.' Water, wine, and milk;

all forms of the draughts that slake the thirsts of humanity, are found

in God Himself, and he who has Him needs seek nowhere besides.

Lastly--

III. The soul that is satisfied with God immediately renews its quest.

My soul followeth hard after Thee.' The two things come together,

longing and fruition, as I have said. Fruition begets longing, and

there is swift and blessed alternation, or rather co-existence of the

two. Joyful consciousness of possession and eager anticipation of

larger bestowments are blended still more closely, if we adhere to the

original meaning of the words of this last clause, than they are in our

translation, for the psalm really reads, My soul cleaveth after Thee.'

In the one word cleaveth,' is expressed adhesion, like that of the

limpet to the rock, conscious union, blessed possession; and in the

other word after Thee' is expressed the pressing onwards for more and

yet more. But now contrast that with the issue of all other methods of

satisfying human appetites, be they lower or be they higher. They

result either in satiety or in a tyrannical, diseased appetite which

increases faster than the power of satisfying it increases. The man who

follows after other good than God, has at the end to say, I am sick,

tired of it, and it has lost all power to draw me,' or he has to say, I

ravenously long for more of it, and I cannot get any more.' He that

loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth

abundance with increase.' You have to increase the dose of the

narcotic, and as you increase the dose, it loses its power, and the

less you can do without it the less it does for you. But to drink into

the one God slakes all thirsts, and because He is infinite, and our

capacity for receiving Him may be indefinitely expanded; therefore, Age

cannot wither, nor custom stale His infinite variety'; but the more we

have of God, the more we long for Him, and the more we long for Him the

more we possess Him.

Brethren! these are the possibilities of the Christian life; being its

possibilities they are our obligations. The Psalmist's words may well

be turned by us into self-examining interrogations and we may--God

grant that we do!--all ask ourselves; Do I thus thirst after God?' Have

I learned that, notwithstanding all supplies, this world without Him is

a waterless desert? Have I experienced that whilst I call He answers,

and that the water flows in as soon as I open my heart? And do I know

the happy birth of fresh longings out of every fruition, and how to go

further and further into the blessed land, and into my elastic heart

receive more and more of the ever blessed God?' These texts of mine not

only set forth the ideal for the Christian life here, but they carry in

themselves the foreshadowing of the life hereafter. For surely such a

merely physical accident as death cannot be supposed to break this

golden sequence which runs through life. Surely this partial and

progressive possession of an infinite good, by a nature capable of

indefinitely increasing appropriation of, and approximation to it is

the prophecy of its own eternal continuance. So long as the fountain

springs, the thirsty lips will drink. God's servants will live till God

dies. The Christian life will go on, here and hereafter, till it has

reached the limits of its own capacity of expansion, and has exhausted

God. The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water,

springing up into everlasting life.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

SIN OVERCOMING AND OVERCOME

Iniquities prevail against me: as for our transgressions, Thou shalt

purge them away.'--PSALM. lxv. 3.

There is an intended contrast in these two clauses more pointed and

emphatic in the original than in our Bible, between man's impotence and

God's power in the face of the fact of sin. The words of the first

clause might be translated, with perhaps a little increase of

vividness, iniquities are too strong for me'; and the Thou' of the next

clause is emphatically expressed in the original, as for our

transgressions' (which we cannot touch), Thou shalt purge them away.'

Despair of self is the mother of confidence in God; and no man has

learned the blessedness and the sweetness of God's power to cleanse,

who has not learned the impotence of his own feeble attempts to

overcome his transgression. The very heart of Christianity is

redemption. There are a great many ways of looking at Christ's mission

and Christ's work, but I venture to say that they are all inadequate

unless they start with this as the fundamental thought, and that only

he who has learned by serious reflection and bitter personal experience

the gravity and the hopelessness of the fact of the bondage of sin,

rightly understands the meaning and the brightness of the Gospel of

Christ. The angel voice that told us His name, and based His name upon

His characteristic work, went deeper into the philosophy' of

Christianity than many a modern thinker, when it said, Thou shalt call

His name Jesus, because He shall save His people from their sins.' So

here we have the hopelessness and misery of man's vain struggles, and

side by side with these the joyful confidence in the divine victory. We

have the problem and the solution, the barrier and the overleaping of

it; man's impotence and the omnipotence of God's mercy. My iniquities

are too strong for me, but Thou art too strong for them. As for our

transgressions, of which I cannot purge the stain, with all my tears

and with all my work, Thou shalt purge them away.' Note, then, these

two--first, the cry of despair; second, the ringing note of confidence.

I. The cry of despair.

Too strong for me,' and yet they are me. Me, and not me; mine, and yet,

somehow or other, my enemies, although my children--too strong for me,

yet I give them their strength by my own cowardly and feeble compliance

with their temptations; too strong for me and overmastering me, though

I pride myself often on my freedom and spirit when I am yielding to

them. Mine iniquities are mine, and yet they are not mine; me and yet,

blessed be God! they can be separated from me.

The picture suggested by the words is that of some usurping power that

has mastered a man, and laid its grip upon him so that all efforts to

get away from the grasp are hopeless. Now, I dare say, that some of you

are half consciously thinking that this is a piece of ordinary pulpit

exaggeration, and has no kind of application to the respectable and

decent lives that most of you live, and that you are ready to say, with

as much promptitude and as much falsehood as the old Jews did, even

whilst the Roman eagles, lifted above the walls of the castle, were

giving them the lie: We were never in bondage to any man.' You do not

know or feel that anything has got hold of you which is stronger than

you. Well, let us see.

