Expositions of the Holy Scriptures Second Kings from Ch VIII Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther Job Proverbs and

Ecclesiastes

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EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

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

SECOND KINGS FROM CHAP. VIII, AND CHRONICLES, EZRA, AND NEHEMIAH

ESTHER, JOB, PROVERBS

AND ECCLESIASTES

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THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS

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THE STORY OF HAZAEL

So Hazael went to meet him, and took a present with him, even of every

good thing of Damascus, forty camels' burden, and came and stood before

him, and said, Thy son Ben-hadad king of Syria hath sent me to thee,

saying, Shall I recover of this disease? 10. And Elisha said unto him,

Go, say unto him, Thou mayest certainly recover: howbeit the Lord hath

shewed me that he shall surely die. 11. And he settled his countenance

stedfastly, until he was ashamed: and the man of God wept. 12. And

Hazael said, Why weepeth my lord? And he answered, Because I know the

evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel: their strong holds

wilt thou set on fire, and their young men wilt thou slay with the

sword, and wilt dash their children, and rip up their women with child.

13. And Hazael said. But what, is thy servant a dog, that he should do

this great thing? And Elisha answered, The Lord hath shewed me that

thou shalt be king over Syria. 14. So he departed from Elisha, and came

to his master; who said to him, What said Elisha to thee? and he

answered, He told me that thou shouldest surely recover. 15. And it

came to pass on the morrow, that he took a thick cloth, and dipped it

in water, and spread it on his face, so that he died: and Hazael

reigned in his stead.'--2 KINGS viii. 9-15.

This is a strange, wild story. That Damascene monarchy burst into

sudden power, warlike and commercial--for the two things went together

in those days. As is usually the case, Hazael the successful soldier

becomes ambitious. His sword seems to be the real sceptre, and he will

have the dominion. Many years before this Elijah had anointed him to be

king over Syria. That had wrought upon him and stirred ambition in him.

Elijah's other appointments, coeval with his own, had already taken

effect, Jehu was king of Israel, Elisha was prophet, and he only had

not attained the dignity to which he had been designated.

He comes now with his message from the king of Damascus to Elisha. No

doubt he had been often contrasting his own vigour with the decrepit,

nominal king, and many a time had thought of the anointing, and had

nursed ambitious hopes, which gradually turned to dark resolves.

He hoped, no doubt, that Ben-hadad was mortally sick, and it must have

been a cruel, crushing disappointment when he heard that there was

nothing deadly in the illness. Another hope was gone from him. The

throne seemed further off than ever. I suppose that, at that instant,

there sprang in his heart the resolve that he would kill Ben-hadad. The

recoil of disappointment spurred Hazael to the resolution which he then

and there took. It had been gathering form, no doubt, through some

years, but now it became definite and settled. While his face glowed

with the new determination, and his lips clenched themselves in the

firmness of his purpose, the even voice of the prophet went on, howbeit

he shall certainly die,' and the eye of the man of God searched him

till he turned away ashamed because aware that his inmost heart was

read.

Then there followed the prophet's weeping, and the solemn announcement

of what Hazael would do when he had climbed to the throne. He shrank in

real horror from the thought of such enormity of sin. Is thy servant a

dog that he should do such a thing?' Elisha sternly answers: The Lord

hath shewed me that thou shalt be king over Syria.' The certainty is

that in his character occasion will develop evil. The certainty is that

a course begun by such crime will be of a piece, and consistent with

itself.

This conversation with Elisha seems to have accelerated Hazael's

purpose, as if the prediction were to his mind a justification of his

means of fulfilling it.

How like Macbeth he is!--the successful soldier, stirred by

supernatural monitions of a greatness which he should achieve, and at

last a murderer.

This narrative opens to us some of the solemn, dark places of human

life, of men's hearts, of God's ways. Let us look at some of the

lessons which lie here.

I. Man's responsibility for the sin which God foresees.

It seems as if the prophet's words had much to do in exciting the

ambitious desires which led to the crime. Hazael's purpose of executing

the deed is clearly known to the prophet. His ascending the throne is

part of the divine purpose. He could find excuses for his guilt, and

fling the responsibility for firing his ambition on the divine

messenger. It may be asked--What sort of God is this who works on the

mind of a man by exciting promises, and having done so, and having it

fixed in His purposes that the man is to do the crime, yet treats it

when done as guilt?

But now, whatever you may say, or whatever excuses Hazael might have

found for himself, here is just in its most naked form that which is

true about all sin. God foresees it all. God puts men into

circumstances where they will fall, God presents to them things which

they will make temptations. God takes the consequences of their

wrongdoing and works them into His great scheme. That is undeniable on

one side, and on the other it is as undeniable that God's foreseeing

leaves men free. God's putting men into circumstances where they fall

is not His tempting them. God's non-prevention of sin is not permission

to sin. God's overruling the consequences of sin is not His condoning

of sin as part of the scheme of His providence.

Man is free. Man is responsible. God hates sin. God foresees and

permits sin.

It is all a terrible mystery, but the facts are as undeniable as the

mystery of their co-existence is inscrutable.

II. The slumbering possibilities of sin.

Hazael indignantly protests against the thought that he should do such

a thing. There is conscience left in him yet. His example suggests how

little any of us know what it is in us to be or to do. We are all of us

a mystery to ourselves. Slumbering powers lie in us. We are like

quiescent volcanoes.

So much in us lies dormant, needing occasion for its development, like

seeds that may sleep for centuries. That is true in regard to both the

good and the bad in us. Life reveals us to ourselves. We learn to know

ourselves by our actions, better than by mental self-inspection.

All sin is one in essence, and may pass into diverse forms according to

circumstances. Of course characters differ, but the root of sin is in

us all. We are largely good because not tempted, as a house may well

stand firm when there are no floods. By the nature of the case,

thorough self-knowledge is impossible.

Sin has the power of blinding us to its presence. It comes in a cloud

as the old gods were fabled to do. The lungs get accustomed to a

vitiated atmosphere, and scarcely are conscious of oppression till they

cease to play.

All this should teach us--

Lessons of wary walking and humility. We are good because we have not

been tried.

Lessons of charity and brotherly kindness. Every thief in the hulks,

every prostitute on the streets, is our brother and sister, and they

prove their fraternity by their sin. Whatever man has done man may do.'

Nihil humanum alienum a me puto.' Let him that is without sin cast the

first stone.'

III. The fatal necessity by which sin repeats itself in aggravated

forms.

See how Hazael is drifted into his worst crimes. His first one leads on

by fell necessity to others. A man who has done no sin is conceivable,

but a man who has done only one is impossible. Did you ever see a dam

bursting or breaking down? Through a little crack comes one drop: will

it stop there--the gap or the trickle? No! The drop has widened the

crack, it has softened the earth around, it has cleared away some

impediments. So another and another follow ever more rapidly, until the

water pours out in a flood and the retaining embankment is swept away.

No sin is dead, being alone.' The demon brings seven other devils worse

than himself. The reason for that aggravation is plain.

There is, first, habit.

There is, second, growing inclination.

There is, third, weakened restraint.

There is, fourth, a craving for excitement to still conscience.

There is, fifth, the necessity of the man's position.

There is, sixth, the strange love of consistency which tones all life

down or up to one tint, as near as may be. There comes at last despair.

But not merely does every sin tend to repeat itself and to draw others

after it. It tends to repeat itself in aggravated forms. There is

growth, the law of increase as well as of perpetuity. The seed produces

some sixty and some an hundredfold.'

And so the slaughtered soldiers and desolated homesteads of Israel were

the sequel of the cloth on Ben-hadad's face. The secret of much

enormous crime is the kind of relief from conscience which is found in

committing a yet greater sin. The Furies drive with whips of scorpions,

and the poor wretch goes plunging and kicking deeper and deeper in the

mire, further and farther from the path. So you can never say: I will

only do this one wrong thing.'

We see here how powerless against sin are all restraints. The prophecy

did not prevent Hazael from his sins. The clear sense that they were

sins did not prevent him. The horror-struck shudder of conscience did

not prevent him. It was soon gagged.

Hear, then, the conclusion of the whole matter. Christ reveals us to

ourselves. Christ breaks the chain of sin, makes a new beginning, cuts

off the entail, reverses the irreversible, erases the indelible,

cancels the irrevocable, forgives all the faultful past, and by the

power of His love in the soul, works a mightier miracle than changing

the Ethiopian's skin; teaches them that are accustomed to evil to do

well, and though sins be as scarlet, makes them white as snow. He gives

us a cleansed past and a bright future, and out of all our sins and

wasted years makes pardoned sinners and glorified, perfected saints.

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IMPURE ZEAL

And Jehu gathered all the people together, and said unto them, Ahab

served Baal a little; but Jehu shall serve him much. 19. Now therefore

call unto me all the prophets of Baal, all his servants, and all his

priests; let none be wanting: for I have a great sacrifice to do to

Baal; whosoever shall be wanting, he shall not live. But Jehu did it in

subtilty, to the intent that he might destroy the worshippers of Baal.

20. And Jehu said, Proclaim a solemn assembly for Baal. And they

proclaimed it. 21. And Jehu sent through all Israel: and all the

worshippers of Baal came, so that there was not a man left that came

not. And they came into the house of Baal; and the house of Baal was

full from one end to another. 22. And he said unto him that was over

the vestry, Bring forth vestments for all the worshippers of Baal. And

he brought them forth vestments. 23. And Jehu went, and Jehonadab the

son of Rechab, into the house of Baal, and said unto the worshippers of

Baal, Search, and look that there be here with you none of the servants

of the Lord, but the worshippers of Baal only. 24. And when they went

in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings, Jehu appointed fourscore

men without, and said, If any of the men whom I have brought into your

hands escape, he that letteth him go, his life shall be for the life of

him. 25. And it came to pass, as soon as he had made an end of offering

the burnt offering, that Jehu said to the guard and to the captains, Go

in, and slay them; let none come forth. And they smote them with the

edge of the sword; and the guard and the captains cast them out, and

went to the city of the house of Baal. 26. And they brought forth the

images out of the house of Baal, and burned them. 27. And they brake

down the image of Baal, and brake down the house of Baal, and made it a

draught house unto this day. 28. Thus Jehu destroyed Baal out of

Israel. 29. Howbeit from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who

made Israel to sin, Jehu departed not from after them, to wit, the

golden calves that were in Beth-el, and that were in Dan. 30. And the

Lord said unto Jehu, Because thou hast done well in executing that

which is right in Mine eyes, and hast done unto the house of Ahab

according to all that was in Mine heart, thy children of the fourth

generation shall sit on the throne of Israel. 31. But Jehu took no heed

to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart: for he

departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, which made Israel to sin.'--2

KINGS x. 18-31.

The details of this story of bloodshed need little elucidation. Jehu

had driven furiously' to some purpose. Secrecy and swiftness joined to

unhesitating severity had crushed the dynasty of Ahab, which fell

unlamented and unsupported, as if lightning-struck. The nobler elements

had gathered to Jehu, as represented by the Rechabite, Jehonadab,

evidently a Jehovah worshipper, and closely associated with the fierce

soldier in this chapter. Jehu first secured his position, and then

smote the Baal worship as heavily and conclusively as he had done the

royal family. He struck once, and struck no more; for the single blow

pulverised.

The audacious pretext of an intention to outdo the fallen dynasty in

Baal worship must have sounded strange to those who knew how his

massacre of Ahab's house had been represented by him as fulfilling

Jehovah's purpose, but it was not too gross to be believed. So we can

fancy the joyous revival of hope with which from every corner of the

land the Baal priests, prophets, and worshippers, recovered from their

fright, came flocking to the great temple in Samaria, till it was like

a cup filled with wine from brim to brim. The worship cannot have

numbered many adherents if one temple could hold the bulk of them.

Probably it had never been more than a court fashion, and, now that

Jezebel was dead, had lost ground. A token of royal favour was given to

each of the crowd, in the gift of a vestment from the royal wardrobe.

Then Jehu himself, accompanied by the ascetic Jehonadab, entered the

court of the temple, a strangely assorted pair, and a couple of very

distinguished' converts. The Baal priests would thrill with gratified

pride when these two came to worship. The usual precautions against the

intrusion of non-worshippers were taken at Jehu's command, but with a

sinister meaning, undreamed of by the eager searchers. That was a

sifting for destruction, not for preservation. So they all passed into

the inner court to offer sacrifice.

The story gives a double picture in verse 24. Within are the jubilant

worshippers; without, the grim company of their executioners, waiting

the signal to draw their swords and burst in on the unarmed mob. Jehu

carried his deception so far that he himself offered the burnt

offering, with Jehonadab standing by, and then withdrew, followed, no

doubt, by grateful acclamations. A step or two brought him to the

eighty men without.' Two stern words, Go, smite them,' are enough. They

storm in, and the songs of the temple' are turned to howlings in that

day.' The defenceless, surprised crowd, huddled together in the dimly

lighted shrine, were massacred to a man. The innermost sanctuary was

then wrecked, corpses and statues thrown pell-mell into the outer

courts or beyond the precincts, fires lit to burn the abominations, and

busy hands, always more ready for pillage and destruction than for good

work, pulled down the temple, the ruins of which were turned to base

uses. The writer, picturing the wild scene, sums up with a touch of

exultation: Thus Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel'--where note the

emphatic prominence of the three names of the king, the god, and the

nation. That is the vindication of the terrible deed.

Now the main interest of this passage lies in its disclosure of the

strangely mingled character of Jehu, and in the fact that his bloody

severity was approved by God, and rewarded by the continuance of his

dynasty for a longer time than any other on the throne of Israel.

Jehu was influenced by zeal for the Lord,' however much smoke mingled

with the flame. He acted under the conviction that he was God's

instrument, and at each new deed of blood asserted his fulfilment of

prophecy. His profession to Jehonadab (ver. 16) was not hypocrisy nor

ostentation. The Rechabite sheikh was evidently a man of mark, and

apparently one of the leaders of those who had not bowed the knee to

Baal'; and Jehu's disclosure of his animating motive was meant to

secure the alliance of that party through one of its chiefs. No doubt

many elements of selfishness and many stains mingled with Jehu's zeal.

It was much on the same level as the fanaticism of the immediate

successors of Mohammed; but, low as it was, look at its power. Jehu

swept like a whirlwind, or like leaping fire among stubble, from Ramoth

to Jezreel, from Jezreel to Samaria, and nothing stood before his

fierce onset. Promptitude, decision, secrecy,--the qualities which

carry enterprises to success--marked his character; partly, no doubt,

from natural temperament, for God chooses right instruments, but from

temperament heightened and invigorated by the conviction of being the

instrument whom God had chosen. We may learn how even a very imperfect

form of this conviction gives irresistible force to a man, annihilates

fear, draws the teeth of danger, and gathers up all one's faculties to

a point which can pierce any opposition. We may all recognise that God

has sent us on His errands; and if we cherish that conviction, we shall

put away from us slothfulness and fear, and out of weakness shall be

made strong.

But Jehu sets forth the possible imperfections of zeal for the Lord.'

We may defer for a moment the consideration of the morality of his

slaughter of the royal house and the Baal worshippers, and point to the

taint of selfishness and to the leaven of deceit in his enthusiasm. We

have not to analyse it. That is God's work. But clearly the object

which he had in view was not merely fulfilment of prophecy, but

securing the throne; and there was more passion, as well as selfish

policy, in his massacres, than befitted a minister of the divine

justice, who should let no anger disturb the solemnity of his terrible

task. Such dangers ever attend the path of the great men who feel

themselves to be sent by God. In our humbler lives they dog our steps,

and religious fervour needs ever to keep careful watch on itself, lest

it should degenerate unconsciously into self-will, and should allow the

muddy stream of earth-born passion to darken its crystal waters.

Many a great name in the annals of the Church has fallen before that

temptation. We all need to remember that the wrath of man worketh not

the righteousness of God,' and to take heed lest we should be guided by

our own stormy impatience of contradiction, and by a determination to

have our own way, while we think ourselves the humble instruments of a

divine purpose. There was a Zelotes' in the Apostolate; but the coarse,

sanguinary zeal' of his party must have needed much purifying before it

learned what manner of spirit the zeal of a true disciple was of.

Another point of interest is the divine emphatic approval of Jehu's

bloody acts (ver. 30). The massacre of the Baal worshippers is not

included in the acts which God declares to have been according to all

that was in Mine heart,' and it may be argued that it was not part of

Jehu's commission. Certainly the accompanying deceit was not right in

God's eyes,' but the slaughter in Baal's temple was the natural sequel

of the civil revolution, and is most probably included in the deeds

approved.

Perhaps Elisha brought Jehu the message in verse 30. If so, what a

contrast between the two instruments of God's purposes! At all events,

Jehovah's approval was distinctly given. What then? There need be no

hesitation in recognising the progressive character of Scripture

morality, as well as the growth of the revelation of the divine

character, of which the morality of each epoch is the reflection. The

full revelation of the God of love had to be preceded by the clear

revelation of the God of righteousness; and whilst the Old Testament

does make known the love of God in many a gracious act and word, it

especially teaches His righteous condemnation of sin, without which His

love were mere facile indulgence and impunity. The slaughter of that

wicked house of Ahab and of the Baal priests was the act of divine

justice, and the question is simply whether that justice was entitled

to slay them. To that question believers in a divine providence can

give but one answer. The destruction of Baal worship and the

annihilation of its stronghold in Ahab's family were sufficient

reasons, as even we can see, for such a deed. To bring in Jehu into the

problem is unnecessary. He was the sword, but God's was the hand that

struck. It is not for men to arraign the Lord of life and death for His

methods and times of sending death to evil-doers. Granted that the

long-suffering' which is not willing that any should perish' speaks

more powerfully to our hearts than the justice which smites with death,

the later and more blessed revelation is possible and precious only on

the foundation of the former. Nor will a loose-braced generation like

ours, which affects to be horrified at the thought of the wrath of

God,' and recoils from the contemplation of His judgments, ever reach

the innermost secrets of the tenderness of His love.

From the merely human point of view, we may say that revolutions are

not made with rose-water, and that, at all crises in a nation's

history, when some ancient evil is to be thrown off, and some powerful

system is to be crushed, there will be violence, at which easy-going

people, who have never passed through like times, will hold up their

hands in horror and with cheap censure. No doubt we have a higher law

than Jehu knew, and Christ has put His own gentle commandment of love

in the place of what was said to them of old time.' But let us, while

we obey it for ourselves, and abjure violence and blood, judge the men

of old according to that which they had, and not according to that

which they had not.' Jehu's bloody deeds are not held up for

admiration. His obedience is what is praised and rewarded. Well for us

if we obey our better law as faithfully!

The last point in the story is the imperfection of the obedience of

Jehu. He contented himself with rooting out Baal, but left the calves.

That shows the impurity of his zeal,' which flamed only against what it

was for his advantage to destroy, and left the more popular and older

idolatry undisturbed. Obedience has to be all in all, or not at all.'

We may not compound for sins we are inclined to, by' zeal against those

we have no mind to.' Our consciences are apt to have insensitive spots

in them, like witch-marks. We often think it enough to remove the

grosser evils, and leave the less, but white ants will eat up a carcass

faster than a lion. Putting away Baal is of little use if we keep the

calves at Dan and Beth-el. Nothing but walking in the law of the Lord

with all the heart' will secure our walking safely. Unite my heart to

fear Thy name' needs to be our daily prayer. One foot on sea and one on

shore' is not the attitude in which steadfastness or progress is

possible.

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JEHOIADA AND JOASH

And when Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she

arose and destroyed all the seed royal. 2. But Jehosheba, the daughter

of king Joram, sister of Ahaziah, took Joash the son of Ahaziah, and

stole him from among the king's sons which were slain; and they hid

him, even him and his nurse, in the bedchamber from Athaliah, so that

he was not slain. 3. And he was with her hid in the house of the Lord

six years. And Athaliah did reign over the land. 4. And the seventh

year Jehoiada sent and fetched the rulers over hundreds, with the

captains and the guard, and brought them to him into the house of the

Lord, and made a covenant with them, and took an oath of them in the

house of the Lord, and shewed them the king's son. 5. And he commanded

them, saying, This is the thing that ye shall do; A third part of you

that enter in on the sabbath shall even be keepers of the watch of the

king's house; 6. And a third part shall be at the gate of Sur; and a

third part at the gate behind the guard: so shall ye keep the watch of

the house, that it be not broken down. 7. And two parts of all you that

go forth on the sabbath, even they shall keep the watch of the house of

the Lord about the king. 8. And ye shall compass the king round about,

every man with his weapons in his hand: and he that cometh within the

ranges, let him be slain: and be ye with the king as he goeth out and

as he cometh in. 9. And the captains over the hundreds did according to

all things that Jehoiada the priest commanded: and they took every man

his men that were to come in on the sabbath, with them that should go

out on the sabbath, and came to Jehoiada the priest. 10, And to the

captains over hundreds did the priest give king David's spears and

shields, that were in the temple of the Lord. 11. And the guard stood,

every man with his weapons in his hand, round about the king, from the

right corner of the temple to the left corner of the temple, along by

the altar and the temple. 12. And he brought forth the king's son, and

put the crown upon him, and gave him the testimony; and they made him

king, and anointed him; and they clapped their hands, and said, God

save the king. 13. And when Athaliah heard the noise of the guard and

of the people, she came to the people into the temple of the Lord. 14.

And when she looked, behold, the king stood by a pillar, as the manner

was, and the princes and the trumpeters by the king, and all the people

of the land rejoiced, and blew with trumpets: and Athaliah rent her

clothes, and cried, Treason, Treason. 15. But Jehoiada the priest

commanded the captains of the hundreds, the officers of the host, and

said unto them, Have her forth without the ranges: and him that

followeth her kill with the sword. For the priest had said, Let her not

be slain in the house of the Lord. 16. And they laid hands on her; and

she went by the way by the which the horses came into the king's house:

and there was she slain.'--2 KINGS xi. 1-16.

The king of Judah has been killed, his alliance with the king of Israel

having involved him in the latter's fate. Jehu had also murdered the

brethren of Ahaziah,' forty-two in number. Next, Athaliah, the mother

of Ahaziah and a daughter of Ahab, killed all the males of the royal

family, and planted herself on the throne. She had Jezebel's force of

character, unscrupulousness and disregard of human life. She was a

tigress of a woman, and, no doubt, her six year's usurpation was

stained with blood and with the nameless abominations of Baal worship.

Never had the kingdom of Judah been at a lower ebb. One infant was all

that was left of David's descendants. The whole promises of God seemed

to depend for fulfilment on one little, feeble life. The tree had been

cut down, and there was but this one sucker pushing forth a tiny shoot

from the root of Jesse.'

We have in the passage, first, the six years of hiding in the temple.

It is a pathetic picture, that of the infant rescued by his brave aunt

from the blood-bath, and stowed away in the storeroom where the mats

and cushions which served for beds were kept when not in use, watched

over by two loving and courageous women, and taught infantile lessons

by the husband of his aunt, Jehoiada the high priest. Many must have

been aware of his existence, and there must have been loyal guarding of

the secret, or Athaliah's sword would have been reddened with the

baby's blood. Like the child Samuel, he had the Temple for his home,

and his first impressions would be of daily sacrifices and white-robed

priests. It was a better school for him than if he had been in the

palace close by. The opening flower would have been soon besmirched

there, but in the holy calm of the Temple courts it unfolded unstained.

A Christian home should breathe the same atmosphere as surrounded

Joash, and it, too, should be a temple, where holy peace rules, and

where the first impressions printed on plastic little minds are of God

and His service.

We have next the disclosure and coronation of the boy king. The

narrative here has to be supplemented from that in 2 Chron. xxiii.,

which does not contradict that in this passage, as is often said, but

completes it. It informs us that before the final scene in the Temple,

Jehoiada had in Jerusalem assembled a large force of Levites and of the

heads of the fathers' houses' from all the kingdom. That statement

implies that the revolution was mainly religious in its motive, and was

national in its extent. Obviously Jehoiada would have been courting

destruction for Joash and himself unless he had made sure of a strong

backing before he hoisted the standard of the house of David. There

must, therefore, have been long preparation and much stir; and all the

while the foreign woman was sitting in the palace, close by the Temple,

and not a whisper reached her. Evidently she had no party in Judah, and

held her own only by her indomitable will and by the help of foreign

troops. Anybody who remembers how the Austrians in Italy were shunned,

will understand how Athaliah heard nothing of the plot that was rapidly

developing a stone's throw from her isolated throne. Strange delusion,

to covet such a seat, yet no stranger than many another mistaking of

serpents for fish, into which we fall!

Jehoiada's caution was as great as his daring. He does not appear to

have given the Levites and elders any inkling of his purpose till he

had them safe in the Temple, and then he opened his mind, swore them to

stand by him, and showed them the king's son.' What a scene that would

be--the seven-year-old child there among all these strange men, the

joyful surprise flashing in their eyes, the exultation of the faithful

women that had watched him so lovingly, the stern facing of the dangers

ahead. Most of the assembly must have thought that none of David's

house remained, and that thought would have had much to do with their

submitting to Athaliah's usurpation. Now that they saw the true heir,

they could not hesitate to risk their lives to set him on his throne.

Show a man his true king, and many a tyranny submitted to before

becomes at once intolerable. The boy Joash makes Athaliah look very

ugly.

Jehoiada's plans are somewhat difficult to understand, owing to our

ignorance of the details as to the usual arrangements of the guards of

the palace, but the general drift of them is plain enough. The main

thing was to secure the person of the king, and, for that purpose, the

two companies of priests who were relieved on the Sabbath were for once

kept on duty, and their numbers augmented by the company that would, in

the ordinary course, have relieved them. This augmented force was so

disposed as, first, to secure the Temple from attack; and, second, to

compass the king'--in his chamber, that is. We learn from 2 Chronicles

that it consisted of priests and Levites, and some would see in that

statement a tampering with the account in this passage, in the

interests of a later conception of the sanctity of the Temple and of

the priestly order. Our narrative is said to make the foreign

mercenaries of the palace guard the persons referred to; but surely

that cannot be maintained in the face of the plain statement of verse

7, that they kept the watch of the Temple, for that was the office of

the priests. Besides, how should foreign soldiers have needed to be

armed from the Temple armoury? And is it probable on the face of it

that the palace guard, who were Athaliah's men, and therefore

antagonistic to Joash, and Baal worshippers, should have been gained

over to his side, or should have been the guards of the house of

Jehovah? If, however, we understand that these guards were Levites, all

is plain, and the arming of them with the spears and shields that had

been king David's ' becomes intelligible, and would rouse them to

enthusiasm and daring.

Not till all these dispositions for the boy king's safety, and for

preventing an assault on the Temple, had been carried out, did the

prudent Jehoiada venture to bring Joash out from his place of

concealment. Note that in verse 12 he is not called the king,' as in

the previous verses, but, as in verse 4, the king's son.' He was king

by right, but not technically, till he had been presented to, and

accepted by, the representatives of the people, had had the testimony'

placed in his hands, and been anointed by the high-priest. So they made

him king.' The three parts of the ceremony were all significant. The

delivering of the testimony' (the Book of the Law--Deut. xvii. 18, 19)

taught him that he was no despot to rule by his own pleasure and for

his own glory, but the viceroy of the true King of Judah, and himself

subject to law. The people's making him king taught him and them that a

true royalty rules over willing subjects, and both guarded the rights

of the nation and set limits to the power of the ruler. The priest's

anointing witnessed to the divine appointment of the monarch and the

divine endowment with fitness for his office. Would that these truths

were more recognised and felt by all rulers! What a different thing the

page of history would be!

The vigilance of the tigress had been eluded, and Athaliah had a rude

awakening. But she had her mother's courage, and as soon as she heard

in the palace the shouts, she dashed to the Temple, alone as she was,

and fronted the crowd. The sight might have made the boldest quail. Who

was that child standing in the royal place? Where had he come from? How

had he been hidden all these years? What was all this frenzy of

rejoicing, this blare of trumpets, these ranks of grim men with weapons

in their hands? The stunning truth fell on her; but, though she felt

that all was lost, not a whit did she blench, but fronted them all as

proudly as ever. One cannot but admire the dauntless woman, magnificent

in sin.' But her cry of Treason! treason!' brought none to her side. As

she stood solitary there, she must have felt that her day was over, and

that nothing remained but to die like a queen. Proudly as ever, she

passed down the ranks and not a face looked pity on her, nor a voice

blessed her. She was reaping what she had sown, and she who had killed

without compunction the innocents who stood between her and her

ambitions, was pitilessly slain, and all the land rejoiced at her

death.

So ended the all but bloodless revolution which crushed Baal worship in

Judah. It had been begun by Elijah and Elisha, but it was completed by

a high priest. It was religious even more than political. It was a

national movement, though Jehoiada's courage and wisdom engineered it

to its triumph. It teaches us how God watches over His purposes and

their instruments when they seem nearest to failure, for one poor

infant was all that was left of the seed of David; and how, therefore,

we are never to despair, even in the darkest hour, of the fulfilment of

His promises. It teaches us how much one brave, good man and woman can

do to change the whole face of things, and how often there needs but

one man to direct and voice the thoughts and acts of the silent

multitude, and to light a fire that consumes evil.

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METHODICAL LIBERALITY

4. And Jehoash said to the priests, All the money of the dedicated

things that is brought into the house of the Lord, even the money of

every one that passeth the account, the money that every man is set at,

and all the money that cometh into any man's heart to bring into the

house of the Lord, 5. Let the priests take it to them, every man of his

acquaintance; and let them repair the breaches of the house,

wheresoever any breach shall be found. 6. But it was so, that in the

three and twentieth year of king Jehoash the priests had not repaired

the breaches of the house. 7. Then king Jehoash called for Jehoiada the

priest, and the other priests, and said unto them, Why repair ye not

the breaches of the house? Now therefore receive no more money of your

acquaintance, but deliver it for the breaches of the house. 8. And the

priests consented to receive no more money of the people, neither to

repair the breaches of the house. 9. But Jehoiada the priest took a

chest, and bored a hole in the lid of it, and set it beside the altar,

on the right side as one cometh into the house of the Lord: and the

priests that kept the door put therein all the money that was brought

into the house of the Lord. 10. And it was so, when they saw that there

was much money in the chest, that the king's scribe and the high priest

came up, and they put up in bags, and told the money that was found in

the house of the Lord. 11. And they gave the money, being told, into

the hands of them that did the work, that had the oversight of the

house of the Lord: and they laid it out to the carpenters and builders

that wrought upon the house of the Lord, 12. And to masons, and hewers

of stone, and to buy timber and hewed stone to repair the breaches of

the house of the Lord, and for all that wast laid out for the house to

repair it. 13. Howbeit there were not made for the house of the Lord

bowls of silver, snuffers, basons, trumpets, any vessels of gold, or

vessels of silver, of the money that was brought into the house of the

Lord: 14. But they gave that to the workmen, and repaired therewith the

house of the Lord. 15. Moreover they reckoned not with the men, into

whose hand they delivered the money to be bestowed on workmen: for they

dealt faithfully.'--2 KINGS xii. 4-15.

The sons of Athaliah, that wicked woman, had broken up the house of

God,' says Chronicles. The dilapidation had not been complete, but had

been extensive, as may be gathered from the large expenditure recorded

in this passage for repairs, and the enumeration of the artisans

employed. No doubt Joash was guided by Jehoiada in setting about the

restoration, but the fact that he gives the orders, while the high

priest is not mentioned, throws light on the relative position of the

two authorities, and on the king's office as guardian of the Temple and

official head of the church.' The story comes in refreshingly and

strangely among the bloody pages in which it is embedded, and it

suggests some lessons as to the virtue of plain common sense and

business principles applied to religious affairs. If the outward

business of the house of God' were always guided with as much practical

reasonableness as Joash brought to bear on it, there would be fewer

failures or sarcastic critics.

We note, first, the true source of money for religious purposes. There

was a fixed amount for which each man is rated,' and that made the

minimum, but there was also that which cometh into any man's heart to

bring,' and that was infinitely more precious than the exacted tax. The

former was appropriate to the Old Testament, of which the animating

principle was law and the voice: Thou shalt' or Thou shalt not.' The

latter alone fits the New Testament, of which the animating principle

is love and the voice: Though I have all boldness in Christ to enjoin

thee . . . yet for love's sake I rather beseech.' What disasters and

what stifling of the spirit of Christian liberality have marred the

Church for many centuries, and in many lands, because the great

anachronism has prevailed of binding its growing limbs in Jewish

swaddling bands, and degrading Christian giving into an assessment! And

how shrunken the stream that is squeezed out by such a process,

compared with the abundant gush of the fountain of love opened in a

grateful, trusting heart!

Next, we have the negligent, if not dishonest, officials. We do not

know how long Joash tried the experiment of letting the priests receive

the money and superintend the repairs; but probably the restoration

project was begun early in his reign, and if so, he gave the experiment

of trusting all to the officials, a fair, patient trial, till the

twenty-third year of his reign. Years gone and nothing done, or at

least nothing completed! We do not need to accuse them of intentional

embezzlement, but certainly they were guilty of carelessly letting the

money slip through their fingers, and a good deal of it stick to their

hands. It is always the temptation of the clergy to think of their own

support as a first charge on the church, nor is it quite unheard of

that the ministry should be less enthusiastic in religious objects than

the laity,' and should work the enthusiasm of the latter for their own

advantage. Human nature is the same in Jerusalem in Joash's time, and

to-day in Manchester, or New York, or Philadelphia, and all men who

live by the gifts of Christian people have need to watch themselves,

lest they, like Ezekiel's false shepherds, feed themselves and not the

flock, and seek the wool and the fat and not the good of the sheep.

Next we have the application of businesslike methods to religious work.

It was clearly time to take the whole matter out of the priest's hands,

and Joash is not afraid to assume a high tone with the culprits, and

even with Jehoiada as their official head. He was in some sense

responsible for his subordinates, and probably, though his own hands

were clean, he may have been too lax in looking after the disposal of

the funds. Note that while Joash rebuked the priests, and determined

the new arrangements, it was Jehoiada who carried them out and provided

the chest for receiving the contributions. The king wills, the high

priest executes, the rank and file of the priests, however against the

grain, consent. The arrangement for collecting the contributions saved

the faces' of the priests to some extent, for the gifts were handed to

them, and by them put into the chest. But, of course, that was done at

once, in the donor's presence. If changes involving loss of position

are to work smoothly, it is wise to let the deposed officials down as

easily as may be.

Similar common sense is shown in the second step, the arrangement for

ascertaining the amounts given. The king's secretary and the

high-priest (or a representative) jointly opened the chest, counted and

bagged up the money. They checked each other, and prevented suspicion

on either side. No man who regards his own reputation will consent to

handle public money without some one to stand over him and see what he

does with it. One would be wise always to suspect people who appeal for

help for the Lord's work' and are too spiritual' to have such worldly

things as committees or auditors of their books. Accurate accounts are

as essential to Christian work as spirituality or enthusiasm. The next

stage was to hand over the money to the contractors,' as we should call

them; and there similar precautions were taken against possible

peculation on the part of the two officials who had received the money,

for it was apparently weighed out into the hands' of the overseers, who

would thus be able to check what they received by what the secretary

and the high-priest had taken from the chest, and would be responsible

for the expenditure of the amount which the two officials knew that

they had received.

But all this system of checks seems to break down at the very point

where it should have worked most searchingly, for they reckoned not

with the men, into whose hand they delivered the money' to pay the

workmen, for they dealt faithfully.' That last clause looks like a hit

at the priests who had not dealt so, and contrasts the methods of plain

business men of no pretensions, with those of men whose very calling

should have guaranteed their trustworthiness. The contrast has been

repeated in times and places nearer home. But another suggestion may

also be made about this singular lapse into what looks like unwise

confidence. These overseers had proved their faithfulness and earned

the right to be trusted entirely, and the way to get the best out of a

man, if he has any reliableness in him, is to trust him utterly, and to

show him that you do. It is a shame to tell Arnold a lie; he always

believes us,' said the Rugby boys about their great head-master. There

is a time for using all precautions, and a time for using none.

Businesslike methods do not consist in spying at the heels of one's

agents, but in picking the right men, and, having proved them, giving

them a free hand. And is not that what the great Lord and Employer does

with His servants, and is it not part of the reason why Jesus gets more

out of us than any one else can do, that He trusts us more?

One more point may be noticed; namely, the order of precedence in which

the necessary works were done. Not a coin went to provide the utensils

for sacrifice till the Temple was completely repaired. After they had

set up the house of God in its state,' as Chronicles tells us, they

took the balance of the funds to the king and Jehoiada, and spent that

on vessels for the house.' A clear insight to discern what most needs

to be done, and a firm resolve to do the duty that lies nearest thee,'

and to let everything else, however necessary, wait till it is done, is

a great part of Christian prudence, and goes far to make works or lives

truly prosperous. First things first'!--it is a maxim that carries us

far and as right as far.

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THE SPIRIT OF POWER

And Elisha said to the king of Israel, Put thine hand upon the bow. And

he put his hand upon it: and Elisha put his hands upon the king's

hands.'--2 KINGS xiii. 16.

This is part of one of the strangest narratives in the Old Testament.

Elisha is on his deathbed, sick of the sickness' wherewith he should

die.' A very different scene, that close sick-chamber, from the open

plain beyond Jordan from which Elijah had gone up; a very different way

of passing from life by wasting sickness than by fiery chariot! But God

is as near His servant in the one place as in the other, and the slow

wasting away is as much His messenger as the sudden apocalypse of the

horsemen of fire. The king of Israel comes to the old prophet, and very

significantly repeats over him his own exclamation over Elijah, My

father! My father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.'

Elisha takes no notice of the grief and reverence expressed by the

exclamation, but goes straight to his work, and what follows is

remarkable indeed.

Here is a prophet dying; and his last words are not edifying moral and

religious reflections, nor does he seem to be much concerned to leave

with the king his final protest against Israel's sin, but his thoughts

are all of warfare, and his last effort is to stir up the sluggish

young monarch to some of his own enthusiasm in the conflict with the

enemy. It does not sound like an edifying deathbed. People might have

said, Ah! secular and political affairs should be all out of a man's

mind when he comes to his last moments.' But Elisha thought that to

stick to his life's work till the last breath was out of him, and to

devote the last breath to stimulating successors who might catch up the

torch that dropped from his failing hands, was no unworthy end of a

prophet's life.

So there followed what perhaps is not very familiar to some of us, that

strange scene in which the dying man is far fuller of energy and vigour

than the young king, and takes the upper hand of him, giving him a

series of curt, authoritative commands, each of which he punctiliously

obeys. Take bow and arrow,' and he took them. Then the prophet lays his

wasted hand for a moment on the strong, young hand, and having thus

either in symbol or reality--never mind which--communicated power, he

says to him, Fling open the casement towards the quarter where the

enemy's territory lies,' and he flings it open. Now, shoot,' and he

shoots. Then the old man gathers himself up on his bed, and with a

triumphant shout exclaims, The Lord's arrow of victory! . . . Thou

shalt smite the Syrians till they be consumed.'

That is not all. There is a second stage. The promise is given; the

possibility is opened before the king, and now all depends on the

question whether he will rise to the height of the occasion. So the

prophet says to him, Take the sheaf of arrows in your hand'; and he

takes them. And then he says, Now smite upon the ground.' It is a test.

If he had been roused and stirred by what had gone before; if he had

any earnestness of belief in the power that was communicated, and any

eagerness of desire to realise the promises that had been given of

complete victory, what would he have done? What would Elisha have done

if he had had the quiver in his hand? This king smites three

perfunctory taps on the floor, and having done what will satisfy the

old man's whim, and what in decency he had to do, he stops, as if weary

of the whole performance. So the prophet bursts out in indignation on

his dying bed--Thou shouldst have smitten five or six times; then hadst

thou conquered utterly. Now thou shalt conquer but thrice.' A strange

story; very far away from our atmosphere and latitude! Yet are there

not obviously in it great principles which may be disentangled from

their singular setting, and fully applied to us? I think so. Let us try

and draw them from it.

I. Here we have the power communicated.

Now the story seems to indicate that it was only for a moment that the

prophet's hands were laid on the king's hands, because, after they had

been so laid, he is bidden to go to the window and fling it open, and

the bedridden man could not go there with him; then he is bidden to

draw the bow, and another hand upon his would have been a hindrance

rather than a help. So it was but a momentary touch, a communication of

power in reality or in symbol that the muscular young hand needed, and

the wasted old one could give. And is that not a parable for us? We,

too, if we are Christian men and women, have a gospel of which the very

kernel is that there is to us a communication of power, and the very

name of that divine Spirit whom it is Christ's greatest work to send

flashing and flaming through the world, is the Spirit of Power.' And so

the old promise that ye shall be clothed with strength from on high is

the standing prerogative of the Christian Church. There is not merely

some partial communication, as when hand touched hand, but every organ

is vitalised and quickened; as in the case of the other miracle of this

prophet, when he stretched himself on the dead child eye to eye, and

mouth to mouth, and hand to hand; and each part received the vitalising

influence. We have, if we are Christian people, a Spirit given to us,

and are strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man.'

That gift, that strength comes to us by contact, not with Elisha, but

with Elisha's Lord and Master. Christ's touch, when He was on earth,

brought sight to the blind, healing to the sick, vigour to the limbs of

the lame, life to the dead. And you and I can have that touch, far more

truly, and far more mightily operative upon us than they had, who only

felt the contact of His finger, and only derived corporeal blessing.

For we can draw near to Him, and in union with Him by faith and love

and obedience, can have His Spirit in close contact with our spirits,

and strengthening us for all service, and for every task. Brethren!

that touch which gives strength is a real thing. It is no mere piece of

mystical exaggeration when we speak of our spirits being in actual

contact with Christ's Spirit. Many of us have no clear conception, and

still less a firm realisation, of that closer than corporeal contact,

more real than bodily presence, and more intimate than any possible

physical union, which is the great gift of God in Jesus Christ, and

brings to us, if we will, life and strength according to our need. I

would that the popular Christianity of this day had a far larger

infusion of the sound, mystical element that lies in the New Testament

Christianity, and did not talk so exclusively about a Christ that is

for us as to have all but lost sight of the second stage of our

relation to Christ, and lost a faith in a Christ that is in us

Brethren! He can lay His hand upon your spirit's hand. He can flash

light into your spirit's eye from His eye. He can put breath and

eloquence into your spirit's lips from His lips, and His heart beating

against yours can transfuse--if I may so say--into you His own

life-blood, which cleanses from all sin, and fits for all conflict.