Consider for a moment. You are powerless to master your evil,

considered as habits. You do not know the tyranny of the usurper until

a rebellion is got up against him. As long as you are gliding with the

stream you have no notion of its force. Turn your boat and try to pull

against it, and when the sweat-drops come on your brow, and you are

sliding backwards, in spite of all your effort, you will begin to find

out what a tremendous down-sucking energy there is in that quiet,

silent flow. So the ready compliance of the worst part of my nature

masks for me the tremendous force with which my evil tyrannises over

me, and it is only when I face round and try to go the other way, that

I find out what a power there is in its invisible grasp.

Did you ever try to cure some trivial bad habit, some trick of your

fingers, for instance? You know what infinite pains and patience and

time it took you to do that, and do you think that you would find it

easier if you once set yourself to cure that lust, say, or that

petulance, pride, passion, dishonesty, or whatsoever form of selfish

living in forgetfulness of God may be your besetting sin? If you will

try to pull the poison fang up, you will find how deep its roots are.

It is like the yellow charlock in a field, which seems only to spread

in consequence of attempts to get rid of it--as the rough rhyme says;

One year's seeding, seven years' weeding'--and more at the end of the

time than at the beginning. Any honest attempt at mending character

drives a man to this--My iniquities are too strong for me.'

I do not for a moment deny that there may be, and occasionally is, a

magnificent force of will and persistency of purpose in efforts at

self-improvement on the part of perfectly irreligious men. But, if by

the occasional success of such effort, a man conquers one form of evil,

that does not deliver him from evil. You have the usurping dominion

deep in your nature, and what does it matter in essence which part of

your being is most conspicuously under its control? It may be some

animal passion, and you may conquer that. A man, for instance, when he

is young, lives in the sphere of sensuous excitement; and when he gets

old he turns a miser, and laughs at the pleasures that he used to get

from the flesh, and thinks himself ever so much wiser. Is he any

better? He has changed, so to speak, the kind of sin. That is all. The

devil has put a new viceroy in authority, but it is the old government,

though with fresh officials. The house which is cleared of the seven

devils without getting into it the all-filling and sanctifying grace of

God and love of Jesus Christ will stand empty. Nature abhors a vacuum,

and so does Satan, and the empty house invites the seven ill-tenants,

and back they come in their diabolical completeness.

So, dear friends! though you may do a great deal--thank God!--in

subduing evil habits and inclinations, you cannot touch, so as to

master, the central fact of sin unless you get God to help you to do

it, and you have to go down on your knees before you can do that work.

Iniquities are too strong for me.'

Then, again, consider our utter impotence in dealing with our own evil

regarded as guilt. When we do wrong, the judge within, which we call

conscience, says to us two things, or perhaps three. It says first,

That is wrong'; it says secondly, You have got to answer for it'; and I

think it says thirdly, And you will be punished for it.' That is to

say, there is a sense of demerit that goes side by side with our evil,

as certainly as the shadow travels with the substance. And though,

sometimes, when the sun goes behind a cloud, there is no shadow, and

sometimes, when the light within us is darkened, conscience does not

cast the black shade of demerit across the mind; yet conscience is

there, though silent. When it does speak it says, You have done wrong,

and you are answerable.' Answerable to whom? To it? No! To society? No!

To law? No! You can only be answerable to a person, and that is God.

Against Him we have sinned. We do wrong; and if wrong were all that we

had to charge ourselves with, it would be because there was nothing but

law that we were answerable to. We do unkind things, and if unkindness

and inhumanity were all that we had to charge ourselves with, it would

be because we were only answerable to one another. We do suicidal

things, and if self-inflicted injury were all our definition of evil,

it would be because we were only answerable to our conscience and

ourselves. But we sin, and that means that every wrong thing, big or

little, which we do, whether we think about God in the doing of it or

no, is, in its deepest essence, an offence against Him.

The judgment of conscience carries with it the solemn looking for of

future judgment. It says, I am only a herald: He is coming.' No man

feels the burden of guilt without an anticipation of judgment. What are

you going to do with these two feelings? Do you think that you can deal

with them? It is no use saying, I am not responsible for what I did; I

inherited such-and-such tendencies; circumstances are so-and-so. I

could not help it; environment, and evolution, and all the rest of it

diminish, if they do not destroy, responsibility.' Be it so! And yet,

after all, this is left--the certainty in my own convictions that I had

the power to do or not to do. That is a fundamental part of a man's

consciousness. If it is a delusion, what is to be trusted, and how can

we be sure of anything? So that we are responsible for our action, and

can no more elude the guilt that follows sin than we can jump off our

own shadow. And I want you to consider what you are going to do about

your guilt.

One thing you cannot do--you cannot remove it. Men have tried to do so

by sacrifices, and false religions. They have swung in the air by means

of hooks fastened into their bodies, and I do not know what besides,

and they have not managed it. You can no more get rid of your guilt by

being sorry for your sin than you could bring a dead man to life again

by being sorry for his murder. What is done is done. What I have

written I have written!' Nothing will ever wash that little lily hand

white again,' as the magnificent murderess in Shakespeare's great

creation found out. You can forget your guilt; you can ignore it. You

can adopt some of the easily-learned-by-rote and fashionable theories

that will enable you to minimise it, and to laugh at us old-fashioned

believers in guilt and punishment. You do not take away the rock

because you blow out the lamps of the lighthouse, and you do not alter

an ugly fact by ignoring it. I beseech you, as reasonable men and

women, to open your eyes to these plain facts about yourselves, that

you have an element of demerit and of liability to consequent evil and

suffering which you are perfectly powerless to touch or to lighten in

the slightest degree.