Then, further, let me remind you that this power, which is bestowed on

condition of contact, is given before duties are commanded. This king,

in our acted parable, first had the touch of Elisha's fingers, and then

received the command from Elisha's lips, Shoot!' So Jesus Christ gives

before He commands, and commands nothing which He has not fitted us to

perform. He is not an austere man, reaping where He did not sow, and

gathering where He did not straw'; but He comes first to us saying, I

give thee Myself,' and then He looks us in the eyes and says, Wilt thou

not give Me thyself?' He bestows the strength first, and He commands

the consequent duty afterwards.

Further, this strength communicated is realised in the effort to obey

Christ's great commands. Joash felt nothing when the prophet's hand was

laid upon his but, perhaps, some tingling. But when he got the bow in

his hand and drew the arrow to its head, the infused power stiffened

his muscles and strengthened him to pull; and though he could not

distinguish between his own natural corporeal ability and that which

had been thus imparted to him, the two co-operated in the one act, and

it was when he drew his bow that he felt his strength. Stretch forth

thine hand,' said Christ to the lame man. But the very infirmity to be

dealt with was his inability to stretch it forth. At the command he

tried, and, to his wonder, the stiffened sinews relaxed, and the joint

that had been immovable had free play, and he stretched out his hand,

and it was restored whole as the other. So He gives what He commands,

and in obeying the command we realise and are conscious of the power.

Elisha and Joash but act an illustration of the great word of Paul:

Work out your own salvation . . . for it is God that worketh in you.'

II. And now, secondly, look at the perfected victory that is possible.

When the arrows, by God's strength operating through Joash's arm, had

been shot, the prophet says, The arrow of the Lord's victory! . . .

thou shalt smite . . . till thou have consumed.' Yes, of course; if the

arrow is the Lord's arrow, and the strength is His strength, then the

only issue corresponding to the power is perfect victory. I would that

Christian people realised more than they do practically in their lives

that while men's ideals and aims may be all unaccomplished, or but

partially approximated to, since God is God, His nature is perfection,

and nothing that He does can fall beneath His ideal and purpose in

doing it. All that comes from Him must correspond to Him from whom it

comes. He never leaves off till He has completed, nor can any one say

about any of His work, He began to build, and was not able to finish.'

So, Christian people! I would that we should rise to the height of our

prerogatives, and realise the fact that perfect victory is possible,

regard being had to the power which teaches our hands to war and our

fingers to fight.' A great deal of not altogether profitable jangling

goes on at present in reference to the question of whether absolute

sinlessness is possible for a Christian man on earth. Whatever view we

take upon that question, it ought not to hide from us the fact which

should loom very much more largely in our daily operative belief than

it does with most of us, that in so far as the power which is given to

us is concerned, perfect victory is within our grasp, and is the only

worthy and correspondent result to the perfect power which worketh in

us. So there is no reason, as from any defect of the divine gift to the

weakest of us, why our Christian lives should have ups and downs, why

there should be interruptions in our devotion, fallings short in our

consecration, contradictions in our conduct, slidings backward in our

progress. There is no reason why, in our Christian year, there should

be summer and winter; but according to the symbolical saying of one of

the old prophets, The ploughman may overtake the reaper, and he that

treadeth out the grapes him that soweth the seed.' In so far as our

Christian life is concerned, the perfection of the power that is

granted to us involves the possibility of perfection in the recipient.

And the same thing is true in reference to a Christian man's work in

the world. God's Church has ample resources to overcome the evil of the

world. The fire is tremendous, but the Christian Church has possession

of the floods that can extinguish the fire. If we utilised all that we

have, we might smite till we had consumed,' and turned the world into

the Church of God. That is the ideal, the possibility, when we look at

the Christian man as possessor of the communicated power of God. And

then we turn to the reality, to our own consciences, to the state of

our religious communities everywhere, and we see what seems to be blank

contradiction of the possibility. Where is the explanation?

III. That brings me to my last point, the partial victory that is

actually won.

Thou shouldst have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten

the Syrians till they were consumed. But now thou shalt conquer but

thrice.' All God's promises and prophecies are conditional. There is no

such thing as an unconditional promise of victory or of defeat; there

is always an if.' There is always man's freedom as a factor. It is

strange. I suppose no thinking, metaphysical or theological, ever has

solved or ever will, that great paradox of the power of a finite will

to lift itself up in the face of, and antagonism to, an Infinite Will

backed by infinite power, and to thwart its purposes. How often would I

have gathered . . . and ye would not.' Here is all the power for a

perfect victory, and yet the man that has it has to be contented with a

very partial one.

It is a solemn thought that the Church's unbelief can limit and hinder

Christ's work in the world, and we have here another illustration of

that truth. You will find now and then in the newspapers, stories--they

may be true or false--about caterpillars stopping a train. There is an

old legend of that fabulous creature the remora, a tiny thing that

fastened itself to the keel of a ship, and arrested it in mid-ocean.

That is what we do with God and His purposes, and with His power

granted to us.

A low expectation limits the power. This king did not believe, did not

expect, that he would conquer utterly, and so he did not. You believe

that you can do a thing, and in nine cases out of ten that goes

nine-tenths of the way towards doing it. If we cast ourselves into our

fight expecting victory, the expectation will realise itself in nine

cases out of ten. And the man who in faith refuses to say that beast of

a word--impossible!' will find that all things are possible to him that

believeth.' Expect great things of God,' and you will feel His power

tingling to your very fingertips, and will be able to draw the arrow to

its head, and send it whizzing home to its mark.

Small desires block the power. Where there is an iron-bound coast

running in one straight line, the whole ocean may dash itself on the

cliffs at the base, but it enters not into the land; but where the

shore opens itself out into some deep gulf far inland, and broad across

at the entrance, then the glad water rushes in and fills it all. Make

room for God in your lives by your desires and you will get Him in the

fullness of His power.

The use of our power increases our power. Joash had an unused quiver

full of arrows, and he only smote thrice. To him that hath shall be

given, and from him that hath not shall be taken.' The reason why many

of us professing Christians have so little of the strength of God in

our lives is because we have made so little use of the strength that we

have. Stow away your seed-corn in a granary and do not let the air into

it, and weevils and rats will consume it. Sow it broadcast on the

fields with liberal hand, and it will spring up, some thirty, some

sixty, some an hundredfold.' Use increases strength in all regions, and

unused organs atrophy and wither.

So, dear friends! if we will keep ourselves in contact with Christ, and

tremulously sensitive to His touch, if we will expect power according

to our tasks and our needs, if we will desire more of His grace, and if

we will honestly and manfully use the strength that we have, then He

will teach our hands to war and our fingers to fight,' and will give us

strength, so that a bow of brass is bent by' our arms, and we shall be

more than conquerors through Him that loved us.'

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A KINGDOM'S EPITAPH

In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria took Samaria, and

carried Israel away into Assyria, and placed them in Halah and in Habor

by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. 7. For so it

was, that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God,

which had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand

of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods, 8. And walked in

the statutes of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out from before the

children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made. 9.

And the children of Israel did secretly those things that were not

right against the Lord their God, and they built them high places in

all their cities, from the tower of the watchmen to the fenced city.

10. And they set them up images and groves in every high hill, and

under every green tree: 11. And there they burnt incense in all the

high places, as did the heathen whom the Lord carried away before them;

and wrought wicked things to provoke the Lord to anger: 12. For they

served idols, whereof the Lord had said unto them, Ye shall not do this

thing. 13. Yet the Lord testified against Israel, and against Judah, by

all the prophets and by all the seers, saying, Turn ye from your evil

ways, and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the

law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by My

servants the prophets. 14. Notwithstanding they would not hear, but

hardened their necks, like to the neck of their fathers, that did not

believe in the Lord their God. 15. And they rejected His statutes, and

His covenant that He made with their fathers, and His testimonies which

He testified against them; and they followed vanity, and became vain,

and went after the heathen that were round about them, concerning whom

the Lord had charged them, that they should not do like them. 16. And

they left all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made them

molten images, even two calves, and made a grove, and worshipped all

the host of heaven, and served Baal. 17. And they caused their sons and

their daughters to pass through the fire, and used divination and

enchantments, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord,

to provoke Him to anger. 18. Therefore the Lord was very angry with

Israel, and removed them out of His sight: there was none left but the

tribe of Judah only.'--2 KINGS xvii. 6-18.

The brevity of the account of the fall of Samaria in verse 6 contrasts

with the long enumeration of the sins which caused it, in the rest of

this passage. Modern critics assume that verses 7-23 are an

interpolation by the Deuteronomic writer,' apparently for no reason but

because they trace Israel's fall to its cause in idolatry. But surely

the bare notice in verse 6, immediately followed by verse 24, cannot

have been all that the original historian had to say about so tragic an

end of so large a part of the people of God. The whole purpose of the

Old Testament history is not to chronicle events, but to declare God's

dealings, and the fall of a kingdom was of little moment, except as

revealing the righteousness of God.

The main part of this passage, then, is the exposition of the causes of

the national ruin. It is a post mortem inquiry into the diseases that

killed a kingdom. At first sight, these verses seem a mere heaping

together, not without some repetition, of one or two charges; but, more

closely looked at, they disclose a very striking progress of thought.

In the centre stands verse 13, telling of the mission of the prophets.

Before it, verses 7-12, narrate Israel's sin, which culminates in

provoking the Lord to anger (ver. 11). After it, the sins are

reiterated with noticeable increase of emphasis, and again culminate in

provoking the Lord to anger (ver. 17). So we have two degrees of

guilt--one before and one after the prophets' messages; and two

kindlings of God's anger--one which led to the sending of the prophets,

and one which led to the destruction of Israel. The lessons that flow

from this obvious progress of thought are plain.

I. The less culpable apostasy before the prophets' warnings. The first

words of verse 7, rendered as in the Revised Version, give the purpose

of all that follows; namely, to declare the causes of the calamity just

told. Note that the first characteristic of Israel's sin was ungrateful

departure from God. There is a world of pathos and meaning in that

their God,' which is enhanced by the allusion to the Egyptian

deliverance. All sins are attempts to break the chain which binds us to

God--a chain woven of a thousand linked benefits. All practically deny

His possession of us, and ours of Him, and display the short memory

which ingratitude has. All have that other feature hinted at here--the

contrast, so absurd if it were not so sad, between the worth and power

of the God who is left and the other gods who are preferred. The

essential meanness and folly of Israel are repeated by every heart

departing from the living God.

The double origin of the idolatry is next set forth. It was in part

imported and in part home-made. We have little conception of the

strength of faith and courage which were needed to keep the Jews from

becoming idolaters, surrounded as they were by such. But the same are

needed to-day to keep us from learning the ways of the world and

getting a snare to our souls. Now, as ever, walking with God means

walking in the opposite direction from the crowd, and that requires

some firm nerve. The home-made idolatry is gibbeted as being according

to the statutes of the kings.' What right had they to prescribe their

subjects' religion? The influence of influential people, especially if

exerted against the service of God, is hard to resist; but it is no

excuse for sin that it is fashionable.

The blindness of Israel to the consequences of their sin is hinted in

the reference to the fate of the nations whom they imitated. They had

been cast out; would not their copyists learn the lesson? We, too, have

examples enough of what godless lives come to, if we had the sense to

profit by them. The God who cast out the vile Canaanites and all the

rest of the wicked crew before the sons of the desert has not changed,

and will treat Israel as He did them, if Israel come down to their

level. Outward privileges make idolatry or any sin more sinful, and its

punishment more severe.

Another characteristic of Israel's sin is its being done secretly.' Of

the various meanings proposed for that word (ver. 9) the best seems to

be that it refers to the attempt to combine the worship of God and of

idols, of which the calf worship is an instance. Elijah had long ago

taunted the people with trying to hobble on both knees,' or on two

opinions' at once; and here the charge is of covering idolatry with a

cloak of Jehovah worship. A varnish of religion is convenient and

cheap, and often effectual in deceiving ourselves as well as others;

but as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he,' whatever his cloak may

be; and the thing which we count most precious and long most for is our

god, whatever our professions of orthodox religion.

The idolatry is then described, in rapid touches, as universal.

Wherever there was a solitary watchman's tower among the pastures there

was a high place, and they were reared in every city. Images and

Asherim deformed every hill-top and stood under every spreading tree.

Everywhere incense loaded the heavy air with its foul fragrance. The

old scenes of unnamable abomination, which had been so terribly

avenged, seemed to have come back, and to cry aloud for another purging

by fire and sword.

The terrible upshot of all was to provoke the Lord to anger.' The New

Testament is as emphatic as the Old in asserting that there is the

capacity of anger in the God whose name is love, and that sin calls it

forth. The special characteristic of sin, by which it thus attracts

that lightning, is that it is disobedience. As in the first sin, so in

all others, God has said, Ye shall not do this thing'; and we say, Do

it we will.' What can the end of that be but the anger of the Lord?

Because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of

disobedience.'

II. Verse 13 gives the pleading of Jehovah. The mission of the prophets

was God's reply to Israel's rebellion, and was equally the sign of His

anger and of His love. The more sin abounds, the more does God multiply

means to draw back to Himself. The deafer the ears, the louder the

beseeching voice of His grieved and yet pitying love. His anger clothes

itself in more stringent appeals and clearer revelations of Himself

before it takes its slaughtering weapons in hand. The darker the

background of sin, the brighter the beams of His light show against it.

Man's sin is made the occasion for a more glorious display of God's

character and heart. It is on the storm-cloud that the sun paints the

rainbow. Each successive stage in man's departure from God evoked a

corresponding increase in the divine effort to attract him back, till

last of all He sent unto them His Son.' In nature, attraction

diminishes as distance increases; in the realms of grace, it grows with

distance. The one desire of God's heart is that sinners would return

from their evil ways, and He presses on them the solemn thought of the

abundant intimations of His will which have been given from of old, and

are pealed again into all ears by living voices. His law for us is not

merely an old story spoken centuries ago, but is vocal in our

consciences to-day, and fresh as when Sinai flamed and thundered above

the camp, and the trumpet thrilled each heart.

III. The heavier sin that followed the divine pleading. That divine

voice leaves no man as it finds him. If it does not sway him to

obedience, it deepens his guilt, and makes him more obstinate. Like

some perverse ox in the yoke, he stiffens his neck, and stands the very

picture of brute obduracy. There is an awful alternative involved in

our hearing of God's message, which never returns to Him void, but ever

does something to the hearer, either softening or hardening, either

scaling the eyes or adding another film on them, either being the

savour of life unto life or of death unto death.' The mission of the

prophets changed forgetfulness of God's statutes' into rejection' of

them, and made idolatry self-conscious rebellion. Alas, that men should

make what is meant to be a bond to unite them to God into a wedge to

part them farther from Him! But how constantly that is the effect of

the gospel, and for the same reason as in Israel--that they did not

believe in the Lord their God'!

The miserable result on the sinners' own natures is described with

pregnant brevity in verse 15. They followed vanity, and became vain.'

The worshipper became like the thing worshipped, as is always the case.

The idol is vanity, utter emptiness and nonentity; and whoever worships

nothingness will become in his own inmost life as empty and vain as it

is. That is the retribution attendant on all trust in, and longing

after, the trifles of earth, that we come down to the level of what we

set our hearts upon. We see the effects of that principle in the moral

degradation of idolaters. Gods lustful, cruel, capricious, make men

like themselves. We see it working upwards in Christianity, in which

God becomes man that men may become like God, and of which the whole

law is put into one precept, which is sure to be kept, in the measure

of the reality of a man's religion. Be ye therefore imitators of God,

as beloved children.'

In verses 16 and 17 the details of the idolatry follow the general

statement, as in verses 9 to 12, but with additions and with increased

severity of tone. We hear now of calves and star worship, and Baal, and

burning children to Moloch, and divination and enchantment. The

catalogue is enlarged, and there is added to it the terrible

declaration that Israel had sold themselves to do evil in the sight of

the Lord.' The same thing was said by Elijah to Ahab--a noble instance

of courage. The sinner who steels himself against the divine

remonstrance, does not merely go on in his old sins, but adds new ones.

Begin with the calves, and fancy that you are worshipping Jehovah, and

you will end with Baal and Moloch. Refuse to hear God's pleadings, and

you will sell your freedom, and become the lowest and only real kind of

slave--the bondsman of evil. When that point of entire abandonment to

sin, which Paul calls being sold under sin,' is reached, as it may be

reached, at all events by a nation, and corruption has struck too deep

to be cast out, once again the anger of the Lord is provoked; but this

time it comes in a different guise. The armies of the Assyrians, not

the prophets, are its messengers now. Israel had made itself like the

nations whom God had used it to destroy, and now it shall be destroyed

as they were.

To be swept out of His sight is the fate of obstinate rejection of His

commandments and pleadings. Israel made itself the slave of evil, and

was made the captive of Assyria. Self-willed freedom, which does as it

likes, and heeds not God, ends in bondage, and is itself bondage. God's

anger against sin speaks pleadingly to us all, saying, Do not this

abominable thing that I hate.' Well for us if we hearken to His voice

when His anger is kindled but a little.' If we do not yield to Him, and

cast away our idols, we shall become vain as they. Our evil will be

more fatal, and our obstinacy more criminal, because He called, and we

refused. Who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when

He appeareth?' These captives, dragging their weary limbs, with despair

in their hearts, across the desert to a land of bondage, were but

shadows, in the visible region of things, of the far more doleful and

dreary fate that sooner or later must fall on those who would none of

God's counsel, and despised all His reproof, but cling to their idol

till they and it are destroyed together.

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DIVIDED WORSHIP

These nations feared the Lord, and served their own gods.'--2 KINGS

xvii. 33.

The kingdom of Israel had come to its fated end. Its king and people

had been carried away captives in accordance with the cruel policy of

the great Eastern despotisms, which had so much to do with weakening

them by their very conquests. The land had lain desolate and

uncultivated for many years, savage beasts had increased in the

untilled solitudes, even as weeds and nettles grew in the gardens and

vineyards of Samaria. At last the king of Assyria resolved to people

the country; and for this purpose he sent a mixed multitude from the

different nationalities of his empire to the land of Israel. They were

men of five nationalities, most of them recently conquered. Israel had

been deported to different parts of the Assyrian empire; men from

different parts of the empire were deported to the land of Israel. Such

cruel uprootings seemed to be wisdom, but were really a policy that

kept alive disaffection. It was the same mistake (and bore the same

fruits) as Austria pursued in sending Hungarian regiments to keep down

Venice, and Venetian-born soldiers to overawe Hungary.

These new settlers brought with them their national peculiarities, and

among the rest, their gods. They knew nothing about the Jehovah whom

they supposed to be the local deity of Israel; and when they were

troubled by the wild beasts which had, of course, rapidly increased in

the land, they attributed it to their neglect of His worship, and sent

an embassy to the king of Assyria telling that as they know not the

manners of the God of the land,' He has sent lions among them.

This is an instructive example of the heathen way of thinking. They

have their local deities. Each land, each valley, each mountain top,

has its own. They are ready to worship them all, for they have no real

worship for any. Their reason for worship is to escape from harm, to

pay the tribute to which the god has a right on his own territory, lest

he should make it the worse for them if they neglect it. The mild

tolerance of heathendom' simply means the utter absence of religion and

an altogether inadequate notion of deity.

So the settlers have sent to them one of these schismatic priests who

had belonged to the extinct sanctuary at Beth-el, and he, apparently,

not having any truer notions of God or of worship than they had,

nothing loth, teaches them the rites of the Israelite worship, which

was not like that of Judah, as is distinctly stated in the context.

This worship of Jehovah was, however, blended by them with their own

national idolatry. How contemptuously the historian enumerates the hard

names of their gods and the rabble rout of them which each nation made!

The men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth' (probably a deity, though the

name may mean booths for purposes of prostitution) and the others made

Nergal and Ashima and Nibhaz and Tartak.' What names, and what a

pantheon! They feared the Lord and served their own gods.'

This was the beginning of the Samaritan people, whom we find through

the rest of Scripture even down to the Acts of the Apostles, retaining

some trace of their heathen origin. Simon Magus bewitched them in his

sorceries. They began as heathen, though in lapse of years they came to

be pure monotheists, even more rigid than the Jews themselves, and

today, if you went to Nablus, you would find the small remnant of their

descendants adhering to Moses and the law, guarding their sacred copy

of the Pentateuch with unintelligent awe, and eating the Paschal Lamb

with wild rites. They have changed the object of their worship, but one

fears that it is little more real and deep than in old days, 2500 years

ago, when their forefathers feared the Lord and served their own gods.'

Now I venture to take this verse as indicative of a tendency which

belongs to a great many more people than the confused mass of settlers

that were shot down on the hills of Israel by the king of Assyria. It

is really a description of a great deal of what goes by the name of

religion amongst us.

I. The Religion of Fear.

These people would never have thought about God if it had not been for

the lions. When they did think of Him it was only to tremble before

Him. The reason for their trembling was that they did not know the

etiquette of His worship; that they thought of Him as having rights

over them because they had come into His territory, which He would

exact, or punish them for omitting. In a word, their notion of God was

that of a jealous, capricious tyrant, whose ways were inscrutable to

them, in whose territory they found themselves without their will, and

who needed to be propitiated if they would live in peace.

And this is the thought which is most operative in many minds, though

it is veiled in more seemly phrases, and which darkens and injures all

those on whom it lays hold. Need I spend time in showing you how, point

by point, this picture is a picture of many among us? How many of you

think of God when you are ill, and forget Him when you are well? How

many of you pour out a prayer when you are in trouble, and forget all

about Him and it when you are prosperous? How many of you see God in

your calamities and not in your joys? Why do people call sudden deaths

and the like the visitation of God'? How many of us are like Italian

sailors who burn candles and shriek out to the Madonna when the storm

catches them, and get drunk in the first wine-shop which they come to

when they land! Is not many a man's thought of God, I knew Thee that

Thou wert an austere Man, and I was afraid'?

The popular religion is largely a religion of fear.

There is a fear which is right and noble. That is reverend, humble

adoration at the sight or thought of God's great perfections. Angels

veil their faces with their wings. Such awe has no thought of personal

consequences--is inseparable from all true knowledge of God; for all

greatness of character is perfected by love. Of such fear we are not

now speaking.

Terror of God is deep in men's hearts.

Fear is the apprehension of personal evil from some person or thing.

Now I believe that terror has its place in the human economy, and in

religion, as the sense of pain has. There is something in man's

relations to God to cause it.

The Bible sets forth the terror of the Lord,' that men may tremble

before Him. Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake.' But that terror

is only right when it proceeds from a sense of God's holiness and a

consciousness of my own sinfulness. It is not right when it is a mere

dread of a hard tyrant. That terror is only right when it leads to a

joyful acceptance of God's revelation of His love in Christ.

Fear was never meant to be permanent, it is only the alarum-bell which

rings to wake up the soul that sleeps on when in mortal peril. And it

should pass into penitence, faith, joy in Jesus. We have access with

confidence by the faith of Him.' The brightness is great and awful, but

go nearer, as you can in Jesus, and lo! there is love in the

brightness. You see it all tender and sweet. A heart and a hand are

there, and from the midst of it the Father's voice speaks, and says, My

son, give Me thine heart.'

The religion of fear is worthless. It produces no holiness, it does

nothing for a man, it does not bind him to God. He is none the stronger

for it. It paralyses so far as it does anything.

It is spasmodic and intermittent. It is impossible to keep it up, so it

comes in fits and starts. When the morning comes men laugh at their

terrors. It leads to wild endeavours to forget God--atheism--to

insensibility. He who begins by fearing when there was no need, ends by

not fearing when he ought.

II. The Religion of Form.

The Samaritans' whole worship was outward worship. They did the things

which the Beth-el priest taught them to do, and that was all.

And this again is a type, very common in our day. Religion must have

forms. The forms often help to bring us the spirit. But we are always

in danger of trusting to them too much.

How many of us have our Christianity only in outward seeming? The only

thing that unites men to God is love.

So your external connection with God's worship is of no use at all

unless you have that.

Church and chapel-goers are alike exposed to the danger of erecting the

forms of worship to a place in which they cannot be put without marring

the spirit of worship. Whether our worship be more or less symbolic,

whether we have a more or less elaborate ritual, whether we think more

or less of sacraments, whether we put hearing a sermon as more or less

prominent, or even if we follow the formless forms of the Friends, we

are all tempted to substitute our forms for the spirit which alone is

worship.

III. The Religion of Compromise or Worldliness.

They had God and they had gods. They liked the latter best. They gave

God formal worship, but they gave the others more active service.

Such a kind of religion is a type of much that we see around us; the

attempt to be Christians and worldlings, the indecision under which

many men labour all their lives, being drawn one way by their

consciences, another by their inclinations.

You cannot unite the two. God requires all. He fills the heart, and

claims supreme control over all the nature. There cannot be two supreme

in the soul. It cannot be God and self. It must be God or self. You may

look now one way and now another, but the way the heart goes is the

thing. Mr. Facing-both-ways does not really face both ways. He only

turns quickly round from one to the other.

Such divided religion is impossible in the nature of God--of the

soul--of religion.

To attempt it, then, is really to decide against God.

It is weak and unmanly to be thus vague and decided by circumstances.

You would have been a Mohammedan if you had been born in Turkey.

You ought to decide for God.

He claims, He deserves, He will reward and bless, your whole soul.

Choose you this day whom ye will serve. If the Lord be God, follow Him'

If Baal or Succoth-benoth, then follow him. You cannot serve God and

Mammon.' He that is not for us is against us.' Be one thing or the

other.

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HEZEKIAH, A PATTERN OF DEVOUT LIFE

Hezekiah trusted in the Lord God of Israel. . .. 6. He clave to the

Lord, and departed not from following Him, but kept His

commandments.'--2 KINGS xviii. 5, 6.

Devout people in all ages and stations are very much like each other.

The elements of godliness are always the same. This king of Israel,

something like two thousand six hundred years ago, and the humblest

Christian to-day have the family likeness on their faces. These words,

which are an outline sketch of the king's character, are really a

sketch of the religious life at all times and in all places. He

realised it; why may not we? He achieved it amid much ignorance; why

should not we amid our blaze of knowledge? He accomplished it amid the

temptations of a monarchy; why should not we in our humbler spheres?

There are four things set forth here as constituting a religious life.

We begin at the bottom with the foundation of everything. He trusted in

the Lord God of Israel.' The Old Testament is just as emphatic in

declaring that there is no religion without trust, and that trust is

the very nerve and life-blood of religion, as is the New. Only that in

the one half of the book our translators have chosen to use the word

trust,' and in the other half of the book they have chosen to use, for

the very same act, the word faith.' They have thus somewhat obscured

the absolute identity which exists in the teaching of the Old and of

the New Testament as regards the bond which unites men to God. That

union always was, and always will be, begun in the simple attitude and

exercise of trust, and everything else will come out of that, and

without that nothing else will come.

So this king had a certain measure of knowledge about the character of

God, and that measure of knowledge led him to lean all his weight upon

the Lord. You and I know a great deal more about God and His ways and

purposes than Hezekiah did, but we can make no better use of it than he

did--translate our knowledge into faith, and rely with simple, absolute

confidence on Him whose name we know in Christ more fully and blessedly

than was possible to Hezekiah.

And need I remind you of how, in this life of which the outline is here

given and the inmost secret is here disclosed, there were significant

and magnificent instances of the power of humble trust to bring to an

else helpless man all the blessings that he needs, and to put a crystal

wall round about him that will preserve him from every evil, howsoever

threatening it may seem?

It has come addressed to me, but it is meant for Thee. Vindicate Thine

own cause by delivering Thine own servant.' And so, when the morning

dawned, they were all dead men,' and faith rejoiced in a perfect

deliverance. And you and I may get the same answer, in the midst of all

our trials, difficulties, toils, and conflicts, if only we will go the

same way to get it, and let our faith work, as Hezekiah's worked, and

take everything that troubles us to our Father in the heavens, and be

quite sure that He is the God who daily bears our burdens.' Let us

begin with the simple act of confidence in Him. That is the foundation,

and on that we may build everything besides.

Let us see what this man further built upon it. The second story, if I

may so say, of the temple-fortress of his life, upon the foundation of

faith, was, He clave to the Lord.'

That is to say, the act of confidence must be followed and perfected by

tenacious adherence with all the tendrils of a man's nature to the God

in whom he says that he trusts. The metaphor is a very forcible one, so

familiar in Scripture as that we are apt to overlook its emphasis. Let

me recall one or two of the instances in which it is employed about

other matters which throw light on its force here.

First of all, remember that sweet picture of the widow woman from Moab

and the two daughters-in-law, one sent back, not reluctantly, to her

home; and the other persisting in keeping by Naomi's side, in spite of

difficulties and remonstrances. With kisses of real love Orpah went

back, but she did go back, to her people and her gods, but Ruth clave

unto her.' So should we cling to God, as Ruth flung her arms round

Naomi, and twined her else lonely and desolate heart about her dear and

only friend, for whose sweet sake she became a willing exile from

kindred and country. Is that how we cleave to the Lord?

More sacred still are the lessons that are suggested by the fact that

this is the word employed to describe the blessed and holy union of man

and woman in pure wedded life, and I suppose some allusion to that use

of the expression underlies its constant application to the relation of

the believing soul to Jehovah. For by trust the soul is wedded to Him,

and so joined to the Lord' as to be one spirit.'

Or if we do not care to go so deep as that, let us take the metaphor

that lies in the word itself, without reference to its Scriptural

applications. As the limpet holds on to its rock, as the ivy clings to

the wall, as a shipwrecked sailor grasps the spar which keeps his head

above water, so a Christian man ought to hold on to God, with all his

energy, and with all parts of his nature. The metaphor implies

tenacity; closeness of adhesion, in heart and will, in thought, in

desire, and in all the parts of our receptive humanity, all of which

can touch God and be touched by Him, and all of which are blessed only

in the measure in which, yielding to Him, they are filled and steadied

and glorified.

And there is implied, too, not only tenacity of adherence, but tenacity

in the face of obstacles. There must be resistance to all the forces

which would detach, if there is to be union with God in the midst of

life in the world. Or, to recur for a moment to the figure that I

employed a moment ago, as the sailor clings to a spar, though the waves

dash round him, and his fingers get stiffened with cold and cramped

with keeping the one position, and can scarcely hold on, but he knows

that it is life to cling and death to loosen, and so tightens his

grasp; thus have we to lay hold of God, and in spite of all obstacles,

to keep hold of Him. Our grasp tends to slacken, and is feeble at the

best, even if there were nothing outside of us to make it difficult for

us to get a good grip. But there are howling winds and battering waves

blowing and beating on us, and making it hard to keep our hold.

Do not let us yield to these, but in spite of them all let our hearts

tighten round Him, for it is only in His sweet, eternal, perfect love

that they can be at rest. And let our thoughts keep close to Him in

spite of all distractions, for it is only in the measure in which His

light fills our minds and His truth occupies our thoughts that our

thinking spirits will be at rest. And let our desires, as the tentacles

of some shell-fish fasten upon the rock, and feel out towards the ocean

that is coming to it, let our desires go all out towards Him until they

touch that after which they feel, and curl round it in repose and in

blessedness.

The whole secret of a joyful, strong, noble Christian life lies

here--that on the foundation of faith we should rear tenacious

adherence to Him in spite of all obstacles. So it was a most

encyclopaedic, though laconic, exhortation that that good man' sent

down from Jerusalem to encourage the first heathen converts gave, when

instead of all other instruction or advice, or inculcation of less

important, and yet real, Christian duties, Barnabas exhorted them all

that with purpose of heart'--the full devotion of their inmost

natures--they should cleave to the Lord.'

Then the third stage, or the third story, in this building is that,

cleaving to the Lord, he departed not from following Him.' The metaphor

of cleaving implies proximity and union; the metaphor of following

implies distance which is being diminished. These two are incongruous,

and the very incongruity helps to give point to the representation. The

same two ideas of union and yet of pursuit are brought still more

closely together in other parts of Scripture. For instance, there is a

remarkable saying in one of the Psalms, translated in our Bible--My

soul followeth hard after Thee. Thy right hand upholdeth me,' where the

expression followeth hard after' is a lame attempt at translating the

perhaps impossible-to-be-translated fullness of the original, which

reads My soul cleaveth after Thee.' It is an incongruous combination of

ideas, by its very incongruity and paradoxical form suggesting a

profound truth--viz. that in all the conscious union and tenacious

adherence to God which makes the Christian life, there is ever, also, a

sense of distance which kindles aspiration and leads to the effort

after continual progress. However close we may be to God, it is always

possible to press closer. However full may be the union, it may always

be made fuller; and the cleaving spirit will always be longing for a

closer contact and a more blessed sense of being in touch with God.

So, as we climb, new heights reveal themselves, and the further we

advance in the Christian life the more are we conscious of the infinite

depths that yet remain to be traversed. Hence arises one great element

of the blessedness of being a Christian--namely, that we need not fear

ever coming to the end of the growth in holiness and the increase of

joy and power that are possible to us. So that weariness, and the sense

of having reached the limits that are possible on a given path, which

sooner or later fall upon men that live for anything but God, can never

be ours if we live for Him. But the oldest and most experienced will

have the same forward-looking glances of hope and forward-directed

steps of strenuous effort as the youngest beginner on the path; and a

Paul will be able to say when he is Paul the aged,' and the time of his

departure is at hand,' that he forgets the things that are behind, and

reaches forth unto the things that are before, while he presses towards

the mark.' Let us be thankful for the endless progress which is

possible to the Christian, and let us see to it that we are never

paralysed into supposing that to-morrow must be as this day,' but trust

the infinite resources of our God, and be sure that we growingly make

our own the growing gifts which He bestows.

And so, lastly, the fourth element in this analysis of a devout life is

He kept the commandments of the Lord.' That is the outcome of them all.

Faith, adhesion, aspiration, and progress, all vindicate their value

and reality in the simple, homely way of practical obedience.

Let us learn two things. One as to the worthlessness of all these

others, if they do not issue in this. Not that these inward emotions

are ever to be despised, but that, if they are genuine in our hearts,

they cannot but manifest themselves in our lives. And so, dear

Christian friends! do you not build upon your faith, on your adherence

to God, on your aspirations after Him, unless you can bring into court,

as witnesses for these, daily and hourly, your efforts after the

conformity of your will to His, in the great things and in the small.

Then, and only then, may we be sure that our confidence is not a

delusion, and that it is to Him that we cleave when our feet tread in

the paths of goodness.

And on the other hand, let us learn that all attempts to be obedient to

a divine will which do not begin with trust and cleaving to Him are

vain. There is no other way to get that conformity of will except by

that union of spirit. All other attempts are beginning at the wrong

end. You do not begin building your houses with the chimney-pots, but

many a man who seeks to obey without trusting does precisely commit

that fault. Let us be sure that the foundations are in, and then let us

be sure that we do not stop half-way up, lest all that pass by should

mock and say, This man began to build and was not able to finish.'

How many professing Christians' lives are half-finished and unroofed

houses, because they have not added to their faith'--that is, to their

cleaving to the Lord'--endless aspiration and continual progress, and

to their aspiration and their progress the peaceable fruit of practical

righteousness! If these things be in us and abound, they mark us as

devout men after God's pattern. And if we want to be devout men after

God's pattern, we must follow God's sequence, which begins with trust

and ends with obedience.

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HE UTTERED HIS VOICE, THE EARTH MELTED'

Then Isaiah the son of Amos sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus saith the

Lord God of Israel, That which thou hast prayed to Me against

Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard. 21. This is the word that the

Lord hath spoken concerning 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. 22. Whom hast thou reproached and

blasphemed? and against whom hast thou exalted thy voice, and lifted up

thine eyes on high? even against the Holy One of Israel. . .. 28.

Because thy rage against Me and thy tumult is come up into Mine ears,

therefore I will put My hook in thy nose, and My bridle in thy lips,

and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest. 29. And this

shall be a sign unto thee, Ye shall eat this year such things as grow

of themselves, and in the second year that which springeth of the same;

and in the third year sow ye, and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat

the fruits thereof. 30. And the remnant that is escaped of the house of

Judah shall yet again take root downward, and bear fruit upward. 31.

For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out

of mount Zion: the zeal of the Lord of hosts shall do this. 32.

Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall

not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it

with shield, nor cast a bank against it. 33. By the way that he came,

by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith

the Lord. 34. For I will defend this city, to save it, for Mine own

sake, and for My servant David's sake. 35. And it came to pass that

night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of

the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they

arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. 36. So

Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt

at Nineveh. 37. And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house

of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him

with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Armenia: and

Esarhaddon his son reigned in his stead.'--2 KINGS xix. 20-22; 28-37.

At an earlier stage of the Assyrian invasion Hezekiah had sent to

Isaiah, asking him to pray to his God for deliverance, and had received

an explicit assurance that the invasion would be foiled. When the

second stage was reached, and Hezekiah was personally summoned to

surrender, by a letter which scoffed at Isaiah's promise, he himself

prayed before the Lord. Isaiah does not seem to have been present, and

may not have known of the prayer. At all events, the answer was given

to him to give to the king; and it is noteworthy that, as in the former

case, he does not himself come, but sends to Hezekiah. He did come when

he had to bring a message of death, and again when he had to rebuke

(chap. xx.), but now he only sends. As the chosen speaker of Jehovah's

will, he was mightier than kings, and must not imperil the dignity of

the message by the behaviour of the messenger. In a sentence,

Hezekiah's prayer is answered, and then the prophet, in Jehovah's name,

bursts into a wonderful song of triumph over the defeated invader. I

have heard.' That is enough. Hezekiah's prayer has, as it were, fired

the fuse or pulled the trigger, and the explosion follows, and the shot

is sped. Whereas thou hast prayed, . . . I have heard,' is ever true,

and God's hearing is God's acting in answer. The methods of His

response vary, the fact that He responds to the cry of despair driven

to faith by extremity of need does not vary.

But it is noteworthy that, with that brief, sufficient assurance,

Hezekiah, as it were, is put aside, and instead of three fighters in

the field, the king, with God to back him, and on the other side

Sennacherib, two only, appear. It is a duel between Jehovah and the

arrogant heathen who had despised Him. Jerusalem appears for a moment,

in a magnificent piece of poetical scorn, as despising and making

gestures of contempt at the baffled would-be conqueror, as Miriam and

her maidens did by the Red Sea. The city is virgin,' as many a fortress

in other lands has been named, because uncaptured. But she, too, passes

out of sight, and Jehovah and Sennacherib stand opposed on the field.

God speaks now not concerning,' but to, him, and indicts him for insane

pride, which was really a denial of dependence on God, and passionate

antagonism to Him, as manifested not only in his war against Jehovah's

people, but also in the tone of his insolent defiances of Hezekiah, in

which he scoffed at the vain trust which the latter was placing in his

God, and paralleled Jehovah with the gods of the nations whom he had

already conquered (Isaiah xix. 12).

The designation of God, characteristic of Isaiah, as the Holy One of

Israel,' expresses at once His elevation above, and separation from,

all mundane, creatural limitations, and His special relation to His

people, and both thoughts intensify Sennacherib's sin. The Highest,

before whose transcendent height all human elevations sink to a uniform

level, has so joined Israel to Himself that to touch it is to strike at

Him, and to vaunt one's self against it is to be arrogant towards God.

That mighty name has received wider extension now, but the wider sweep

does not bring diminished depth, and lowly souls who take that name for

their strong tower can still run into it and be safe from the

oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,' and the strongest foes.

There is tremendous scorn in the threat with which the divine address

to Sennacherib ends. The dreaded world-conqueror is no more in God's

eyes than a wild beast, which He can ring and lead as He will, and not

even as formidable as that, but like a horse or a mule, that can easily

be bridled and directed. What majestic assertion lies in these figures

and in My hook' and My bridle!' How many conquerors and mighty men

since then have been so mastered, and their schemes balked! Sennacherib

had to return by the way that he came,' and to tramp back, foiled and

disappointed, over all the weary miles which he had trodden before with

such insolent confidence of victory. A modern parallel is Napoleon's

retreat from Moscow. But the same experience really befalls all who

order life regardless of God. Their schemes may seem to succeed, but in

deepest truth they fail, and the schemers never reach their goal.

In verse 29 the prophet turns away abruptly and almost contemptuously

from Sennacherib to speak comfortably to Jerusalem, addressing Hezekiah

first, but turning immediately to the people. The substance of his

words to them is, first, the assurance that the Assyrian invasion had

limits of time set to it by God; and, second, that beyond it lay

prosperous times, when the prophetic visions of a flourishing Israel

should be realised in fact. For two seed-times only field work was to

be impossible on account of the Assyrian occupation, but it was to foam

itself away, like a winter torrent, before a third season for sowing

came round.

But how could this sequence of events, which required time for its

unfolding, be a sign'? We must somewhat modify our notions of a sign to

understand the prophet. The Scripture usage does not only designate by

that name a present event or thing which guarantees the truth of a

prophecy, but it sometimes means an event, or sequence of events, in

the future, which, when they have come to pass in accordance with the

divine prediction of them, will shed back light on other divine words

or acts, and demonstrate that they were of God. Thus Moses was given as

a sign of his mission the worshipping in Mount Sinai, which was to take

place only after the Exodus. So with Isaiah's sign here. When the

harvest of the third year was gathered in, then Israel would know that

the prophet had spoken from God when he had sung Sennacherib's defeat.

For the present, Hezekiah and Judah had to live by faith; but when the

deliverance was complete, and they were enjoying the fruits of their

labours and of God's salvation, then they could look back on the weary

years, and recognise more clearly than while these were slowly passing

how God had been in all the trouble, and had been carrying on His

purposes of mercy through it all. And there will be a sign' for us in

like manner when we look back from eternity on the transitory conflicts

of earthly life, and are satisfied with the harvest which He has caused

to spring from our poor sowings to the Spirit.