Consider, again, our utter impotence in regard to our evil, looked upon

as a barrier between us and God. That is the force of the context here.

The Psalmist has just been saying, O Thou that hearest prayer! unto

Thee shall all flesh come.' And then he bethinks himself how flesh

compassed with infirmities can come. And he staggers back bewildered.

There can be no question but that the plain dictate of common sense is,

We know that God heareth not sinners.' My evil not only lies like a

great black weight of guilt and of habit on my consciousness and on my

activity, but it actually stands like a frowning cliff, barring my path

and making a barrier between me and God. Your hands are full of blood;

I hate your vain oblations,' says the solemn Voice through the prophet.

And this stands for ever true--The prayer of the wicked is an

abomination.' There frowns the barrier. Thank God! mercies come through

it, howsoever close-knit and impenetrable it may seem. Thank God! no

sin can shut Him out from us, but it can shut us out from Him. And

though we cannot separate God from ourselves, and He is nearer us than

our consciousness and the very basis of our being, yet by a mysterious

power we can separate ourselves from Him. We may build up, of the black

blocks of our sins flung up from the inner fires, and cemented with the

bituminous mortar of our lusts and passions, a black wall between us

and our Father. You and I have done it. We can build it--we cannot

throw it down; we can rear it--we cannot tunnel it. Our iniquities are

too strong for us.

Now notice that this great cry of despair in my text is the cry of a

single soul. This is the only place in the psalm in which the singular

person is used. Iniquities are too strong for us,' is not sufficient.

Each man must take guilt to himself. The recognition and confession of

evil must be an intensely personal and individual act. My question to

you, dear friend! is, Did you ever know it by experience? Going apart

by yourself, away from everybody else, with no companions or

confederates to lighten the load of your felt evil, forgetting tempters

and associates and all other people, did you ever stand, you and God,

face to face, with nobody to listen to the conference? And did you ever

feel in that awful presence that whether the world was full of men, or

deserted and you the only survivor, would make no difference to the

personal responsibility and weight and guilt of your individual sin?

Have you ever felt, Against Thee, Thee only, have I'--solitary--

sinned,' and confessed that iniquities are too strong for me'?

II. Now, let me say a word or two about the second clause of this great

verse, the ringing cry of confident hope.

The confidence is, as I said, the child of despair. You will never go

into that large place of assured trust in God's effacing finger passed

over all your evil until you have come through the narrow pass, where

the black rocks all but bar the traveller's foot, of conscious

impotence to deal with your sin. You must, first of all, dear friends!

go down into the depths, and learn to have no trust in yourselves

before you can rise to the heights, and rejoice in the hope of the

glory and of the mercy of God. Begin with too strong for me,' and the

impotent me' leads on to the almighty Thou.'

Then, do not forget that what was confidence on the Psalmist's part is

knowledge on ours. As for our transgressions, Thou wilt purge them

away.' You and I know why, and know how. Jesus Christ in His great work

for us has vindicated the Psalmist's confidence, and has laid bare for

the world's faith the grounds upon which that divine power proceeds in

its cleansing mercy. Thou wilt purge them away,' said he. Christ hath

borne our sins in His own body on the tree,' says the New Testament. I

have spoken about our impotence in regard to our own evil, considered

under three aspects. I meant to have said more about Christ's work upon

our sins, considered under the same three aspects. But let me just,

very briefly, touch upon them.

Jesus Christ, when trusted, will do for sin, as habit, what cannot be

done without Him. He will give the motive to resist, which is lacking

in the majority of cases. He will give the power to resist, which is

lacking in all cases. He will put a new life and spirit into our nature

which will strengthen and transform our feeble wills, will elevate and

glorify our earthward trailing affections, will make us love that which

He loves, and aspire to that which He is, until we become, in the

change from glory to glory, reflections of the image of the Lord. As

habit and as dominant power within us, nothing will cast out the evil

that we have entertained in our hearts except the power of the life of

Christ Jesus, in His Spirit dwelling within us and making us clean.

When a strong man keeps his house, his goods are in peace, but when a

stronger than he cometh he taketh from him all his implements in which

he trusteth, and divideth his spoil.' And so Christ has bound the

strong man, in that one great sacrifice on the Cross. And now He comes

to each of us, if we will trust Him, and gives motives, power, pattern,

hopes, which enable us to cast out the tyrant that has held dominion

over us. If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.'

And I tell all of you, especially you young men and women, who

presumably have noble aspirations and desires, that the only way to

conquer the world, the flesh, and the devil, is to let Christ clothe

you with His armour; and let Him lay His hand on your feeble hands

whilst you aim the arrows and draw the bow, as the prophet did in the

old story, and then you will shoot, and not miss. Christ, and Christ

alone, within us will make us powerful to cast out the evil.

In like manner, He, and He only, deals with sin, considered as guilt.

Here is the living secret and centre of all Christ's preciousness and

power--that He died on the Cross; and in His spirit, which knew the

drear desolation of being forsaken by God, and in His flesh, which bore

the outward consequences of sin, in death as a sinful world knows it,

bare our sins and carried our sorrows,' so that by His stripes we are

healed.'

If you will trust yourselves to the mighty Sacrifice, and with no

reservation, as if you could do anything, will cast your whole weight

and burden upon Him, then the guilt will pass away, and the power of

sin will be broken. Transgressions will be buried--covered,' as the

original of my text has it--as with a great mound piled upon them, so

that they shall never offend or smell rank to heaven any more, but be

lost to sight for ever.

Christ can take away the barrier reared by sin between God and the

human spirit. Solid and black as it stands, His blood dropped upon it

melts away. Then it disappears like the black bastions of the aerial

structures in the clouds before the sunshine. He hath opened for us a

new and living way, that we might have access and confidence,' and,

sinners as we are, that we might dwell for ever more at the side of our

Lord.

So, dear brother! whilst humanity cries--and I pray that all of us may

cry like the Apostle, Oh, wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me

from the body of this death?'--Faith lifts up, swift and clear, her

ringing note of triumph, which I pray God or rather, which I beseech

you that you will make your own, I thank God! I through Jesus Christ

our Lord.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE BURDEN-BEARING GOD

Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits.'--(A.V.).

Blessed be the Lord, who daily beareth our burden.' --PSALM lxviii. 19

(R.V.).

The difference between these two renderings seems to be remarkable, and

a person ignorant of any language but our own might find it hard to

understand how any one sentence was susceptible of both. But the

explanation is extremely simple. The important words in the Authorised

Version, with benefits,' are a supplement, having nothing to represent

them in the original. The word translated loadeth' in the one rendering

and beareth' in the other admits of both these meanings with equal

ease, and is, in fact, employed in both of them in other places in

Scripture. It is clear, I think, that, in this case, at all events, the

Revision is an improvement. For the great objection to the rendering

which has become familiar to us all, Who daily loadeth us with

benefits,' is that these essential words are not in the original, and

need to be supplied in order to make out the sense. Whereas, on the

other hand, if we adopt the suggested emendation, Who daily beareth our

burdens,' we get a still more beautiful meaning, which requires no

forced addition in order to bring it out. So, then, I accept that

varied form of our text as the one on which I desire to say a few words

now.

I. The first thing that strikes me in looking at it is the remarkable

and eloquent blending of majesty and condescension.

It is not without significance that the Psalmist employs that name for

God in this clause, which most strongly expresses the idea of supremacy

and dominion. Rule and dignity are the predominant ideas in the word

Lord,' as, indeed, the English reader feels in hearing it; and then,

side by side with that, there lies this thought, that the Highest, the

Ruler of all, whose absolute authority stretches over all mankind,

stoops to this low and servile office, and becomes the burden-bearer

for all the pilgrims who will put their trust in Him. This blending

together of the two ideas of dignity and condescension to lowly offices

of help and furtherance is made even more emphatic if we glance back at

the context of the psalm. For there is no place in Scripture in which

there is flashed before the mind of the singer a grander picture of the

magnificence and the glory of God, than that which glitters and flames

in the previous verses. We read in them of God riding through the

heavens by His name Jehovah'; of Him as marching at the head of the

people, through the wilderness, and of the earth quivering at His

tread, and the heavens dropping at His presence. We read of Zion itself

being moved at the presence of the Lord. We read of His word going

forth so mightily as to scatter armies and their kings. We read of the

chariots of God as twenty thousand, even thousands of angels.' All is

gathered together in the great verse, Thou hast ascended on high, Thou

hast led captivity captive.' And then, before he has taken breath

almost, the Psalmist turns, with most striking and dramatic abruptness,

from the contemplation, awe-struck and yet jubilant, of all that

tremendous, magnificent, and earth-shaking power to this wonderful

thought, Blessed be the Lord! who daily beareth our burdens.' Not only

does He march at the head of the congregation through the wilderness,

but He comes, if I might so say, behind the caravan, amongst the

carriers and the porters, and will bear anything that any of the weary

pilgrims intrusts to His care.

Oh, dear brethren! if familiarity did not dull the glory of it, what a

thought that is--a God that carries men's loads! People talk much

rubbish about the stern Old Testament Deity'; is there anything

sweeter, greater, more heart-compelling and heart-softening, than such

a thought as this? How all the majesty bows itself, and declares itself

to be enlisted on our side, when we think that He that sitteth on the

circle of the heavens, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers'

is the God that daily beareth our burdens'!

And that is the tone of the Old Testament throughout, for you will

always find braided together in the closest vital unity the

representation of these two aspects of the divine nature; and if ever

we hear set forth a more than ordinarily magnificent conception of His

power and majesty be sure that, if you look, you will find side by side

with it a more than ordinarily tender representation of His gentleness

and His grace. And if we look deeper, this is not a case of contrast,

it is not that there are sharply opposed to each other these two

things, the gentleness and the greatness, the condescension and the

magnificence, but that the former is the direct result of the latter;

and it is just because He is Lord, and has dominion over all, that,

therefore, He bears the burdens of all. For the responsibilities of the

Creator are in proportion to His greatness, and He that has made man

has thereby made it necessary that He should, if they will let Him, be

their Burden-bearer and their Servant. The highest must be the lowest,

and just because God is high over all, blessed for ever, therefore is

He the Supporter and Sustainer of all. So we may learn the true meaning

of elevation of all sorts, and from the example of loftiest, may draw

the lesson for our more insignificant varieties of height, that the

higher we are, the more we are bound to stoop, and that men are then

likest God, when their elevation suggests to them responsibility, and

when he that is chiefest becomes the servant.

II. So, then, notice next the deep insight into the heart and ways of

God here.