The definite promise of deliverance in verses 32-34 is addressed to

Judah, and emphasises the completeness of the frustration of the

invader's efforts. There is a climax in the enumeration of the things

that he will not be allowed to do--he will not make his entry into the

city, nor even shoot an arrow there, nor even make preparation for a

siege. His whole design will be overturned, and as had already been

said (ver. 28), he will retrace his steps a baffled man.

Note the strong antithesis: He shall not come into this city, . . . for

I will defend this city.' Zion is impregnable because Jehovah defends

it. Sennacherib can do nothing, for he is fighting against God. And if

we are come unto the city of the living God,' we can take the same

promise for the strength of our lives. God saves Zion for His own

sake,' for His name is concerned in its security, both because He has

taken it for His own and because He has pledged His word to guard it.

It would be a blot on His faithfulness, a slur on His power, if it

should be conquered while it remains true to Him, its King. His honour

is involved in protecting us if we enter into the strong city of which

the builder and maker is God. And for David's sake,' too, He defends

Zion, because He had sworn to David to dwell there. But Zion's security

becomes an illusion if Zion breaks away from God. If it becomes as

Sodom, it shares Sodom's fate.

It is remarkable that neither in the song of triumph nor in the

prophecy of deliverance is there allusion to the destruction of the

Assyrian army. How the exultant taunts of the one and the definite

promises of the other were to be fulfilled was not declared till the

event declared it. But faithful expectation had not long to wait, for

that night' the blow fell, and no second was needed. We are not told

where the Assyrian army was, but clearly it was not before Jerusalem.

Nor do we learn what was the instrument of destruction wielded by the

angel of the Lord,' if there was any. The catastrophe may have been

brought about by a pestilence, but however effected, it was the act of

God,' the fulfilment of His promise, the making bare of His arm. By

terrible things in righteousness' did He answer the prayer of Hezekiah,

and give to all humble souls who are oppressed and cry to Him a pledge

that as they have heard, so' will they see, in the city of' their God.'

How much more impressive is the stern, naked brevity of the Scriptural

account than a more emotional expansion of it, like, for instance,

Byron's well-known, and in their way powerful lines, would have been!

To the writer of this book it seemed the most natural thing in the

world that the foes of Zion should be annihilated by one blow of the

divine hand. His business is to tell the facts; he leaves commentary

and wonder and triumph or terror to others.

There is but one touch of patriotic exultation apparent in the

half-sarcastic and half-rejoicing accumulation of synonyms descriptive

of Sennacherib's retreat. He departed, and went and returned.' It is

like the picture in Psalm xlviii., which probably refers to the same

events: They saw it, and so they marvelled; they were troubled, and

hasted away.'

About twenty years elapsed between Sennacherib's retreat and his

assassination. During all that time he dwelt at Nineveh,' so far as

Judah was concerned. He had had enough of attacking it and its God. But

the notice of his death is introduced here, not only to complete the

narrative, but to point a lesson, which is suggested by the fact that

he was murdered as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god.'

Hezekiah had gone into the house of his God with Sennacherib's letter,

and the dead corpses of an army showed what Jehovah could do for His

servant; Sennacherib was praying in the temple of his god, and his

corpse lay stretched before his idol, an object lesson of the impotence

of Nisroch and all his like to hear or help their worshippers.

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THE REDISCOVERED LAW AND ITS EFFECTS

And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found

the book of the law in the house of the Lord: and Hilkiah gave the book

to Shaphan, and he read it. 9. And Shaphan the scribe came to the king,

and brought the king word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered

the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the

hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the house of

the Lord. 10. And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiah

the priest hath delivered me a book: and Shaphan read it before the

king. 11. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the

book of the law, that he rent his clothes. 12. And the king commanded

Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son

of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king'

s, saying, 13. Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people,

and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for

great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our

fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according

unto all that which is written concerning us. 14. So Hilkiah the

priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asahiah, went unto

Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son

of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the

college;) and they communed with her. 15. And she said unto them, Thus

saith the Lord God of Israel, Tell the man that sent you to me, 16.

Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and

upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the

king of Judah hath read: 17. Because they have forsaken Me, and have

burnt incense unto other gods, that they might provoke Me to anger with

all the works of their hands; therefore My wrath shall be kindled

against this place, and shall not be quenched. 18. But to the king of

Judah, which sent you to enquire of the Lord, thus shall ye say to him,

Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, As touching the words which thou

hast heard; 19. Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled

thyself before the Lord, when thou heardest what I speak against this

place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a

desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before Me;

I also have heard thee, saith the Lord. 20. Behold, therefore, I will

gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave

in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring

upon this place. And they brought the king word again.'--2 KINGS xxii.

8-20.

We get but a glimpse into a wild time of revolution and

counter-revolution in the brief notice that the servants of Amon,'

Josiah's father, conspired and murdered him in his palace, but were

themselves killed by a popular rising, in which the people of the land

made Josiah his son king in his stead,' and so no doubt balked the

conspirators' plans. Poor boy! he was only eight years old when he made

his first acquaintance with rebellion and bloodshed. There must have

been some wise heads and strong arms and loyal hearts round him, but

their names have perished. The name of David was still a spell in

Judah, and guarded his childish descendant's royal rights. In the

eighteenth year of his reign, the twenty-sixth of his age, he felt

himself firm enough in the saddle to begin a work of religious

reformation, and the first reward of his zeal was the finding of the

book of the law. Josiah, like the rest of us, gained fuller knowledge

of God's will in the act of trying to do it so far as he knew it. Light

is sown for the upright.'

I. We have, first, the discovery of the law. The important and

complicated critical questions raised by the narrative cannot be

discussed here, nor do they affect the broad lines of teaching in the

incident. Nothing is more truthful-like than the statement that, in

course of the repairs of the Temple, the book should be

found,--probably in the holiest place, to which the high priest would

have exclusive access. How it came to have been lost is a more puzzling

question; but if we recall that seventy-five years had passed since

Hezekiah, and that these were almost entirely years of apostasy and of

tumult, we shall not wonder that it was so. Unvalued things easily slip

out of sight, and if the preservation of Scripture depended on the

estimation which some of us have of it, it would have been lost long

ago. But the fact of the loss suggests the wonder of the preservation.

It would appear that this copy was the only one existing,--at all

events, the only one known. It alone transmitted the law to later days,

like some slender thread of water that finds its way through the sand

and brings the river down to broad plains beyond. Think of the millions

of copies now, and the one dusty, forgotten roll tossing unregarded in

the dilapidated Temple, and be thankful for the Providence that has

watched over the transmission. Let us take care, too, that the whole

Scripture is not as much lost to us, though we have half a dozen Bibles

each, as the roll was to Josiah and his men.

Hilkiah's announcement to Shaphan has a ring of wonder and of awe in

it. It sounds as if he had not known that such a book was anywhere in

the Temple. And it is noteworthy that not he, but Shaphan, is said to

have read it. Perhaps he could not,--though, if he did not, how did he

know what the book was? At all events, he and Shaphan seem to have felt

the importance of the find, and to have consulted what was to be done.

Observe how the latter goes cautiously to work, and at first only says

that he has received a book.' He gives it no name, but leaves it to

tell its own story,--which it was then, and is still, well able to do.

Scripture is its own best credentials and witnesses whence it comes.

Again Shaphan is the reader, as it was natural that a scribe' should

be, and again the possibility is that Josiah could not read.

II. One can easily picture the scene while the reader's voice went

steadily through the commandments, threatenings, and promises,--the

deepening eagerness of the king, the gradual shaping out before his

conscience of God's ideal for him and his people, and the gradual

waking of the sense of sin in him, like a dormant serpent beginning to

stir in the first spring sunshine.

The effect of God's law on the sinful heart is vividly pictured in

Josiah's emotion. By the law is the knowledge of sin.' To many of us

that law, in spite of our outward knowledge of it, is as completely

absent from our consciousness as it had been from the most ignorant of

Josiah's subjects; and if for once its searchlight were thrown into the

hidden corners of our hearts and lives, it would show up in dreadful

clearness the skulking foes that are stealing to assail us, and the

foul things that have made good their lodgment in our hearts and lives.

It always makes an epoch in a life when it is really brought to the

standard of God's law; and it is well for us if, like Josiah, we rend

our clothes, or rather our heart, and not our garments,' and take home

the conviction, I have sinned against the Lord.'

The dread of punishment sprang up in the young king's heart, and though

that emotion is not the highest motive for seeking the Lord, it is not

an unworthy one, and is meant to lead on to nobler ones than itself.

There is too much unwillingness, in many modern conceptions of Christ's

gospel, to recognise the place which the apprehension of personal evil

consequences from sin has in the initial stages of the process by which

we are translated from the kingdom of darkness into that of God's dear

Son.'

III. The message to Huldah is remarkable. The persons sent with it show

its importance. The high priest, the royal secretary, and one of the

king's personal attendants, who was, no doubt, in his confidence, and

two other influential men, one of whom, Ahikam, is known as Jeremiah's

staunch friend, would make some stir in the second quarter,' on their

way to the modest house of the keeper of the wardrobe. The weight and

number of the deputation did honour to the prophetess, as well as

showed the king's anxiety as to the matter in hand. Jeremiah and

Zephaniah were both living at this time, and we do not know why Huldah

was preferred. Perhaps she was more accessible. But conjecture is idle.

Enough that she was recognised as having, and declared herself to have,

direct authoritative communications from God.

For what did Josiah need to inquire of the Lord concerning the words of

this book'? They were plain enough. Did he hope to have their sternness

somewhat mollified by the words of a prophetess who might be more

amenable to entreaties or personal considerations than the unalterable

page was? Evidently he recognised Huldah as speaking with divine

authority, and he might have known that two depositories of God's voice

could not contradict each other. But possibly his embassy simply

reflected his extreme perturbation and alarm, and like many another man

when God's law startles him into consciousness of sin, he betook

himself to one who was supposed to be in God's counsels, half hoping

for a mitigated sentence, and half uncertain of what he really wished.

He confusedly groped for some support or guide. But, confused as he

was, his message to the prophetess implied repentance, eager desire to

know what to do, and humble docility. If dread of evil consequences

leads us to such a temper, we shall hear, as Josiah did, answers of

peace as authoritative and divine as were the threatenings that brought

us to our senses and our knees.

IV. The answer which Josiah received falls into two parts, the former

of which confirms the threatenings of evil to Jerusalem, while the

latter casts a gleam athwart the thundercloud, and promises Josiah

escape from the national calamities. Observe the difference in the

designation given him in the two parts. When the threatenings are

confirmed, his individuality is, as it were, sunk; for that part of the

message applies to any and every member of the nation, and therefore he

is simply called the man that sent you.' Any other man would have

received the same answer. But when his own fate is to be disclosed,

then he is the king of Judah, who sent you,' and is described by the

official position which set him apart from his subjects.

Huldah has but to confirm the dread predictions of evil which the roll

had contained. What else can a faithful messenger of God do than

reiterate its threatenings? Vainly do men seek to induce the living

prophet to soften down God's own warnings. Foolishly do they think that

the messenger or the messenger's Sender has any pleasure in the death

of the wicked'; and as foolishly do they take the message to be unkind,

for surely to warn that destruction waits the evildoer is gracious. The

signal-man who waves the red flag to stop the train rushing to ruin is

a friend. Huldah was serving Judah best by plain reiteration of the

words of the book.'

But the second half of her message told that in wrath God remembered

mercy. And that is for ever true. His thunderbolts do not strike

indiscriminately, even when they smite a nation. Judah's corruption had

gone too far for recovery, and the carcase called for the gathering

together of the vultures, but Josiah's penitence was not in vain. I

have heard thee' is always said to the true penitent, and even if he is

involved in widespread retribution, its strokes become different to

him. Josiah was assured that the evil should not come in his days. But

Huldah's promise seems contradicted by the circumstances of his death.

It was a strange kind of being gathered to his grave in peace when he

fell on the fatal field of Megiddo, and his servants carried him in a

chariot dead, . . . and buried him in his own sepulchre' (2 Kings

xxiii. 30). But the promise is fulfilled in its real meaning by the

fact that the threatenings which he was inquiring about did not fall on

Judah in his time, and so far as these were concerned, he did come to

his grave in peace.

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THE END

1. And it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth

month, in the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of

Babylon came, he, and all his host, against Jerusalem, and pitched

against it; and they built forts against it round about. 2. And the

city was besieged unto the eleventh year of king Zedekiah. 3. And on

the ninth day of the fourth month the famine prevailed in the city, and

there was no bread for the people of the land. 4. And the city was

broken up, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate,

between two walls, which is by the king's garden; (now the Chaldees

were against the city round about;) and the king went the way toward

the plain. 5. And the army of the Chaldees pursued after the king, and

overtook him in the plains of Jericho: and all his army were scattered

from him. 6. So they took the king, and brought him up to the king of

Babylon to Riblah; and they gave judgment upon him. 7. And they slew

the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah,

and bound him with fetters of brass, and carried him to Babylon. 8. And

in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, which is the

nineteenth year of king Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came

Nebuzar-adan, captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon,

unto Jerusalem: 9. And he burnt the house of the Lord, and the king's

house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house

burnt he with fire. 10. And all the army of the Chaldees, that were

with the captain of the guard, brake down the walls of Jerusalem round

about. 11. Now the rest of the people that were left in the city, and

the fugitives that fell away to the king of Babylon, with the remnant

of the multitude, did Nebuzar-adan, the captain of the guard, carry

away. 12. But the captain of the guard left of the poor of the land to

be vine-dressers and husbandmen.'--2 KINGS xxv. 1-12.

Eighteen months of long-drawn-out misery and daily increasing famine

preceded the fall of the doomed city. The siege was a blockade. No

assaults by the enemy, nor sorties by the inhabitants, are narrated,

but the former grimly and watchfully drew their net closer, and the

latter sat still in their despair. The passionless tone of the

narrative here is very remarkable. Not a word escapes the writer to

show his feelings, though he is telling his country's fall. We must

turn to Lamentations for sighs and groans. There we have the emotions

of devout hearts; here we have the calm record of God's judgment. It is

all one long sentence, for in the Hebrew each verse begins with and,'

clause heaped on clause, as if each were a footstep of the destroying

angel in his slow, irresistible march.

The narrative falls into two principal parts--the fate of the king and

that of the city. It is unnecessary to dwell on the details. The

confusion of counsels, the party strife, the fierce hatred of God's

prophet, the agony of famine, are all suppressed here, but painted with

terrible vividness in the Book of Jeremiah. At last the fatal day came.

On the north side a breach was made in the wall, and through it the

fierce besiegers poured--the princes of the king of Babylon,' with

their idolatrous and barbarous names, came in, and sat in the middle

gate.' It was night. The sudden appearance of the conquerors in the

heart of the city shot panic into the feeble king and his men of war'

who had never struck one blow for deliverance; and they hurried under

cover of darkness, and hidden between two walls, down the ravine to the

king's garden, once the scene of pleasure, but waste now, and thence,

as best they could, round or over Olivet to the road to Jericho. The

king's flight by night had been foretold by Ezekiel far away in

captivity (Ezek. xii. 12); and the same prophet received on that very

day a divine message announcing the fall of the city, and bidding him

write thee the name of the day, even of this selfsame day,' as that on

which the king of Babylon drew close unto Jerusalem' (Ezek. xxiv. 1 et

seq.).

Down the rocky road went the flying host, with their shaftless, broken

bows' closely followed by the avenging foe with red pursuing spear.'

Where Israel had first set foot on its inheritance, the last king of

David's line was captured and his monarchy shattered. The scene of the

first victory, when Jericho fell before unarmed men trusting in God,

was the scene of the last defeat. The spot where the covenant was

renewed, and the reproach of Israel rolled away, was the spot where the

broken covenant was finally avenged and abrogated. The end came back to

the beginning, and the cradle was the coffin.

Away up to Riblah, in the far north, under the shadow of Lebanon, the

captive was dragged to meet the conqueror. The name of each is a

profession of belief. The one means Jehovah is righteousness'; the

other, Nebo, protect the crown.' The idol seemed to have overcome, but

the defeat of the unbelieving confessor of the true God at the hands of

the idolater is really the victory of the righteousness which the name

celebrated and the bearer of the name insulted. His murdered sons were

the last sight which he saw before he was blinded, according to the

ferocious practice of the East. It was ingenuity of cruelty to let him

see for so long, and then to give him that as the last thing seen, and

therefore often remembered. Note how the enigma of Ezekiel's prophecy

(Ezek. xii. 13) and its apparent contradiction of Jeremiah's (Jer.

xxxii. 4; xxxiv. 3) are reconciled, and learn how easily the fact, when

it comes, clears the riddles of prophecy, and how easily, probably, the

whole facts, if we knew them, would clear the difficulties of Scripture

history. The blinded king was harmless, but according to Jewish

tradition, was set to work in a mill (though that is probably only an

application of Samson's story), and according to Jeremiah (Jer. lii.

11), was kept in prison till his death. So ended the monarchy of Judah.

The fate of the city was not settled for a month, during which, no

doubt, there was much consultation at Riblah whether to garrison or

destroy it. The king of Babylon did not go in person, but despatched a

force commanded by a high officer, to burn palace, Temple, the more

important houses (the poorer people would probably be lodged in huts

not worth burning), and to raze the fortifications. In accordance with

the practice of the great Eastern despotisms, deportation followed

victory--a clever though cruel device for securing conquests. But some

were left behind; for the land, if deserted, would have fallen out of

cultivation, and been profitless to Babylon. The bulk of the people of

Jerusalem, the fugitives who had joined the invaders during the siege,

and the mass of the general population, were carried off, in such a

long string of misery as we may still see on the monuments, and a

handful left behind, too poor to plot, and stirred to diligence by

necessity. So ended the possession by Israel of its promised

inheritance.

Now this fall of Jerusalem is like an object-lesson to teach

everlasting truth as to the retributive providence of God. What does it

say?

It declares plainly what brings down God's judgments. The terms on

which Israel prospered and held its land were obedience to God's law.

We cannot directly apply the principles of God's government of it to

modern nations. The present analogue of Israel is the Church, not the

nation. But when all deductions have been made, it is still true that a

nation's religious attitude is a most potent factor in its prosperous

development. It is not accidental that, on the whole, stagnant Europe

and America are Roman Catholic, and the progressive parts Protestant.

Nor was it causes independent of religion that scattered a decaying

Christianity in the lands of the Eastern Church before the onslaught of

wild Arabs, who, at all events, did believe in Allah. So there are

abundant lessons for politics and sociology in the story of Jerusalem's

fall.

But these lessons have direct application to the individual and to the

Christian Church. All departure from God is ruin. We slay ourselves by

forsaking Him, and every sinner is a suicide. We live under a moral

government, and in a system of things so knit together as that even

here every transgression receives its just recompense--if not visibly

and palpably in outward circumstances, yet really and punctually in

effects on mind and heart, which are more solemn and awful. Behold the

righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and

the sinner.' Sin and sorrow are root and fruit.

Especially does that crash of Jerusalem's fall thunder the lesson to

all churches that their life and prosperity are inseparably connected

with faithful obedience and turning away from all worldliness, which is

idolatry. They stand in the place that was made empty by Israel's later

fall. Our very privileges call us to beware. Because of unbelief they

were broken off, and thou standest by faith.' That great seven-branched

candlestick was removed out of its place, and all that is left of it is

its sculptured image among the spoils on the triumphal arch to its

captor. Other lesser candlesticks have been removed from their places,

and Turkish oppression brings night where Sardis and Laodicea once gave

a feeble light. The warning is needed to-day; for worldliness is

rampant in the Church. If God spared not the natural branches, take

heed lest He also spare not thee.' The fall of Jerusalem is not merely

a tragic story from the past. It is a revelation, for the present, of

the everlasting truth, that the professing people of God deserve and

receive the sorest chastisement, if they turn again to folly.

Further, we learn the method of present retribution. Nebuchadnezzar

knew nothing of the purposes which he fulfilled. He meaneth not so,

neither doth his heart think so.' He was but the axe' with which God

hewed. Therefore, though he was God's tool, he was also responsible,

and would be punished even for performing God's whole work upon

Jerusalem,' because of the glory of his high looks.' The retribution of

disobedience, so far as that retribution is outward, needs no miracle.'

The ordinary operations of Providence amply suffice to bring it. If God

wills to sting, He will hiss for the fly,' and it will come. The

ferocity and ambition of a grim and bloody despot, impelled by

vainglory and lust of cruel conquest, do God's work, and yet the doing

is sin. The world is full of God's instruments, and He sends

punishments by the ordinary play of motives and circumstances, which we

best understand when we see behind all His mighty hand and sovereign

will. The short-sighted view of history says Nebuchadnezzar captured

Jerusalem B.C. so and so,' and then discourses about the tendencies of

which Babylonia was exponent and creature. The deeper view says, God

smote the disobedient city, as He had said, and Nebuchadnezzar was the

rod of His anger.'

Again, we learn the Divine reluctance to smite. More than four hundred

years had passed since Solomon began idolatry, and steadily, through

all that time, a stream of prophecy of varying force and width had

flowed, while smaller disasters had confirmed the prophets' voices.

Rising up early and sending' his servants, God had been in earnest in

seeking to save Israel from itself. Men said then, Where is the promise

of His coming?' and mocked His warnings and would none of His reproof;

but at last the hour struck and the crash came. As a dream when one

awaketh; so, O Lord! when Thou awakest, Thou shalt despise their

image.' His judgment seems to slumber, but its eyes are open, and it

remains inactive, that His long-suffering may have free scope. As long

as His gaze can discern the possibility of repentance, He will not

strike; and when that is hopeless, He will not delay. The explanation

of the marvellous tolerance of evil which sometimes tries faith and

always evokes wonder, lies in the great words, which might well be

written over the chair of every teacher of history: The Lord is not

slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is

long-suffering to us-ward.' Alas, that that divine patience should ever

be twisted into the ground of indurated disobedience! Because sentence

against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of

the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.'

God's reluctance to punish is no reason for doubting that He will.

Judgment is His strange work,' less congenial, if we may so paraphrase

that strong word of the prophet' s, than pure mercy, but it will be

done nevertheless. The tears over Jerusalem that witnessed Christ's

sorrow did not blind the eyes like a flame of fire, nor stay the

outstretched hand of the Judge, when the time of her final fall came.

The longer the delay, the worse the ruin. The more protracted the

respite and the fuller it has been of entreaties to return, the more

terrible the punishment. Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity

of God: towards them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness,

if thou continue in His goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut

off.'

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THE FIRST BOOK OF CHRONICLES

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THE KING'S POTTERS

There they dwelt with the king for his work.'--1 CHRON. iv. 23.

In these dry lists of names which abound in Chronicles, we now and then

come across points of interest, oases in the desert, which need but to

be pondered sympathetically to yield interesting suggestions. Here for

example, buried in a dreary genealogical table, is a little touch which

repays meditating on. Among the members of the tribe of Judah were a

hereditary caste of potters who lived in Netaim and Gederah,' if we

adhere to the Revised Version's text, or among plantations and hedges'

if we prefer the margin. But they are also described as dwelling with

the king.' That can only mean on the royal estates, for the king

himself resided in Jerusalem. He, however, held large domains in the

territory of Judah, on some of which these ceramic artists were settled

down and followed their calling. They were kept on the royal estates

and kept in comfort, not needing to till, but fed and cared for, that

they might be free to mould, out of common clay, forms of beauty and

vessels meet for the master's use.' Surely we may read into the brief

statement of the text a meaning of which the writer of it never dreamt,

and see in the description of these forgotten artisans, a symbol of our

Christian relations to our Lord and of our life's work.

I. We, too, dwell with the King.

The Davidic king was in Jerusalem, and the potters were among

plantations and hedges,' yet in a real sense they dwelt with the king,'

though some of them might never have seen his face or trod the streets

of the sacred city. Perhaps now and then he came to visit them on his

outlying domains, but they were always parts of his household. And have

we, Christ's servants, not His gracious parting word: I am with you

always'? True, we are not beside Him in the great city, but He is

beside us in His outlying domains, and we may be with Him in His glory,

if while we still outwardly live among the plantations and hedges' of

this life, we dwell in spirit, by faith and aspiration, with our risen

and ascended Lord. If we so dwell with the King,' He will dwell with

us, and fill our humble abode with the radiance of His presence, making

that place of His feet glorious.' That He should be with us is supreme

condescension, that we should be with Him is the perfection of

exaltation. How low He stoops, how high we can rise! The vigour of our

Christian life largely depends on our keeping vivid the consciousness

of our communion with Jesus and the sense of His real presence with us.

How life's burdens would be lightened if we faced them all in the

strength of the felt nearness of our Lord! How impossible it would be

that we should ever feel the dreary sense of solitude, if we felt that

unseen, but most real, Presence wrapping us round! It is only when our

faith in it has fallen asleep that any earthly good allures, or any

earthly evil frightens us. To be sure, in our thrilling consciousness,

that we dwell with Jesus is an impenetrable cuirass that blunts the

points of all arrows and keeps the breast that wears it unwounded in

the fray. The world has no voices which can make themselves heard above

that low sovereign whisper: I am with you always, even to the end of

the world'--and after the end has come, then we shall be with Him.

But we find in this notice a hint that leads us in yet another

direction. They dwelt with the king' in the sense that they were housed

and cared for on his lands. And in like manner, the true conception of

the Christian life is that each of us is a sojourner with Thee,' set

down on Christ's domains, and looked after by Him in regard to

provision for outward wants. We have nothing in property, but all is

His and held by His gift and to be used for Him. The slave owns

nothing. The patch of ground which he cultivates for his food and what

grows on it, are his master' s. These workmen were not slaves, but they

were not owners either. And we hold nothing as our own, if we are true

to the terms on which it is given us to hold.

So if we rightly appreciate our position as dwelling on the King's

lands, our delusion of possession will vanish, and we shall feel more

keenly the pressure of responsibility while we feel less keenly the

grip of anxiety. We are for the time being entrusted with a tiny piece

of the royal estates. Let us not strut about as if we were owners, nor

be for ever afraid that we shall not have enough for our needs. One

sometimes comes on a model village close to the gates of some ducal

palace, and notes how the lordly owner's honour prompts its being kept

up to a high standard of comfort and beauty. We may be sure that the

potters were well lodged and looked after, and that care for their

personal wants was shifted from their shoulders to the king' s. So

should ours be. He will not leave His servants to starve. They should

not dishonour Him and disturb themselves by worries and cares that

would be reasonable only if they had no Provider. He has said, All

things are given to Me of My Father,' and He gives us all that God has

given Him.

II. We dwell with the King for His work.

The king's potters had not to till the land nor do any work but to

mould clay into vessels for use and beauty. For that purpose they had

their huts and bits of ground assigned them. So with us, Christ has a

purpose in His provision for us. We are set down on His domains, and we

enjoy His presence and providing in order that, set free from carking

cares and low ends, we may, with free and joyous hearts, yield

ourselves to His joyful service. The law of our life should be that we

please not ourselves, nor consult our own will in choosing our tasks,

nor seek our own profit or gratification in doing them, but ever ask of

Him: Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' and when the answer comes, as

come it will to all who ask with real desire to learn and with real

inclination to do His will, that we make haste and delay not, but make

haste to keep His commandments.' The spirit which should animate our

active lives is plainly enough taught us in that little word, they

dwelt with the king for his work.'

Nor are we to forget that, in a very profound sense, dwelling with the

King must go before doing His work. Unless we are living continually

under the operation of the stimulus of communion with Jesus, we shall

have neither quickness of ear to know what He wishes us to do, nor any

resolute concentration of ourselves on our Christ-appointed tasks. The

spring of all noble living is communion with noble ideals, and

fellowship with Jesus sets men agoing, as nothing else will, in

practical lives of obedience to Jesus. Time given to silent, retired

meditation on that sweet, sacred bond that knits the believing soul to

the redeeming Lord is not lost with reference to active work for Jesus.

The meditative and the practical life are not antagonistic, but

complementary, Mary and Martha are sisters, though sometimes they

differ, and foolish people try to set them against each other.

But we must beware of a common misconception of what the King's work

is. The royal potters did not make only things of beauty, but very

common vessels designed for common and ignoble uses. There were vessels

of dishonour dried in their kilns as well as vessels meet for the

master's use.' There is a usual and lamentable narrowing of the term

Christian work,' to certain conventional forms of service, which has

done and is doing an immense amount of harm. The King's work is far

wider in scope than teaching in Sunday-schools, or visiting the sick,

or any similar acts that are usually labelled with the name. It covers

all the common duties of life. A shallow religion tickets some selected

items with the name; a robuster, truer conception extends the

designation to everything. It is not only when we are definitely trying

to bring others into touch with Jesus that we are doing Him service,

but we may be equally serving Him in everything. The difference between

the king's work and the poor potters' own lay not so much in the nature

as in the motive of it, and whatever we do for Christ's sake and with a

view to His will is work that He owns, while a regard to self in our

motive or in our end decisively strikes any service tainted by it out

of the category.

We are to hallow all our deeds by drawing the motive for them from the

King and by laying the fruits of them at His feet. Thus, and only thus,

will the most secular' actions be sanctified and the narrowest life be

widened to contain a present Christ.

There are subsidiary motives which may legitimately blend with the

supreme one. The potters would be stimulated to work hard and with

their utmost skill when they thought of how well they were paid in

house and store for their work. We have ample reasons for dedicating

our whole selves to Jesus when we think of His gift of Himself to us,

of His wages beforehand, of His joyful presence with His eye ever on

us, marking our purity of motive and our diligence.

There is a final thought that may well stimulate us to put all our

skill and effort into our work. The potters' work went to Jerusalem. It

was for the king. What can be too good for him? He will see it,

therefore let us put our best into it. And we shall see it too, when we

too enter the city of the great King.' Jars that perhaps were wrought

by these very workmen of whom we have been speaking turn up to-day in

the excavations in Palestine. So much has perished and they remain,

speaking symbols of the solemn truth that nothing human ever dies. Our

works do follow us.' Let us so live that these may be found unto praise

and honour and glory' at the appearing of the King.'

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DAVID'S CHORISTERS

They stood in their office, according to their order.'--1 CHRON. vi. 32

(R.V. margin).

This brief note is buried in the catalogue of the singers appointed by

David for the service of song in the house of the Lord.' The waves of

their choral praise have long ages since ceased to eddy round the

tabernacle of the tent of meeting,' and all that is left of their

melodious companies is a dry list of names, in spite of which the dead

owners of them are nameless. But the chronicler's description of them

may carry some lessons for us, for is not the Church of Christ a choir,

chosen to shew forth the praises of Him who has called us out of

darkness into His marvellous light'? We take a permissible liberty with

this fragment, when we use it to point lessons that may help that great

band of choristers who are charged with the office of making the name

of Jesus ring through the world. Now, in making such a use of the text,

we may linger on each important word in it and find each fruitful in

suggestions which we shall be the better for expanding in our own

meditations.

We pause on the first word, which is rendered in the Authorised and

Revised Versions waited,' and in the margin of the latter stood.' The

former rendering brings into prominence the mental attitude with which

the singers held themselves ready to take their turns in the service,

the latter points rather to their bodily attitude as they fulfilled

their office. We get a picture of the ranked files gathered round their

three leaders, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan. These three names are familiar

to us from the Psalter, but how all the ranks behind them have fallen

dim to us, and how their song has floated into inaudible distance! They

stood,' a melodious multitude, girt and attent on their song, or

waiting their turn to fill the else silent air with the high praises of

Jehovah, and glad when it came to their turn to open their lips in

full-throated melody.

Now may we not catch the spirit of that long vanished chorus, and find

in the two possible renderings of this word a twofold example, the

faithful following of which would put new vigour into our service? We

are called to a loftier office, and have heavenly harmonies entrusted

to us to be made vocal by our lips, compared with which theirs were

poor. They waited on' their office, and shall not we, in a higher

fashion, wait on our ministry, and suffer no inferior claims to block

our way or hamper our preparedness to discharge it? To let ourselves be

entangled with the affairs of this life,' or to drowse in idle cell,'

sleepily letting summonses that should wake us to work sound unheeded

and almost unheard, is flagrant despite done to our high vocation as

Christians. They also serve who only stand and wait,' but not if in

their waiting their eyes are straying everywhere but to their Master's

pointing hand or directing eye. The world is full of voices calling

Christ's folk to help; but what a host of so-called Christians fail to

hear these piteous and despairing cries, because the noise of their own

whims, fancies, and self-centred desires keeps buzzing in their ears. A

constant accompaniment of deafness is constant noises in the head; and

the Christians who are hardest of hearing when Christ calls are

generally afflicted with noises which are probably the cause, and not

merely an accompaniment, of their deafness. For indeed it demands no

little detachment of spirit from self and sense, from the world and its

clamant suitors, if a Christian soul is to be ready to mark the first

signal of the great Conductor's baton, and to answer the lightest

whisper, intrusting it with a task for Him, with its self-consecrating

Here am I. Send me.'

It used to be said that they who watched for providences never wanted

providences to watch for; it is equally true that they who are on the

watch for opportunities for service never fail to find them, and that

ears pricked to hear what God the Lord shall speak,' summoning to work

for Him, will not listen in vain. Paul saw in a vision a man of

Macedonia' begging for his help, and straightway' he concluded that God

had called' him to preach in Europe. Happy are these Christian workers

who hear God's voice speaking through men's needs, and recognise a

divine imperative in human cries!

May we not see in the attitude of David's choristers as they sang,

hints for our own discharge of the tasks of our Christian service?

There was a curse of old on him who did the work of the Lord

negligently,' and its weight falls still on workers and work. For who

can measure the harm done to the Christian life of the negligent

worker, and who can expect any blessing to come either to him or to

others from such half-hearted seeming service? The devil's kingdom is

not to be cast down nor Christ's to be builded up by workers who put

less than their whole selves, the entire weight of their bodies, into

their toil. A pavior on the street brings down his rammer at every

stroke with an accompanying exclamation expressing effort, and there is

no place in Christ's service for dainty people who will not sweat at

their task, and are in mortal fear of over-work. Strenuousness, the

gathering together of all our powers, are implied in the attitude of

Heman and his band as they stood' in their office. Idle revellers might

loll on their rose-strewn couches as they sing idle songs to the sound

of the viol and devise for themselves instruments of music, like

David,' but the austerer choir of the Temple despised ease, and stood

ready for service and in the best bodily posture for song.

The second important word of the text brings other thoughts no less

valuable and rich in practical counsel. The singers in the Temple stood

in their office,' which was song. Their special work was praise. And

that is the highest task of the Church. As a matter of fact, every

period of quickened earnestness in the Church's life has been a period

marked by a great outburst of Christian song. All intense emotion seeks

expression in poetry, and music is the natural speech of a vivid faith.

Luther chanted the Marseillaise of the Reformation, A safe stronghold

our God is still,' and many another sweet strain blended strangely with

the fiery and sometimes savage words from his lips. The Scottish

Reformation, grim in some of its features as it was, had yet its Gude

and Godly Ballads.' At the birth of Methodism, as round the cradle at

Bethlehem, hovered as it were angel voices singing, Glory to God in the

highest.' A flock of singing birds let loose attends every revival of

Christian life.

The Church's praise is the noblest expression of the Church's life. Its

hymns go deeper than its creeds, touch hearts more to the quick,

minister to the faith which they enshrine, and often draw others to see

the preciousness of the Christ whom they celebrate. How little we

should have known of Old Testament religion, notwithstanding law and

prophets, if the Psalter had perished!

And it is true, in a very deep sense, that we shall do more for Christ

and men by voicing our own deep thankfulness for His great gifts and

speaking simply our valuation of, and our thankfulness for, what we

draw from Him than by any other form of so-called Christian work. We

can offend none by saying: We have found the Messias,' and are

adoringly glad that we have. The most effectual way of moving other

souls to participate in our joy is to let our joy speak. If you wish me

to weep,' your own tears must not be held back, and if you wish others

to know the preciousness of Christ, you must ring out His name with

fervour of emotion and the triumphant confidence. We are the

secretaries of God's praise,' as George Herbert has it, for we have

possession of His greatest gift, and have learned to know Him in

loftier fashion than Heman's choristers dreamed of, having seen the

glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,' and tasted the sweetness of

redeeming love. The Apocalyptic seer sets forth a great truth when he

tells us that he first heard a new song from the lips of the

representatives of the Church, who could sing, Thou wast slain and

didst redeem us to God with Thy blood,' and then heard their adoration

echoed from many angels round about the throne,' and finally heard the

song reverberated from every created thing in heaven and earth, in the

sea and all deep places. A praising Church has experiences of its own

which angels cannot share, and it sets in motion the great sea of

praise whose surges break in music and roll from every side of the

universe in melodious thunder to the great white throne. Without our

song even angel voices would lack somewhat.

God said, "A praise is in Mine ear;

There is no doubt in it, no fear:

Clearer loves sound other ways:

I miss My little human praise."'

The song of the redeemed has in it a minor strain that gives a

sweetness far more poignant than belongs to those who cannot say: Out

of the depths I cried unto Thee.' The sweetest songs are those which

tell of saddest thought,' and recount experiences of conquered sin and

life springing from death.

But it is also true that no kind of Christian service will be

effectual, if it lacks the element of grateful praise as its motive and

mainspring. Perhaps there would be fewer complaints of toiling all

night and wearily hauling in empty nets, if the nets were oftener let

down not only at Thy word' but with glad remembrance of the fishermen's

debt to Jesus, and in the spirit of praise. When all our work is a

sacrifice of praise, it is pleasing to God and profitable to ourselves

and to others. If we would oftener bethink ourselves, and herald every

deed with a silent dedication of it and of ourselves to Him who died

for us, we should less often have to complain that we have sowed much

and brought back little. A pinch of incense cast into the common

domestic fire makes its flame sacrificial and fragrant.

The last important word of the text is also fertile in hints for us.

The singers stood in their office according to their order.' That last

expression may either refer to rotation of service or to distribution

of parts in the chorus. They did not sing in unison, grand as the

effect of such a song from a multitude sometimes is, but they had their

several parts. The harmonious complexity of a great chorus is the ideal

for the Church. Paul puts the same thought in a sterner metaphor when

he tells the Colossian Christians that he joys beholding your order and

the steadfastness of your faith in Christ,' where he is evidently

thinking of the Roman legion with its rigid discipline and its solid,

irresistible, ranked weight. Division of function and consequent

concordant action of different parts is the lesson taught by both

metaphors, and by the many modern examples of the immense results

gained in machinery that almost simulates vital action, and by

organisations for great purposes in which men combine. The Church

should be the highest example of such combination, for it is the shrine

of the noblest life, even the life of its indwelling Lord. Every member

of it should have and know his place. Every Christian should know his

part in the great chorus, for he has a part, even if it is only that of

tinkling the triangle in the orchestra or beating a drum. That division

of function and concordance of action apply to all forms of the

Church's action, and are enforced most chiefly by the great Apostolic

metaphor of the body and its members. Paul did not delight in

uniformity.' Inferiors calling themselves his successors have often

aimed at enforcing it, but nature has been too strong for them, and the

hedge will grow its own way in spite of pedants' shears. If the whole

body were an eye, where the hearing?' The monotony of a church in which

uniformity was the ideal would be intolerable. The chorus has its

parts, and the soprano cannot say to the bass, I have no need of you,'

nor the bass to the tenor, I have no need of thee.'

So let us see that we find our own place, and see that we fill it,

singing our own part lustily, and not being either confused or made

dumb because another has other notes to sing than are written on our

score. Let us recognise unity made more melodious by diversity, the

importance of the humblest, and having gifts differing according to the

grace given unto us let us wait on our ministry,' and stand in our

office according to our order.

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DRILL AND ENTHUSIASM

[Men that] could keep rank, they were not of double heart.'--1 CHRON.

xii. 33.

These words come from the muster-roll of the hastily raised army that

brought David up to Hebron and made him King. The catalogue abounds in

brief characterisations of the qualities of each tribe's contingent.

For example, Issachar had understanding of the times.' Our text is

spoken of the warriors of Zebulon, who had left their hills and their

flocks in the far north, and poured down from their seats by the blue

waters of Tiberias to gather round their king. They were not only like

their brethren expert in war and fully equipped, but they had some

measure of discipline too, a rare thing in the days when there were no

standing armies. They could keep rank,' could march together, had been

drilled to some unanimity of step and action, could work and fight

together, were an army, not a crowd, and not only so, but also they

were not of double heart.' Each man, and the whole body, had a brave

single resolve; they had one spirit animating the whole, and that was

to make David king, an enthusiastic loyalty which made them brave, and

a discipline which kept the courage from running to waste.

I take, then, this text as bringing before us two very important

characteristics which ought to be found in every Christian church, and

without which no real prosperity and growth is possible. These two may

be put very briefly: organisation and enthusiastic devotion. These are

both important, but in very different degrees. Organisation without

valour is in a worse plight than valour without organisation. The one

is fundamental, the other secondary. The one is the true cause, so far

as men are concerned, of victory, the other is but the instrument by

which the cause works. There have been many victories won by

undisciplined valour, but disciplined cowardice and apathy come to no

good.

These two have been separated and made antagonistic, and churches are

to be found which glory in the one, and others in the other. Some have

gone in for order, and are like butterflies in a cabinet all ticketed

and displayed in place, but a pin is run through their bodies and they

are dead; and others have prided themselves on unfettered freedom, and

been not an army, but a mob. The true relation, of course, is that life

should shape and inform organisation, and organisation should preserve,

manifest and obey life. There must be body to hold spirit, there must

be spirit to keep body from rotting.

I. Organisation.

This is not the strong point of Nonconformist churches. We pride

ourselves on our individualism, and that is all very well. We believe

in direct access of each soul to Christ, that men must come to Him one

by one, that religion is purely a personal matter, and the firmness

with which we hold this tends to make us weak in combined action. It

cannot be truthfully denied that both in the relations of our churches

to one another, and in the internal organisation of these, we are and

have been too loosely compacted, and have forgotten that two is more

than one plus one, so that we are only helping to redress the balance a

little when we insist upon the importance of organisation in our

churches.

And first of all--remember the principles in subordination to which our

organisation must be framed.