He daily beareth our burdens.' If there is any meaning in this word at

all, it means that He so knits Himself with us as that all which

touches us touches Him, that He takes a share in all our pressing

duties, and feels the reflection from all our sorrows and pains. We

have no impassive God in the heavens, careless of mankind, nor is His

settled and changeless and unshaded blessedness of such a sort as that

there cannot pass across it--if I may not say a shadow, I may at least

say--a ripple from men's pangs and troubles and cares. Love is the

identification of oneself with the beloved object. We call it sympathy,

when we are speaking about the fellow feeling between man and man that

is kindled of love. But there is something deeper than sympathy in that

great Heart, which gathers into itself all hearts, and in that great

Being, whose being underlies all our beings, and is the root from which

we all live and grow. God, in all our afflictions, is afflicted; and in

simple though profound verity, has that which is most truly represented

to men, by calling it a fellow feeling with our infirmities and our

sorrows.

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,

And thy Maker is not nigh;

Think not thou canst weep a tear,

And thy Maker is not near.'

For want of a better word, we speak of the sympathy of God: but we need

something far more intimate and unwearied than we understand by that

word, to express the community of feeling between all who trust Him and

His own infinite heart. If this bearing of our burden means anything,

it gives us a deep insight, too, into His workings, as well as into His

heart. For it covers over this great truth that He Himself comes to us,

and by the communication of His own power to us, makes us able to bear

the burdens which we roll upon Him. The meaning of His lifting our

load,' in so far as that expression refers to the divine act rather

than the divine heart, is that He breathes into us the strength by

which we can carry the heavy task of duties, and can endure the

crushing pressure of our sorrows. All the endurance of the saints is

God in them bearing their burdens.

Notice, too, daily beareth,' or, as the Hebrew has it yet more

emphatically because more simply, day by day beareth.' He travels with

us, in the greatness of His might and the long-suffering of His

unwearied patience, through all our tribulation, and as He has borne

and carried' His people all the days of old,' so, at each new

recurrence of new weights, He is with us still. Like some river that

runs by the wayside and ever cheers the traveller on the dusty path

with its music, and offers its waters to cool his thirsty lips, so, day

by day, in the slow iteration of our lingering sorrows, and in the

monotonous recurrence of our habitual duties, there is with us the

ever-present help of the Ancient of Days, who measures out daily

strength for the daily load, and never sends the one without proffering

the other.

III. So, again, notice here the remarkable anticipation of the very

heart of the Gospel.

The God who daily beareth our burdens,' says the Psalmist. He spoke

deeper things than he knew, and was wiser than he understood. For the

hope that gleams in these words comes to fulfilment, in Him of whom it

was written in prophetic anticipation, so clear and definite that it

reads like historical narrative--He bare our grief and carried our

sorrows. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him. The Lord hath laid

on Him the iniquity of us all.'

Ah! it were of small avail to know a God that bore the burden of our

sorrows and the load of our duties, if we did not know a God who bore

the weight of our sins. For that is the real crushing weight that

breaks men's hearts and bows them to the earth. So the New Testament,

with its message of a Christ on whom is laid the whole pressure of the

world's sin, is the deepest fulfilment of the great words of my text.

IV. Note, lastly, what we should therefore do with our burdens.

First, we should cast them on God, and let Him carry them. He cannot

unless we do. One sometimes sees a petulant and self-confident little

child staggering along with some heavy burden by the parent's side, but

pushing away the hand that is put out to help it to carry its load. And

that is what too many of us do when God says to us, Here, My child! let

Me help you, I will take the heavy end of it, and do you take the light

one.' Cast thy burden upon the Lord'--and do it by faith, by simple

trust in Him, by making real to yourselves the fact of His divine

sympathy, and His sure presence, to aid and to sustain.

Having thus let Him carry the weight, do not you try to carry it too.

As our good old hymn has it-- Why should I the burden bear?' It is a

great deal more God's affair than yours. We have, indeed, in a sense,

to carry it. Every man shall bear his own burden.' The weight of duty

is not to be indolently shoved off our shoulders on to His, saying, Let

Him do the work.' We have indeed to carry the weight of sorrow. There

is no use in trying to deny its bitterness and its burden, and it would

not be well for us that it should be less bitter and less heavy. In

many lands the habit prevails, especially amongst the women, of

carrying heavy loads on their heads; and all travellers tell us that

the practice gives a dignity and a grace to the carriage, and a freedom

and a swing to the gait, which nothing else will do. Depend upon it,

that so much of our burdens of work and weariness as is left to us,

after we have cast them upon Him, is intended to strengthen and ennoble

us. But do not let there be the gnawings of anxiety. Do not let there

be the self-torment of aimless prognostications of evil. Do not let

there be the chewing of the bitter morsel of irrevocable sorrows; but

fling all upon God. And remember what the Master has said, and His

servant has repeated: Take no anxious care . . . for your heavenly

Father knoweth'; Cast your anxiety upon Him, for He careth for you.'

And the last advice that comes from my text is, to see that your

tongues are not silent in that great hymn of praise which ought to go

up to the Lord that daily beareth our burdens.' He wants only our trust

and our thanks, and is best paid by the praise of our love, and of our

heaping still more upon His ever strong and ready arm. Bless the Lord!

who beareth our burdens, and see that you give Him yours to bear.

Listen to Him who hath said, Come unto Me all ye that . . . are heavy

laden, and I will give you rest.'

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

REASONABLE RAPTURE

Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I

desire besides Thee. 26. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the

strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.' --PSALM lxxiii. 25, 26.

We have in this psalm the record of the Psalmist's struggle with the

great standing difficulty of how to reconcile the unequal distribution

of worldly prosperity with the wisdom and providence of God. That

difficulty pressed more acutely upon men of the Old Dispensation than

even upon us, because the very promise of that stage of revelation was

that Godliness brought with it outward well-being. Our Psalmist reaches

a solution, not exactly by the same path by which the writers of the

Books of Job and Ecclesiastes find an answer to the problem. This man

gives up the endeavour to solve the question by reflection and thought,

and as he says, goes into the sanctuary of God,' gets into communion

with his Father in heaven, and by reason of that communion reaches a

conclusion which is, at all events, an approximate solution of his

difficulty, viz. the belief of a future life, Then understood I their

end.' The solemn vision of a life beyond the present, which should be

the outcome and retribution of this, rises before him from out of his

agitated thoughts, like the moon, pale and phantom-like, from a stormy

sea. That truth, if revealed at all to the Psalmist's contemporaries,

certainly did not occupy the same position of clearness or of

prominence as it does in our religious beliefs. But here we see a soul

led up by its wrestlings to apprehend it, and as was said of a

statesman, calling a new world into existence to redress the balance of

the old.' So we get here a soul taught by God, and filled with Him by

communion, therefore lifted to the height of a faith in a future life,

and so made able to look out upon all the perplexities and staggering

mysteries of earth's mingled ill and good, if not with distinct

understanding, at least with patient faith.

The words of my text indicate for us the very high-water mark of

religious experience, the very apex and climax of what some people

would call mystical religion to which this man has climbed, because he

fought with his doubts, and by God's grace was able to lay them. To him

the world's uncertain ill or good becomes infinitely insignificant,

because for the future he has a clear vision of a continued life with

God, and because for the present he knows that to have God in his heart

is all that he really needs.

I. We have here, first, a necessity which, misdirected, is the source

of man's misery.

Whom have I in heaven but Thee? there is none upon earth that I desire

besides Thee.' If men would interpret the deepest voices of their own

souls that is what they would all say, because, from the very make of

our human nature there is not one of us, howsoever weak and sinful and

small, but is great enough to be too great to be filled with anything

smaller than God. Our thoughts, even the thoughts of the least

enlightened amongst us, go wandering through eternity; and as the

writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes says:--He hath set eternity in men's

hearts.' We all of us need, though, alas! so few of us know that we

need, a living possession of a living perfect Person, for mind, for

heart, for will. Nothing short of the fulness of God' is enough for the

smallest amongst us. So, because we do not believe this, because

hundreds of you do not know what it is for which your souls are crying

out, the misery of man is great upon him.' You try to fill that deep

and aching void in your hearts, which is a sign of your possible

nobleness, and a pledge of your possible blessedness, with all manner

of minute rubbish, which can never fill up the gap that is there.

Cartload after cartload may be tilted into the bottomless bog, and

there is no more solid ground on the surface than there was at the

beginning. Oh, my brother! consult thine own deepest need; listen to

that voice, often stifled, often neglected, and by some of you always

misunderstood, which speaks in your wills, minds, consciences, hopes,

desires, hearts; and is it not this: My soul thirsteth for God, for the

living God'?

There is none in the heaven, with all its stars and angels, enough for

thee but Him. There is none upon earth, with all its flowers, and

treasures, and loves, that will calm and still thy soul but only God.

The words of my text spring from a necessity felt by every man,

misdirected by a tragical majority of men, and therefore the source of

restlessness and misery.

II. Secondly, we see here the longing which, rightly directed and

cherished, is the very spirit of religion.

He, and only he, is the religious man, who can take these words of my

text for the inmost words of his conscious effort and life. Only in the

measure in which you and I recognise that God is our sole and

all-sufficient good, in that measure have we any business to call

ourselves devout or Christian people. That is a sharp test, is it not?

Is it not a valid and an accurate one? Is that not what really makes a

religious man, namely, the supreme admiration of, and aspiration after,

and possession of God, and God alone? What a contrast that forms to our

ordinary notions of what religion is! High above all creeds which are

valuable as leading up to this enthusiasm of longing and rapture of

possession, high above all preliminaries and preparations in the way of

outward services and ceremonial or united acts of worship, which are

only helps to this inward possession, rises such a thought of religion

as this. You are not a Christian because you believe a creed. The very

death of Jesus Christ is a means to this end. In order that we might

come into personal, rapturous, and hallowing possession of God, His

very Self in our hearts and spirits, Jesus Christ died and rose again.

Do not mistake the staircase for the presence-chamber. Do not fancy

that you are Christian people because you hold certain opinions or

beliefs in regard of certain doctrines. Do not fancy that religion

consists in either the mere outward practice of, or abstinence from,

certain forms of conduct. Such things are the means to, or the outcome

of, this inward devotion, but the true essence of our religion is that

we recognise God as our only good, and that in Him we find absolute

rest and perfect sufficiency.

Is that your religion, my brother? What a contrast these words of my

text present not only to our notions of what constitutes religion, but

to our practice! What is the thing that you and I crave most to have?

What is the thing that we lament most of all when we lose? Where do our

desires go when we take the guiding hand off them, and let them run as

they will? For some of us there are dearer hearts on earth than His,

Perhaps for some of us there are more dearly loved faces in heaven than

His. Taking the two extreme possible cases, and supposing at the one

end of the scale a man that had everything but God, and at the other

end a man that had nothing but God, do we live as if we believed that

the man that had everything minus God is a pauper; and the other who

has God minus everything is rich to all the intents of bliss'? Let us

shape our desires, aspirations, efforts, according to that certain

truth.