What are we united by? Common love and faith to Christ, or rather

Christ Himself. One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are

brethren.' So there must be nothing in our organisation which is

inconsistent with Christ's supreme place among us, and with our

individual obedience to Him. There are to be no lords over God's

heritage' in the Church of Christ. There are churches in which the

temptation to be such affects the official chiefly, and there are

others, with a different polity, in which it is chiefly a Diotrephes,

who loves to have pre-eminence. Character, zeal, social station, even

wealth will always confer a certain influence, and their possessors

will be tempted to set up their own will or opinions as dominant in the

Church. Such men are sinning against the very bond of Christian union.

Organisation which is bought by investing one man with authority, is

too dearly purchased at the cost of individual development on the

individual's own lines. A row of clipped yew-trees is not an inspiring

sight.

And yet again what are we organised for? Not merely for our own growth

or spiritual advantage, but also, and more especially, for spreading

faith in Christ and advancing His glory. All our organisation, then, is

but an arrangement for doing our work, and if it hinders that, it is

cumbrous and must be cut away or modified, at all hazards.

Ecclesiastical martinets are still to be found, to whom drill is

all-important, and who see no use in irregular valour, but they are a

diminishing number, and they may be recommended to ponder the old wise

saying: Where no oxen are, the crib is clean, but much increase is by

the strength of the ox.' If the one aim is a clean crib' the best way

to secure that is to keep it empty; but if a harvest is the aim, there

must be cultivation, and one must accept the consequences of having a

strong team to plough. The end of drill is fighting. The parade-ground

and its exercising is in order that a corps may be hurled against the

enemy, or may stand unmoved, like a solid breakwater against a charge

which it flings off in idle spray, and the end of the Church's

organisation is that it may move en masse, without waste, against the

enemy.

But a further guiding principle to shape Christian organisation is that

of the Church as the body of Christ. That requires that there shall be

work for every member. Christ has endowed His members with varying

gifts, powers, opportunities, and has set them in diverse

circumstances, that each may give his own contribution to the general

stock of work. Our theory is that each man has his own proper gift from

God, one after this manner, and another after that.' But what is our

practice? Take any congregation of Christian people in any of our

churches, and especially in the Free Churches of which I know most, and

is there anything like this wide diversity of forms of service, to

which each contributes? A handful of people do all the work, and the

remainder are idlers. The same small section are in evidence always,

and the rest are nowhere. There are but a few bits of coloured glass in

a kaleidoscope, they take different patterns when the tube is turned,

but they are always the same bits of glass.

There needs to be a far greater variety of forms of work for our people

and more workers in the field. There are too few wheels for the

quantity of water in the river, and, partly for that reason, the amount

of water that runs waste over the sluice is deplorable. There is a

danger in having too many spindles for the power available, but the

danger in modern church organisation is exactly the other way.

Every one should have his own work. In all living creatures,

differentiation of organs increases as the creature rises in the scale

of being, from the simple sac which does everything up to the human

body with a distinct function for every finger. It should not be

possible for a lazy Christian to plead truly as his vindication that no

man had hired' him. It should be the Church's business to find work for

the unemployed.

The example in our text should enforce the necessity of united work.

David's levies could keep rank. They did not let each man go at his own

rate and by his own road, but kept together, shoulder to shoulder, with

equal stride. They were content to co-operate and be each a part of a

greater whole. That keeping rank is a difficult problem in all

societies, where individual judgments, weaknesses, wills, and crotchets

are at work, but it is apt to be especially difficult in Christian

communities, where one may expect to find individual characteristics

intensified, a luxuriant growth of personal peculiarities, an intense

grip of partial aspects of the great truths and a corresponding dislike

of other aspects of these, and of those whose favourite truths they

are. One would do nothing to clip that growth, but still Christians who

have not learned to subordinate themselves in and for united work are

of little use to God or man. What does such united work require? Mainly

the bridling of self, the curbing of one's own will, not insisting on

forcing one's opinions on one's brother, not being careful of having

one's place secured and one's honour asserted. Without such virtues no

association of man could survive for a year. If the world managed its

societies as the Church manages its unity, they would collapse quickly.

Indeed it is a strong presumption in favour of Christianity that the

Churches have not killed it long ago. Vanity, pride, self-importance,

masterfulness, pettishness get full play among us. Diotrephes has many

descendants to-day. A cotton mill, even if it were a co-operative one,

could not work long without going into bankruptcy, if there were no

more power of working together than some Christian congregations have.

A watch would be a poor timekeeper, where every wheel tried to set the

pace and be a mainspring, or sulked because the hands moved on the face

in sight of all men, while it had to move round and fit into its

brother wheel in the dark.

Subordination is required as well as co-operation. For if there be

harmonious co-operation in varying offices, there must be degrees and

ranks. The differences of power and gift make degrees, and in every

society there will be leaders. Of course there is no commanding

authority in the Churches. Its leaders are brethren, whose most

imperative highest word is, We beseech you.'

Of course, too, these varieties and degrees do not mean real

superiority or inferiority in the eye of God. From the highest point of

view nothing is great or small, there is no higher or lower. The only

measure is quality, the only gauge is motive. Small service is true

service while it lasts.' He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a

prophet, shall receive a prophet's reward. But yet there are, so far as

our work here is concerned, degrees and orders, and we need a hearty

and ungrudging recognition of superiority wherever we find it. If the

brother of high degree' needs to be exhorted to beware of arrogance and

imposing his own will on his fellows, the brother of low degree' needs

not less to be exhorted to beware of letting envy and self-will hiss

and snarl in his heart at those who are in higher positions than

himself. If the chief of all needs to be reminded that in Christ's

household preeminence means service, the lower no less needs to be

reminded that in Christ's household service means pre-eminence.

So much, then, for organisation. It is perfectly reconcilable with

democracy that is not mob-ocracy. In fact, democracy needs it most. If

I may venture to speak to the members of the Free Churches, with which

I am best acquainted, I would take upon myself to say that there is

nothing which they need more than that they should show their polity to

be capable of reconciling the freest development of the individual with

the most efficient organisation of the community. The object is work

for Christ, the bond of their fellowship is brotherly union with

Christ. Many eyes are on them to-day, and the task is in their hands of

showing that they can keep rank. The most perfect discipline in war in

old times was found, not amongst the subjects of Eastern despots who

were not free enough to learn to submit, but amongst the republics of

Greece, where men were all on a level in the city, and fell into their

places in the camp, because they loved liberty enough to know the worth

of discipline, and so the slaves of Xerxes were scattered before the

resistless onset of the phalanx of the free. The terrible legion which

moved altogether when it moved at all,' and could be launched at the

foe like one javelin of steel, had for its units free men and equals.

There needs freedom for organisation. There needs organisation for

freedom. Let us learn the lesson. God is not the author of confusion,

but of order, in all churches of saints.'

II. Enthusiastic devotion.

These men came to bring David up to Hebron with one single purpose in

their hearts. They had no sidelong glances to their own self-interest,

they had no wavering loyalty, they had no trembling fears, so we may

take their spirit as expressing generally the deepest requirements for

prosperity in a church.

The foundation of all prosperity is a passion of personal attachment to

Christ our King.

Christ is Christianity objective. Love to Christ is Christianity

subjective. The whole stress of Christian character is laid on this. It

is the mother of all grace and goodness, and in regard to the work of

the Church, it is the ardour of a soul full of love to Jesus that

conquers. The one thing in which all who have done much for Him have

been alike in that single-hearted devotion.

But such love is the child of faith. It rests upon belief of truth, and

is the response of man to God. Dwelling in the truth is the means of

it. How our modern Christianity fails in this strong personal bond of

familiar love!

Consider its effect on the individual.

It will give tenacity of purpose, will brace to strenuous effort, will

subdue self, self-regard, self-importance, will subdue fear. It is the

true anaesthetic. The soldier is unconscious of his wounds, while the

glow of devotion is in his heart and the shout of the battle in his

ears. It will give fertility of resource and patience.

Consider its effect on the community.

It will remove all difficulties in the way of discipline arising from

vanity and self which can be subdued by no other means. That flame

fuses all into one glowing mass like a stream that pours from the blast

furnace. What a power a church would be which had this! It is itself

victory. The men that go into battle with that one firm resolve, and

care for nothing else, are sure to win. Think what one man can do who

has resolved to sell his life dear!

Consider the worthlessness of discipline without this.

It is a poor mechanical accuracy. How easy to have too much machinery!

How the French Revolution men swept the Austrian martinets before them!

David was half-smothered in Saul's armour. On the other hand, this

fervid flame needs control to make it last and work. Spirit and law are

not incompatible. Valour may be disciplined, and the combination is

irresistible.

And so here, till we exchange the close array of the battlefield for

the open ranks of the festal procession on the Coronation day, and lay

aside the helmet for the crown, the sword for the palm, the breastplate

for the robe of peace, and stand for ever before the throne, in the

peaceful ranks of the solemn troops and sweet societies' of the

unwavering armies of the heavens who serve Him with a perfect heart,

and burn unconsumed with the ardours of an immortal and ever

brightening love, let us see to it that we too are men that can keep

rank and are not of double heart.'

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DAVID'S PROHIBITED DESIRE AND PERMITTED SERVICE

Then he called for Solomon his son, and charged him to build an house

for the Lord God of Israel. 7. And David said to Solomon, My son, as

for me, it was in my mind to build an house unto the name of the Lord

my God: 8. But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Thou hast shed

blood abundantly, and hast made great wars: thou shalt not build an

house unto My name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in

My sight. 9. Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of

rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about: for

his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto

Israel in his days. 10. He shall build an house for My name; and he

shall be My son, and I will be his Father; and I will establish the

throne of his kingdom over Israel for ever. 11. Now, my son, the Lord

be with thee; and prosper thou, and build the house of the Lord thy God

as He hath said of thee. 12. Only the Lord give thee wisdom and

understanding, and give thee charge concerning Israel, that thou mayest

keep the law of the Lord thy God, 13. Then shalt thou prosper, if thou

takest heed to fulfil the statutes and judgments which the Lord charged

Moses with concerning Israel: be strong, and of good courage; dread

not, nor be dismayed. 14. Now, behold, in my trouble I have prepared

for the house of the Lord an hundred thousand talents of gold, and a

thousand thousand talents of silver; and of brass and iron without

weight; for it is in abundance: timber also and stone have I prepared

and thou mayest add thereto. 15. Moreover, there are workmen with thee

in abundance, hewers and workers of stone and timber, and all manner of

cunning men for every manner of work. 16. Of the gold, the silver, and

the brass, and the iron, there is no number. Arise, therefore, and be

doing, and the Lord be with thee.'--1 CHRON. xxii. 6-16.

This passage falls into three parts. In verses 6-10 the old king tells

of the divine prohibition which checked his longing to build the

Temple; in verses 11-13 he encourages his more fortunate successor, and

points him to the only source of strength for his happy task; in verses

14-16 he enumerates the preparations which he had made, the possession

of which laid stringent obligations on Solomon.

I. There is a tone of wistfulness in David's voice as he tells how his

heart's desire had been prohibited. The account is substantially the

same as we have in 2 Samuel vii. 4-16, but it adds as the reason for

the prohibition David's warlike career. We may note the earnestness and

the motive of the king's desire to build the Temple. It was in my

heart'; that implies earnest longing and fixed purpose. He had brooded

over the wish till it filled his mind, and was consolidated into a

settled resolve. Many a musing, solitary moment had fed the fire before

it burned its way out in the words addressed to Nathan. So should our

whole souls be occupied with our parts in God's service, and so should

our desires be strongly set towards carrying out what in solitary

meditation we have felt borne in on us as our duty.

The moving spring of David's design is beautifully suggested in the

simple words unto the name of the Lord my God.' David's religion was

eminently a personal bond between him and God. We may almost say that

he was the first to give utterance to that cry of the devout heart, My

God,' and to translate the generalities of the name the God of Israel'

into the individual appropriation expressed by the former designation.

It occurs in many of the psalms attributed to him, and may fairly be

regarded as a characteristic of his ardent and individualising

devotion. The sense of a close, personal relation to God naturally

prompted the impulse to build His house. We must claim our own portion

in the universal blessings shrined in His name before we are moved to

deeds of loving sacrifice. We must feel that Christ loved me, and gave

Himself for me,' before we are melted into answering surrender.

The reason for the frustrating of David's desire, as here given, is his

career as a warrior king. Not only was it incongruous that hands which

had been reddened with blood should rear the Temple, but the fact that

his reign had been largely occupied with fighting for the existence of

the kingdom showed that the time for engaging in such a work, which

would task the national resources, had not yet come. We may draw two

valuable lessons from the prohibition. One is that it indicates the

true character of the kingdom of God as a kingdom of peace, which is to

be furthered, not by force, but in peace and gentleness. The other is

that various epochs and men have different kinds of duties in relation

to Christ's cause, some being called on to fight, and others to build,

and that the one set of tasks may be as sacred and as necessary for the

rearing of the Temple as the other. Militant epochs are not usually

times for building. The men who have to do destructive work are not

usually blessed with the opportunity or the power to carry out

constructive work. Controversy has its sphere, but it is mostly

preliminary to true edification.' In the broadest view all the activity

of the Church on earth is militant, and we have to wait for the coming

of the true Prince of peace' to build up the true Temple in the land of

peace, whence all foes have been cast out for ever. To serve God in

God's way, and to give up our cherished plans, is not easy; but David

sets us an example of simple-hearted, cheerful acquiescence in a

Providence that thwarted darling designs. There is often much self-will

in what looks like enthusiastic perseverance in some form of service.

II. The charge to Solomon breathes no envy of his privilege, but

earnest desire that he may be worthy of the honour which falls to him.

Petitions and exhortations are closely blended in it, and, though the

work which Solomon is called to do is of an external sort, the

qualifications laid down for it are spiritual and moral. However

secular' our work in connection with God's service may be, it will not

be rightly done unless the highest motives are brought to bear on it,

and it is performed as worship. The basis of all successful work is

God's presence with us, so David prays for that to be granted to

Solomon as the beginning of all his fitness for his task.

Next, David recalls to his son God's promise concerning him, that it

may hearten him to undertake and to carry on the great work. A

conviction that our service is appointed for us by God is essential for

vigorous and successful Christian work. We must have, in some way or

other, heard Him speak concerning us,' if we are to fling ourselves

with energy into it.

The petitions in verse 12 seem to stretch beyond the necessities of the

case, in so far as building the Temple is concerned. Wisdom and

understanding, and a clear consciousness of the duty enjoined on him by

God in reference to Israel, were surely more than that work required.

But the qualifications for God's service, however the manner of service

may be concerned with the outward business of the house of God,' are

always these which David asked for Solomon. The highest result of true

wisdom and understanding' given by God is keeping God's law; and

keeping it is the one condition on which we shall obtain and retain

that presence of God with us which David prayed for Solomon, and

without which they labour in vain that build. A life conformed to God's

will is the absolutely indispensable condition of all prosperity in

direct Christian effort. The noblest exercise of our wisdom and

understanding is to obey every word that we hear proceeding out of the

mouth of God.

III. There is something very pathetic in the old king's enumeration of

the treasures which, by the economies of a lifetime, he had amassed.

The amount stated is enormous, and probably there is some clerical

error in the numbers specified. Be that as it may, the sum was very

large. It represented many an act of self-denial, many a resolute

shearing off of superfluities and what might seem necessaries. It was

the visible token of long years of fixed attention to one object. And

that devotion was all the more noble because the result of it was never

to be seen by the man who exercised it.

Therein David is but a very conspicuous example of a law which runs

through all our work for God. None of us are privileged to perform

completed tasks. One soweth and another reapeth.' We have to be content

to do partial work, and to leave its completion to our successors.

There is but one Builder of whom it can be said that His hands have

laid the foundation of this house; His hands shall also finish it.' He

who is the Alpha and Omega,' and He alone, begins and completes the

work in which He has neither sharers nor predecessors nor successors.

The rest of us do our little bit of the great work which lasts on

through the ages, and, having inherited unfinished tasks, transmit them

to those who come after us. It is privilege enough for any Christian to

lay foundations on which coming days may build. We are like the workers

on some great cathedral, which was begun long before the present

generation of masons were born, and will not be finished until long

after they have dropped trowel and mallet from their dead hands. Enough

for us if we can lay one course of stones in that great structure. The

greater our aims, the less share has each man in their attainment. But

the division of labour is the multiplication of joy, and all who have

shared in the toil will be united in the final triumph. It would be

poor work that was capable of being begun and perfected in a lifetime.

The labourer that dug and levelled the track and the engineer that

drives the locomotive over it are partners. Solomon could not have

built the Temple unless, through long, apparently idle, years, David

had been patiently gathering together the wealth which he bequeathed.

So, if our work is but preparatory for that of those who come after,

let us not think it of slight importance, and let us be sure that all

who have had any portion in the toil shall share in the victory, that

he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.'

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DAVID'S CHARGE TO SOLOMON

And David assembled all the princes of Israel, the princes of the

tribes, and the captains of the companies that ministered to the king

by course, and the captains over the thousands, and captains over the

hundreds, and the stewards over all the substance and possession of the

king, and of his sons, with the officers, and with the mighty men, and

with all the valiant men, unto Jerusalem. 2. Then David the king stood

up upon his feet, and said, Hear me, my brethren, and my people: As for

me, I had in mine heart to build an house of rest for the ark of the

covenant of the Lord, and for the footstool of our God, and had made

ready for the building: 3. But God said unto me, Thou shalt not build

an house for My name, because thou hast been a man of war, and hast

shed blood. 4. Howbeit the Lord God of Israel chose me before all the

house of my father to be king over Israel for ever: for He hath chosen

Judah to be the ruler; and of the house of Judah, the house of my

father; and among the sons of my father He liked me to make me king

over all Israel: 5. And of all my sons, (for the Lord hath given me

many sons), he hath chosen Solomon my son to sit upon the throne of the

kingdom of the Lord over Israel. 6. And He said unto me, Solomon thy

son, he shall build My house and My courts: for I have chosen him to be

My son, and I will be his father. 7. Moreover I will establish his

kingdom for ever, if he be constant to do My commandments and My

judgments, as at this day. 8. Now therefore in the sight of all Israel

the congregation of the Lord, and in the audience of our God, keep and

seek for all the commandments of the Lord your God: that ye may possess

this good land, and leave it for an inheritance for your children after

you for ever. 9. And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy

father, and serve Him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for

the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations

of the thoughts: if thou seek Him, He will be found of thee; but if

thou forsake Him, He will cast thee off for ever. 10. Take heed now;

for the Lord hath chosen thee to build an house for the sanctuary: be

strong, and do it.'--1 CHRON. xxviii. 1-10.

David had established an elaborate organisation of royal officials,

details of which occupy the preceding chapters and interrupt the course

of the narrative. The passage picks up again the thread dropped at

chapter xxiii. 1. The list of the members of the assembly called in

verse 1 is interesting as showing how he tried to amalgamate the old

with the new. The princes of Israel, the princes of the tribes,

represented the primitive tribal organisation, and they receive

precedence in virtue of the antiquity of their office. Then come

successively David's immediate attendants, the military officials, the

stewards of the royal estates, the officers' or eunuchs attached to the

palace, and the faithful mighty men' who had fought by the king's side

in the old days. It was an assembly of officials and soldiers whose

adherence to Solomon it was all-important to secure, especially in

regard to the project for building the Temple, which could not be

carried through without their active support. The passage comprises

only the beginning of the proceedings of this assembly of notables. The

end is told in the next chapter; namely, that the Temple-building

scheme was unanimously and enthusiastically adopted, and large

donations given for it, and that Solomon's succession was accepted, and

loyal submission offered by the assembly to him.

David's address to this gathering is directed to secure these two

points. He begins by recalling his own intention to build the Temple

and God's prohibition of it. The reason for that prohibition differs

from that alleged by Nathan, but there is no contradiction between the

two narratives, and the chronicler has already reported Nathan's words

(chap. xvii. 3, etc.), so that the motive which is ascribed to many of

the variations in this book, a priestly desire to exalt Temple and

ritual, cannot have been at work here. Why should there not have been a

divine communication to David as well as Nathan's message? That hands

reddened with blood, even though it had been shed in justifiable war,

were not fitted to build the Temple, was a thought so far in advance of

David's time, and flowing from so spiritual a conception of God, that

it may well have been breathed into David's spirit by a divine voice.

Sword in one hand and trowel in the other are incongruous,

notwithstanding Nehemiah's example. The Temple of the God of peace

cannot be built except by men of peace. That is true in the widest and

highest application. Jesus builds the true Temple. Controversy and

strife do not. And, on a lower level, the prohibition is for ever

valid. Men do not atone for a doubtful past by building churches,

founding colleges, endowing religious or charitable institutions.

The speech next declares emphatically that the throne belongs to David

and his descendants by real divine right,' and that God's choice is

Solomon, who is to inherit both the promises and obligations of the

office, and, among the latter, that of building the Temple. The

unspoken inference is that loyalty to Solomon would be obedience to

Jehovah. The connection between the true heavenly King and His earthly

representative is strongly expressed in the remarkable phrase: He hath

chosen Solomon . . . to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of Jehovah,'

which both consecrates and limits the rule of Solomon, making him but

the viceroy of the true king of Israel. When Israel's kings remembered

that, they flourished; when they forgot it, they destroyed their

kingdom and themselves. The principle is as true to-day, and it applies

to all forms of influence, authority, and gifts. They are God' s, and

we are but stewards.

The address to the assembly ends with the exhortation to these leaders

to observe,' and not merely to observe, but also to seek out' God's

commandments, and so to secure to the nation, whom they could guide,

peaceful and prosperous days. It is not enough to do God's will as far

as we know it; we must ever be endeavouring after clearer, deeper

insight into it. Would that these words were written over the doors of

all Senate and Parliament houses! What a different England we should

see!

But Solomon was present as well as the notables, and it was well that,

in their hearing, he should be reminded of his duties. David had

previously in private taught him these, but this public charge' before

the chief men of the kingdom bound them more solemnly upon him, and

summoned a cloud of witnesses against him if he fell below the high

ideal. It is pitched on a lofty key of spiritual religion, for it lays

Know thou the God of thy fathers' as the foundation of everything. That

knowledge is no mere intellectual apprehension, but, as always in

Scripture, personal acquaintanceship with a Person, which involves

communion with Him and love towards Him. For us, too, it is the seed of

all strenuous discharge of our life's tasks, whether we are rulers or

nobodies, and it means a much deeper experience than understanding or

giving assent to a set of truths about God. We know one another when we

summer and winter with each other, and not unless we love one another,

and we know God on no other terms.

After such knowledge comes an outward life of service. Active obedience

is the expression of inward communion, love, and trust. The spring that

moves the hands on the dial is love, and, if the hands do not move,

there is something wrong with the spring. Morality is the garment of

religion; religion is the animating principle of morality. Faith

without works is dead, and works without faith are dead too.

But even when we know God' we have to make efforts to have our service

correspond with our knowledge, for we have wayward hearts and obstinate

wills, which need to be stimulated, sometimes to be coerced and

forcibly diverted from unworthy objects. Therefore the exhortation to

serve God with a perfect heart and with a willing mind' is always

needful and often hard. Entire surrender and glad obedience are the

Christian ideal, and continual effort to approximate to it will be ours

in the degree in which we know God.' There is no worse slavery than

that of the half-hearted Christian whose yoke is not padded with love.

Reluctant obedience is disobedience in God's sight.

David solemnly reminds Solomon of those pure eyes and perfect

judgment,' not to frighten, but to enforce the thought of the need for

whole-hearted and glad service, and of the worthlessness of external

acts of apparent worship which have not such behind them. What a deal

of seeming wheat would turn out to be chaff if that winnowing fan which

is in Christ's hand were applied to it! How small our biggest heaps

would become!

The solemn conditions of the continuance of God's favour and of the

fulfilment of His promises are next plainly stated. God responds to our

state of heart and mind. We determine His bearing to us. The seeker

finds. If we move away from Him, He moves away from us. That is not,

thank God! all the truth, or what would become of any of us? But it is

true, and in a very solemn sense God is to us what we make Him. With

the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure; and with the perverse Thou wilt

show Thyself froward.'

The charge ends with recalling the high honour and office to which

Jehovah had designated Solomon, and with exhortations to take heed' and

to be strong, and do it.' It is well for a young man to begin life with

a high ideal of what he is called to be and do. But many of us have

that, and miserably fail to realise it, for want of these two

characteristics, which the sight of such an ideal ought to stamp on us.

If we are to fulfil God's purposes with us, and to be such tools as He

can use for building His true Temple, we must exercise self-control and

take heed to our ways,' and we must brace ourselves against opposition

and crush down our own timidity. It seems to be commanding an

impossibility to say to a weak creature like any one of us, Be strong,'

but the impossible becomes a possibility when the exhortation takes the

full Christian form: Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His

might.'

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THE WAVES OF TIME

The times that went over him.'--1 CHRON. xxix. 30.

This is a fragment from the chronicler's close of his life of King

David. He is referring in it to other written authorities in which

there are fuller particulars concerning his hero; and he says, the acts

of David the King, first and last, behold they are written in the book

of Samuel the seer . . . with all his reign and his might, and the

times that went over him, and over all Israel, and over all the

kingdoms of the countries.'

Now I have ventured to isolate these words, because they seem to me to

suggest some very solemn and stimulating thoughts about the true nature

of life. They refer, originally, to the strange vicissitudes and

extremes of fortune and condition which characterised, so dramatically

and remarkably, the life of King David. Shepherd-boy, soldier, court

favourite, outlaw, freebooter and all but brigand; rebel, king,

fugitive, saint, sinner, psalmist, penitent--he lived a life full of

strongly marked alternations, and the times that went over him' were

singularly separate and different from each other. There are very few

of us who have such chequered lives as his. But the principle which

dictated the selection by the chronicler of this somewhat strange

phrase is true about the life of every man.

I. Note, first, the times' which make up each life.

Now, by the phrase here the writer does not merely mean the succession

of moments, but he wishes to emphasise the view that these are epochs,

sections of time,' each with its definite characteristics and its

special opportunities, unlike the rest that lie on either side of it.

The great broad field of time is portioned out, like the strips of

peasant allotments, which show a little bit here, with one kind of crop

upon it, bordered by another little morsel of ground bearing another

kind of crop. So the whole is patchy, and yet all harmonises in effect

if we look at it from high enough up. Thus each life is made up of a

series, not merely of successive moments, but of well-marked epochs,

each of which has its own character, its own responsibilities, its own

opportunities, in each of which there is some special work to be done,

some grace to be cultivated, some lesson to be learned, some sacrifice

to be made; and if it is let slip it never comes back any more. It

might have been once, and we missed it, and lost it for ever.' The

times pass over us, and every single portion has its own errand to us.

Unless we are wide awake we let it slip, and are the poorer to all

eternity for not having had in our heads the eyes of the wise man which

discern both time and judgment.' It is the same thought which is

suggested by the well-known words of the cynical book of

Ecclesiastes--To every thing there is a season and a time'--an

opportunity, and a definite period--for every purpose that is under the

sun.' It is the same thought which is suggested by Paul's words, As we

have therefore opportunity, let us do good to all men. In due season we

shall reap if we faint not.' There is a time for weeping and a time for

laughing, a time for building up and a time for casting down.' It is

the same thought of life, and its successive epochs of opportunity

never returning, which finds expression in the threadbare lines about a

tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to

fortune,' and neglected, condemns the rest of a career to be hemmed in

among creeks and shallows.

Through all the variety of human occupations, each moment comes to us

with its own special mission, and yet, alas! to far too many of us the

alternations do not suggest the question, what is it that I am hereby

called upon to be or to do? what is the lesson that present

circumstances are meant to teach, and the grace that my present

condition is meant to force me to cultivate or exhibit? There is one

point, as it were, upon the road where we may catch a view far away

into the distance, and, if we are not on the lookout when we come

there, we shall never get that glimpse at any other point along the

path. The old alchemists used to believe that there was what they

called the moment of projection,' when, into the heaving molten mass in

their crucible, if they dropped the magic powder, the whole would turn

into gold; an instant later and there would be explosion and death; an

instant earlier and there would be no effect. And so God's moments come

to us; every one of them--if we had eyes to see and hands to grasp--a

crisis, affording opportunity for something for which all eternity will

not afford a second opportunity, if the moment be let pass. The times

went over him,' and your life and mine is parcelled out into seasons

which have their special vocation for and message to us.

How solemn that makes our life! How it destroys the monotony that we

sometimes complain of! How it heightens the low things and magnifies

the apparently small ones! And how it calls upon us for a sharpened

attention, that we miss not any of the blessings and gifts which God is

meaning to bestow upon us through the ministry of each moment! How it

calls upon us for not only sharpened attention, but for a desire to

know the meaning of each of the hours and of every one of His

providences! And how it bids us, as the only condition of understanding

the times, so as to know what we ought to do, to keep our hearts in

close union with Him, and ourselves ever standing, as becomes servants,

girded and ready for work; and with the question on our lips and in our

hearts, Lord, what wouldst Thou have me to do? and what wouldst Thou

have me to do now?' The lesson of the day has to be learned in a day,

and at the moment when it is put in practice.

II. Another thought suggested by this text is, the Power that moves the

times.

As far as my text represents--and it is not intended to go to the

bottom of everything--these times flow on over a man, as a river might.

But is there any power that moves the stream? Unthinking and

sense-bound men--and we are all such, in the measure in which we are

unspiritual--are contented simply to accept the mechanical flow of the

stream of time. We are all tempted not to look behind the moving screen

to see the force that turns the wheel on which the painted scene Is

stretched. But, Oh! how dreary a thing it is if all that we have to say

about life is, The times pass over us,' like the blind rush of a

stream, or the movement of the sea around our coasts, eating away here

and depositing its spoils there, sometimes taking and sometimes giving,

but all the work of mere eyeless and purposeless chance or of natural

causes.

Oh, brethren! there is nothing more dismal or paralysing than the

contemplation of the flow of the times over our heads, unless we see in

their flow something far more than that.

It is very beautiful to notice that this same phrase, or at least the

essential part of it, is employed in one of the Psalms ascribed to

David, with a very significant addition. He says, My times are in Thy

hand.' So, then, the passage of our epochs over us is not merely the

aimless flow of a stream, but the movement of a current which God

directs. Therefore, if at any time it goes over our heads and seems to

overwhelm us, we can look up through the transparent water and say, Thy

waves and Thy billows have gone over me,' and so I die not of

suffocation beneath them. God orders the times, and therefore, though,

as the bitter ingenuity of Ecclesiastes, on the lookout for proofs of

the vanity of life, complained, in a one-sided view, as an aggravation

of man's lot, that there is a time for everything, yet that aspect of

change is not its deepest or truest. True it is that sometimes birth

and sometimes death, sometimes joy and sometimes sorrow, sometimes

building up and sometimes casting down, follow each other with

monotonous uniformity of variety, and seem to reduce life to a

perpetual heaping up of what is as painfully to be cast down the next

moment, like the pitiless sport of the wind amongst the sandhills of

the desert. But the futility is only apparent, and the changes are not

meant to occasion man's misery' to be great upon him,' as Ecclesiastes

says they do. The diversity of the times' comes from a unity of

purpose; and all the various methods of the divine Providence exercised

upon us have one unchanging intention. The meaning of all the times' is

that they should bring us nearer to God, and fill us more full of His

power and grace. The web is one, however various may be the pattern

wrought upon the tapestry. The resulting motion of the great machine is

one, though there may be a wheel turning from left to right here, and

another one that fits into it, turning from right to left there. The

end of all the opposite motions is straight progress. So the varying

times do all tend to the one great issue. Therefore let us seek to

pursue, in all varying circumstances, the one purpose which God has in

them all, which the Apostle states to be even your sanctification,' and

let us understand how summer and winter, springtime and harvest,

tempest and fair weather, do all together make up the year, and ensure

the springing of the seed and the fruitfulness of the stalk.

III. Lastly, let me remind you, too, how eloquently the words of my

text suggest the transiency of all the times.'

They passed over him' as the wind through an archway, that whistles and

comes not again. The old, old thought, so threadbare and yet always so

solemnising and pathetic, which we know so well that we forget it, and

are so sure of that it has little effect on life, the old, old thought,

this too will pass away,' underlies the phrase of my text, How blessed

it is, brethren! to cherish that wholesome sense of the transiency of

things here below, only those who live under its habitual power can

fairly estimate. It is thought to be melancholy. We are told that it

spoils joys and kills interest, and I know not what beside. It spoils

no joys that ought to be joys. It kills no interests that are not on

other grounds unworthy to be cherished. Contrariwise, the more fully we

are penetrated with the persistent conviction of the transiency of the

things seen and temporal, the greater they become, by a strange

paradox. For then only are they seen in their true magnitude and

nobility, in their true solemnity and importance as having a bearing on

the things that are eternal. Time is the ceaseless lackey of eternity,'

and the things that pass over us may become, like the waves of the sea,

the means of bearing us to the unmoving shore. Oh! if only in the midst

of joys and sorrows, of heavy tasks and corroding cares, of weary work

and wounded spirits, we could feel, but for a moment,' all would be

different, and joy would come, and strength would come, and patience

would come, and every grace would come, in the train of the wholesome

conviction that here we have no continuing city.'

Cherish the thought. It will spoil nothing the spoiling of which will

be a loss. It will heighten everything the possession of which is a

gain. It will teach us to trust in the darkness, and to believe in the

light. And when the times are dreariest, and frost binds the ground, we

shall say, If winter comes, can spring be far behind?' The times roll

over us, like the seas that break upon some isolated rock, and when the

tide has fallen and the vain flood has subsided, the rock is there. If

the world helps us to God, we need not mind though it passes, and the

fashion thereof.

But do not let us forget that this text in its connection may teach us

another thought. The transitory times that went over' Israel's king are

all recorded imperishably on the pages here, and so, though condensed

into narrow space, the record of the fleeting moments lives for ever,

and the books shall be opened, and men shall be judged according to

their works.' We are writing an imperishable record by our fleeting

deeds. Half a dozen pages carry all the story of that stormy life of

Israel's king. It takes a thousand rose-trees to make a vial full of

essence of roses. The record and issues of life will be condensed into

small compass, but the essence of it is eternal. We shall find it

again, and have to drink as we have brewed when we get yonder. Be not

deceived, God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he

also reap.' There is a time to sow,' and that is the present life; and

there is a time to gather the fruits' of our sowing, and that is the

time when times have ended and eternity is here.

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THE SECOND BOOK OF CHRONICLES

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THE DUTY OF EVERY DAY

Then Solomon offered burnt offerings unto the Lord . . . Even after a

certain rate every day.'--(A.V.)

Then Solomon offered burnt offerings unto the Lord, even as the duty of

every day required it.'--2 CHRON. viii. 12-13 (R. V.).

This is a description of the elaborate provision, in accordance with

the commandment of Moses, which Solomon made for the worship in his new

Temple. The writer is enlarging on the precise accordance of the ritual

with the regulations laid down in the law. He expresses, by the phrase

which we have taken as our text, not only the accordance of the worship

with the commandment, but its unbroken continuity, and also the variety

in it, according to the regulations for different days. For the verse

runs on, on the Sabbaths, and on the new moons, and on the solemn

feasts, three times in the year, even in the Feast of unleavened bread,

and in the Feast of weeks, and in the Feast of Tabernacles.' There

were, then, these characteristics in the ritual of Solomon's Temple,

precise compliance with the Divine commandment, unbroken continuity,

and beautiful flexibility and variety of method.

But passing altogether from the original application of the words, I

venture to do now what I very seldom do, and that is, to take this

verse as a kind of motto. Even according as the duty of every day

required'; the phrase may suggest three thoughts: that each day has its

own work, its own worship, and its own supplies, even as the duty of

every day required.'

Each day has its own work.

Of course there is a great uniformity in our lives, and many of us who

are set down to one continuous occupation can tell twelve months before

what, in all probability, we shall be doing at each hour of each day in

the week. But for all that, there is a certain individual physiognomy

about each new day as it comes to us; and the oldest, most habitual,

and therefore in some degree easiest and least stimulating, work has

its own special characteristics as it comes again to us day by day for

the hundredth time.

So there are three pieces of practical wisdom that I would suggest, and

one is--be content to take your work in little bits as it comes. There

is a great deal of practical wisdom in taking short views of things,

for although we have often to look ahead, yet it is better on the whole

that a man should, as far as he can, confine his anticipations to the

day that is passing, and leave the day that is coming to look after

itself. Take short views and be content to let each day prescribe its

tasks, and you have gone a long way to make all your days quiet and

peaceful. For it is far more the anticipation of difficulties than the

realisation of them that wears and wearies us. If a man says to

himself, This sorrow that I am carrying, or this work that I have to

do, is going to last for many days to come,' his heart will fail. If he

said to himself, It will be no worse to-morrow than it is at this

moment, and I can live through it, for am I not living through it at

this moment, and getting power to endure or do at this moment? and

to-morrow will probably be like today,' things would not be so

difficult.

You remember the homely old parable of the clock on the stair that gave

up ticking altogether because it began to calculate how many thousands

of seconds there are in the year, and that twice that number of times

it would have to wag backwards and forwards. The lesson that it learned

was--tick one tick and never mind the next. You will be able to do it

when the time to do it comes. Let us act as the duty of every day

requireth.' Sufficient for the day is the work thereof.'

Then there is another piece of advice from this thought of each day

having its own work, and that is--keep your ears open, and your eyes

too, to learn the lesson of what the day's work is. There is generally

abundance of direction for us if only we are content with the

one-step-at-a-time direction, which we get, and if another condition is

fulfilled, if we try to suppress our own wishes and the noisy babble of

our own yelping inclinations, and take the whip to them until they

cease their barking, that we may hear what God says. It is not because

He does not speak, but because we are too anxious to have our own way

to listen quietly to His voice, that we make most of our blunders as to

what the duty of every day requires. If we will be still and listen,

and stand in the attitude of the boy-prophet before the glimmering lamp

in the sacred place, saying, Speak, Lord! for Thy servant heareth,' we

shall get sufficient instruction for our next step.

Another piece of practical wisdom that I would suggest is that if every

day has its own work, we should buckle ourselves to do the day's work

before night falls and not leave any over for to-morrow, which will be

quite full enough. Do the duty that lies nearest thee,' was the

preaching of one of our sages, and it is wholesome advice. For when we

do that duty, the doing of it has a wonderful power of opening up

further steps, and showing us more clearly what is the next duty. Only

let us be sure of this, that no moment comes from God which has not in

it boundless possibilities; and that no moment comes from God which has

not in it stringent obligations. We neither avail ourselves of the one,

nor discharge the other, unless we come, morning by morning, to the new

day that is dawning upon us, with some fresh consciousness of the large

issues that may be wrapped in its unseen hours, and the great things

for Him that we may do ere its evening falls.

Each day has its tasks, and if we do not do the tasks of each day in

its day, we shall fling away life. If a man had L. 100,000 for a

fortune, and turned it all into halfpence, and tossed them out of the

window, he could soon get rid of his whole fortune. And if you fling

away your moments or live without the consciousness of their solemn

possibilities and mystic awfulness, you will find at the last that you

have made ducks and drakes' of your years, and have flung them away in

moments without knowing what you were doing, and without possibility of

recovery. Take care of the pence, the pounds will take care of

themselves.' Take care of the days, and the years will show a fair

record.

Secondly, we have here the suggestion that every day has its own

worship.

As I remarked at the beginning of my observations, the chronicler

dwells, with a certain kind of satisfaction, in accordance with the

tone of his whole writings, upon the external ritual of the Temple; and

points out its entire conformity with the divine precept, and the

unbroken continuity of worship day after day, year in year out, and the

variation of the characteristics of that worship according as the day

was more or less ritually important. From his words we may deduce a

very needful though obvious and commonplace lesson. What we want is

every-day religion, and that every-day religion is the only thing that

will enable us to do what the duty of every day requires. But that

every-day religion which will be our best ally, and power for the

discharge of the obligations that each moment brings with it, must have

its points of support, as it were, in special moments and methods of

worship.

So, then, take that first thought: What we want is a religion that will

go all through our lives. A great many of you keep your religion where

you keep your best clothes: putting it on on Sunday and locking it away

on the Sunday night in a wardrobe because it is not the dress that you

go to work in. And some of you keep your religion in your pew, and lock

it up in the little box where you put your hymn-books and your Bibles,

which you read only once a week, devoting yourselves to ledgers or

novels and newspapers for the rest of your time. We want a religion

that will go all through our life; and if there is anything in our life

that will not stand its presence, the sooner we get rid of that element

the better. A mountain road has generally a living brooklet leaping and

flashing by the side of it. So our lives will be dusty and dead and

cold and poor and prosaic unless that river runs along by the roadside

and makes music for us as it flows. Take your religion wherever you go.

If you cannot take it in to any scenes or company, stop you outside.

There is nothing that will help a man to do his day's work so much as

the realisation of Christ's Presence. And that realisation, along with

its certain results, devotion of heart to Him and submission of will to

His commandment, and desire to shape our lives to be like His, will

make us masters of all circumstances and strong enough for the hardest

work that God can lay upon us.

There is nothing so sure to make life beautiful, and noble, and pure,

and peaceful, and strong as this--the application to its monotonous

trifles of religious principles. If you do not do little things as

Christian men and women, and under the influence of Christian

principle, pray what are you going to do under the influence of

Christian principle? If you are keeping your religion to influence the

crises of your lives, and are content to let the trifles be ruled by

the devil or the world and yourselves, you will find out, when you come

to the end, that there were perhaps three or four crises in your

experience, and that all the rest of life was made of trifles, and that

when the crises came you could not lay your hand on the religious

principle that would have enabled you to deal with them. The sword had

got so rusty in its scabbard because it had never been drawn for long

years, that it could not be readily drawn in the moment of sudden

peril; and if you could have drawn it, you would have found its edge

blunted. Use your religion on the trifles, or you will not be able to

make much of it in the crises. He that is faithful in that which is

least is faithful also in much.' The worship of every day is the

preparation for the work of that day.