I do not need to remind you that this lofty height of conscious

longing, not unblest with contemporaneous fruition, is above the height

to which we habitually rise. But what I would now insist upon is only

this, that whilst there will be variations, whilst there will be ups

and downs, the periods in our lives when we do not consciously

recognise Him as our supreme and single good are the periods that drop

below duty and blessedness. Acknowledge the imperfections, but Oh, my

friends! you Christian men and women, who know that these hours of high

communion with a loving God are not diffused through your whole life,

do not sit down contented, and say that it must be so; but confess them

as being imperfections which are your own fault, and remember that just

as much, and not one hairsbreadth more than, we can take these words of

my text for ours, so much and no more, have we a right to call

ourselves religious men and women.

III. Again, we have here the blessed possession, which deadens earthly

desires.

That clause, There is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee,'

might, I think, be rendered more accurately With Thee'--that is to say,

possessing Thee,'--I desire none upon earth.' If we thus have been

longing after God, and fuller possession of Him, and if in some

measure, in answer to the desire, as is always the case, we have

received into mind and heart and will more of His preciousness and

sweetness, then that will kill the desires that otherwise would

conflict with it. Our great poet, speaking about a supreme earthly

love, says--

That rich golden shaft

Hath killed the flock of all affections else,

That lived in her.'

And the same thing is true about this higher life. This new affection

will deaden, and in some sense destroy, the desires that turn to lower

and to earthly things. The sun when it rises quenches the brightest

stars that can but fade in his light and die. And so when, in answer to

our longing, God lifts the light of His countenance--a better

sunrise--upon us, that new affection dims and quenches the brightness

of these little, though they be lustrous points, that shed a

fragmentary and manifold twinkling over the darkness of our former

night. Walk in the light,' and your heaven will be naked of all

competing brightness.

Only remember that this supreme, and in some sense exclusive, love and

longing does not destroy the sweetness of lower possessions and

blessings. A new deep love in a man or a woman's heart does not make

their former affections less, but more, sweet and noble and strong. And

so when we get to love God best, and to love all other persons and

things in Him, and Him in them, then they become sources of dignity and

nobleness, of sweetness and strength, in our lives, which they

otherwise never would be. If you want to make all your family

affections, for instance, more permanent, more lofty, and more blessed,

let them be all in God:

I trust he lives in God, and there

I find him worthier to be loved,'

says the poet about one that had been carried into the other life. It

is true about us in our relations to one another, even whilst we remain

here. Let God be first, and the second rises higher in the scale than

when we thought it first. The more our hearts are knit to Him and all

other desires are subordinated to Him, the more do they become

precious, and powers for good in our lives.

IV. And so, lastly, we have here the possession which is the pledge of

perpetuity.

The Psalmist, in the last verse of my text, supposes an extreme, and in

some sense, an impossible case. My flesh'--my bodily frame--and my

heart'--some portion of my immaterial being--faileth.' The clause

should probably be taken as hypothetical. Even supposing that it has

come to this,' says he, that I had been separated from my body, and

that along with the body there had also been "consumed" (as is the

meaning of the original word) some portion of my spiritual being, even

then, though there were only a thin thread of personality left, enough

to call "me" and no more, so to speak, I should cling with that to God,

and I know that then I should have enough, for "God is the Rock of my

heart, and my Portion for ever." ' These two last words are obviously

here to be taken in their widest extension. The whole context requires

us to suppose that the Psalmist's eye is looking across the black gorge

of death to the shining table-land beyond. So here we are admitted to

see faith in the future life in the very act of growth. The singer

soars to that sunlit height of confidence in the endless blessedness of

union with God, just because he feels so deeply the sacredness and the

blessedness of his present communion with God.

Next to the resurrection of Jesus Christ the best proof of immortality

lies in the present experience of communion with God. Anything is more

reasonable than to believe that a soul which can grasp God for its

good, which can turn itself to, and be united with, an infinite Being;

and itself is capable of indefinite approximation towards that Being,

should have its course and career cut short by such a surface thing as

death. If there be a God at all, anything is more reasonable than to

believe that the union, formed between Him and me by faith here, can

ever come to an end until I have exhausted Him, and drawn all His

fulness into myself. This communion, by its very sweetness yieldeth

proof that it was born for immortality.' And the Psalmist here, just

because to-day God is the Rock of his heart, is sure that that relation

must last on, through life, through death, ay! and for ever, when all

that seems shall suffer shock.'

So, my brethren! here is the choice and alternative presented before

us. And I ask you which is the wise man, he who clutches at external

possessions which cannot abide, or he who hungers for that indwelling

God, who sinks into the very substance of his soul, and is more

inseparable from him than his very body? Which is the wise man, he of

whom it shall one day be said, This night thy soul shall be required of

thee,' and His glory shall not descend after him,' or the man who knows

for what his heart hungers, and knowing it turns to God in Christ, by

simple faith and lowly aspiration, as his enduring Treasure; and then,

and therefore, can look out with a calm smile of security over all the

tumbling sea of change, and beyond the dark horizon there where sight

fails; and can say, I am persuaded that neither things present, nor

things to come, nor life, nor death, nor any other creature, shall be

able to separate me from the God who is my Treasure, and the Life of my

very self'?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

NEARNESS TO GOD THE KEY TO LIFE'S PUZZLE

It is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord

God, that I may declare all Thy works.'--PSALM lxxiii. 28.