Further, that worship, that religion, wearing its common, modest suit

of workaday clothes, must also, if there is to be any power in it, have

a certain variety in its methods. Solomon offered burnt offerings . . .

on the Sabbaths, on the new moons,' which had a little more ceremonial

than the Sabbaths, and on the solemn feasts three times in a year,'

which had still more ceremonial than the new moons, even in the Feast

of unleavened bread, and in the Feast of weeks, and in the Feast of

tabernacles.' These were spring-tides when the sea of worship rose

beyond its usual level, and they kept it from stagnating. We, too, if

we wish to have this every-day religion running with any strength of

scour and current through our lives, will need to have moments when it

touches high-water mark, else it will not flush the foulness out of our

hearts and our lives.

Lastly, take the other suggestion, that every day has its own supplies.

That does not lie in the text properly, but for the sake of

completeness I add it. Every day has its own supplies. The manna fell

every day, and was gathered and consumed on the day on which it fell.

God gives us strength measured accurately by the needs of the day. You

will get as much as you require, and if ever you do not get as much as

you require, which is very often the case with Christian people, that

is not because God did not send enough manna, but because their omer

was not ready to catch it as it fell. The day's supply is measured by

the day's need. Suppose an Israelite had sat in his tent and said, I am

not going out to gather,' would he have had any in his empty vessel?

Certainly not. The manna lay all around the tent, but each man had to

go out and gather it. God makes no mistakes in His weights and

measures. He gives us each sufficient strength to do His will and to

walk in His ways; and if we do not do His will or walk in His ways, or

if we find our burden too heavy, our sorrows too sharp, our loneliness

too dreary, our difficulties too great, it is not because the Lord's

hand is shortened that it cannot' supply, but because our hands are so

slack that they will not take the sufficiency which He gives. In the

midst of abundance we are starving. We let the water run idly through

the open sluice instead of driving the wheels of life.

My friend! God's measure of supply is correct. If we were more faithful

and humble, and if we understood better and felt more how deep is our

need and how little is our strength, we should more continually be able

to rejoice that He has given, and we have received, even as the duty of

every day required.'

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CONTRASTED SERVICES

They shall be his servants: that they may know My service, and the

service of the kingdoms of the countries.'--2 CHRON. xii. 8.

Rehoboam was a self-willed, godless king who, like some other kings,

learned nothing by experience. His kingdom was nearly wrecked at the

very beginning of his reign, and was saved much more by the folly of

his rival than by his own wisdom. Jeroboam's religious revolution drove

all the worshippers of God among the northern kingdom into flight. They

might have endured the separate monarchy, but they could not endure the

separate Temple. So all priests and Levites in Israel, and all the

adherents of the ancestral worship in the Temple at Jerusalem, withdrew

to the southern kingdom and added much to its strength.

Rehoboam's narrow escape taught him neither moderation nor devotion,

his new strength turned his head. He forsook the law of the Lord. The

dreary series, so often illustrated in the history of Israel, came into

operation. Prosperity produced irreligion; irreligion brought

chastisement; chastisement brought repentance; repentance brought the

removal of the invader--and then, like a spring released, back went

king and nation to their old sin.

So here--Rehoboam's sins take visible form in Sheshak's army. He has

sown the dragon's teeth and they spring up armed men. Shemaiah the

prophet, the first of the long series of noble men who curbed the

violence of Jewish monarchs, points the lesson of invasion in plain,

blunt words: Ye have forsaken Me.' Then follow penitence and

confession--and the promise that Jerusalem shall not be destroyed, but

at the same time they are to be left as vassals and tributaries of

Egypt--an anomalous position for them--and the reason is given in these

words of our text.

I. The contrasted Masters.

Judah was too small to be independent of the powerful warlike states to

its north and south, unless miraculously guarded and preserved. So it

must either keep near God, and therefore free and safe from invasion,

or else, departing from God and following its own ways, fall under

alien dominion. Its experience was a type of that of universal

humanity. Man is not independent. His mass is not enough for him to do

without a central orb round which he may revolve. He has a choice of

the form of service and the master that he will choose, but one or

other must dominate his life and sway his motions. Ye cannot serve God

and Mammon'; ye must serve God or Mammon. The solemn choice is

presented to every man, but the misery of many lives is that they drift

along, making their election unawares, and infallibly choosing the

worse by the very act of lazily or weakly allowing accident to

determine their lives. Not consciously and strongly to will the right,

not resolutely and with coercion of the vagrant self to will to take

God for our aim, is to choose the low, the wrong. Perhaps none, or very

few of us, would deliberately say I choose Mammon, having carefully

compared the claims of the opposite systems of life that solicit me,

and with open-eyed scrutiny measured their courses, their goods and

their ends.' But how many of us there are who have in effect made that

choice, and never have given one moment's clear, patient examination of

the grounds of our choice! The policy of drift is unworthy of a man and

is sure to end in ruin.

It is not for me to attempt here to draw out the contrast between man's

chief end and all other rival claimants of our lives. Each man must do

that for himself, and I venture to assert that the more thoroughly the

process of comparison is carried out, and the more complete the

analysis not only of the rival claims and gifts, but of our capacities

and needs, the more sun-clear will be the truth of the old, well-worn

answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever.'

The old woman by her solitary fireside who has learned that and

practises it, has chosen the better part which will last when many

shining careers have sunk into darkness, and many will-o'-the-wisps,

which have been pursued with immense acclamations, have danced away

into the bog, and many a man who has been envied and admired has had to

sum up his successful career in the sad words, I have played the fool

and erred exceedingly.' I cannot pretend to conduct the investigation

for you, but I can press on every one who does not wish to let

accidents mould him, at least to recognise that there is a choice to be

made, and to make it deliberately and with eyes open to the facts of

the case. It is a shabby way of ruining yourself to do it for want of

thought. The rabble of competitors of God catch more souls by accident

than of set purpose. Most men are godless because they have never

fairly faced the question: what does my soul require in order to reach

its highest blessedness and its noblest energy?

II. The contrasted experience of the servants.

Judah learned that the yoke of obedience to God's law was a world

lighter than the grinding oppression of the Egyptian invader.

God's service is freedom; the world's is slavery.

Liberty is unrestrained power to do what we ought. Man must be subject

to law. The solemn imperative of duty is omnipresent and sovereign. To

do as we like is not freedom, but bondage to self, and that usually our

worst self, which means crushing or coercing the better self. The

choice is to chain the beast in us or to clip the wings of the angel in

us, and he is a fool who conceits himself free because he lets his

inferior self have its full swing, and hustles his better self into

bondage to clear the course for the other. There is but one deliverance

from the sway of self, and it is realised in the liberty wherewith

Christ has made us free. To make self our master inevitably leads to

setting beggars on horseback and princes walking. Passion, the flesh'

is terribly apt to usurp the throne within when once God is dethroned.

Then indulgence feeds passion, and deeper draughts become necessary in

order to produce the same effects, and cravings, once allowed free

play, grow in ravenousness, while their pabulum steadily loses its

power to satisfy. The experience of the undevout sensualist is but too

faithful a type of that of all undevout livers, in the failure of

delights to delight and of acquisitions to enrich, and in the bondage,

often to nothing more worthy to be obeyed than mere habit, and in the

hopeless incapacity to shake off the adamantine chains which they have

themselves rivetted on their limbs. There are endless varieties in the

forms which the service of self assumes, ranging from gross animalism,

naked and unashamed, up to refined and cultured godlessness, but they

are one in their inmost character, one in their disabling the spirit

from a free choice of its course, one in the limitations which they

impose on its aspirations and possibilities, one in the heavy yoke

which they lay on their vassals. The true liberty is realised only when

for love's dear sake we joyously serve God, and from the highest motive

enrol ourselves in the household of the highest Person, and by the act

become no more servants but sons.' Well may we all pray--

Lord! bind me up, and let me lie

A prisoner to my liberty,

If such a state at all can be

As an imprisonment, serving Thee.'

God's service brings solid good, the world's is vain and empty.

God's service brings an approving conscience, a calm heart, strength

and gladness. It is in full accord with our best selves. Tranquil joys

attend on it. In keeping Thy commandments there is great reward,' and

that not merely bestowed after keeping, but realised and inherent in

the very act. On the other side, think of the stings of conscience, the

illusions on which those feed who will not eat of the heavenly food,

the husks of the swine-trough, the ashes for bread, that self and the

world, in all their forms set before men. A pathetic character in

modern fiction says, If you make believe very much it is nice.' It

takes a tremendous amount of make-believe to keep up an appetite for

the world's dainties or to find its meats palatable, after a little

while. No sin ever yields the fruit it was expected to produce, or if

it does it brings something which was not expected, and the bitter tang

of the addition spoils the whole. It may be wisely adapted to secure a

given end, but that end is only a means to secure the real end, our

substantial blessedness, and that is never attained but by one course

of life, the life of service of God. We may indeed win a goodly

garment, but the plague is in the stuff and, worn, it will burn into

the bones like fire. I read somewhere lately of thieves who had stolen

a cask of wine, and had their debauch, but they sickened and died. The

cask was examined and a huge snake was found dead in it. Its poison had

passed into the wine and killed the drinkers. That is how the world

serves those who swill its cup. What fruit had ye then in those things

whereof ye are now ashamed?' The threatening pronounced against

Israel's disobedience enshrines an eternal truth: Because thou servedst

not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, by

reason of the abundance of all things; therefore shalt thou serve thine

enemies . . . in hunger and in thirst, and in nakedness and in want of

all things.'

God's service has final issues and the world's service has final

issues.

Only fools try to blink the fact that all our doings have consequences.

And it augurs no less levity and insensibility to blink the other fact

that these consequences show no indications of being broken short off

at the end of our earthly life. Men die into another life, as they have

ever, dimly and with many foolish accompaniments, believed; and dead,

they are the men that they have made themselves while living. Character

is eternal, memory is eternal, death puts the stamp of perpetuity on

what life has evolved. Nothing human ever dies. The thought is too

solemn to be vulgarised by pulpit rhetoric. Enough to say here that

these two tremendous alternatives, Life and Death, express some little

part of the eternal issues of our fleeting days. Looking fixedly into

these two great symbols of the ultimate issues of these contrasted

services, we can dimly see, as in the one, a wonder of resplendent

glories moving in a sphere as calm as it is bright,' so, in the other,

whirling clouds and jets of vapour as in the crater of a volcano. One

shuddering glance over the rim of it should suffice to warn from

lingering near, lest the unsteady soil should crumble beneath our feet.

But the true Lord of our lives loves us too well to let us experience

all the bitter issues of our foolish rebellion against His authority,

and yet He loves us too well not to let us taste something of them that

we may know and see that it is an evil thing and a bitter, that thou

hast forsaken the Lord thy God.' The experiences of the consequences of

godless living are in some measure allowed to fall on us by God's love,

lest we should persist in the evil and so bring down on ourselves still

more fatal issues. It is mercy that here chastises the evildoer with

whips, in hope of not having to chastise him with scorpions. God

desires to teach us, by the pains and heartaches of an undevout life,

by disappointments, foiled plans, wrecked hopes, inner poverty, the

difference between His service and that of the kingdoms of the

countries,' if haply He may not be forced to let the full flood of

fatal results overwhelm us. It is best to be drawn to serve Him by the

cords of love, but it is possible to have the beginnings of the desire

so to serve roused by the far lower motives of weariness and disgust at

the world's wages, and by dread of what these may prove when they are

paid in full. Self-interest may sicken a man of serving Mammon, and may

be transformed into the self-surrender which makes God's service

possible and blessed. The flight into the city of refuge may be

quickened by the fear of the pursuer, whose horse's hoofs are heard

thundering on the road behind the fugitive, and whose spear is all but

felt a yard from his back, but once within the shelter of the city

wall, gratitude for deliverance will fill his heart and perfect love

will cast out fear.'

The king concerning whom our text was spoken had to suffer humiliation

by the Egyptian invasion. His sufferings were meant to be educational,

and when they in some measure effected their purpose, God curbed the

invader and granted some measure of deliverance. So is it with us, if,

moved by whatever impulse, we betake ourselves to Jesus to save us from

the bitter fruits of our evil lives. The extreme severity of the

results of our sins does not fall on penitent, believing spirits, but

some do fall. As the Psalmist says: Thou wast a God that forgavest them

though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.' A profligate course

of life may be forgiven, but health or fortune is ruined all the same.

In brief, the so-called natural' consequences are not removed, though

the sin which caused them is pardoned. Polluted memories, indulged

habits, defiled imaginations, are not got rid of, though the sins that

inflicted them are forgiven.

Is it not, then, the part of wise men to lay to heart the lessons of

experience, and to let what we have learned of the bitter fruit of

godless living turn us away from such service, and draw us by merciful

chastisement to yield ourselves to God, whom to serve accords with our

deepest needs and brings first fruits and pre-libations of blessedness

and peace here, and fullness of joy with pleasures for evermore

hereafter?

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THE SECRET OF VICTORY

The children of Judah prevailed, because they relied upon the Lord God

of their fathers.'--2 CHRON. xiii. 18.

These words are the summing-up of the story of a strange old-world

battle between Jeroboam, the adventurer who rent the kingdom, and

Abijah, the son of the foolish Rehoboam, whose unseasonable blustering

had played into the usurper's hands. The son was a wiser and better man

than his father. It is characteristic of the ancient world, that before

battle was joined Abijah made a long speech to the enemy, recounting

the ritual deficiencies of the Northern kingdom, and proudly

contrasting the punctilious correctness of the Temple service with the

irregular cult set up by Jeroboam. He confidently pointed to the

priests with their trumpets' in his army as the visible sign that God

is with us at our head,' and while charging Israel with having forsaken

the Lord our God,' to whom he and his people had kept true, besought

them not to carry their rebellion to the extreme of fighting against

their fathers' God, and assured them that no success could attend their

weapons in such a strife. The passionate appeal had no effect, but

while Abijah was orating, Jeroboam was carrying out a ruse, and

planting part of his troops behind Judah, so as to put them between two

fires and draw a net round the outnumbered and outmanoeuvred enemy.

Abijah and his men suddenly detected their desperate position, and did

the only wise thing. When, with a shock of surprise, they saw that

behold! the battle was before and behind them,' they cried unto the

Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets.' The sharp, short cry

from thousands of agitated men ringed round by foes, and the blare of

the trumpets were both prayers, and heartened the suppliants for their

whirlwind charge, before which the men of Israel, double in number as

they were, broke and fled. The defeat was thorough, and, for a while,

Rehoboam and his kingdom were brought under,' and a comparatively long

peace followed. Our text gathers up the lesson taught, not to Judah or

Israel alone, by victory and defeat, when it declares that to rely upon

the Lord is to prevail. It opens for us the secret of victory, in that

old far-off struggle and in to-day's conflicts.

I. We note the faith of the fighters.

They relied,' says the chronicler, upon the Lord.' Now the word

rendered relied' is one of several picturesque words by which the Old

Testament, which we are sometimes told, with a great flourish of

learning, has no mention of faith,' expresses trust,' by metaphors

drawn from bodily actions which symbolise the spiritual act. The word

here literally signifies to lean on, as a feeble hand might on a staff,

or a tremulous arm on a strong one. And does not that picture carry

with it much insight into what the essence of Old Testament trust' or

New Testament faith' is? If we think of faith as leaning, we shall not

fall into that starved misconception of it which takes it to be nothing

more than intellectual assent. We shall see there is a far fuller pulse

of feeling than that beating in it. A man who leans on some support,

does so because he knows that his own strength is insufficient for his

need. The consciousness of weakness is the beginning of faith. He who

has never despaired of himself has scarcely trusted in God. Abijah's

enemies were two to one of his own men. No wonder that they cried unto

the Lord, and felt a stound of despair shake their courage. And who of

us can face life with its heavy duties, its thick-clustering dangers

and temptations, its certain struggles, its possible failures, and not

feel the cold touch of dread gripping our hearts, though strong and

brave? Surely he has had little experience, or has learned little

wisdom from the experience he has had, who has yet to discover his own

weakness. But the consciousness of weakness is by itself debilitating,

and but increases the weakness of which it is painfully aware. There is

no surer way to sap what strength we have than to tell ourselves what

poor creatures we are. The purpose and end of self-contemplation which

becomes aware of our own feebleness is to lead us to the contemplation

of God, our immortal strength. Abijah's assurance that God is with us

at our head' rang out triumphantly. Faith has an upper and an under

side: the under side is self-distrust; the upper, trust in God. He will

never lean all his weight on a prop, who fancies that he can stand

alone, or has other stays to hold him up.

But Abijah's example teaches us another lesson--that for a vigorous

faith, there must be obedience to all God's known will. True, thank

God! faith often springs in its power in a soul that is conscious but

of sin, but a continuance in disobedience will inevitably kill faith.

It was because Abijah and his people had kept the charge of the Lord

our God,' that they were sure that God was with them. We can only be

sure of God to lean on when we are doing His will, and we shall do His

will only as we are sure that we lean on Him. Our trust in Him will be

strong and operative in the measure in which our lives are conformed to

His commandments. Much elaborate dissertation has been devoted to

expounding what faith is, and the strong, vivid Scriptural conception

of it has been woefully darkened and overlaid with cobwebs of theology,

but surely this eloquent metaphor of our text tells us more than do

many learned volumes. It bids us lean on God, rest the whole weight of

our needs, our weaknesses, and our sins on Him. Like any human friend

or helper, He is better pleased when we lean hard on Him than when we

gingerly put a finger on His arm, and lay no pressure on it, as we do

when in ceremonial fashion we seem to accept another's support, and

hold ourselves back from putting a weight on the offered arm. We cannot

rely too utterly on Him. We honour Him most when we repose our whole

selves on His strong arm.

II. The increase of faith by sudden fear.

When Judah looked back, behold, the battle was before and behind them.'

The shock of seeing the flashing spears in the rear would make the

bravest hold their breath for one overwhelming moment, but the next

moment their faith in God surged back with tenfold force, increased by

the sudden new peril. The sharp collision of flint and steel struck out

a spark of faith. What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee,' said an

expert in the genesis and growth of trust. Peril kills a feeble trust,

but vivifies it, if strong. The recognition of danger is meant to drive

us to God. If each fresh difficulty or danger makes us tighten our

clasp of Him, and lean the harder on Him, it has done its highest

service to us, and we have conquered it, and are the stronger because

of it. The storm that makes the traveller, fighting with the wind and

the rain in his face, clasp his cloak tighter round him, does him no

harm. The purpose of our trials is to drive us to God, and a

fair-weather faith which had all but fallen asleep is often roused to

energy that works wonders, by the sudden dash of danger flung into and

disturbing a life. It is wise seamanship to make a run to get snugly

behind the breakwater when a sudden gale springs up.

III. The expression of faith in appeal to God.

When the ambush was unmasked, the surrounded men of Judah cried unto

the Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets,' before they flung

themselves on the enemy. We may be sure that their cry was short and

sharp, and poignant with appeal to God. There would be no waste words,

nor perfunctory petitions without wings of desire, in that cry. Should

we not look for the essential elements of prayer rather to such cries,

pressed from burdened hearts by a keen sense of absolute helplessness,

and very careless of proprieties so long as they were shrill enough to

pierce God's ear and touch His heart, than to the formal petitions of

well-ordered worship? A single ejaculation flung heavenward in a moment

of despair or agony is more precious in God's sight than a whole litany

of half-hearted devotions.

The text puts in a striking form another lesson well worth learning,

that, in the greatest crises, no time is better spent than time used

for prayer. A rush on the enemy would not have served Abijah's purpose

nearly so well as that moment's pause for crying to the Lord, before

his charge. Hands lifted to heaven are nerved to clutch the sword and

strike manfully. It is not only that Christ's soldiers are to fight and

pray, but that they fight by praying. That is true in the small

conflicts and antagonisms of the lives of each of us, and it is true in

regard to the agelong battle against ignorance and sin. Christian's

sword was named All-prayer.'

The priests, too, blew a prayer through their trumpets, for the

ordinance had appointed that when ye go to war . . . then shall ye

sound an alarm with the trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the

Lord your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies.' The clear,

strident blare was not intended to hearten warriors, or to sing

defiance, but to remind God of His promises, and to bring Him on to the

battlefield, as He had said that He would be. The truest prayer is that

which but picks up the arrows of promise shot from heaven to earth, and

casts them back from earth to heaven. He prays best who fills his mouth

with God's words, turning every I will' of His into Do Thou!'

IV. The strength that comes through faith.

As the men of Judah shouted, it came to pass that God smote Jeroboam

and all Israel before Abijah and Judah.' There is no such quickener of

all a man's natural force as even the lowest forms of faith. He who

throws himself into any enterprise sure of success will often succeed

just because he was sure he would. The world's history is full of

instances where men, with every odds against them, have plucked the

flower safety out of the nettle danger, just because they trusted in

their star, or their luck, or their destiny. We all know how a very

crude faith turned a horde of wild Arabs into a conquering army, that

in a century dominated the world from Damascus to Seville. The truth

that is in Christian Science' is that many forms of disease yield to

the patient's firm persuasion of recovery. And from these and many

other facts the natural power of faith is beginning to dawn on the most

matter-of-fact and unspiritual people. They are beginning to think that

perhaps Christ was right after all in saying All things are possible to

him that believeth,' and that it is not such a blunder after all to

make faith the first step to all holiness and purity, and the secret of

victory in life's tussle. Leaving out of view for the moment the

supernatural effects of faith, which Christianity alleges are its

constant consequences, it is clear that its natural effects are all in

the direction of increasing the force of the trusting man. It calms, it

heartens for all work, effort, and struggle. It imparts patience, it

brightens hope, it forbids discouragement, it rebukes and cures

despondency. And besides all this, there is the supernatural

communication of a strength not our own, which is the constant result

of Christian faith. Christian faith knits the soul and the Saviour in

so close a union, that all that is Christ's becomes the Christian' s,

and every believer may hear His Lover's voice whispering to him what

one of His servants once heard in an hour of despondency, My grace is

sufficient for thee, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' Faith

joins us to the Lord, and he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit';

and that Lord has said to all His disciples, I give thee Myself, and in

Myself all that is Mine.' We do not go to warfare at our own charges,

but there will pass into and abide in our hearts the warlike might of

the true King and Captain of the Lord's host, and we shall hear the

ring of His encouraging voice saying, Be of good cheer! I have overcome

the world.'

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ASA'S REFORMATION, AND CONSEQUENT PEACE AND VICTORY

And Asa did that which was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his

God; 3. For he took away the altars of the strange gods, and the high

places, and brake down the images, and cut down the groves: 4. And

commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers, and to do the

law and the commandment. 5. Also he took away out of all the cities of

Judah the high places and the images: and the kingdom was quiet before

him. 6. And he built fenced cities in Judah: for the land had rest, and

he had no war in those years; because the Lord had given him rest. 7.

Therefore he said unto Judah, Let us build these cities, and make about

them walls, and towers, gates, and bars, while the land is yet before

us; because we have sought the Lord our God, we have sought Him, and He

hath given us rest on every side. So they built and prospered. 8. And

Asa had an army of men that bare targets and spears, out of Judah three

hundred thousand; and out of Benjamin, that bare shields and drew bows,

two hundred and fourscore thousand: all these were mighty men of

valour.'--2 CHRON. xiv. 2-8.

Asa was Rehoboam's grandson, and came to the throne when a young man.

The two preceding reigns had favoured idolatry, but the young king had

a will of his own, and inaugurated a religious revolution, with which

and its happy results this passage deals.

I. It first recounts the thorough clearance of idolatrous emblems and

images which Asa made. Strange altars,'--that is, those dedicated to

other gods; high places,'--that is, where illegal sacrifice to Jehovah

was offered; pillars,'--that is, stone columns; and Asherim,'--that is,

trees or wooden poles, survivals of ancient stone- or tree-worship;

sun-images,'--that is, probably, pillars consecrated to Baal as

sun-god, were all swept away. The enumeration vividly suggests the

incongruous rabble of gods which had taken the place of the one Lord.

How vainly we try to make up for His absence from our hearts by a

multitude of finite delights and helpers! Their multiplicity proves the

insufficiency of each and of all.

1 Kings xv. 13 adds a detail which brings out still more clearly Asa's

reforming zeal; for it tells us that he had to fight against the

influence of his mother, who had been prominent in supporting

disgusting and immoral forms of worship, and who retained some

authority, of which her son was strong enough to take the extreme step

of depriving her. Remembering the Eastern reverence for a mother, we

can estimate the effort which that required, and the resolution which

it implied. But 1 Kings differs from our narrative in stating that the

high places' were not taken away--the explanation of the variation

probably being that the one account tells what Asa attempted and

commanded, and the other records the imperfect way in which his orders

were carried out. They would be obeyed in Jerusalem and its

neighbourhood, but in many a secluded corner the old rites would be

observed.

It is vain to force religious revolutions. Laws which are not supported

by the national conscience will only be obeyed where disobedience will

involve penalties. If men's hearts cleave to Baal, they will not be

turned into Jehovah-worshippers by a king's commands. Asa could command

Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers, and to do the law,' but he

could not make them do it.

II. The chronicler brings out strongly the truth which runs through his

whole book,--namely, the connection between honouring Jehovah and

national prosperity. He did not import that thought into his narrative,

but he insisted on it as moulding the history of Judah. Modern critics

charge him with writing with a bias, but he learned the bias' from

God's own declarations, and had it confirmed by observation,

reflection, and experience. The whole history of Israel and Judah was

one long illustration of the truth which he is constantly repeating. No

doubt, the divine dealings with Israel brought obedience and well-being

into closer connection than exists now; but in deepest truth the sure

defence of our national prosperity is the same as theirs, and it is

still the case that righteousness exalteth a nation.' The kingdom was

quiet,' says the chronicler, and he had no war in those years; because

the Lord had given him rest.' 1 Kings makes more of the standing enmity

with the northern kingdom, and records scarcely anything of Asa's reign

except the war which, as it says, was between him and Baasha of Israel

all their days.' But, according to 2 Chronicles xvi. 1, Baasha did not

proceed to war till Asa's thirty-sixth year, and the halcyon time of

peace evidently followed immediately on the religious reformation at

its very beginning.

Asa's experience embodies a truth which is substantially fulfilled in

nations and in individuals; for obedience brings rest, often outward

tranquillity, always inward calm. Note the heightened earnestness

expressed in the repetition of the expression We have sought the Lord'

in verse 7, and the grand assurance of His favour as the source of

well-being in the clause which follows, and He hath given us rest on

every side.' That is always so, and will be so with us. If we seek Him

with our whole hearts, keeping Him ever before us amid the distractions

of life, taking Him as our aim and desire, and ever stretching out the

tendrils of our hearts to feel after Him and clasp Him, all around and

within will be tranquil, and even in warfare we shall preserve unbroken

peace.

Asa teaches us, too, the right use of tranquillity. He clearly and

gratefully recognised God's hand in it, and traced it not to his own

warlike skill or his people's prowess, but to Him. And he used the time

of repose to strengthen his defences, and exercise his soldiers against

possible assaults. We do not yet dwell in the land of peace, where it

is safe to be without bolts and bars, but have ever to be on the watch

for sudden attacks. Rest from war should give leisure for building not

only fortresses, but temples, as was the case with Solomon. The time

comes when, as in many an ancient fortified city of Europe, the

ramparts may be levelled, and flowers bloom where sentries walked; but

to-day we have to be on perpetual guard, and look to our

fortifications, if we would not be overcome.

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ASA'S PRAYER

And Asa cried unto the Lord his God, and said, Lord, it is nothing with

Thee to help, whether with many, or with them that have no power: help

us, O Lord our God; for we rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go against

this multitude. O Lord, Thou art our God; let not man prevail against

Thee.'--2 CHRON. xiv. 11.

This King Asa, Rehoboam's grandson, had had a long reign of peace,

which the writer of the Book of Chronicles traces to the fact that he

had rooted out idolatry from Judah, The land had rest, and he no war

. . . because the Lord had given him rest.'

But there came a time when the war-cloud began to roll threateningly

over the land, and a great army--the numbers of which, from their

immense magnitude, seem to be erroneously given--came up against him.

Like a wise man he made his military dispositions first, and prayed

next. He set his troops in order, and then he fell down on his knees,

and spoke to God.

Now, it seems to me that this prayer contains the very essence of what

ought to be the Christian attitude in reference to all the conditions

and threatening dangers and conflicts of life; and so I wish to run

over it, and bring out the salient points of it, as typical of what

ought to be our disposition.

I. The wholesome consciousness of our own impotence.

It did not take much to convince Asa that he had no power.' His army,

according to the numbers given of the two hosts, was outnumbered two to

one; and so it did not require much reflection to say, We have no

might.' But although perhaps not so sufficiently obvious to us, as

truly as in the case in our text, if we look fairly in the face our

duties, our tasks, our dangers, the possibilities of life and its

certainties, the more humbly we think of our own capacity, the more

wisely we shall think about God, and the more truly we shall estimate

ourselves. The world says, Self-reliance is the conquering virtue';

Jesus says to us, Self-distrust is the condition of all victory.' And

that does not mean any mere shuffling off of responsibility from our

own shoulders, but it means looking the facts of our lives, and of our

own characters, in the face. And if we will do that, however apparently

easy may be our course, and however richly endowed in mind, body, or

estate we may be, if we all do that honestly, we shall find that we

each are like the man with ten thousand' that has to meet the King that

comes against him with twenty thousand'; and we shall not desire

conditions of peace' with our enemy, for that is not what in this case

we have to do, but we shall look about us, and not keep our eyes on the

horizon, and on the levels of earth, but look up to see if there is not

there an Ally that we can bring into the field to redress the balance,

and to make our ten as strong as the opposing twenty. Zerah the

Ethiopian, who was coming down on Asa, is said to have had a million

fighting-men at his back, but that is probably an erroneous figure,

because Old Testament numbers are necessarily often unreliable. Asa had

only half the number; so he said, What can I do?' And what could he do?

He did the only thing possible, he grasped at God's skirts, and

prayed,' and that made all the difference.

Now all that is true about the disproportion between the foes we have

to face and fight and our own strength. It is eminently true about us

Christian people, if we are doing any work for our Master. You hear

people say, Look at the small number of professing Christians in this

country, as compared with the numbers on the other side. What is the

use of their trying to convert the world?' Well, think of the assembled

Christian people, for instance, of Manchester, on the most charitable

supposition, and the shallowest interpretation of that word Christian.'

What are they among so many? A mere handful. If the Christian Church

had to undertake the task of Christianising the world by its own

strength, we might well despair of success and stop altogether. We have

no might.' The disproportion both numerically and in all things that

the world estimates as strength (which are many of them good things),

is so great that we are in a worse case than Asa was. It is not two to

one; it is twenty to one, or an even greater disproportion. But we are

not only numerically weak. A multitude of non-effectives, mere camp

followers, loosely attached, nominal Christians, have to be deducted

from the muster-roll, and the few who are left are so feeble as well as

few that they have more than enough to do in holding their own, to say

nothing of dreaming of charging the wide-stretching lines of the enemy.

So a profound self-distrust is our wisdom. But that should not paralyse

us, but lead to something better, as it led Asa.

II. Summoning God into the field should follow wholesome self-distrust.

Asa uses a remarkable expression, which is, perhaps, scarcely

reproduced adequately in our Authorised Version: It is nothing with

Thee to help, whether with many or with them that have no power.' It is

a strange phrase, but it seems most probable that the suggested

rendering in the Revised Version is nearer the writer's meaning, which

says, Lord! there is none beside Thee to help between the mighty and

them that have no power,' which to our ears is a somewhat cumbrous way

of saying that God, and God only, can adjust the difference between the

mighty and the weak; can redress the balance, and by the laying of His

hand upon the feeble hand can make it strong as the mailed fist to

which it is opposed. If we know ourselves to be hopelessly outnumbered,

and send to God for reinforcements, He will clash His sword into the

scale, and make it go down. Asa turns to God and says, Thou only canst

trim the scales and make the lighter of the two the heavier one by

casting Thy might into it. So help us, O Lord our God!'

One man with God at his back is always in the majority; and, however

many there may be on the other side, there are more that be with us

than they that be with them.' There is encouragement for people who

have to fight unpopular causes in the world, who have been accustomed

to be in minorities all their days, in the midst of a wicked and

perverse generation. Never mind about the numbers; bring God into the

field, and the little band, which is compared in another place in these

historical Books to two flocks of kids' fronting the enemy, that had

flowed all over the land, is in the majority. God with us'; then we are

strong.

The consciousness of weakness may unnerve a man; and that is why people

in the world are always patting each other on the back and saying Be of

good cheer, and rely upon yourself.' But the self-distrust that turns

to God becomes the parent of a far more reliable self-reliance than

that which trusts to men. My consciousness of need is my opening the

door for God to come in. Just as you always find the lakes in the

hollows, so you will always find the grace of God coming into men's

hearts to strengthen them and make them victorious, when there has been

the preparation of the lowered estimate of one's self. Hollow out your

heart by self-distrust, and God will fill it with the flashing waters

of His strength bestowed. The more I feel myself weak, the more I am

meant not to fold my hands and say, I never can do that thing; it is of

no use my trying to attempt it, I may as well give it up'; but to say,

Lord I there is none beside Thee that can set the balance right between

the mighty and him that hath no strength.' Help me, O Lord my God!'

Just as those little hermit-crabs that you see upon the seashore, with

soft bodies unprotected, make for the first empty shell they can find,

and house in that and make it their fortress, our exposed natures, our

unarmoured characters, our sense of weakness, ought to drive us to Him.

As the unarmed population of a land invaded by the enemy pack their

goods and hurry to the nearest fortified place, so when I say to myself

I have no strength, let me say, Thou art my Rock, my Strength, my

Fortress, and my Deliverer. My God, in whom I trust, my Buckler, and

the Horn of my Salvation, and my high Tower.'

Now, there is one more word about this matter, and that is, the way by

which we summon God into the field. Asa prays, Help us, O Lord our God!

for we rest on Thee'; and the word that he employs for rest' is not a

very frequent one. It carries with it a very striking picture. Let me

illustrate it by a reference to another case where it is employed. It

is used in that tragical story of the death of Saul, when the man that

saw the last of him came to David and drew in a sentence the pathetic

picture of the wearied, wounded, broken-hearted, discrowned, desperate

monarch, leaning on his spear. You can understand how hard he leaned,

with what a grip he held it, and how heavily his whole languid,

powerless weight pressed upon it. And that is the word that is used

here. We lean on Thee' as the wounded Saul leaned upon his spear. Is

that a picture of your faith, my friend? Do you lean upon God like

that, laying your hand upon Him till every vein on your hand stands out

with the force and tension of the grasp? Or do you lean lightly, as a

man that does not feel much the need of a support? Lean hard if you

wish God to come quickly. We rest on Thee; help us, O Lord!'

III. Courageous advance should follow self-distrust and summoning God

by faith.

It is well when self-distrust leads to confidence, when, as Charles

Wesley has it in his great hymn:

. . . I am weak,

But confident in self-despair.'

But that is not enough. It is better when self-distrust and confidence

in God lead to courage, and as Asa goes on, Help us, for we rely on

Thee, and in Thy name we go against this multitude.' Never mind though

it is two to one. What does that matter? Prudence and calculation are

well enough, but there is a great deal of very rank cowardice and want

of faith in Christian people, both in regard to their own lives and in

regard to Christian work in the world, which goes masquerading under

much too respectable a name, and calls itself judicious caution' and

prudence.' There is little ever done by that, especially in the

Christian course; and the old motto of one of the French republicans

holds good; Dare! dare! always dare!' You have more on your side than

you have against you, and creeping prudence of calculation is not the

temper in which the battle is won. Dash' is not always precipitate and

presumptuous. If we have God with us, let us be bold in fronting the

dangers and difficulties that beset us, and be sure that He will help

us.

IV. And now the last point that I would notice is this--the

all-powerful plea which God will answer.

Thou art my God, let not man prevail against Thee.' That prayer covers

two things. You may be quite sure that if God is your God you will not

be beaten; and you may be quite sure that if you have made God's cause

yours He will make your cause His, and again you will not be beaten.

Thou art our God.' It takes two to make a bargain,' and God and we have

both to act before He is truly ours. He gives Himself to us, but there

is an act of ours required too, and you must take the God that is given

to you, and make Him yours because you make yourselves His. And when I

have taken Him for mine, and not unless I have, He is mine, to all

intents of strength-giving and blessedness. When I can say, Thou art my

God, and it is impossible that Thou wilt deny Thyself,' then nothing

can snap that bond; and neither life nor death, nor angels, nor

principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor

height, nor depth, nor any other creature' can do it. But there is a

creature that can, and that is I. For I can separate myself from the

love and the guardianship of God, and He can say to a man, I am thy

God,' and the man not answer, Thou art my God.'

And then there is another plea here. Let not man prevail against Thee.'

What business had Asa to identify his little kingdom and his victory

with God's cause and God's conquest? Only this, that he had flung

himself into God's arms, and because he had, and was trying to do what

God would have him do, he was quite sure that it was not Asa but

Jehovah that the million of Ethiopians were fighting against. People

warn us against the fanaticism of taking for granted that our cause is

God's cause. Well, we need the warning sometimes, but we may be quite

sure of this, that if we have made God's cause ours, He will make our

cause His, down to the minutest point in our daily lives.

And then, if thus we say in the depths of our hearts, and live

accordingly, There is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O

God!' it will be with us as it was with Asa in the story before us, the

enemy fled, and could not recover themselves, for they were destroyed

before the Lord and before His hosts.'

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THE SEARCH THAT ALWAYS FINDS

They . . . sought Him with their whole desire; and He was found of

them: and the Lord gave them rest round about.'--2 CHRON. xv. 15.

These words occur in one of the least familiar passages of the Old

Testament. They describe an incident in the reign of Asa, who was the

grandson of Solomon's foolish son Rehoboam, and was consequently the

third king of Judah after the secession of the North. He had just won a

great victory, and was returning with his triumphant army to Jerusalem,

when there met him a prophet, unknown otherwise, who poured out fiery

words, exhorting Asa and his people to cleave to God and to cast away

their idols. Asa, encouraged by the prophetic words of this bold

speaker for God, screwed himself up, and was able to induce also his

people, to effect a great religious reformation. He made a clean sweep

of the idols, and gathered the sadly-dwindled nation together in

Jerusalem, where they renewed the covenant with the Lord God of their

fathers. The text sums up their work and its result. They sought Him

with their whole heart, and He was found of them; and the Lord gave

them rest round about.' The words express in simplest form what should

be the chief desire of our hearts and occupation of our lives, and what

will then be our peaceful experience. We shall best bring out these

points if we take the words just as they lie, and consider the seeking,

the finding which certainly crowns that seeking, and the rest which

ensues on finding God.

I. The seeking.

Now, of course, there is no doubt that what the chronicler meant to

describe by the phrase, seeking the Lord,' was largely the mere

external acts of ritual worship, the superficial turning from idols to

a purely external recognition of God as the God of Israel. But while

there may have been nothing deeper than a change in the nominal object

of nominal worship, so far as many were concerned, no doubt a very real

turning of heart to God underlay the external change in many other

cases, of which the destruction of idols and the renewed observance of

the form of Jehovah's worship were the consequence and sign. That

turning of mind, will, and affection towards God must be ours if we are

to be among those wise and happy seekers who are sure to find that

which--or rather Him whom--they seek and to rest in Him whom they find.

That search is not after a lost treasure, nor does it imply ignorance

of where its object is to be found. We seek that which we know, and

which we may be assured of finding. Therefore there need be no tremors

of uncertainty in our quest, and the blessedness of the search is as

real as, though different from, the blessedness of the possession which

ends it. The famous saying which prefers the search after, to the

possession of truth, is more proud than wise; but the comparison which

it institutes is so far true that there is a joy in the aspiration

after and the efforts towards truth only less joyous than that which

attends its attainment. But truth divorced from God is finite and may

pall, become familiar and lose its radiance, like a gathered flower;

and hence the preference for the search is intelligible though

one-sided. But God does not pall, and the more we find Him the more we

delight in Him; the highest bliss is to find Him, the next highest is

to seek Him; and, since seeking and finding Him are never wholly

separate, these kindred joys blend their lights in the experience of

all His children.

But our text lays emphasis on the whole-heartedness of the people's

seeking of God. The search must be earnest and engaged in with the

whole energy of our whole being, if any blessing is to come from it.

Why! one reason why the great mass of professing Christians make so

little of their religion is because they are only half-hearted in it.

If you divide a river into two streams the force of each is less than

half the power of the original current; and the chances are that you

will make a stagnant marsh where there used to be a flowing stream. All

in all, or not at all,' is the rule for life, in all departments. It is

the rule in daily business. A man that puts only half himself in his

profession or trade, while the other half of his wits is gone

woolgathering and dreaming, is predestined from all eternity to fail.

The same is true about our religion. If you and I attend to it as a

kind of by-occupation; if we give the balance of our time and the

superfluity of our energy, after we have done a hard day's work--say,

an hour upon a Sunday--to seeking God, and devote all the rest of the

week to seeking worldly prosperity, it is no wonder if our religion

languishes, and is mainly a matter of forms, as it is with such hosts

of people that call themselves Christians.

Oh! dear brethren, I do believe there is more unconscious unreality in

the average Christian man's endeavour to be a better Christian than

there is in almost anything else in the world:--

One foot on sea, and one on shore,

To one thing constant never.'

That is why so many of us know nothing of a progressive strengthening

of our faith, and an increasing conquest of ourselves, and a firmer

grasp of God, and a fuller realisation of the blessedness of walking in

His ways.

They sought Him with all their heart.' That does not mean, remember,

that there are to be no other desires, for it is a great mistake to pit

religion against other things which are meant to be its instruments and

its helps. We are not required to seek nothing else in order to seek

God wholly. He demands no impossible and fantastic detachment of

ourselves from the ordinary and legitimate occupations, affections, and

duties of human life, but He does ask that the dominant desire after

Him should be powerful enough to express itself through all our

actions, and that we should seek for God in them, and for them in God.