The old perplexity as to how it comes, if God is good and wise and

strong, that bad men should prosper and good men should suffer, has

been making the Psalmist's faith reel. He does not answer the question

exactly as the New Testament would have done, but he does find a

solution sufficient for himself in two thoughts, the transiency of that

outward prosperity, and the eternal sufficiency of God. It was too

painful for me until I went into the Sanctuary, then understood I their

end'; and on the other hand: Thou art the Strength of my life, and my

Portion for ever.' So he climbs at last to the calm height where he

learns that, whatever be a man's outward prosperity, if he is separated

from God he ceases to be. As the context says: They that are far from

Thee shall perish.' Thou hast destroyed'--already, before they die--all

them that go a-whoring from Thee.' And on the other hand, whatever be

the outward condition, God is enough. It is good for me,' rich or poor

harassed or at rest, afflicted or prosperous, in health or sickness,

solitary or compassed about with loving friends, it is good for me to

draw near to God'; and nothing else is good. Thus the river that has

had to fight its way through rocks, and has been chafed in the

conflict, and has twisted its path through many a deep, dark, sunless

gorge, comes out at last into the open, and flows with a broad sunlit

breast, peaceable and full, into the great ocean--It is good for me to

draw near to God.'

But that is not all. The Psalmist goes on to tell how we are to draw

near to God: I have put my trust in Him.' And that is not all, for he

further goes on to tell how, drawing near to God through faith, all

these puzzles and mysteries about men's condition cease to perplex, and

a beam of light falls upon the whole of them. I have put my trust in

God, that I may declare all Thy works.' There are no knots in the

thread now.

I. So here we have, first the truth of experience that nearness to God

is the one good.

Of course, it is so in the Psalmist's view, since he believes, as we

profess to believe, that, to quote the words of another Psalmist, With

Thee is the fountain of life'; and therefore that to draw near to Thee'

is to carry our little empty pitchers to that great spring that is

always flowing with waters ever sweet and clear. Union with God is

life, in all senses of the word, according as the creature is capable

of union with Him. Why! there is no life in a plant except God's power

is vitalising it. Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow'

because God makes them grow. There is no bodily life in a man, unless

He continually breathes into the nostrils the breath of life. If you

stop the flow of the fountain, then all the pools are dry. There is no

life intellectual in a man, except by the inspiration of the Almighty,'

from whom all just thoughts do proceed.' Above all these forms of life

the real life of a spirit is the life derived from the union with God

Himself, whereby He pours Himself into it, and in the deepest sense of

the words it is true: Because I live ye shall live also.' It is good

for me to draw near to God,' because, unless I do, and if I am

separated from Him, my true self is dead, even whilst I seem to live.

All that are parted from Him perish; all that are joined to Him, and

only they, do live what is worth calling life. Cut off the sunbeam from

the sun, and what becomes of it? It vanishes. Separate a soul from God,

and it is dead. What is all the good of the world to you if your true

self is dead? And what an absurdity it is to deck a corpse with riches

and pomp of various kinds! That is what the men of the world are doing,

who have chained themselves to earth, and cut themselves off from God.

For me it is good to draw near to God.' Do you draw near? Because if

you do not, no matter what prosperity you have, you do not know

anything about the true life and real good for heart and spirit.

I suppose I need scarcely go on pointing out other aspects of this

supreme--or more truly, this solitary--good. For instance, nothing is

really good to me unless I have it within me, so as that it can never

be wrenched away from me. The blessings that we cannot incorporate with

the very substance of our being are only partial blessings after all;

and all these things round us that do minister to our necessities,

tastes, affections, and sometimes to our weaknesses, these good things

fail just in this, that they stand outside us, and there is no real

union between us and them. So, changes come, and we have to unclasp

hands, and the footsteps that used to be planted by the side of ours

cease, and our track across the sands is lonely; and losses come, and

death comes, and all the glory and the good that were only externally

possessed by us we leave behind us. As this psalm says: I considered

their end . . . how they are brought into desolation, as in a moment!'

What is the good of a good that is not incorporated into any being?

What is the good of a good about which I cannot say, with a smile of

confidence, I know that where-ever I may go, and whatever may befall

me, that can never pass from me'? There is but one good of that sort. I

am persuaded that . . . neither life nor death . . . nor any other

creature, shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ

Jesus our Lord.' It is good for me,' amidst the morasses and quicksands

and bogs of life's uncertain and shifting ill and good, to set my feet

upon the rock, and to say: Here I stand, and my footing will never give

way.' Do you, brother! possess a changeless, imperishable, inwrought

good like that? You may if you like.

But remember, too, that in regard to this Christian good, it is not

only the possession of it, but the aspiration after it, that is

blessed. The Psalmist does not only say, It is good for me to be near

to God,' but he says, It is good for me to draw near.' There is one

kind of life in which the seeking is all but as blessed as the finding.

There is one kind of life in which to desire is all but as full of

peace, and power, and joy as to possess. Therefore, another psalm,

which begins by celebrating the blessedness of the men that dwell in

God's house, and are still praising Thee,' goes on to speak of the

blessedness, not less blessed, of the men in whose heart are the ways.'

They who have reached the Temple are at rest, and blessed in their

repose. They who are journeying towards it are in action, and blessed

in their activity. It is good to draw near'; and the seeking after God

is as far above the possession of all other good as heaven is above

earth.

But then, notice further, how our Psalmist comes down to very plain,

practical teaching. He seems to feel that he must explain what he means

by drawing near to God. And here is his explanation. I have put my

trust in the Lord.'

II. The way to nearness to God is twofold.

On the one hand the true path is Jesus Christ, on the other hand the

means by which we walk upon that path is our faith. The Apostle puts it

all in a nutshell when he says that his pray