Whilst thus we are to give the right interpretation to that

whole-heartedness in our seeking God, on which the text lays stress, do

not let us forget that the one token of it which the text specifies is,

casting out our idols. There must be detachment if there is to be

attachment. If some climbing plant, for instance, has twisted itself

round the unprofitable thorns in the hedge, the gardener, before he can

get it to go up the support that it is meant to encircle, has carefully

to detach it from the stays to which it has wantonly clung, taking care

that in the process he does not break its tendrils and destroy its

power of growth. So, to train our souls to cleave to God, and to grow

up round the great Stay that is provided for us, there is needed, as an

essential part of the process, the voluntary, conscious, conscientious,

and constant guarding of ourselves from the vagrancies of our desires,

which send out their shoots away from Him; and when the objects of

these become idols, then there is nothing for it but that, like Asa and

his people, we should hew them to pieces and make a bonfire of them;

and then renew our covenant before God. I desire to press that upon you

and upon myself. The heart must be emptied of baser liquors, if the new

wine of the Kingdom is to be poured into it.

True it is, of course--and thank God for it!--that the most powerful

agent in effecting that detachment of ourselves from lower things is

our fruition of higher. It is when God comes into the temple that Dagon

falls on the threshold. It is when a new affection begins to spring in

the heart that old loves are thrust out of it. But whilst that is true,

it is also true that the two processes run on simultaneously; and that

whilst, on the one hand, if we are ever to overcome our love of the

world it must be through the love of God, on the other hand, if we are

ever to be confirmed in a whole-hearted love of God, it must be through

our conquest of our love of the world. Unite my heart to fear Thy name'

was the profound prayer of the old Psalmist; and the heart,' according

to Old Testament usage, is the central fountain from which flow all the

streams of conscious life. To seek Him with the whole heart is to

engage the whole self in the quest, and that is the only kind of

seeking which has the certainty of success.

II. The finding which crowns such seeking.

He was found of them.' Yes; anything is possible rather than that a

whole-hearted search after God should be a vain search. For there are,

in that case, two seekers--God is seeking for us more truly than we are

seeking for Him. And if the mother is seeking her child, and the child

its mother, it will be a very wide desert where they will not meet. The

Father seeketh such to worship Him,' that is--the divine activity is

going about the world, searching for the heart that turns to Him, and

it cannot but be that they that seek Him shall find Him, or shall be

found of Him.' Open the windows, and you cannot keep out the sunshine;

open your lungs and you cannot keep out the air. In Him we live and

move and have our being,' and if our desires turn, however blindly, to

Him, and are accompanied with the appropriate action, heaven and earth

are more likely to rush to ruin than such a searching to be frustrated

of its aim.

Brethren! is there anything else in the world of which you can say,

Seek, and ye shall find'? You, with white hairs on your heads, have you

found anything else in which the chase was sure to result in the

capture; in which capture was sure to yield all that the hunter had

wished? There is only one direction for a man's desires and aims, in

which disappointment is an impossibility. In all other regions the most

that can be promised is Seek, and perhaps you will find'; and, when you

have found, perhaps you will feel that the prize was not worth the

finding. Or it is, Seek, and possibly you will find; and after you have

found and kept for a little while, you will lose.' Though it may be

Better to have loved and lost,

Than never to have loved at all,'

a treasure that slips out of our fingers is not the best treasure that

we can search for. But here the assurance is, Seek, and ye shall find;

and shall never lose. Find, and you shall always possess.'

What would you think of a company of gold-seekers, hunting about in

some exhausted claim, for hypothetical grains, ragged, starving--and

all the while in the next gully were lying lumps of gold for the

picking up? And that figure fairly represents what people do and suffer

who seek for good and do not seek for God.

III. The rest which ensues on finding God.

The Lord gave them rest round about.' We believe that the Jewish nation

was under special supernatural guidance, so that national adherence to

the Law was always followed by external prosperity. That is not, of

course, the case with us. But which is the better thing, rest round

about' or rest within? We have no immunity from toil or conflict.

Seeking God does not cover our heads from the storm of external

calamities, nor arm our hearts against the darts and daggers of many a

pain, anxiety, and care, but disturbance around is a very small matter

if there be a better thing, rest within.

Do you remember who it was that said, In the world ye shall have

tribulation . . . but in Me ye shall have peace'? Then we have, as it

were, two abodes--one, as far as regards the life of sense, in the

world of sense--another, as far as regards the inmost self, which may,

if we will, be in Christ. A vessel with an outer casing and a layer of

air between it and the inner will keep its contents hot. So we may have

round us the very opposite of repose, and, if God so wills, let us not

kick against His will; we may have conflict and stir and strife, and

yet a better rest than that of my text may be ours. Rest round about'

is sometimes good and sometimes bad. It is often bad, for it is the

people that have no changes' who most usually do not fear God.' But

rest within, that is sure to come when a man has sought with all his

desire for God, whom he has found in all His fullness, is only good and

best of all.

We all know, thank God! in worldly matters and in inferior degree, how

blessed and restful it is when some strong affection is gratified, some

cherished desire fulfilled. Though these satisfactions are not

perpetual, nor perfect, they may teach us what a depth of blessed and

calm repose, incapable of being broken by any storms or by any tasks,

will come to and abide with the man whose deepest love is satisfied in

God, and whose most ardent desires have found more than they sought for

in Him. Be sure of this, dear friends! that if we do thus seek, and

thus find, it is not in the power of anything that is at enmity with

joy' utterly to abolish or destroy' the quietness of our hearts. Rest

in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.' They who thus repose will

have peace in their hearts, even whilst tasks and temptations, changes

and sorrows, disturb their outward lives. In the world ye shall have

tribulation.' Be it so; it may be borne with submission and

thankfulness if in Christ we have peace.

Thus we may have the peace of God, rest in and from Him, entering into

us, and in due time, by His gracious guidance and help, we shall enter

into eternal rest. Whilst to seek is to find Him, in a very deep and

blessed sense, even in this life; in another aspect all our earthly

life may be regarded as seeking after Him, and the future as the true

finding of Him. That future will bring to those whose hearts have

turned from the shows and vanities of time to God a possession of Him

so much fuller than was experienced here that the lesser discoveries

and enjoyments of Him which are experienced here, scarcely deserve in

comparison to be called by the same name. So my text may be taken, as

in its first part, a description of the blessed life here--They sought

Him with all their heart'--and in its second, as a shadowy vision of

the yet more blessed life hereafter, He was found of them, and the Lord

gave them rest round about,' as well as within, in the land of peace,

where sorrow and sighing, and toil and care, shall pass from memory;

and they that warred against us shall be far away.

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JEHOSHAPHAT'S REFORM

And Jehoshaphat his son reigned in his stead, and strengthened himself

against Israel. 2. And he placed forces in all the fenced cities of

Judah, and set garrisons in the land of Judah, and in the cities of

Ephraim, which Asa his father had taken. 3. And the Lord was with

Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the first ways of his father David,

and sought not unto Baalim; 4. But sought to the Lord God of his

father, and walked in His commandments, and not after the doings of

Israel. 5. Therefore the Lord established the kingdom in his hand; and

all Judah brought to Jehoshaphat presents; and he had riches and honour

in abundance. 6. And his heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord:

moreover he took away the high places and groves out of Judah. 7. Also

in the third year of his reign he sent to his princes, even to

Ben-hail, and to Obadiah, and to Zechariah, and to Nethaneel, and to

Michaiah, to teach in the cities of Judah. 8. And with them he sent

Levites, even Shemaiah, and Nethaniah, and Zebadiah, and Asabel, and

Shemiramoth, and Jehonathan, and Adonijah, and Tobijah, and

Tobadonijah, Levites: and with them Elishama and Jehoram, priests. 9.

And they taught in Judah, and had the book of the law of the Lord with

them, and went about throughout all the cities of Judah, and taught the

people. 10. And the fear of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms of the

lands that were round about Judah, so that they made no war against

Jehoshaphat.'--2 CHRON. xvii. 1-10.

The first point to be noted in this passage is that Jehoshaphat

followed in the steps of Asa his father. Stress is laid on his

adherence to the ancestral faith, the first ways of his father

David,'--before his great fall,--and the paternal example, he sought to

the God of his father.' Such carrying on of a predecessor's work is

rare in the line of kings of Judah, where father and son were seldom of

the same mind in religion. The principle of hereditary monarchy secures

peaceful succession, but not continuity of policy. Many a king of Judah

had to say in his heart what Ecclesiastes puts into Solomon's mouth, I

hated all my labour, . . . seeing that I must leave it unto the man

that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man

or a fool?' But it is not only in kings' houses that that experience is

realised. Many a home is saddened to-day because the children do not

seek the God of their fathers. Instead of the fathers' should come up

thy children'; but, alas! grandmother Lois and mother Eunice do not

always see the boy who has known the Scriptures from a child grow up

into a Timothy, in whom their unfeigned faith lives again. The neglect

of religious instruction in professedly Christian families, the

inconsistent lives of parents or their too rigid restraints, or,

sometimes, their too lax discipline, are to be blamed for many such

cases. But there are many instances in which not the parents, but the

children, are to be blamed. An earnest Sunday-school teacher may do

much to lead the children of godly parents to their father's God.

Blessed is the home where the golden chain of common faith binds hearts

together, and family love is elevated and hallowed by common love of

God!

Jehoshaphat's religion was, further, resolutely held in the face of

prevailing opposition. The Baalim' were popular; it was fashionable to

worship them. They were numerous, and all varieties of taste could find

a Baal to please them. But this young king turned from the tempting

ways that opened flower-strewn before him, and chose the narrow road

that led upwards. So did not I, because of the fear of God,' might have

been his motto. A similar determined setting of our faces God-ward, in

spite of the crowd of tempting false deities around us, must mark us,

if we are to have any religion worth calling by the name. This king

recoiled from the example of the neighbouring monarchy, and walked not

after the doings of Israel.' His seeking to God was very practical, for

it was not shown simply by professed beliefs or by sentiment, but by

ordering his life in obedience to God's will. The test of real religion

is, after all, a life unlike the lives of the men who do not share our

faith, and moulded in accordance with God's known will. It is vain to

allege that we are seeking the Lord unless we are walking in His

commandments.

Prosperity followed godliness, in accordance with the divinely

appointed connection between them which characterised the Old

Dispensation. Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament;

adversity is the blessing of the New,' says Bacon. But the epigram is

too neat to be entirely true, for the Book of Job and many a psalm show

that the eternal problem of suffering innocence was raised by facts

even in the old days, and in our days there are forms of well-being

which are the natural fruits of well-doing. Still, the connection was

closer in Judah than with us, and, in the case before us, the

establishment of Jehoshaphat in the kingdom, his subject's love, which

showed itself in voluntary gifts over and above the taxes imposed, and

his wealth and honour, were the direct results of his true religion.

A really devout man must be a propagandist. True faith cannot be hid

nor be dumb. As certainly as light must radiate must faith strive to

communicate itself. So the account of Jehoshaphat's efforts to spread

the worship of Jehovah follows the account of his personal godliness.

His heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord.' There are two kinds

of lifted-up hearts; one when pride, self-sufficiency, and

forgetfulness of God, raise a man to a giddy height, from which God's

judgments are sure to cast him down and break him in the fall; one when

a lowly heart is raised to high courage and devotion, and set on high,'

because it fears God's name. Such elevation is consistent with

humility. It fears no fall; it is an elevation above earthly desires

and terrors, neither of which can reach it, so as to hinder the man

from walking in the ways of the Lord.' This king was lifted to it by

his happy experience of the blessed effects of obedience. These

encouraged him to vigorous efforts to spread the religion which had

thus gladdened and brightened his own life. Is that the use we make of

the ease which God gives us?

Jehoshaphat had to destroy first, in order to build up. The high places

and Asherim' had to be taken out of Judah before the true worship could

be established there. So it is still. The Christian has to carry a

sword in the one hand, and a trowel in the other. Many a rotten old

building, the stones of which have been cemented in blood, has to be

swept away before the fair temple can be reared. The Devil is in

possession of much of the world, and the lawful owner has to dispossess

the squatter.' No one can suppose that society is organised on

Christian principles even in so-called Christian countries'; and there

is much overturning work to be done before He whose right it is to

reign is really king over the whole earth. We, too, have our high

places and Asherim' to root out.

But that destructive work is not to be done by force. Institutions can

only be swept away when public opinion has grown to see their evils.

Forcible reformations of manners, and, still more, of religion, never

last, but are sure to be followed by violent rebounds to the old order.

So, side by side with the removal of idolatry, this king took care to

diffuse the knowledge of the true worship, by sending out a body of

influential commissioners to teach in Judah. That was a new departure

of great importance. It presents several interesting features. The

composition of the staff of instructors is remarkable. The principal

men in it are five court officers, next to whom, and subordinate, as is

shown not only by the order of enumeration, but by the phrase with

them,' were nine Levites, and, last and lowest of all, two priests. We

might have expected that priests should be the most numerous and

important members of such a body, and we are led to suspect that the

priesthood was so corrupted as to be careless about religious

reformation. A clerical order is not always the most ardent in

religious revival. The commissioners were probably chosen, without

regard to their being priests, Levites, or laymen,' because of their

zeal in the worship of Jehovah; and the five princes' head the list in

order to show the royal authority of the commission.

Another point is the emphasis with which their function of teaching is

thrice mentioned in three verses. Apparently the bulk of the nation

knew little or nothing of the law of the Lord,' either on its spiritual

and moral or its ceremonial side; and Jehoshaphat's object was to

effect an enlightened, not a forcible and superficial, change. God's

way of influencing actions is to reveal Himself to the understanding

and the heart, that these may move the will, and that may shape the

deeds. Wise men will imitate God's way. Jehoshaphat did not issue royal

commands, but sent out teachers. In chapter xix. we find him

despatching judges' in similar fashion throughout Judah. They had the

power to punish, but these teachers had only authority to explain and

to exhort.

The present writer accepts the chronicler's statement that the teachers

had the Book of the Law' with them, though he recognises it as possible

that that Book' was not identical with the complete collection of

documents which now bears the name. But, be that as it may, the

incident of our text is remarkable as being the only recorded

systematic and complete attempt to diffuse the remedy against idolatry

throughout the kingdom, as putting religious reformation on its only

sure ground, and as hinting at deep and widespread ignorance among the

masses.

When a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at

peace with him.' So Judah found. A terror of the Lord fell upon all the

kingdoms' around. No doubt, the news filtered to them of how Jehovah

was exerting His might on the nation, and a certain indefinable awe of

this so potent god, who was defeating the Baalim, made them think that

peace was the best policy. Each nation was supposed to have its own

god, and the national god was supposed to fight for his worshippers; so

that war was a struggle of deities as well as of men, and the stronger

god won. Here was a god who had reconquered his territory, and had cast

out usurpers. Prudence dictated keeping on good terms with him. But it

never occurred to any of these peoples that their own gods were any

less real than Judah' s, or that Judah's God could ever become theirs.

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AMASIAH

Amasiah, the son of Zichri, who willingly offered himself unto the

Lord.'--1 CHRON. xvii. 16.

This is a scrap from the catalogue of Jehoshaphat's mighty men of

valour'; and is Amasiah's sole record. We see him for a moment and hear

his eulogium and then oblivion swallows him up. We do not know what it

was that he did to earn it. But what a fate, to live to all generations

by that one sentence!

I. Cheerful self-surrender the secret of all religion.

The words of our text contain a metaphor naturally drawn from the

sacrificial system. It comes so easily to us that we scarcely recognise

the metaphorical element, but the clear recognition of it gives great

additional energy to the words. Amasiah was both sacrificer and

sacrifice. His offering was self-immolation. As in all love, so in that

noblest kind of it which clasps God, its perfect expression is, I give

Thee my living, loving self.' Nor is it only sacrifice and sacrificer

that are seen in deepest truth in the experience of the Christian life,

but the reality of the Temple is also there, for Ye also . . . are

built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up

spiritual sacrifices.' Only when God dwells in us, shall we have the

nerve and the firmness of hand to take the knife and slay before the

Lord,' the awful Guest in the sanctuary within, the most precious of

the children of our spirits.

The essence of the sacrifice of self is the sacrifice of will. In the

Christian experience willingly offered' is almost tautology, for

unwilling offerings are a contradiction and in fact there are no such

things. The quality of unwillingness destroys the character of the

offering and robs it of all sacredness. Reluctant Christianity is not

Christianity. That noun and that adjective can never be buckled

together.

The submission of will and the consequent surrender of myself and my

powers, opportunities, and possessions, so that I do all, enjoy all,

use all, and when need is, endure all with glad thankful reference to

God is only possible to me in the measure in which my will is made

flexible by love, and such will-subduing love comes only when we know

and believe the love that God hath to us.' There is the point at which

not a few moral and religious teachers go wrong and bewilder themselves

and their disciples. There, too, is the point at which Christ and the

Gospel of salvation through faith in Him stand forth as emancipating

humanity from the dreary round of efforts and vain attempts to work up

the condition needful for achieving the height of self-surrender, which

is seen to be indispensable to all true nobleness of living, but is

felt to be beyond the reach of the ordinary man. There, too, is the

point at which many good people mar their lives as Christians. They

waste their strength in trying to bring the jibbing horse up to the

leap. They try to blow up a fire of devotion and to make themselves

priests to offer themselves, but all the while the mutinous self

recoils from the leap, and the fire burns smokily, and their sacrifice

is laid on the altar with little joy, because they have not been

careful and wise enough to begin at the beginning and to follow God's

way of melting their wills, by love, the reflection of the Infinite

love of God to them. God's priests offer themselves because they offer

their wills; they offer their wills because they love God; they love

God because they know that God loves them. That is the divine order. It

is vain to try to accomplish the end by any other.

II. This willing offering hallows all life.

No syllable is left to tell us what Amasiah did to win this praise.

Probably the words enshrine some now forgotten memory of his cheerful

courage, some heroic feat on an unrecorded battlefield. Particulars are

not given nor needed. Specific actions are unimportant; the spirit of a

life can be told with very incomplete details, and it, not the details,

is the important thing. Sometimes, as in many modern biographies, one

cannot see the wood for the trees,' and misses the main drift and aim

of a life in the chaos of a bewildering mass of nothings. How much more

happy the lot of this man of whom we have only the generalised

expression of the text, unweighted and undisturbed by petty incidents!

It takes tons of rose leaves to make a tiny phial of otto of roses, but

the fragrance is far more pungent in a drop of the distillation than in

armfuls of leaves. Every life shrinks into very small compass, and the

centuries do not tolerate long biographies. Shall we not seek to order

our life so that Amasiah's epitaph may serve for us? It will be blessed

if this--and nothing else--is known about us, that we willingly offered

ourselves to the Lord.' My friend: will that be a true epitome of your

life?

III. This willing offering is accepted by God.

We may hear a mightier voice behind the chronicler' s, and the judgment

of the Judge of all pronounced by His lips. It matters little what men

say of one another, but it matters everything what God says of us. We

are but too apt to forget that He is now saying something as to each of

us, and that we have not to wait for death to put a final period to our

activities, before our lives become fit subjects for God's judgment,

Moment by moment we are writing our own sentences. But while it is good

for us to remember the continuous judgment of God on each deed, it is

not good to let dark thoughts of the principles of that judgment

paralyse our activity or chill our confidence in His forgiving and

accepting mercy. There is often a dark suspicion, like that of the

one-talented servant, which blackens God's fair fame as being an

austere Man,' making demands rather than imparting power, and the

effect of such an ugly conception of Him is to cut the nerve of service

and bury the talent, carefully folded up, it may be, but none the less

earning nothing. If we call on Him as Father, who without respect of

persons judgeth according to every man's work,' let us be sure that it

will be a Fatherly judgment that He will pass upon us and our

offerings. There is a wonderful collection on His altar of what many

people would think rubbish, just as many a mother has laid away among

her treasures some worthless article which her child had once given

her--a weed plucked by the roadside in a long past summer day, some

trifle of rare preciousness in the child's eyes, and of none in any

others than her own. She opens her drawer and brings out the poor

little thing, and her eyes fill and her heart fills as she looks. And

does not God keep His children's gifts as lovingly, and set them in

places of honour in the day when He makes up His jewels'? There are

cups of cold water and widows' mites and much else that a supercilious

world would call trash' stored there. Thank God! He accepts imperfect

service, faltering faith, partial consecration, a little love. Even our

poor offering may be an odour of a sweet smell,' ministering fragrance

that is a delight to Him, if it is offered with the much incense of the

great Sacrifice and through the mediation of the great High Priest.

The world forgot Amasiah, or never knew him, an obscure soldier in an

obscure kingdom, but God did not forget, and here is his epitaph, and

this is his memorial to all generations. Men's chronicles have no room

for all the names that their wearers are eager to have inscribed on

their crumbling and crowded pages, but the Lamb's Book of Life' has

ample space on its radiant pages for all who desire to set their names

there, and if ours are there, we need not envy the proudest whose

titles and deeds fill the most conspicuous pages in the world's

records. Then shall every man have praise of Christ,' and he who wins

that guerdon needs nothing more, and can have nothing more to swell his

blessedness.

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A MIRROR FOR MAGISTRATES'

And Jehoshaphat the king of Judah returned to his house in peace to

Jerusalem. 2. And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him,

and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love

them that hate the Lord? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the

Lord. 3. Nevertheless there are good things found in thee, in that thou

hast taken away the groves out of the land, and hast prepared thine

heart to seek God. 4. And Jehoshaphat dwelt at Jerusalem: and he went

out again through the people from Beer-sheba to mount Ephraim, and

brought them back unto the Lord God of their fathers. 5. And he set

judges in the land throughout all the fenced cities of Judah, city by

city. 6. And said to the judges, Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not

for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment. 7.

Wherefore now let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take heed and do

it: for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, nor respect of

persons, nor taking of gifts. 8. Moreover in Jerusalem did Jehoshaphat

set of the Levites, and of the priests, and of the chief of the fathers

of Israel, for the judgment of the Lord, and for controversies, when

they returned to Jerusalem. 9. And he charged them, saying, Thus shall

ye do in the fear of the Lord, faithfully, and with a perfect heart.

10. And what cause soever shall come to you of your brethren that dwell

in their cities, between blood and blood, between law and commandment,

statutes and judgments, ye shall even warn them that they trespass not

against the Lord, and so wrath come upon you, and upon your brethren:

this do, and ye shall not trespass. 11. And, behold, Amariah the chief

priest is over you in all matters of the Lord; and Zebadiah the son of

Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, for all the king's matters:

also the Levites shall be officers before you. Deal courageously, and

the Lord shall be with the good.'--2 CHRON. xix. 1-11.

Jehoshaphat is distinguished by two measures for his people's good:

one, his sending out travelling preachers through the land (2 Chron.

xvii. 7-9); another, this provision of local judges and a central court

in Jerusalem. The former was begun as early as the third year of his

reign, but was probably interrupted, like other good things, by his

ill-omened alliance with Ahab. The prophet Jehu's plain speaking seems

to have brought the king back to his better self, and its fruit was his

going among the people,' from south to north, as a missionary, to bring

them back to Jehovah.' The religious reformation was accompanied by his

setting judges throughout the land. Our modern way of distinguishing

between religious and civil concerns is foreign to Eastern thought, and

was especially out of the question in a theocracy. Jehovah was the King

of Judah; therefore the things that are Caesar's and the things that

are God's coalesced, and these two objects of Jehoshaphat's journeyings

were pursued simultaneously. We have travelled far from his simple

institutions, and our course has not been all progress. His supreme

concern was to deal out even-handed justice between man and man; is not

ours rather to give ample doses of law? To him the judicial function

was a copy of God' s, and its exercise a true act of worship, done in

His fear, and modelled after His pattern. The first impression made in

one of our courts is scarcely that judge and counsel are engaged in

worship.

There had been local judges before Jehoshaphat--elders in the villages,

the heads of the fathers' houses' in the tribes. We do not know whether

the great secession had flung the simple old machinery somewhat out of

gear, or whether Jehoshaphat's action was simply to systematise and

make universal the existing arrangements. But what concerns us most is

to note that all the charge which he gives to these peasant magistrates

bears on the religious aspect of their duties. They are to think

themselves as acting for Jehovah and with Jehovah. If they recognise

the former, they may be confident of the latter. They are to let the

fear of Jehovah be upon you,' for that awe resting on a spirit will,

like a burden or water-jar on a woman's shoulder, make the carriage

upright and the steps firm. They are not only to act for and with

Jehovah, but to do like Him, avoiding injustice, favouritism, and

corruption, the plague-spots of Eastern law-courts. In such a state of

society, the cases to be adjudicated were mostly such as mother-wit,

honesty and the fear of God could solve; other times call for other

qualifications. But still, let us learn from this charge that even in

our necessarily complicated legal systems and political life, there is

room and sore need for the application of the same principles. What a

different world it would be if our judges and representatives carried

some tincture of Jehoshaphat's simple and devout wisdom into their

duties! Civic and political life ought to be as holy as that of

cloister and cell. To judge righteously, to vote honestly, is as much

worship as to pray. A politician may be a priest of the Most High God.'

And for us all the spirit of Jehoshaphat's charge is binding, and every

trivial and secular task is to be discharged for God, with God, in the

fear of God. On the bells of the horses shall be Holiness unto

Jehovah.' If our religion does not drive the wheels of daily life, so

much the worse for our life and our religion. But, above all, this

charge reminds us that the secret of right living is to imitate God.

These peasants were to find direction, as well as inspiration, in

gazing on Jehovah's character, and trying to copy it. And we are to be

imitators of God, as beloved children,' though our best efforts may

only produce poor results. A masterpiece may be copied in some wretched

little newspaper blotch, but the great artist will own it for a copy,

and correct it into complete likeness.

The second step was to establish a supreme court' in Jerusalem, which

had two divisions, ecclesiastical and civil, as we should say, the

former presided over by the chief priest, and the latter by the ruler

of the house of Judah.' Murder cases and the graver questions involving

interpretation of the law were sent up thither, while the village

judges had probably to decide only points that shrewdness and integrity

could settle. But these superior judges, too, received charges as to

moral, rather than intellectual or learned qualifications. Religiously,

uprightly, with a perfect heart,' courageously, they were to act, and

Jehovah be with the good!' That may be a prayer, like the old

invocation with which heralds sent knights to tilt at each other, and

with which, in some legal proceedings, the pleas are begun, God defend

the right!' But more probably it is an assurance that God will guide

the judges to favour the good cause, if they on their parts will bring

the aforesaid qualities to their decisions. And are not these qualities

just such as will, for the most part, give similar results to us, if in

our various activities we exercise them? And may we not see a sequence

worth our practically putting to the proof in these characteristics

enjoined on Jehoshaphat's supreme court? Begin with the fear of the

Lord'; that will help us to faithfulness and a perfect heart'; and

these again by taking away occasions of ignoble fear, and knitting

together the else tremulous and distracted nature, will make the

fearful brave and the weak strong.

But another thought is suggested by Jehoshaphat's language. Note how

this court does not seem to have inflicted punishments, but to have had

only counsels and warnings to wield. It was a board of conciliation

rather than a penal tribunal. Two things it had to do--to press upon

the parties the weighty consideration that crimes against men were sins

against God, and that the criminal drew down wrath on the community.

This remarkable provision brings out strongly thoughts that modern

society will be the better for incorporating. The best way to deal with

men is to get at their hearts and consciences. The deeper aspect of

civil crimes or wrongs to men should be pressed on the doer; namely,

that they are sins against God. Again, all such acts are sins against

the mystical sacred bond of brotherhood. Again, the solidarity of a

nation makes it inevitable that one sinner destroyeth much good,' and

pulls down with him, when God smites him, a multitude of innocents. So

finely woven is the web of the national life that, if a thread run in

any part of it, a great rent gapes. If one member sins, all the members

suffer with it. And lastly, the cruellest thing that we can do is to be

dumb when we see sin being committed. It is not public men, judges and

the like, alone, who are called on thus to warn evil-doers, but all of

us in our degree. If we do not, we are guilty along with a guilty

nation; and it is only when, to the utmost of our power, we have warned

our brethren as to national sins, that we can wash our hands in

innocency, This do, and ye shall not be guilty.'

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A STRANGE BATTLE

We have no might against this great company that cometh against us;

neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon Thee.'--2 CHRON xx.

12.

A formidable combination of neighbouring nations, of which Moab and

Ammon, the ancestral enemies of Judah, were the chief, was threatening

Judah. Jehoshaphat, the king, was panic-stricken when he heard of the

heavy war-cloud that was rolling on, ready to burst in thunder on his

little kingdom. His first act was to muster the nation, not as a

military levy but as suppliants, to seek help of the Lord.' The enemy

was camping down by the banks of the Dead Sea, almost within striking

distance of Jerusalem. It seemed a time for fighting, not for praying,

but even at that critical moment, the king and the men, whom it might

have appeared that plain duty called to arms, were gathered in the

Temple, and, hampered by their wives and children, were praying. Would

they not have done better if they had been sturdily marching through

the wilderness of Judah to front their foes? Our text is the close and

the climax of Jehoshaphat's prayer, and, as the event proved, it was

the most powerful weapon that could have been employed, for the rest of

the chapter tells the strangest story of a campaign that was ever

written. No sword was drawn. The army was marshalled, but Levites with

their instruments of music, not fighters with their spears, led the

van, and as they began to sing and to praise,' sudden panic laid hold

on the invading force, who turned their arms against each other. So

when Judah came to some rising ground, on which stood a watch-tower

commanding a view over the savage grimness of the wilderness,' it saw a

field of corpses, stark and stiff and silent. Three days were spent in

securing the booty, and on the fourth, Jehoshaphat and his men

assembled themselves in the Valley of Blessing,' and thence returned a

joyous multitude praising God for the victory which had been won for

them without their having struck a blow. The whole story may yield

large lessons, seasonable at all times. We deal with it, rather than

with the fragment of the narrative which we have taken as our text.

I. We see here the confidence of despair.

Jehoshaphat's prayer had stayed itself on God's self-revelation in

history, and on His gift of the land to their fathers. It had pleaded

that the enemy's hostility was a poor reward' for Israel's ancient

forbearance, and now, with a burst of agony, it casts down before God,

as it were, Judah's desperate plight as outnumbered by the swarm of

invaders and brought to their last shifts--we have no might against

this great company . . . neither know we what to do.' But the very

depth of despair sets them to climb to the height of trust. That is a

mighty But,' which buckles into one sentence two such antitheses as

confront us here. We know not what to do, but our eyes are upon

Thee'--blessed is the desperation which catches at God's hand; firm is

the trust which leaps from despair!

The helplessness is always a fact, though most of us manage to get

along for the most part without discovering it. We are all outnumbered

and overborne by the claims, duties, hindrances, sorrows, and

entanglements of life. He is not the wisest of men who, facing all that

life may bring and take away, all that it must bring and take away,

knows no quiver of nameless fear, but jauntily professes himself ready

for all that life can inflict. But there come moments in every life

when the false security in which shallow souls wrap themselves ignobly

is broken up, and then often a paroxysm of terror or misery grips a

man, for which he has no anodyne, and his despair is as unreasonable as

his security. The meaning of all circumstances that force our

helplessness on us is to open to us Jehoshaphat's refuge in his--our

eyes are upon Thee.' We need to be driven by the crowds of foes and

dangers around to look upwards. Our props are struck away that we may

cling to God. The tree has its lateral branches hewed off that it may

shoot up heavenward. When the valley is filled with mist and swathed in

evening gloom, it is the time to lift our gaze to the peaks that glow

in perpetual sunshine. Wise and happy shall we be if the sense of

helplessness begets in us the energy of a desperate faith. For these

two, distrust of self and glad confidence in God, are not opposites, as

naked distrust and trust are, but are complementary. He does not turn

his eyes to God who has not turned them on himself, and seen there

nothing to which to cling, nothing on which to lean. Astronomers tell

us that there are double stars revolving round one axis and forming a

unity, of which the one is black and the other brilliant. Self-distrust

and trust in God are thus knit together and are really one.

II. We see here the peaceful assurance of victory that attends on

faith.

A flash of inspiration came to one of the Levitical singers who had, no

doubt, been deeply moved and had unconsciously fitted himself for

receiving it. Divinely breathed confidence illuminated his waiting

spirit, and a great message of encouragement poured from his lips. His

words heartened the host more than a hundred trumpets braying in their

ears. How much one man who has drunk in God's assurance of victory can

do to send a thrill of his own courage through more timorous hearts!

Courage is no less contagious than panic. This Levite becomes the

commander of the army, and Jehoshaphat and his captains bow their

heads' and accept his plan for to-morrow, hearing in his ringing

accents a message from Jehovah. The instructions given and at once

accepted are as unlike those of ordinary warfare as is the whole

incident; for there is to be no sword drawn nor blow struck, but they

are to stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.' They are told

where to find the enemy and are bid to go forth in order of battle

against them, and they are assured that the battle is not theirs, but

God' s.' No wonder that the message was hailed as from heaven, and put

new heart into the host, or that, when the messenger's voice ceased,

his brother Levites broke into shrill praise as for a victory already

won. With what calm, triumphant hearts the camp would sleep that night!

May we not take that inspired Levite's message as one to ourselves in

the midst of our many conflicts both in the outward life and in the

inward? If we have truly grasped God's hands, and are fighting for what

is accordant with His will, we have a right to feel that the battle is

not ours but God' s,' and to be sure that therefore we shall conquer.

Of course we are not to say to ourselves, God will fight for us, and we

need not strike a blow,' Jehoshaphat's example does not fit our case in

that respect, and we may thank God that it does not. We have a better

lot than to stand still and see the salvation of God,' for we are

honoured by being allowed to share the stress of conflict and the glow

of battle as well as in the shout of victory. But even in the struggles

of outward life, and much more in those of our spiritual nature, every

man who watches his own career will many a time have to recognise God's

hand, unaided by any act of his own, striking for him and giving him

victory; and in the spiritual life every Christian man knows that his

best moments have come from the initiation of the Spirit who bloweth

where He listeth.' How often we have been surprised by God's help; how

often we have been quickened by God's inbreathed Spirit, and have been

taught that the passivity of faith draws to us greater blessings than

the activity of effort! They also serve who only stand and wait,' and

they also conquer who in quietness and confidence keep themselves still

and let God work for them and in them. The first great blessing of

trust in God is that we may be at peace on the eve of battle, and the

second is that in every battle it is, in truth, not we that fight, but

God who fights for and in us.

III. We learn here the best preparation for the conflict.

When the morning dawned, the array was set in order and the march

begun, and a strange array it was. In the van marched the Temple

singers singing words that are music to us still: Give thanks unto the

Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever,' and behind them came the ranks

of Judah, no doubt swelling the volume of melody, that startled the

wild creatures of the wilderness, and perhaps travelled through the

still morning as far as the camp of the enemy. The singers had no

armour nor weapons. They were clad in the beauty of holiness,' the

priestly dress, and for sword and spear they carried harps and

timbrels. Our best weapons are like their equipment.

We are most likely to conquer if we lift up the voice of thanks for

victory in advance, and go into the battle expecting to triumph,

because we trust in God. The world's expectation of success is too

often a dream, a will-o'-the-wisp that tempts to bogs where the

beguiled victim is choked, though even in the world it is often true;

screw your courage to the sticking point, and we'll not fail.' But

faith, that is the expectation of success based on God's help and

inspiring to struggles for things dear to His heart, is wont to fulfil

itself, and by bringing God into the fray, to secure the victory. A

thankful heart not seldom brings into existence that for which it is

thankful.

IV. We see here the victory and the praise for it.

The panic that laid hold on the enemy, and turned their swords against

each other, was more natural in an undisciplined horde such as these

irregular levies of ancient times, than it would be in a modern army.

Once started, the infection would spread, so we need not wonder that by

the time that Judah arrived on the field all was over. How often a like

experience attends us! We quiver with apprehension of troubles that

never attack us. We dread some impending battlefield, and when we reach

it, Jehoshaphat's surprise is repeated, and, behold they were dead

bodies, fallen to the earth.' Delivered from foes and fears, Judah's

first impulse was to secure the booty, for they were keen after wealth,

and their faith' was not very pure or elevating. But their last act was

worthier, and fitly ended the strange campaign. They gathered in some

wady among the grim cliffs of the wilderness of Judah, which broke the

dreariness of that savage stretch of country with perhaps verdure and a

brook, and there they blessed the Lord.' The chronicler gives a piece

of popular etymology, in deriving the name, the valley of blessing,'

from that morning's worship. Perhaps the name was older than that, and

was given from a feeling of the contrast between the waste wilderness,

which in its gaunt sterility seemed an accursed land, and the glen

which with its trees and stream was indeed a valley of blessing.' If

so, the name would be doubly appropriate after that day's experience.

Be that as it may, here we have in vivid form the truth that all our

struggles and fightings may end in a valley of blessing, which will

ring with the praise of the God who fights for us. If we begin our

warfare with an appeal to God, and with prayerful acknowledgment of our

own impotence, we shall end it with thankful acknowledgment that we are

more than conquerors through Him that loved us' and fought for us, and

our choral song of praise will echo through the true Valley of

Blessing, where no sound of enemies shall ever break the settled

stillness, and the host of the redeemed, like that army of Judah, shall

bear psalteries and harps and trumpets,' and shall need spear and sword

no more at all for ever.

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HOLDING FAST AND HELD FAST

As they went forth Jehoshaphat stood and said, Believe in the Lord your

God, so shall ye be established.'--2 CHRON. xx. 20.

Certainly no stronger army ever went forth to victory than these Jews,

who poured out of Jerusalem that morning with no weapon in all their

ranks, and having for their van, not their picked men, but singers who

praised the beauty of holiness,' and chanted the old hymn, Give thanks

unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever.' That was all that men

had to do in the battle, for as the shrill song rose in the morning air

the Lord set liers in wait for the foe,' and they turned their swords

against one another, so that when Jehoshaphat and his troops came in

sight of the enemy the battle was over and the field strewn with

corpses--so great and swift is the power of devout recognition of God's

goodness and trust in His enduring mercy, even in the hour of extremest

peril.

The exhortation in our text which is Jehoshaphat's final word to his

army, has, in the original, a beauty and emphasis that are incapable of

being preserved in translation. There is a play of words which cannot

be reproduced in another language, though the sentiment of it may be

explained. The two expressions for believing' and being established'

are two varying forms of the same root-word; and although we can only

imitate the original clumsily in our language, we might translate in

some such way as this: Hold fast by the Lord your God, and you will be

held fast,' or stay yourselves on Him and you will be stable.' These

attempts at reproducing the similarity of sound between the two verbs

in the two clauses of our text, rude as they are, preserve what is

lost, so far as regards form, in the English translation, though that

is correct as to the meaning of the command and promise. If we note

this connection of the two clauses we just come to the general

principle which lies here, that the true source of steadfastness in

character and conduct, of victory over temptation, and of standing fast

in slippery places, is simple reliance, or, to use the New Testament

word, faith,' Believe and ye shall be established.' Put out your hand

and clasp Him, and He puts out His hand and steadies you. But all the

steadfastness and strength come from the mighty Hand that is

outstretched, not from the tremulous one that grasps it.

So, then, keeping to the words of my text, let me suggest to you the

large lessons that this saying teaches us, in regard to three things,

which I may put as being the object, the nature, and the issues of

faith; or, in other words, to whom we are to cling, how we are to

cling, and what the consequence of the clinging is.

I. To whom we must cling.

Stay yourselves on the Lord your God,' Well, then, faith is not

believing a number of theological articles, nor is it even accepting

the truth of the Gospel as it lies in Jesus Christ, but it is accepting

the Christ whom the truth of the Gospel reveals to us. And, although we

have to come to Him through the word that declares what He is, and what

He has done for us, the act of believing on Him is something that lies

beyond the mere understanding of, or giving credence to, the message

that tells us who He is and what He has done. A man may have not the

ghost of a doubt or hesitation about one tittle of revealed truth, and

if you were to cross-question him, could answer satisfactorily all the

questions of an orthodox inquisitor, and yet there may not be one

faintest flicker of faith in that man's whole being, for all the

correctness of his creed, and the comprehensiveness of it, too. Trust

is more than assent. If it is a Person on whom our faith leans, then

from that there follows clearly enough that the bond which binds us to

Him must be something far warmer, far deeper, and far more under the

control of our own will than the mere consent or assent of our brains

to a set of revealed truths. The Lord your God,' and not even the Bible

that tells you about Him; the Lord your God,' and not even the revealed

truths that manifest Him, but Him as revealed by the truths--it is He

that is the Object to which our faith clings.

Jehoshaphat, in the same breath in which he exhorted his people to

believe in the Lord, that they might be established,' also said,

Believe His prophets, so shall ye prosper.' The immediate reference, of

course, was to the man who the day before had assured them of victory.

But the wider truth suggested is, that the only way to get to God is

through the word that speaks of Him, and which has come from the lips

either of prophets or of the Son who has spoken more, and more sweetly

and clearly, than all the prophets put together. If we are to believe

God, we must believe the prophets that tell us of Him.

And then there is another suggestion that may be made. The Object of

faith proposed to Judah is not only the Lord,' but the Lord your God.'

I do not say that there can be no faith without the appropriating'

action which takes the whole Godhead for mine, but I doubt very much

whether there is any. And it seems to me that to a very large extent

the difference between mere nominal, formal Christians and men who

really are living by the power of faith in God as revealed in Jesus

Christ, lies in that one little word, the Lord your God.' That a man

shall put out a grasping hand, and say, I take for my own--for my very

own--the universal blessing, I claim as my possession that God of the

spirits of all flesh, I believe that He does stand in a real

individualising relation to me, and I to Him,' is surely of the very

essence of faith. There is no presumption, but the truest wisdom and

lowliness in enclosing, if I may so say, a part of this great common

for ours, and putting a hedge about it, as it were, and saying, That is

mine.' We shall not have understood the sweetness and the power of the

Gospel of Jesus Christ until we have pointed and condensed the general

declaration, He so loved the world,' into the individualising and

appropriating one, He loved me, and gave Himself for me.' Oh! if we

could only apply that process thoroughly to all the broad glorious

words and promises of Scripture, and feel that the whole incidence of

them was meant to fall upon us, one by one, and that just as the sun,

up in the heavens there, sends all his beams into the tiniest daisy on

the grass, as if there was nothing else in the whole world, but only

its little petals to be smoothed out and opened, I think our

Christianity would be more real, and we should have more blessings in

our hands. God in Christ and I, the only two beings in the universe,

and all His fullness mine, and all my weakness supported and

supplemented by Him--that is the view that we should sometimes take. We

should set ourselves apart from all mankind, and claim Him as our very

own, and so be filled with the fullness of God.

This, then, is the Object of faith, a Person who is all mine and all

yours too. The beam of light that falls on my eye falls on yours, and

no man makes a sunbeam the smaller because he sees by it; and in like

manner we may each possess the whole of God for our very own property.

II. How we cling.

The metaphor, I suppose, is more eloquent than all explanations of it.

Believe in the Lord'; hold fast by Him with a tight grip, continually

renewed when it tends to slacken, as it surely will, and then you will

be established.

We might run out into any number of figurative illustrations. Look at

that little child beginning to learn to walk, how it fastens its little

dimpled hands into its mother's apron, and so the tiny tottering feet

get a kind of steadfastness into them. Look at that man lying at the

door of the Temple, who never had walked since his mother's womb, and

had lain there for forty years, with his poor weak ankles all atrophied

by reason of their disuse. He held Peter and John.' Would not his grasp

be tight? Would he not clasp their hands as his only stay? He had not

become accustomed to the astounding miracle of walking, nor learned to

balance himself and accomplish the still more astounding feat of

standing steady. So he clutched at the two Apostles and was

established.' Look at that man walking by a slippery path which he does

not know, holding by the hand the guide who is able to direct and keep

him up. See this other in some wild storm, with an arm round a

steadfast tree-stem, to keep him from being blown over the precipice,

how he clings like a limpet to a rock. And that is how we are to hold

on to God, with what would be despair if it were not the perfection of

confidence, with the clear sense that the only thing between us and

ruin is the strong Hand that we clasp.

And what do we mean by clasping God? I mean making daily efforts to

rivet our love on Him, and not to let the world, with all its delusive

and cloying sweets, draw us away from Him. I mean continual and

strenuous efforts to fix our thoughts upon Him, and not to allow the

trivialities of life, or the claims of culture, or the necessities of

our daily position so to absorb our minds as that thoughts of God are

comparative strangers there, except, perhaps, sometimes on a Sunday,

and now and then at the sleepy end, or the half-awake beginning, of a

day. I mean continually repeated and strenuous efforts to cleave to Him

by the submission of our will, letting Him do what seemeth Him good,'

and not lifting ourselves up against Him, or perking our own

inclinations, desires, and fancies in His face, as if we would induce

Him to take them for His guides! And I mean that we should try to

commit our way unto the Lord, to rest in the Lord, and wait patiently

for Him.' The submissive will which cleaves to God's commandments, the

waiting heart that clings to His love, the regulated thoughts that

embrace His truth, and the childlike confidence that commits its path

to Him--these are the elements of that steadfast adherence to the Lord

which shall not be in vain.

III. The blessed effects of this clinging to God.

So shall ye be established.' That follows, as a matter of course. The

only way to make light things stable is to fasten them to something

that is stable. And the only way to put any kind of calmness and

fixedness, and yet progress--stability in the midst of progress, and

progress in the midst of stability--into our lives, is by keeping firm

hold of God. If we grasp His hand, then a calm serenity will be ours.

In the midst of changes, sorrows, losses, disappointments, we shall not

be blown about here and there by furious winds of fortune, nor will the

heavy currents of the river of life sweep us away. We shall have a

holdfast and a mooring. And although, like some light-ship anchored in

the Channel, we may heave up and down with the waves, we shall keep in

the same place, and be steadfast in the midst of mobility, and

wholesomely mobile although anchored in the one spot where there is

safety. As the issue of faith, of this throwing the responsibility for

ourselves upon God, there will be quietness of heart, and continuance

and persistence in righteousness, and steadfastness of purpose and

continuity of advancement in the divine life. The law of the Lord is in

his heart,' says one of the Psalms, none of his steps shall slide.' The

man who walks holding God's hand can put down a firm foot, even when he

is walking in slippery places. There will be decision, and strength,

and persistence of continuous advance, in a life that derives its

impulse and its motive power from communion with God in Jesus Christ.

There will be victory, not indeed after the fashion of that in this

story before us. In it, of course, men had to do nothing but stand

still and see the salvation of God.' That is the law for us, in regard

to the initial blessings of acceptance, and forgiveness, and the

communication of the divine life from above. We have to be simple

recipients, and we have no co-operating share in that part of the work

of our own salvation. But for the rest we have to help God. Work out

your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh

in you.' But none the less, This is the victory that over-cometh the

world, even our faith,' and if we give heed to Jehoshaphat's

commandment, and go out to battle as his people did, with the love and

trust of God in our hearts, then we shall come back as they did, laden

with spoil, and shall name the place which was the field of conflict

the valley of blessing,' and return to Jerusalem with psalteries, and

harps, and trumpets,' and God will give us rest from all our enemies

round about us.'

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JOASH

And Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the

days of Jehoiada the priest. . .. 17. Now after the death of Jehoiada

came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance to the king. Then the

king hearkened unto them.'--2 CHRON. xxiv. 2, 17.

Here we have the tragedy of a soul. Joash begins life well and for the

greater part of it remains faithful to his conscience and to his duty,

and then, when outward circumstances change, he casts all behind him,

forgets the past and commits moral suicide. It is the sad old story, a

bright commencement, an early promise all scattered to the winds. It is

a strange story, too. This seven-year-old king had been saved when his

father had been killed, and that true daughter of Jezebel, as well by

nature as by blood, Athaliah, had murdered all his brothers and

sisters, and made herself queen. He had been saved by the courage of a

woman who might worthily stand by the side of Deborah and other Jewish

heroines. By this woman, who was his aunt, he was hidden and brought up

in the Temple until, whilst yet a mere boy, he came to the throne, the

High Priest Jehoiada, the husband of his aunt, being his guardian

during his nonage. He reigns well till the lad of seven becomes a

mature man of thirty or thereabouts, and then Jehoiada dies, full of

years and honours, and they fitly lay him among the kings of Judah, a

worthy resting-place for one who had done good in Israel.' And now the

weakling on the throne is left alone without the strong arm to guide

him and keep him right, and we read that the princes of Judah came and

made obeisance to him.' They take him on his weak side, and I dare say

Jehoiada had been too true and too noble to do that, and though we are

not told what means they took to flatter and coax him, we see very

plainly what they were conspiring to do, for we read that they left the

house of the Lord their God, the God of their fathers, and served

groves and idols,' the groves here mentioned being symbols of Ashtaroth

the goddess of the Sidonians. And so all the past is wiped out and

Joash takes his place amongst the apostates. The story has solemn

lessons.

I. Note the change from loyal adhesion to apostasy.

The strong man on whom Joash used to lean was away, and the poor, weak

king went just where the wicked princes led him. It was probably out of

sheer imbecility that he passed from the worship of God to the

acknowledgment and service of idols.

The first point that I would insist upon is a well-worn and familiar

one, as I am well aware, but I urge it upon you, and especially upon

the younger portion of my audience. It is this, that there is no

telling the amount of mischief that pure weakness of character may lead

into. The worst men we come across in the Bible are not those who begin

with a deliberate intention of doing evil. They are weak creatures,

reeds shaken by the wind,' who have no power of resisting the force of

circumstances. It is a truth which every one's experience confirms,

that the mother of all possible badness is weakness, and that, not only

as Milton's Satan puts it, To be weak is to be miserable,' but that

weakness is wickedness sooner or later. The man who does not bar the

doors and windows of his senses and his soul against temptation, is

sure to make shipwreck of his life and in the end to become a fool.'

There is so much wickedness lying round us in this world that any man

who lets himself be shaped and coloured by that with which he comes in

contact, is sure to go to the bad in the long run. Where a man lays

himself open to the accidents of time and circumstances, the majority

of these influences will be contrary to what is right and good.

Therefore, he must gather himself together and learn to say No!' There

is no foretelling the profound abysses into which a good, easy' nature,

with plenty of high and pure impulses, perhaps, but which are written

in water, may fall. Thou, therefore, young man! be strong in the grace

that is in Christ Jesus.' Learn to say No! or else you will be sure to

say Yes! in the wrong place, and then down you will go, like this Joash

whose goodness depended on Jehoiada, and when he died, all the virtue

that had characterised this life hitherto was laid with him in the

dust.

Let us learn from this story in the next place, how little power of

continuance there is in a merely traditional religion. Many of you call

yourselves Christian people mainly because other people do the same. It

is customary to respect and regard Christianity. You have been brought

up in the midst of it. Our country is always considered a Christian

land, and so, naturally, you tacitly accept the truth of a religion

which is so influential. The lowest phase of this attitude is that

which seeks some advantage from a church connection, like the foolish

man in the Old Testament who thought he would do well because he had a

Levite for his priest. Religion is the most personal thing about a man.

To become a Christian is the most personal act one can perform. It is a

thing that a man has to do for himself, and however friends and guides

may help us in other matters, in trials and perplexities and

difficulties, by their sympathy and experience, they are useless here.

A man has here to act as if there were no other beings in the universe

but a solitary God and himself, and unless we have ourselves done that

act in the depths of our own personality, we have not done it at all.

If you young people are good, just because you have pious parents who

make you go to church or chapel on a Sunday, and keep you out of

mischief during the week, your goodness is a sham. One great result of

personal Christianity is to make a minister, a teacher, a guide,

superfluous, and when such an one becomes so, his work has been

successful and not till then. Unless you put forth for yourself the

hand of faith and for yourself yield up the devotion and love of your

own heart, your religion is nought.

However much active effort about the outside of religion there may be,

it is of itself useless. It is without bottom and without reality. Here

we have Joash busy with the externals of worship and actually deceiving

himself thereby. It was a great deal easier to make that chest for

contributions to a Temple Repairing Fund, and to get it well filled,

and to patch up the house of the Lord, than for him to get down on his

knees and pray, and he may have thought that to be busy about the house

of God was to be devout. So it may be with many Sunday-school teachers

and Church workers. Their religion may be as merely superficial and as

little personal as this man's was. It is not for me to say so about A,

B, or C. It is for you to ask of yourselves if it is so as to you. But

I do say that there is nothing that masks his own soul from a man more

than setting him to do something for Christianity and God's Church,

while in his inmost self he has not yet yielded himself to God.

I look around and I see the devil slaying his thousands by setting them

to work in Christian associations and leaving them no time to think

about their own Christianity. My brother! if the cap fits, go home and

put it on.

We see in Joash's life for how long a time a man may go on in this

self-delusion of external and barren service and never know it. Joash

came to the throne at the age of seven. Up till that age he had lived

in the Temple in concealment. Until he was one and thirty he went on in

a steady, upright course, never knowing that there was anything hollow

in his life. Apparently, Jehoiada's long life of one hundred and thirty

years extended over the greater part of Joash's reign, during most of

which he had Jehoiada to direct him and keep him right, and all this

tragedy comes at the tag end of it.

So he went on apparently all right, like a tree that has become quite

hollow, till during some storm it is blown down and falls with a crash,

and it is seen that for years it has been only the skin of a tree, bark

outside, and inside--emptiness.

II. We come now to the second stage in the later life of Joash: His

resistance to the divine pleading.

And they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served

groves and idols, and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for their

trespass, yet He sent prophets to them to bring them again unto the

Lord.' He sent with endless pity, with long-suffering patience. He

would not be put away, and as they increased the distance between Him

and them, He increased His energies to bring them back. But they lifted

themselves up, Joash and his princes, and with that strange, awful

power of resisting the attraction of the divine pleading, and hardening

their hearts against the divine patience--they would not.' And then

comes the affecting episode of the death of the high priest Zechariah,

who had succeeded to his father's place and likewise to his heroism,

and who, with the Spirit of God upon him, stands up and pointing out

his wickedness, rebukes the fallen monarch for his apostasy. Joash,

doubtless stung to the quick by Zechariah's just reproaches, allowed

the truculent princes to slay him in the court of the Temple, even

between the very shrine and the altar.

What a picture we have here of the divine love which follows every

wanderer with its pleadings and beseechings! It came to this man

through the lips of a prophet. It comes to us all in daily blessings,

sometimes in messages, like these poor words of mine. God will not let

us ruin ourselves without pleading with us and wooing us to love Him

and cling to Him. He rises up early' and daily sends us His messages,

sometimes rebukes and voices in our conscience, sometimes sunset glows

and starry heavens lifting our thoughts above this low earth, sometimes

sorrows that are meant to drive us to His breast,' and above all, the

Gospel of our salvation' in Christ, ever, in such a land as ours,

sounding in our ears.

Still further, we see in Joash what a strange, awful strength of

obstinate resistance, a character weak as regards its resistance to

man, can put forth against God. He never attempted to say No!' to the

princes of Judah, but he could say it again and again to his Father in

heaven. He could not but yield to the temptations which were level with

his eyes, and this poor creature, easily swayed by human allurements

and influences, could gather himself together, standing, as it were, on

his little pin point, and say to God, Thou dost call and I refuse.'

What a paradox, and yet repetitions of it are sitting in these pews,

only half aware that it is about them that I am speaking!

The ever-deepening evil which began with forsaking the house of the

Lord and serving Ashtaroth, ends with Joash steeping his hands in

blood. The murder of Zechariah was beyond the common count of crimes,

for it was a foul desecration of the Temple, an act of the blackest

ingratitude to the man who had saved his infant life, and put him on

the throne, an outrage on the claims of family connections, for Joash

and Zechariah were probably blood relations. My brother! once get your

foot upon that steep incline of evil, once forsake the path of what is

good and right and true, and you are very much like a climber who

misses his footing up among the mountain peaks, and down he slides till

he reaches the edge of the precipice and then in an instant is dashed

to pieces at the bottom. Once put your foot on that slippery slope and

you know not where you may fall to.

III. Last comes the final scene: The retribution.

We have that picture of Zechariah, solemnly lifting up his eyes to

heaven and committing his cause to God. The Lord look upon it and

require it,' says the martyr priest in the spirit of the old Law. The

dying appeal was soon answered in the invasion of the Syrian army, a

comparatively small company, into whose hands the Lord delivered a very

great host of the Israelites. The defeat was complete, and possibly

Joash's great diseases,' of which the narrative speaks, refer to wounds

received in the fight. The end soon comes, for two of his servants,

neither of them Hebrews, one being the son of an Ammonitess and the

other the son of a Moabitess, who were truer to his religion than he

had been, and resolved to revenge Zechariah's death, entered the room,

of the wounded king in the fortress whither he had retired to hide

himself after the fight, and slew him on his bed.' Imagine the grim

scene--the two men stealing in, the sick man there on the bed helpless,

the short ghastly struggle and the swift end. What an end for a life

with such a beginning!

Now I am not going to dwell on this retribution, inflicted on Joash, or

on that which comes to us if we are like him, through a loud-voiced

conscience, and a memory which, though it may be dulled and hushed to

sleep at present, is sure to wake some day here or yonder. But I

beseech you to ask yourselves what your outlook is. Be not deceived,

God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also

reap.' Is that all? Zechariah said, The Lord look upon it and require

it.' The great doctrine of retribution is true for ever. Yes; but our

Zechariah lifts up his eyes to heaven and he says, Father! forgive

them, for they know not what they do.' And so, dear brother! you and I,

trusting to that dear Lord, may have all our apostasy forgiven, and be

brought near by the blood of Christ. Let us say with the Apostle Peter,

Lord, to whom shall we go but to Thee? Thou hast the words of eternal

life.'

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GLAD GIVERS AND FAITHFUL WORKERS

And it came to pass after this, that Joash was minded to repair the

house of the Lord. 5. And he gathered together the priests and the

Levites, and said to them, go out unto the cities of Judah, and gather

of all Israel money to repair the house of your God from year to year,

and see that ye hasten the matter. Howbeit the Levites hastened it not.

6. And the king called for Jehoiada the chief, and said unto him, Why

hast thou not required of the Levites to bring in out of Judah and out

of Jerusalem the collection, according to the commandment of Moses the

servant of the Lord, and of the congregation of Israel, for the

tabernacle of witness' 7. For the sons of Athaliah, that wicked woman,

had broken up the house of God: and also all the dedicated things of

the house of the Lord did they bestow upon Baalim. 8. And at the king's

commandment they made a chest, and set it without at the gate of the

house of the Lord. 9. And they made a proclamation through Judah and

Jerusalem, to bring in to the Lord the collection that Moses the

servant of God laid upon Israel in the wilderness. 10. And all the

princes and all the people rejoiced, and brought in, and cast into the

chest, until they had made an end. 11. Now it came to pass, that at

what time the chest was brought unto the king's office by the hand of

the Levites, and when they saw that there was much money, the king's

scribe and the high priest's officer came and emptied the chest, and

took it, and carried it to his place again. Thus they did day by day,

and gathered money in abundance. 12. And the king and Jehoiada gave it

to such as did the work of the service of the house of the Lord, and

hired masons and carpenters to repair the house of the Lord, and also

such as wrought iron and brass to mend the house of the Lord. 13. So

the workmen wrought, and the work was perfected by them, and they set

the house of God in his state, and strengthened it. 11. And when they

had finished it, they brought the rest of the money before the king and

Jehoiada, whereof were made vessels for the house of the Lord, even

vessels to minister, and to offer withal, and spoons, and vessels of

gold and silver. And they offered burnt offerings in the house of the

Lord continually all the days of Jehoiada.'--2 CHRON. xxiv. 4-14.

Joash owed his life and his throne to the high-priest Jehoiada, who was

his uncle by marriage with the sister of Ahaziah, his father. Rescued

by his aunt when an infant, he was with them, hid in the house of God

six years,' and, when seven years old, was made king by Jehoiada's

daring revolt against that wicked woman,' Athaliah. Jehoiada's

influence was naturally paramount, and was as wholesome as strong. It

is remarkable, however, that this impulse to repair the Temple seems to

have originated with the king, not with the high-priest, though no

doubt the spirit which conceived the impulse was largely moulded by the

latter. The king, whose childhood had found a safe asylum in the

Temple, might well desire its restoration, even apart from

considerations of religion.

I. The story first brings into strong contrast the eager king, full of

his purpose, and the sluggards to whom he had to entrust its execution.

We can only guess the point in his reign at which Joash summoned the

priests to his help. It was after his marriage (ver. 3), and

considerably before the twenty-third year of his reign, at which time

his patience was exhausted (2 Kings xii. 6). Some years were apparently

wasted by the dawdling sluggishness of the priests, who, for some

reason or other, did not go into the proposed restoration heartily.

Joash seems to have suspected that they would push the work languidly;

for there is a distinct tinge of suspicion and whipping up' in his

injunction to hasten the matter.'

The first intention was to raise the funds by sending out the priests

and Levites to collect locally the statutory half-shekel, as well as

other contributions mentioned in 2 Kings xii. There we learn that each

collector was to go to his acquaintance.' The subscription was to be

spread over some years, and for a while Joash waited quietly; but in

the twenty-third year of his reign (see 2 Kings), he could stand delay

no longer. Whether the priests had been diligent in collecting or not,

they had done nothing towards repairing. Perhaps they found it

difficult to determine the proportion of the money which was needed for

the ordinary expenses of worship, and for the restoration fund; and, as

the former included their own dues and support, they would not be

likely to set it down too low. Perhaps they did not much care to carry

out a scheme which had not begun with themselves; for priests are not

usually eager to promote ecclesiastical renovations suggested by

laymen. Perhaps they did not care as much about the renovation as the

king did, and smiled at his earnestness as a pious imagining. Possibly

there was even deliberate embezzlement. But, at any rate, there was

half-heartedness, and that always means languid work, and that always

means failure. The earnest people are fretted continually by the

indifferent. Every good scheme is held back, like a ship with a foul

bottom, by the barnacles that stick to its keel and bring down its

speed. Professional ecclesiastics in all ages have succumbed to the

temptation of thinking that church property' was first of all to be

used for their advantage, and, secondarily, for behoof of God's house.

Eager zeal has in all ages to be yoked to torpid indifference, and to

drag its unwilling companion along, like two dogs in a leash. Direct

opposition is easier to bear than apparent assistance which tries to

slow down to half speed.

Joash's command is imperative on all workers for God. See that ye

hasten the matter,' for time is short, the fruit great, the evening

shadows lengthening, the interests at stake all-important, and the Lord

of the harvest will soon come to count our sheaves. Whatever work may

be done without haste, God's cannot be, and a heavy curse falls on him

who does the work of the Lord negligently.' The runner who keeps well

on this side of fatigue, panting, and sweat, has little chance of the

crown.

II. The next step is the withdrawal of the work from the sluggards.

They are relieved both of the collection and expenditure of the money.

Apparently (2 Kings xii. 9) the contributors handed their donations to

the doorkeepers, who put them into the chest with a hole in the lid of

it,' in the sight of the donors. The arrangement was not flattering to

the hierarchy, but as appearances were saved by Jehoiada's making the

chest (see 2 Kings) they had to submit with the best grace they could.

In our own times, we have seen the same thing often enough. When clergy

have maladministered church property, Parliament has appointed

ecclesiastical commissioners. Common sense prescribes taking slovenly

work out of lazy hands. The more rigidly that principle is carried out

in the church and the nation, at whatever cost of individual

humiliation, the better for both. The tools to the hands that can use

them' is the ideal for both. God's dealings follow the same law, both

in withdrawing opportunities of service and in giving more of such. The

reward for work is more work, and the punishment for sloth is

compulsory idleness.

III. We are next shown the glad givers. Probably suspicion had been

excited in others than the king, and had checked liberality. People

will not give freely if the expenses of the collectors' support swallow

up the funds. It is hard to get help for a vague scheme, which unites

two objects, and only gives the balance, after the first is provided

for, to the second and more important. So the whole nation, both high

and low, was glad when the new arrangement brought a clear issue, and

secured the right appropriation of the money.

No doubt, too, Joash's earnestness kindled others. Chronicles speaks

only of the tax,'--that is, the half-shekel,--but Kings mentions two

other sources, one of which is purely spontaneous gifts, and these are

implied by the tone of verse 10, which lays stress on the gladness of

the offerers. That is the incense which adds fragrance to our gifts.

Grudging service is no service, and money given for ever so religious a

purpose, without gladness because of the opportunity of giving, is not,

in the deepest sense, given at all. Love is a longing to give to the

beloved, and whoever truly loves God will know no keener delight than

surrender for His dear sake. Pecuniary contributions for religious

purposes afford a rough but real test of the depth of a man's religion;

but it is one available only for himself, since the motive, and not the

amount, is the determining element. We all need to bring our hearts

more under the Influence of God's love to us, that our love to Him may

be increased, and then to administer possessions, under the impulse to

glad giving which enkindled love will always excite. Super-heated steam

has most expansive power and driving force. These glad givers may

remind us not only of the one condition of acceptable giving, but also

of the need for clear and worthy objects, and of obvious

disinterestedness in those who seek for money to help good causes. The

smallest opening for suspicion that some of it sticks to the

collector's fingers is fatal, as it should be.

IV. Joash was evidently a business-like king. We next hear of the

precautions he took to secure the public confidence. There was a rough

but sufficient audit. When the chest grew heavy, and sounded full, two

officials received it at the king's office.' The Levites carried it

there, but were not allowed to handle the contents. The two tellers

represented the king and the chief priest, and thus both the civil and

religious authorities were satisfied, and each officer was a check on

the other. Public money should never be handled by a man alone; and an

honest one will always wish, like Paul, to have a brother associated

with him, that no man may blame him in his administration of it. If we

take day by day' literally, we have a measure of the liberality which

filled the chest daily; but, more probably, the expression simply means

from time to time,' when occasion required.

V. The application of the money is next narrated. In this Jehoiada is

associated with Joash, the king probably desiring to smooth over any

slight that might seem to have been put on the priests, as well as

being still under the influence of the high-priest's strong character

and early kindness. Together they passed over the results of the

contribution to the contractors, who in turn paid it in wages to the

workmen who repaired the fabric, such as masons and carpenters, and to

other artisans who restored other details, such as brass and iron work.

The Second Book of Kings tells us that Joash's cautious provision

against misappropriation seems to have deserted him at this stage; for

no account was required of the workmen, for they dealt faithfully.'

That is an indication of their goodwill. The humble craftsmen were more

reliable than the priests. They had, no doubt, given their half-shekel

like others, and now they gladly gave their work, and were not

hirelings, though they were hired. We, too, have to give our money and

our labour; and if our hearts are right, we shall give both with the

same conscientious cheerfulness, and, if we are paid in coin for our

work, will still do it for higher reasons and looking for other wages.

These Temple workmen may stand as patterns of what religion should do

for those of us whose lot is to work with our hands,--and not less for

others who have to toil with their brains, and the sweat of whose brow

is inside their heads. A Christian workman should be a faithful'

workman, and will be so if he is full of faith.

Joash knew when to trust and when to keep a sharp eye on men. His

experience with the priests had not soured him into suspecting

everybody. Cynical disbelief in honesty is more foolish and hurtful to

ourselves than even excessive trust. These workmen wrought all the more

faithfully because they knew that they were trusted, and in nine cases

out of ten men will try to live up to our valuation of them. The Rugby

boys used to say, It's a shame to tell Arnold a lie, he always believes

us.' Better to be cheated once than to treat the nine as

rogues,--better for them and better for ourselves.

Faithful' work is prosperous work. As verse 13 picturesquely says,

Healing went up upon the work'; and the Temple was restored to its old

fair proportions, and stood strong as before. Where there is

conscientious effort, God's blessing is not withheld. Labour in the

Lord' can never be empty labour, though even a prophet may often be

tempted, in a moment of weary despondency, to complain, I have laboured

in vain.' We may not see the results, nor have the workmen's joy of

beholding the building rise, course by course, under our hands, but we

shall see it one day, though now we have to work in the dark.

There seems a discrepancy between the statements in Chronicles and

Kings as to the source from which the cost of the sacrificial vessels

was defrayed, since, according to the former, it was from the

restoration fund, which is expressly denied by the latter. The

explanation seems reasonable, that, as Chronicles says, it was from the

balance remaining after all restoration charges were liquidated, that

this other expenditure was met. First, the whole amount was sacredly

devoted to the purpose for which it had been asked, and then, when the

honest overseers repaid the uncounted surplus, which they might have

kept, it was found sufficient to meet the extra cost of furnishing. God

blesses the faithful steward of his gifts with more than enough for the

immediate service, and the best use of the surplus is to do more with

it for Him. God is able to make all grace abound unto you; that ye,

having always all sufficiency in every thing, may abound unto every

good work, . . . being enriched in every thing unto all liberality.'

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PRUDENCE AND FAITH

And Amaziah said to the man of God, But what shall we do for the

hundred talents which I have given to the army of Israel? And the man

of God answered, The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.'--2

CHRON. xxv. 9.

The character of this Amaziah, one of the Kings of Judah, is summed up

by the chronicler in a damning epigram: He did that which was right in

the sight of the Lord, but not with a perfect heart.' He was one of

your half-and-half people, or, as Hosea says, a cake not turned,' burnt

black on one side, and raw dough on the other. So when he came to the

throne, in the buoyancy and insolence of youth, he immediately began to

aim at conquests in the neighbouring little states; and in order to

strengthen himself he hired a hundred thousand mighty men of valour'

out of Israel for a hundred talents of silver. To seek help from Israel

was, in a prophet's eyes, equivalent to flinging off help from God. So

a man of God comes to him, and warns him that the Lord is not with

Israel, and that the alliance is not permissible for him. But, instead

of yielding to the prophet's advice, he parries it with this misplaced

question, But what shall we do for the hundred talents that I have

given to the army of Israel?' He does not care to ask whether the

counsel that he is receiving is right or wrong, or whether what he is

intending to do is in conformity with, or in opposition to, the will of

God, but, passing by all such questions, at once he fastens on the

lower consideration of expediency--What is to become of me if I do as

this prophet would have me do? What a heavy loss one hundred talents

will be! It is too much to sacrifice to a scruple of that sort. It

cannot be done.'

A great many of us may take a lesson from this man. There are two

things in my text--a misplaced question and a triumphant answer: What

shall we do for the hundred talents?' The Lord is able to give thee

much more than this.' Now, remarkably enough, both question and answer

may be either very right or very wrong, according as they are taken,

and I purpose to look at those two aspects of each.

I. A misplaced question.

I call it misplaced because Amaziah's fault, and the fault of a great

many of us, was, not that he took consequences into account, but that

he took them into account at the wrong time. The question should have

come second, not first. Amaziah's first business should have been to

see clearly what was duty; and then, and not till then, the next

business should have been to consider consequences.

Consider the right place and way of putting this question. Many of us

make shipwreck of our lives because, with our eyes shut, we determine

upon some grand design, and fall under the condemnation of the man that

began to build, and was not able to finish.' He drew a great plan of a

stately mansion; and then found that he had neither money in the bank,

nor stones in his quarry, to finish it, and so it stood--a ruin. All

through our Lord's life He was engaged rather in repressing volunteers

than in soliciting recruits, and He from time to time poured a douche

of cold water upon swiftly effervescing desires to go after Him. When

the multitudes followed Him, He turned and said to them, If you are

counting on being My disciples, understand what it means: take up the

cross and follow Me.' When an enthusiastic man, who had not looked

consequences in the face, came rushing to Him and said: Lord, I will

follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest,' His answer to him was another

pull at the string of the shower bath: The Son of Man hath not where to

lay His head.' When the two disciples came to him and said: Grant that

we may sit, the one on Thy right hand and the other on Thy left, when

Thou comest into Thy kingdom,' He said: Are ye able to drink of the cup

that I drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized

withal?' Look the facts in the face before you make your election.

Jesus Christ will enlist no man under false pretences.

Recruiting-sergeants tell country bumpkins or city louts wonderful

stories of what they will get if they take the shilling and put on the

king's uniform; but Jesus Christ does not recruit His soldiers in that

fashion. If a man does not open his eyes to a clear vision of the

consequences of his actions, his life will go to water in all

directions. And there is no region in which such clear insight into

what is going to follow upon my determinations and the part that I take

is more necessary than in the Christian life. It is just because in

certain types of character, the word is received with joy,' and springs

up immediately, that when the sun is risen with a burning heat'--that

is, as Christ explains, when the pinch of difficulty comes--immediately

they fall away,' and all their grand resolutions go to nothing. Lightly

come, lightly go.' Let us face the facts of what is involved, in the

way of sacrifice, surrender, loss, if we determine to be on Christ's

side; and then, when the anticipated difficulties come, we shall

neither be perplexed nor swept away, but be able quietly to say, I

discounted it all beforehand; I knew it was coming.' The storm catches

the ship that is carrying full sail and expecting nothing but light and

favourable breezes; while the captain that looked into the weather

quarter and saw the black cloud beginning to rise above the horizon,

and took in his sails and made his vessel snug and tight, rides out the

gale. It is wisdom that becomes a man, to ask this question, if first

of all he has asked, What ought I to do?' But we have here an instance

of a right thing in a wrong place. It was right to ask the question,

but wrong to ask it at that point. Amaziah thought nothing about duty.

There sprang up in his mind at once the cowardly and ignoble thought: I

cannot afford to do what is right, because it will cost me a hundred

talents,' and that was his sin. Consequences may be, must be, faced in

anticipation, or a man is a fool. He that allows the clearest

perception of disagreeable consequences, such as pain, loss of ease,

loss of reputation, loss of money, or any other harmful results that

may follow, to frighten him out of the road that he knows he ought to

take, is a worse fool still, for he is a coward and recreant to his own

conscience.

We have to look into our own hearts for the most solemn and pressing

illustrations of this sin, and I daresay we all of us can remember

clear duties that we have neglected, because we did not like to face

what would come from them. A man in business will say, I cannot afford

to have such a high standard of morality; I shall be hopelessly run

over in the race with my competitors if I do not do as they do,' or he

will say, I durst not take a stand as an out-and-out Christian; I shall

lose connections, I shall lose position. People will laugh at me. What

am I to do for the hundred talents?' But we can find the same thing in

Churches. I do not mean to enter upon controversial questions, but as

an instance, I may remind you that one great argument that our friends

who believe in an Established Church are always bringing forward, is

just a modern form of Amaziah's question, What shall we do for the

hundred talents? How could the Church be maintained, how could its

ministrations be continued, if its State-provided revenues were

withdrawn or given up?' But it is not only Anglicans who put the

consideration of the consequences of obedience in the wrong place. All

the Churches are but too apt to let their eyes wander from reading the

plain precepts of the New Testament to looking for the damaging results

to be expected from keeping them. Do we not sometimes hear, as answer

to would-be reformers, We cannot afford to give up this, that, or the

other practice? We should not be able to hold our ground, unless we did

so-and-so and so-and-so.'

But not only individuals or Churches are guilty in this matter. The

nation takes a leaf out of Amaziah's book, and puts aside many plain

duties, for no better reason than that it would cost too much to do

them. What is the use of talking about suppressing the liquor traffic

or housing the poor? Think of the cost.' The hundred talents' block the

way and bribe the national conscience. For instance, the opium traffic;

how is it defended? Some attempt is made to prove either that we did

not force it upon China, or that the talk about the evils of opium is

missionary fanaticism, but the sheet-anchor is: How are we ever to

raise the Indian revenue if we give up the traffic?' That is exactly

Amaziah over again, come from the dead, and resurrected in a very ugly

shape.

So national policy and Church action, and--what is of far more

importance to you and me than either the one or the other,--our own

personal relation to Jesus Christ and discipleship to Him, have been

hampered, and are being hampered, just by that persistent and unworthy

attitude of looking at the consequences of doing plain duties, and

permitting ourselves to be frightened from the duties because the

consequences are unwelcome to us.

Prudence is all right, but when prudence takes command and presumes to

guide conscience, then it is all wrong. In some courts of law and in

certain cases, the judge has an assessor sitting beside him, an expert

about some of the questions that are involved. Conscience is the judge,

prudence the assessor. But if the assessor ventures up on the

judgment-seat, and begins to give the decisions which it is not his

business to give--for his only business is to give advice--then the

only thing to do with the assessor is to tell him to hold his tongue

and let the judge speak. It is no answer to the prophet's prohibition

to say, But what shall I do for the hundred talents?' A yet better

answer than the prophet gave Amaziah would have been, Never mind about

the hundred talents; do what is right, and leave the rest to God.'

However, that was not the answer.

II. The triumphant answer.

The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.' Now, this answer,

like the question, may be right or wrong, according as it is taken. In

what aspect is it wrong? In what sense is it not true? I suppose this

prophet did not mean more than the undeniable truth that God was able

to give Amaziah more than a hundred talents. He was not thinking of the

loftier meanings which we necessarily, as Christian people, at a later

stage of Revelation, and with a clearer vision of many things, attach

to the words. He simply meant, You will very likely get more than the

hundred talents that you have lost, if you do what pleases God.' He was

speaking from the point of view of the Old Testament; though even in

the Old Testament we have instances enough that prosperity did not

always attend righteousness. In the Old Testament we find the Book of

Job, and the Book of Ecclesiastes, and many a psalm, all of which were

written in order to grapple with the question, How is it that God does

not give the good man more than the hundred talents that he has lost

for the sake of being good?' It is not true, and it is a dangerous

mistake to suggest that it is true, that a man in this world never

loses by being a good, honest, consistent Christian. He often does lose

a great deal, as far as this world is concerned; and he has to make up

his mind to lose it, and it would be a very poor thing to say to him,

Now, live like a Christian man, and if you are flinging away money or

anything else because of your Christianity, you will get it back.' No;

you will not, in a good many cases. Sometimes you will, and sometimes

you will not. It does not matter whether you do or do not.

But the sense in which the triumphant answer of the prophet is true is

a far higher one. The Lord is able to give thee much more than

this,'--what is more'? a thousand talents? No; the much more' that

Christianity has educated us to understand is meant in the depths of

such a promise as this is, first of all, character. Every man that

sacrifices anything to convictions of duty gains more than he loses

thereby, because he gains an inward nobleness and strength, to say

nothing of the genial warmth of an approving conscience. And whilst

that is true in all regions of life, it is most especially true in

regard to sacrifices made from Christian principle. No matter how

disastrous may be the results externally, the inward results of

faithfulness are so much greater and sweeter and nobler than all the

external evil consequences that may follow, that it is good policy' for

a man to beggar himself for Christ's sake, for the sake of the durable

riches--which our Lord Himself explains to be synonymous with

righteousness--which will come thereby. He that wins strength and

Christ-likeness of character by sacrificing for Christ has won far more

than he can ever lose.

He wins not only character, but a fuller capacity for a fuller

possession of Jesus Christ Himself, and that is infinitely more than

anything that any man has ever sacrificed for the sake of that dear

Lord. Do you remember when it was that there was granted to the Apostle

John the vision of the throned Christ, and that he felt laid upon him

the touch of the vivifying Hand from Heaven? It was when I was in

Patmos for the Word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus.' He lost

Ephesus; he gained an open heaven and a visible Christ. Do you remember

who it was that said, I have suffered the loss of all things, and do

count them but dung, that I may win Christ'? It was a good bargain,

Paul! The balance-sheet showed a heavy balance to your credit. Debit,

all things'; credit, Christ.' The Lord is able to give thee much more

than this.'

Remember the old prophecy: For brass I will bring gold; and for iron,

silver.' The brass and the iron may be worth something, but if we

barter them away and get instead gold and silver, we are gainers by the

transaction. Fling out the ballast if you wish the balloon to rise. Let

the hundred talents go if you wish to get the more than this.' And

listen to the New Testament variation of this man of God's promise, If

thou wilt have treasure in heaven, go and sell all that thou hast, and

follow Me.'

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JOTHAM

So Jotham became mighty, because he prepared his ways before the Lord

his God.'--2 CHRON. xxvii 6.

This King Jotham is one of the obscurer of the Jewish monarchs, and we

know next to nothing about him. The most memorable event in his reign

is that in the year when King Uzziah,' his father, died,' and

consequently in Jotham's first year, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting in the

Temple on the empty throne, and had the lips which were to utter so

many immortal words touched with fire from the altar. Whether it were

the effect of the prophet's words, or from other causes, the little

that is told of him is good, and he is eulogised as having imitated his

father's God-pleasing acts, and not having stained himself by repeating

his father's sin. The rest that we hear of him in Chronicles is a mere

sketch of campaigns, buildings, and victories, and then he and his

reign are summed up in the words of our text, which is the analysis of

the man and the disclosure of the secret of his prosperity: He became

mighty, because he prepared his ways'--and, more than that, he prepared

them before the Lord his God.'

So then, if we begin, as it were, at the bottom, as we ought to do, in

studying a character, taking the deepest thing first, and laying hold

upon the seminal and germinal principle of the whole, this text reminds

us that--The secret of true strength lies in the continual recognition

that life is lived Before the Lord our God.'

Now to say, Walk thou before Me,' the command given to Abraham,

suggests a somewhat different modification of the idea from the

apparently parallel phrase, to walk with God' which is declared to have

been the life's habit of Enoch. The one expression suggests simple

companionship and communion; the other suggests rather the vivid and

continual realisation of the thought that we are ever in the great

Taskmaster's eye.' To walk before God is to feel thrillingly and

continually, and yet without being abased or crushed or discomposed,

but rather being encouraged and quickened and calmed and ennobled and

gladdened thereby: Thou God seest me.' It seems to me that one of the

plainest pieces of Christian duty, and, alas! one of the most neglected

of them, is the cultivation, definitely and consciously, by effort and

by self-discipline, of that consciousness as a present factor in all

our lives, and an influencing motive in everything that we do. If once

we could bring before the eye of our minds that great, blazing, white

throne, and Him that sits upon it, we should want nothing else to burn

up the commonplaces of life, and to flash its insignificance into

splendour and awfulness. We should want nothing else to lift us to a

solemn scorn of ills,' and to deliver us from the false sweetnesses and

fading delights that grow on the low levels of a sense-bound life!

Brethren! our whole life would be transformed and glorified, and we

should be different men and women if we ordered our ways as before the

Lord our God.' What meanness could live when we knew that it was seen

by those pure Eyes? How we should be ashamed of ourselves, of our

complaints, of our murmurings, of our reluctance to do our duty, of our

puerile regrets for vanished blessings, and of all the low cares and

desires that beset and spoil our lives, if once this thought, before

God,' were habitual with us, and we walked in it as in an atmosphere!

Why is it not? and might it not be? and if it might not, ought it not

to be? And what are we to say to Him whom we profess to love as our

Supreme Good, if all the day long the thought of Him seldom comes into

our minds, and if any triviality, held near the eye, is large enough

and bright enough to shut Him out from our sight? With deep ethical

significance and accuracy was the command given to Abraham as the sole,

all-sufficient direction for both inward and outward life: Walk before

Me and (so) be thou perfect.' For indeed the full realisation--adequate

and constant and solid enough to be a motive--of Thou God seest me,'

would be found to contain practical directions in regard to all moral

difficulties, and would unfailingly detect the evil, howsoever wrapped

up, and would carry in itself not only motive but impulse, not only law

but power to fulfil it. The Master's eye makes diligent servants. How

schoolboys bend themselves over their slates and quicken their effort

when the teacher is walking behind the benches! And how a gang of idle

labourers will buckle to the spade and tax their muscles in an

altogether different fashion when the overseer appears upon the field!

If we realised, as we should do, the presence in all our little daily

life of that great, sovereign Lord, there would be less skulking, less

superficially performed tasks, less jerry work put into our building;

more of our strength cast into all our work, and less of ourselves in

any of it.

Remember, too, how connected with this is another piece of effort

needful in the religious life, and suggested by the last words of this

text, Before the Lord his God.' Cultivate the habit of narrowing down

the general truths of religion to their relation to yourselves. Do not

be content with the Lord our God,' or the Lord the God of the whole

earth,' but put a my' in, and realise not only the presence of a divine

Inspector, but the closeness of the personal bond that unites to Him;

and the individual responsibility, in all its width and depth and

unshiftableness--if I may use such a word--which results therefrom. You

cannot shake off or step out of the tasks that the Lord your God' lays

upon you. You and He are as if alone in the world. Make Him your God by

choice, by your own personal acceptance of His authority and dependence

upon His power, and try to translate into daily life the great truth,

Thou God seest me,' and bring it to bear upon the veriest trifles and

smallest details.

Now the text follows the order of observation, so to speak, and

mentions the outward facts of Jotham's success before it goes deeper

and accounts for them. We have reversed the process and dealt first

with the cause. The spring of all lay in his conscious recognition of

his relation to God and God's to him. From that, of course, followed

that he prepared,' according to the Authorised Version, or ordered,'

according to the Revised Version, his ways.' There is an alternative

rendering of the word rendered prepared' or ordered' given in the

margin of the Authorised Version, which reads, established his ways.'

Both the ideas of ordering and establishing are contained in the word.

Now that fact, that the same word means both these, conveys a piece of

practical wisdom, which it will do us all good to note clearly and take

to heart. For it teaches us that whatever is ordered' is firm, and

whatever is disorderly, haphazard, done without the exercise of one's

mind on the act, being chaotic, is necessarily short-lived.

The ordered life is the established life. The life of impulse, chance,

passion, the life that is lived without choice and plan, without

reflection and consideration of consequences, the following of nature,

which some people tell us is the highest law, and which is woefully

likely to degenerate into following the lower nature, which ought not

to be followed, but covered and kept under hatches--such a life is sure

to be a topsy-turvy life, which, being based upon the narrowest point,

must, by the laws of equilibrium, topple over sooner or later. If you

would have your lives established, they must be ordered. You must bring

your brains to bear upon them, and you must bring more than brain, you

must bring to bear on every part of them the spiritual instincts that

are quickened by contact with the thought of the All-seeing God, and

let these have the ordering of them. Such lives, and only such, will

endure when all that seems shall suffer shock.' He that doeth the will

of God abideth for ever.'

But the lesson that is pressed upon us by this word, understood in the

other meanings of prepared' or ordered,' is that all our ways,' that

is, our practical life, our acts, direction of mind, habits, should be

regulated by continual consciousness of, and reference to, the

All-discerning Eye that looks down upon us, and the God in whose hands

our breath is, and whose are'--whether we make them so or not--all our

ways.' To translate that into less picturesque, and less forcible, but

more modern words, it is just this: You Christian people ought to make

it a point of duty to cultivate the habit of referring everything that

you do to the will and judgment of God. Take Him into account in

everything great or small, and in nothing say, Thus I will, thus I

command. My will shall stand instead of all other reasons'; but say,

Lord! by Thee and for Thee I try to do this'; and having done it, say,

Lord! the seed is sown in Thy name; bless Thou the springing thereof.'

Works thus begun, continued and ended, will never be put to confusion,

and ways' thus ordered will be established. A path of righteousness

like that can no more fail to be a way of peace than can God's throne

ever totter or fall. An ordered life in which He is consulted, and

which is all shaped at His bidding, and by His strength, and for His

dear name, will stand four-square to all the winds that blow,' and,

being founded upon a rock, will never fall.

But we may also note that in the strength of that thought, that we are

before the Lord our God, we shall best establish our ways in the sense

that we shall keep on steadily and doggedly on the path. Well begun may

be half ended, but there is often a long dreary grind before it is

wholly ended, and the last half of the march is the wearisome half. The

Bible has a great deal to say about the need of obstinate persistence

on the right road. Ye did run well, what did hinder you?' Cast not away

your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward.' We are made

partakers of Christ if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence

firm unto the end.' He that overcometh and keepeth My words unto the

end, to him will I give authority.' Lives which derive their impulse

from communion with God will not come to a dead stop half-way on their

road, like a motor the fuel of which fails; and it will be impossible

for any man to endure unto the end' and so to be heir of the

promise--the same shall be saved,' unless he draws his persistency from

Him who fainteth not, neither is weary' and who reneweth strength to

them that have no might' so that in all the monotonous levels they

shall walk and not faint,' and in all the crises, demanding brief

spurts of energy, they shall run and not be weary,' and at last shall

mount up with wings as eagles.' A path ordered and a path persisted in

ought to be the path of every Christian man.

The text finally tells of the prosperity and growing power which

attends such a course. Jotham became mighty.' That was simple outward

blessing. His kingdom prospered, and, according to the theocratic

constitution of Judah, faithfulness to God and material well-being went

together. You cannot apply these words, of course, to the outward lives

of Christians. It is no doubt true that Godliness is profitable for all

things,' but there are a great many other things besides the godliness

of the man that does them which determine whether a man's undertakings

shall prosper in the world's sense or not. It would be a pitiable thing

if the full revelation of God in Christ did not teach us Christians

more about the meaning and the worth of outward success and inward

prosperity than the Old Testament could teach. I hope we have learned

that lesson; at least, it is not the fault of our lesson book if we

have not. Although it is true that religion does make the best of both

worlds, it does not do so by taking the world's estimate of what its

best for to-day is, and giving a religious man that. Sometimes it does,

and sometimes it does not, and whether it does or no depends on other

considerations than the reality of the man's devotion. Good men are

often made better by being made sad and unsuccessful. And if they are

not bettered by adversity, it is not the fault of the discipline but of

the people who undergo it.

But though the husk of my text falls away--and we should thank God that

it has fallen away--the kernel of it is ever true. Whosoever will thus

root his life in the living thought of a loving, divine Eye being

perpetually upon him, and make that thought a motive for holiness and

loving obedience and effort after service, will find that the true

success, the only success and the only strength that are worth a man's

ambition to desire or his effort to secure, will assuredly be his. He

may be voted a failure as regards the world's prizes. But a man that

orders his ways,' and perseveres in ways thus ordered, before the Lord'

will for reward get more power to order his ways, and a purer and more

thrilling, less interrupted and more childlike vision of the Face that

looks upon him. God's eyes behold the upright,' and the upright behold

His eyes, and in the interchange of glances there is power; and in that

power is the highest reward for ordered lives. We shall get power to

do, power to bear, power to think aright, power to love, power to will,

power to behold, power to deny ourselves, power to become sons of God.'

This is the success of life, when out of all its changes, and by reason

of all its efforts, we realise more fully our filial possession of our

Father, and our Father's changeless love to us. We shall become mighty

with the might that is born of obedience and faith if we order our ways

before the Lord our God. The path of the just is as the shining light,

that shineth more and more until the noontide of the day.'

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COSTLY AND FATAL HELP

He sacrificed unto the gods of Damascus, which smote him: and he said,

Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I

sacrifice to them, that they may help me. But they were the ruin of

him, and of all Israel.'--2 CHRON. xxviii. 23.

Ahaz came to the throne when a youth of twenty. From the beginning he

reversed the policy of his father, and threw himself into the arms of

the heathen party. In a comparatively short reign of sixteen years he

stamped out the worship of God, and nearly ruined the kingdom.

He did not plunge into idolatry for want of good advice. The greatest

of the prophets stood beside him. Isaiah addressed to him remonstrances

which might have made the most reckless pause, and promises which might

have kindled hope and courage in the bosom of despair. Hosea in the

northern kingdom, Micah in Judah, and other less brilliant names were

amongst the stars which shone even in that dark night. But their light

was all in vain. The foolish lad had got the bit between his teeth,

and, like many another young man, thought to show his breadth' and his

spirit' by neglecting his father's counsellors, and abandoning his

father's faith. He was ready to worship anything that called itself a

god, always excepting Jehovah. He welcomed Baal, Moloch, Rimmon, and

many more with an indiscriminate eagerness that would have been

ludicrous if it had not been tragical. The more he multiplied his gods

the more he multiplied his sorrows, and the more he multiplied his

sorrows the more he multiplied his gods.

From all sides the invaders came. From north, northeast, east,

south-east, south, they swarmed in upon him. They tore away the fringes

of his kingdom; and hostile armies flaunted their banners beneath the

very walls of Jerusalem.

And then, in his despair, like a scorpion in a circle of fire, he

inflicted a deadly wound on himself by calling in the fatal help of

Assyria. Nothing loth, that warlike power responded, scattered his less

formidable foes, and then swallowed the prey which it had dragged from

between the teeth of the Israelites and Syrians. The result of Ahaz's

frantic appeals to false gods and faithless men may still be read on

the cuneiform inscriptions, where, amidst a long list of unknown

tributary kings, stands, with a Philistine on one side of him and an

Ammonite on the other, the shameful record, Ahaz of Judah.'

That was what came of forsaking the God of his fathers. It is a type of

what always has come, and always must come, of a godless life. That is

the point of view from which I wish to look at the story, and at these

words of my text which gather the whole spirit of it into one sentence.

I. First, then, let me ask you to notice how this narrative illustrates

for us the crowd of vain helpers to which a man has to take when he

turns his back upon God.

If we compare the narrative in our chapter with the parallel in the

Second Book of Kings, we get a very vivid picture of the strange medley

of idolatries which they introduced. Amongst Ahaz's new gods are, for

instance, the golden calves of Israel and the ferocious Moloch of

Ammon, to whom he sacrificed, passing through the fire at least one of

his own children. The ancient sacred places of the Canaanites, on every

high hill and beneath every conspicuous tree, again smoked with incense

to half-forgotten local deities. In every open space in Jerusalem he

planted a brand-new altar with a brand-new worship attendant upon it.

In the Temple, he brushed aside the altar that Solomon had made and put

up a new one, copied from one which he had seen at Damascus. The

importation of the Damascene altar, I suppose, meant, as our text tells

us, the importation of the Damascene gods along with it.

Side by side with that multiplication of false deities went the almost

entire neglect of the worship of Jehovah, until at last, as his reign

advanced and he floundered deeper into his troubles, the Temple was

spoiled, everything in it that could be laid hands upon was sent to the

melting-pot, to pay the Assyrian tribute; and then the doors were shut,

the lamps extinguished, the fire quenched on the cold altars, and the

silent Temple left to the bats and--the Shekinah; for God still abode

in the deserted house.

Further, side by side with this appealing all round the horizon to

whatsoever obscene and foul shape seemed to promise some help, there

went the foolish appeal to the northern invaders to come and aid him,

which they did, to his destruction. His whole career is that of a

godless and desperate man who will grasp at anything that offers

deliverance, and will worship any god or devil who will extricate him

from his troubles.

Is the breed extinct, think you? Is there any one among us who, if he

cannot get what he wants by fair ways, will try to get it by foul? Do

none of you ever bow down to Satan for a slice of the kingdoms of this

world? Ahaz has still plenty of brothers and sisters in all our

churches and chapels.

This story illustrates for us what, alas! is only too true, both on the

broad scale, as to the generation in which we live, and on the narrower

field of our own individual lives. Look at the so-called cultured

classes of Europe to-day; turning away, as so many of them are, from

the Lord God of their fathers; what sort of gods are they worshipping

instead? Scraps from Buddhism, the Vedas, any sacred books but the

Bible; quackeries, and charlatanism, arid dreams, and fragmentary

philosophies all pieced together, to try and make up a whole, instead

of the old-fashioned whole that they have left behind them. There are

men and women in many congregations who, in modern fashion, are doing

precisely the thing that Ahaz did--having abandoned Christianity, they

are trying to make up for it by hastily stitching together shreds and

patches that they have found in other systems. The garment is narrower

than that a man can wrap himself in it,' and a creed patched together

so will never make a seamless whole which can be trusted not to rend.

But look, further, how the same thing is true as to the individual

lives of godless men.

Many of us are trying to make up for not having the One by seeking to

stay our hearts on the many. But no accumulation of insufficiencies

will ever make a sufficiency. You may fill the heaven all over with

stars, bright and thickly set as those in the whitest spot in the

galaxy, and it will be night still. Day needs the sun, and the sun is

one, and when it comes the twinkling lights are forgotten. You cannot

make up for God by any extended series of creatures, any more than a

row of figures that stretched from here to Sirius and back again would

approximate to infinitude.

The very fact of the multitude of helpers is a sign that none of them

is sufficient. There is no end of cures' for toothache, that is to say

there is none. There is no end of helps for men that have abandoned

God, that is to say, every one in turn when it is tried, and the stress

of the soul rests upon it, gives, and is found to be a broken staff

that pierces the hand that leans upon it.

Consult your own experience. What is the meaning of the unrest and

distraction that mark the lives of most of the men in this generation?

Why is it that you hurry from business to pleasure, from pleasure to

business, until it is scarcely possible to get a quiet breathing time

for thought at all? Why is it but because one after another of your

gods have proved insufficient, and so fresh altars must be built for

fresh idolatries, and new experiments made, of which we can safely

prophesy the result will be the old one. We have not got beyond St.

Augustine's saying:--Oh, God! my heart was made for Thee, and in Thee

only doth it find repose.' The many idols, though you multiply them

beyond count, all put together will never make the One God. You are

seeking what you will never find. The many pearls that you seek will

never be enough for you. The true wealth is One, One pearl of great

price.'

II. So notice again how this story teaches the heavy cost of these

helpers' help.

Ahaz had, as he thought, two strings to his bow. He had the gods of

Damascus and of other lands on one hand, he had the king of Assyria on

another. They both of them exacted onerous terms before they would stir

a foot to his aid. As for the northern conqueror, all the wealth of the

king and of the princes and of the Temple was sent to Assyria as the

price of his hurtful help. As for the gods, his helpers, one of his

sons at least went into the furnace to secure their favour; and what

other sacrifices he may have made besides the sacrifice of his

conscience and his soul, history does not tell us. These were

considerable subsidies to have to be paid down before any aid was

granted.

Do you buy this world's help any cheaper, my brother? You get nothing

for nothing in that market. It is a big price that you have to pay

before these mercenaries will come to fight on your side. Here is a man

that succeeds in life,' as we call it. What does it cost him? Well! it

has cost him the suppression, the atrophy by disuse, of many capacities

in his soul which were far higher and nobler than those that have been

exercised in his success. It has cost him all his days; it has possibly

cost him the dying out of generous sympathies and the stimulating of

unwholesome selfishness. Ah! he has bought his prosperity very dear.

Political economists have much to say about the appreciation of gold.'

I think if people would estimate what they pay for it, in an immense

majority of cases, in treasure that cannot be weighed and stamped, they

would find it to be about the dearest thing in God's universe; and that

there are few men who make worse bargains than the men who give

themselves for worldly success, even when they receive what they give

themselves for.

There are some of you who know how much what you call enjoyment has

cost you. Some of us have bought pleasure at the price of innocence, of

moral dignity, of stained memories, of polluted imaginations, of an

incapacity to rise above the flesh: and some of us have bought it at

the price of health. The world has a way of getting more out of you

than it gives to you.

At the best, if you are not Christian men and women, whether you are

men of business, votaries of pleasure, seekers after culture and

refinement or anything else, you have given Heaven to get earth. Is

that a good bargain? Is it much wiser than that of a horde of naked

savages that sell a great tract of fair country, with gold-bearing

reefs in it, for a bottle of rum, and a yard or two of calico? What is

the difference? You have been fooled out of the inheritance which God

meant for you; and you have got for it transient satisfaction, and

partial as it is transient. If you are not Christian people, you have

to buy this world's wealth and goods at the price of God and of your

own souls. And I ask you if that is an investment which recommends

itself to your common sense. Oh! my brother; what shall it profit a man

if he gain the whole world, and lose himself?' Answer the question.

III. Lastly, we may gather from this story an illustration of the fatal

falsehood of the world's help.

Ahaz pauperised himself to buy the hireling swords of Assyria, and he

got them; but, as it says in the narrative, the king came unto him, and

distressed him, but strengthened him not.' He helped Ahaz at first. He

scattered the armies of which the king of Judah was afraid like chaff,

with his fierce and disciplined onset. And then, having driven them off

the bleeding prey, he put his own paw upon it, and growled Mine!' And

where he struck his claws there was little more hope of life for the

prostrate creature below him.

Ay! and that is what this world always does. In the case before us

there was providential guidance of the politics of the Eastern nations

in order to bring about these results; and we do not look for anything

of that sort. No! But there are natural laws at work today which are

God's laws, and which ensure the worthlessness of the help bought so

dear.

A godless life has at the best only partial satisfaction, and that

partial satisfaction soon diminishes. Even in laughter the heart is

sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.'

That is the experience of all men, and I need not dwell upon the

threadbare commonplaces which have survived from generation to

generation, because each generation in turn has found them so piteously

true, about the incompleteness and the fleetingness of all the joys and

treasures of this life. The awful power of habit, if there were no

other reason, takes the edge off all gratification except in so far as

God is in it. Nothing fully retains its power to satisfy. Nothing has

that power absolutely at any moment; but even what measure of it any of

our possessions or pursuits may have for a time, soon, or at all events

by degrees, passes away. The greater part of life is but like drinking

out of empty cups, and the cups drop from our hands. What one of our

purest and peacefullest poets said in his haste about all his kind is

true in spirit of all godless lives:--

We poets, in our youth, begin in gladness,

But thereof cometh, in the end, despondency and madness.'

Vanity of vanities! saith'--not the Preacher only, but the inmost heart

of every godless man and woman--vanity of vanities! all is vanity!'

And do not forget that, partial and transient as these satisfactions of

which I have been speaking are, they derive what power of helping and

satisfying is in them only from the silence of our consciences, and our

success in being able to shut out realities. One word, they say, spoken

too loud, brings down the avalanche, and beneath its white, cold death,

the active form is motionless and the beating heart lies still. One

word from conscience, one touch of an awakened reflectiveness, one

glance at the end--the coffin and the shroud and what comes after

these--slay your worldly satisfactions as surely as that falling snow

would crush some light-winged, gauzy butterfly that had been dancing at

the cliff's foot. Your jewellery is all imitation. It is well enough

for candle-light. Would you like to try the testing acid upon it? Here

is a drop of it. Know thou that for all these things God will bring

thee into judgment.' Does it smoke? or does it stand the test? Here is

another drop. This night thy soul shall be required of thee.' Does it

stand that test? My brother! do not be afraid to take in all the facts

of your earthly life, and do not pretend to satisfy yourselves with

satisfactions which dare not face realities, and shrivel up at their

presence.

These fatal helpers come as friends and allies, and they remain as

masters. Ahaz and a hundred other weak princes have tried the policy of

sending for a strong foreign power to scatter their enemies, and it has

always turned out one way. The foreigner has come and he has stopped.

The auxiliary has become the lord, and he that called him to his aid

becomes his tributary. Ay! and so it is with all the things of this

world. Here is some pleasant indulgence that I call to my help lightly

and thoughtlessly. It is very agreeable and does what I wanted with it,

and I try it again. Still it answers to my call. And then after a while

I say, I am going to give that up,' and I cannot, I have brought in a

master when I thought I was only bringing in an ally that I could

dismiss when I liked. The sides of the pit are very slippery; it is gay

travelling down them, but when the animal is trapped at the bottom

there is no possibility of getting up again. So some of you, dear

friends! have got masters in your delights, masters in your pursuits,

masters in your habits. These are your gods, these are your tyrants,

and you will find out that they are so, if ever, in your own strength,

you try to break away from them.

So let me plead with you. With some of you, perhaps, my voice, as a

familiar voice, that in some measure, however undeservedly, you trust,

may have influence. Let me plead with you--do not run after these

will-o'-the-wisps that will only lure you into destruction, but follow

the light of life which is Jesus Christ Himself. Do not take these

tyrants for your helpers, who will master you under pretence of aiding

you; and work their will of you instead of lightening your burden. The

same unwise and hopeless mode of life, which we have been describing

this evening by one symbolic illustration, as calling vain helpers to

our aid, was presented by Ahaz's great contemporary Isaiah, in words

which Ahaz himself may have heard, as striking a covenant with death,

and making lies our refuge.' Some of us, alas! have been doing that all

our lives. Let such hearken to the solemn words which may have rung in

the ears of this unworthy king. Judgment also will I lay to the line,

and righteousness to the plummet, and the hail shall sweep away the

refuge of lies.' I come to you, dear friends! to press on your

acceptance the true Guide and Helper--even Jesus Christ your Brother,

in whose single Self you will find all that you have vainly sought

dispersed at sundry times and in divers manners'--among creatures. Take

Him for your Saviour by trusting your whole selves to Him. He is the

Sacrifice by whose blood all our sins are washed away, and the

Indweller, by whose Spirit all our spirits are ennobled and gladdened.

I ask you to take Him for your Helper, who will never deceive you; to

call whom to our aid is to be secure and victorious for ever. Behold! I

lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious

cornerstone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make

haste.'

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A GODLY REFORMATION

Hezekiah began to reign when he was five and twenty years old, and he

reigned nine and twenty years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was

Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. 2. And he did that which was right

in the sight of the Lord, according to all that David his father had

done. 3. He in the first year of his reign, in the first mouth, opened

the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them. 4. And he

brought in the priests and the Levites, and gathered them together into

the east street, 5. And said unto them, Hear me, ye Levites; Sanctify

now yourselves, and sanctify the house of the Lord God of your fathers,

and carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place. 6. For our

fathers have trespassed, and done that which was evil in the eyes of

the Lord our God, and have forsaken Him, and have turned away their

faces from the habitation of the Lord, and turned their backs. 7. Also

they have shut up the doors of the porch, and put out the lamps, and

have not burnt incense, nor offered burnt-offerings in the holy place

unto the God of Israel. 8. Wherefore the wrath of the Lord was upon

Judah and Jerusalem, and He hath delivered them to trouble, to

astonishment, and to hissing, as ye see with your eyes. 9. For, lo, our

fathers have fallen by the sword; and our sons and our daughters and

our wives are in captivity for this. 10. Now it is in mine heart to

make a covenant with the Lord God of Israel, that His fierce wrath may

turn away from us. 11. My sons, be not now negligent: for the Lord hath

chosen you to stand before Him, to serve Him, and that ye should

minister unto Him, and burn incense.'--2 CHRON. xxix. 1-11.

Hezekiah, the best of the later kings, had the worst for his father,

and another almost as bad for his son. His own piety was probably

deepened by the mad extravagance of his father's boundless idolatry,

which brought the kingdom to the verge of ruin. Action and reaction are

equal and contrary. Saints grown amidst fashionable and deep corruption

are generally strong, and reformers usually arise from the midst of the

systems which they overthrow. Hezekiah came to a tottering throne and

an all but beggared nation, ringed around by triumphant enemies. His

brave young heart did not quail. He sought first the kingdom of God,

and His righteousness,' and of the two pressing needs for Judah,

political peace and religious purity, he began with the last. The Book

of Kings tells at most length the civil history; the Book of

Chronicles, as usual, lays most stress on the ecclesiastical. The two

complete each other. The present passage gives a beautiful picture of

the vigorous, devout young king setting about the work of reformation.

We may note, first, his prompt action. Joash had to whip up the

reluctant priests with his See that ye hasten the matter!' Hezekiah

lets no grass grow under his feet, but begins his reforms with his

reign. The first month' (ver. 3) possibly, indeed, means the first

month of the calendar, not of Hezekiah, who may have come to the throne

in the later part of the Jewish year; but, in any case, no time was

lost. The statement in verse 3 may be taken as a general resume of what

follows in detail, but this vigorous speech to the priests was clearly

among the new king's first acts. No doubt his purpose had slowly grown

while his father was affronting Heaven with his mania for idols. Such

decisive, swift action does not come without protracted, previous

brooding. The hidden fires gather slowly in the silent crater, however

rapidly they burst out at last.

We can never begin good things too early, and when we come into new

positions, it is always prudence as well as bravery to show our colours

unmistakably from the first. Many a young man, launched among fresh

associations, has been ruined because of beginning with temporising

timidity. It is easier to take the right standing at first than to

shift to it afterwards. Hezekiah might have been excused if he had

thought that the wretched state of political affairs left by Ahaz

needed his first attention. Edomites on the east, Philistines on the

west and south, Syrians and Assyrians on the north, compassed him about

like bees,' and worldly prudence would have said, Look after these

enemies today, and the Temple tomorrow.' He was wiser than that,

knowing that these were effects of the religious corruption, and so he

went at that first. It is useless trying to mend a nation's fortunes

unless you mend its morals and religion.

And there are some things which are best done quickly, both in

individual and national life. Leaving off bad habits by degrees is not

hopeful. The only thing to be done is to break with them utterly and at

once. One strong, swift blow, right through the heart, kills the wild

beast. Slighter cuts may make him bleed to death, but he may kill you

first. The existing state was undeniably sinful. There was no need for

deliberation as to that. Therefore there was no reason for delay. Let

us learn the lesson that, where conscience has no doubts, we should

have no dawdling. I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy

commandment.'

Note, too, in Hezekiah's speech, the true order of religious

reformation. The priests and Levites were not foremost in it, as indeed

is only too often the case with ecclesiastics in all ages. Probably

many of them had been content to serve Ahaz as priests of his multiform

idolatry. At all events, they needed sanctifying,' though no doubt the

word is here used in reference to merely ceremonial uncleanness. Still

the requirement that they should cleanse themselves before they

cleansed the Temple has more than ceremonial significance. Impure hands

are not fit for the work of religious reformation, though they have

often been employed in it. What was the weakness of the Reformation but

that the passions of princes and nobles were so soon and generally

enlisted for it, and marred it? He that enters into the holy place,

especially if his errand be to cleanse it, must have clean hands, and a

pure heart.' The hands that wielded the whip of small cords, and drove

out the money-changers, were stainless, and therefore strong. Some of

us are very fond of trying to set churches to rights. Let us begin with

ourselves, lest, like careless servants, we leave dirty finger-marks

where we have been cleaning.'

The next point in the speech is the profound and painful sense of

existing corruption. Note the long-drawn-out enumeration of evils in

verses 6 and 7, starting with the general recognition of the father's

trespass, advancing to the more specific sin of forsaking Him and His

house, and dwelling, finally, as with fascinated horror, on all the

details of closed shrine and quenched lamps and cold altars. The

historical truth of the picture is confirmed by the close of the

previous chapter, and its vividness shows how deeply Hezekiah had felt

the shame and sin of Ahaz. It is not easy to keep clear of the

influence of prevailing corruptions of religion. Familiarity weakens

abhorrence, and the stained embodiments of the ideal hide its purity

from most eyes. But no man will be God's instrument to make society,

the church, or the home, better, unless he feels keenly the existing

evils. We do not need to cherish a censorious spirit, but we do need to

guard against an unthinking acquiescence in the present state of

things, and a self-complacent reluctance to admit their departure from

the divine purpose for the church. There is need to-day for a like

profound consciousness of evil, and like efforts after new purity. If

we individually lived nearer God, we should be less acclimatised to the

Church's imperfections. No doubt Hezekiah's clear sight of the

sinfulness of the idolatry so universal round him was largely owing to

Isaiah's influence. Eyes which have caught sight of the true King of

Israel, and of the pure light of His kingdom, will be purged to discern

the sore need for purifying the Lord's house.

The clear insight into the national sin gives as clear understanding of

the national suffering. Hezekiah speaks, in verses 8 and 9, as the Law

and the Prophets had been speaking for centuries, and as God's

providence had been uttering in act all through the national history.

But so slow are men to learn familiar truths that Ahaz had grasped at

idol after idol to rescue him; but they were the ruin of him, and of

all Israel.' How difficult it is to hammer plain truths, even with the

mallet of troubles, into men's heads! How blind we all are to the

causal connection between sin and sorrow! Hezekiah saw the iron link

uniting them, and his whole policy was based upon that wherefore.' Of

course, if we accept the Biblical statements as to the divine dealing

with Israel and Judah, obedience and disobedience were there followed

by reward and suffering more certainly and directly than is now the

case in either national or individual life. But it still remains true

that it is a bitter' as well as an evil' thing to depart from the

living God. If we would find the cause of our own or of a nation's

sorrows, we had better begin our search among our or its sins.

That phrase an astonishment, and an hissing' (ver. 8) is new. It

appears for the first time in Micah (Micah vi. l6), and he, we know,

exercised influence on Hezekiah (Jer. xxvi. 18, 19). Perhaps the king

is here quoting the prophet.

The exposition of the sin and its fruit is followed by the king's

resolve for himself, and, so far as may be, for his people. The phrase

it is in my heart' expresses fixed determination, not mere wish. It is

used by David and of him, in reference to his resolve to build the

Temple. To make a covenant' probably means to renew the covenant, made

long ago at Sinai, but broken by sin. The king has made up his mind,

and announces his determination. He does not consult priests or people,

but expects their acquiescence. So, in the early days of Christianity,

the conversion' of a king meant that of his people. Of course, the

power of the kings of Israel and Judah to change the national religion

at their pleasure shows how slightly any religion had penetrated, and

how much, at the best, it was a matter of mere ceremonial worship with

the masses. People who worshipped Ahaz's rabble of gods and godlings

to-day because he bade them, and Hezekiah's God to-morrow, had little

worship for either, and were much the same through all changes.

Hezekiah was in earnest, and his resolve was none the less right

because it was moved by a desire to turn away the fierce anger of the

Lord. Dread of sin's consequences and a desire to escape these is no

unworthy motive, however some superfine moralists nowadays may call it

so. It is becoming unfashionable to preach the terror of the Lord.' The

more is the pity, and the less is the likelihood of persuading men.

But, however kindled, the firm determination (which does not wait for

others to concur) that As for me, I will serve the Lord,' is the grand

thing for us all to imitate. That strong young heart showed itself

kingly in its resolve, as it had shown itself sensitive to evil and

tender in contemplating the widespread sorrow. If we would brace our

feeble wills, and screw them to the sticking-point of immovable

determination to make a covenant with God, let us meditate on our

departures from Him, the Lover and Benefactor of our souls, and on the

dreadfulness of His anger and the misery of those who forsake Him.

Once more the king turns to the priests. He began and he finishes with

them, as if he were not sure of their reliableness. His tone is kindly,

My sons,' but yet monitory. They would not have been warned against

negligence' unless they had obviously needed it, nor would they have

been stimulated to their duties by reminding them of their

prerogatives, unless they had been apt to slight these. Officials,

whose business is concerned with the things of God, are often apt to

drop into an easy-going pace. Negligent work may suit unimportant

offices, but is hideously inconsistent with the tasks and aims of God's

servants. If there is any work which has to be done with both hands,

earnestly,' it is theirs. Unless we put all our strength into it, we

shall get no good for ourselves or others out of it. The utmost tension

of all powers, the utmost husbanding of every moment, is absolutely

demanded by the greatness of the task; and the voice of the great

Master says to all His servants, My sons, be not now negligent.' Ungirt

loins and unlit lamps are fatal.

We should meditate, too, on the prerogatives and lofty offices to which

Christ calls those who love Him; not to minister to self-complacency,

as if we were so much better than other men, but to deepen our sense of

responsibility, and stir us to strenuous efforts to be what we are

called to be. If Christian people thought more earnestly on what Jesus

Christ means them to be to the world, they would not so often

counterwork His purpose and shirk their own duties. Crowns are heavy to

wear. Gifts are calls to service. If we are chosen to be His ministers,

we have solemn responsibilities. If we are to burn incense before Him,

our censers need to be bright and free from strange fire. If we are the

lights of the world, our business is to shine.

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SACRIFICE RENEWED

Then they went in to Hezekiah the king, and said, We have cleansed all

the house of the Lord, and the altar of burnt-offering, with all the

vessels thereof, and the shew-bread table, with all the vessels

thereof. 19. Moreover, all the vessels, which king Ahaz in his reign

did cast away in his transgression, have we prepared and sanctified,

and, behold, they are before the altar of the Lord. 20. Then Hezekiah

the king rose early, and gathered the rulers of the city, and went up

to the house of the Lord. 21. And they brought seven bullocks, and

seven rams, and seven lambs, and seven he goats, for a sin-offering for

the kingdom, and for the sanctuary, and for Judah. And he commanded the

priests, the sons of Aaron, to offer them on the altar of the Lord. 22.

So they killed the bullocks, and the priests received the blood, and

sprinkled it on the altar: likewise, when they had killed the rams,

they sprinkled the blood upon the altar: they killed also the lambs,

and they sprinkled the blood upon the altar. 23. And they brought forth

the he goats for the sin-offering before the king and the congregation;

and they laid their hands upon them. 24. And the priests killed them,

and they made reconciliation with their blood upon the altar, to make

an atonement for all Israel: for the king commanded that the

burnt-offering and the sin-offering should be made for all Israel. 25.

And he set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with

psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and

of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the

commandment of the Lord by His prophets. 26. And the Levites stood with

the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. 27. And

Hezekiah commanded to offer the burnt-offering upon the altar. And when

the burnt-offering began, the song of the Lord began also with the

trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel.

28. And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the

trumpeters sounded: and all this continued until the burnt-offering was

finished. 29. And when they had made an end of offering, the king and

all that were present with him bowed themselves, and worshipped. 30.

Moreover, Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to

sing praises unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the

seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads

and worshipped. 31. Then Hezekiah answered and said, Now ye have

consecrated yourselves unto the Lord, come near, and bring sacrifices

and thank-offerings into the house of the Lord. And the congregation

brought in sacrifices and thank-offerings; and as many as were of a

free heart burnt offerings.'--2 CHRON. xxix. 18-31.

Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, had wallowed in idolatry, worshipping any and

every god but Jehovah. He had shut up the Temple, defiled the sacred

vessels, and made him altars in every corner of Jerusalem.' And the

result was that he brought the kingdom very near ruin, was not allowed

to be buried in the tombs of the kings, and left his son a heavy task

to patch up the mischief he had wrought. Hezekiah began at the right

end of his task. In the first year of his reign, in the first month,'

he set about restoring the worship of Jehovah. The relations with Syria

and Damascus would come right if the relations with Judah's God were

right. First things first' was his motto, and perhaps he discerned the

true sequence more accurately than some great political pundits do

nowadays. So neglected had the Temple been that a strong force of

priests and Levites took a fortnight to carry forth the filthiness out

of the holy place to the brook Kidron,' and to cleanse and ceremonially

sanctify the sacred vessels. Then followed at once the re-establishment

of the Temple worship, which is narrated in the passage.

The first thing to be noted is that the whole movement back to Jehovah

was a one-man movement. It was Hezekiah's doing and his only. No priest

is named as prominent in it, and the slowness of the whole order is

especially branded in verse 34. No prophet is named; was there any one

prompting the king? Perhaps Isaiah did, though his chapter i. with its

scathing repudiation of the burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed

beasts,' suggests that he did not think the restoration of sacrifice so

important as that the nation should cease to do evil and learn to do

well.' The people acquiesced in the king's worship of Jehovah, as they

had acquiesced in other kings' worship of Baal or Moloch or Hadad. When

kings take to being religious reformers, they make swift converts, but

their work is as slight as it is speedy, and as short-lived as it is

rapid. Manasseh was Hezekiah's successor, and swept away all his work

after twenty-nine years, and apparently the mass of his people followed

him just as they had followed Hezekiah. Religion must be a matter of

personal conviction and individual choice. Imposed from without, or

adopted because other people adopt it, it is worthless.

Another point to notice is that Hezekiah's reformation was mainly

directed to ritual, and does not seem to have included either theology

or ethics. Was be quite right in his estimate of what was the first

thing? Isaiah, in the passage already referred to, does not seem to

think so. To him, as to all the prophets, foul hands could not bring

acceptable sacrifices, and worship was an abomination unless preceded

by obedience to the command: Put away the evil of your doings from

before Mine eyes.' The filth in the hearts of the men of Judah was more

rank, and smelt to heaven' more offensively, than that in the Temple,

which took sixteen days to shovel into Kidron. No doubt ceremonial

bulked more largely in the days of the Old Covenant than it does in

those of the New, and both the then stage of revelation and the then

spiritual stature of the recipients of revelation required that it

should do so. But the true religious reformers, the prophets, were

never weary of insisting that, even in those days, moral and spiritual

reformation should come first, and that unless it did, ritual worship,

though it were nominally offered to Jehovah, was as abhorrent to Him as

if it had been avowedly offered to Baal. Not a little so-called

Christian worship today, judged by the same test, is as truly heathen

superstition as if it had been paid to Mumbo-Jumbo.

But when all deductions have been made, the scene depicted in the

passage is not only an affecting, but an instructive one. Strangely

unlike our notions of worship, and to us almost repulsive, must have

been the slaying of three hundred and seventy animals and the offering

of them as burnt offerings. Try to picture the rivers of blood, the

contortions of the dumb brutes, the priests bedaubed with gore, the

smell of the burnt flesh, the blare of the trumpets, the shouts of the

worshippers, the clashing cymbals, and realise what a world parts it

from They went up into the upper chamber where they were abiding . . .

these all with one accord continued steadfastly in prayer, with the

women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren'! Sacrifice

has been the essential feature in all religions before Christ. It has

dropped out of worship wherever Christ has been accepted. Why? Because

it spoke of a deep, permanent, universal need, and because Christ was

recognised as having met the need. People who deny the need, and people

who deny that Jesus on the Cross has satisfied it, may be invited to

explain these two facts, written large on the history of humanity.

That brings us to the most important aspect of Hezekiah's great

sacrifice. It sets forth the stages by which men can approach to God.

It is symbolic of spiritual facts, and prophetic of Christ's work and

of our way of coming to God through Him. The first requisite for

Judah's return to Jehovah, whom they had forsaken, was the presentation

of a sin offering.' The king and the congregation laid their hands on

the heads of the goats, thereby, as it were, transferring their own

sinful personality to them. Thus laden with the nation's sins, they

were slain, and in their death the nation, as it were, bore the penalty

of its sin. Representation and substitution were dramatised in the

sacrifice. The blood sprinkled on the altar (which had previously been

sanctified' by sprinkling of blood, and so made capable of presenting

what touched it to Jehovah), made atonement for all Israel.' We note in

passing the emphasis of Israel' here, extending the benefit of the

sacrifice to the separated tribes of the Northern Kingdom, in a gush of

yearning love and desire that they, too, might be reconciled to

Jehovah. And is not this the first step towards any man's

reconciliation with God? Is not

My faith would lay her hand

On that dear head of Thine,'

the true expression of the first requisite for us all? Jesus is the

sin-offering for the world. In His death He bears the world's sin. His

blood is presented to God, and if we have associated ourselves with Him

by faith, that blood sprinkled on the altar covers all our sins.

Then followed in this parabolic ceremonial the burnt offering. And that

is the second stage of our return to God, for it expresses the

consecration of our forgiven selves, as being consumed by the holy and

blessed fire of a self-devotion, kindled by the unspeakable gift,'

which fire, burning away all foulness, will make us tenfold ourselves.

That fire will burn up only our bonds, and we shall walk at liberty in

it. And that burnt-offering will always be accompanied with the song of

Jehovah,' and the joyful sound of the trumpets and the instruments of

David.' The treasures of Christian poetry have always been inspired by

the Cross, and the consequent rapture of self-surrender. Calvary is the

true fountain of song.

The last stage in Hezekiah's great sacrifice was thank-offerings,'

brought by as many as were of a willing heart.' And will not the

self-devotion, kindled by the fire of love, speak in daily life by

practical service, and the whole activities of the redeemed man be a

long thank-offering for the Lamb who bears away the sins of the world'?

And if we do not thus offer our whole lives to God, how shall we

profess to have taken the priceless benefit of Christ's death? Hezekiah

followed the order laid down in the Law, and it is the only order that

leads to the goal. First, the atoning sacrifice of the slain Lamb;

next, our identification with Him and it by faith; then the

burnt-offering of a surrendered self, with the song of praise sounding

ever through it; and last, the life of service, offering all our works

to God, and so reaching the perfection of life on earth and antedating

the felicities of heaven.

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A LOVING CALL TO REUNION

And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to

Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the Lord at

Jerusalem, to keep the passover unto the Lord God of Israel. 2. For the

king had taken counsel, and his princes, and all the congregation in

Jerusalem, to keep the passover in the second month. 3. For they could

not keep it at that time, because the priests had not sanctified

themselves sufficiently, neither had the people gathered themselves

together to Jerusalem. 4. And the thing pleased the king and all the

congregation. 5. So they established a decree to make proclamation

throughout all Israel, from Beersheba even to Dan, that they should

come to keep the passover unto the Lord God of Israel at Jerusalem: for

they had not done it of a long time in such sort as it was written. 6.

So the posts went with the letters from the king and his princes

throughout all Israel and Judah, and according to the commandment of

the king, saying, Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the Lord God

of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and he will return to the remnant of

you, that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria. 7. And

be not ye like your fathers, and like your brethren, which trespassed

against the Lord God of their fathers, who therefore gave them up to

desolation, as ye see. 8. Now, be ye not stiffnecked, as your fathers

were, but yield yourselves unto the Lord, and enter into His sanctuary,

which He hath sanctified for ever: and serve the Lord your God, that

the fierceness of His wrath may turn away from you. 9. For if ye turn

again unto the Lord, your brethren and your children shall find

compassion before them that lead them captive, so that they shall come

again into this land: for the Lord your God is gracious and merciful,

and will not turn away His face from you, if ye return unto Him. 10. So

the posts passed from city to city through the country of Ephraim and

Manasseh, even unto Zebulun: but they laughed them to scorn, and mocked

them. 11. Nevertheless divers of Asher and Manasseh and of Zebulun

humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem. 12. Also in Judah the hand

of God was to give them one heart to do the commandment of the king and

of the princes, by the word of the Lord. 13. And there assembled at

Jerusalem much people to keep the feast of unleavened bread in the

second month, a very great congregation.'--2 CHRON. xxx. 1-13.

The date of Hezekiah's passover is uncertain, for, while the immediate

connection of this narrative with the preceding account of his

cleansing the Temple and restoring the sacrificial worship suggests

that the passover followed directly on those events, which took place

at the beginning of the reign, the language employed in the message to

the northern tribes (vers. 6, 7, 9) seems to imply the previous fall of

the kingdom of Israel, If so, this passover did not occur till after

721 B.C., the date of the capture of Samaria, six years after

Hezekiah's accession.

The sending of messengers from Jerusalem on such an errand would

scarcely have been possible if the northern kingdom had still been

independent. Perhaps its fall was thought by Hezekiah to open the door

to drawing the remnant that were escaped' back to the ancient unity of

worship, at all events, if not of polity. No doubt a large number had

been left in the northern territory, and Hezekiah may have hoped that

calamity had softened their enmity to his kingdom, and perhaps touched

them with longings for the old worship. At all events, like a good man,

he will stretch out a hand to the alienated brethren, now that evil

days have fallen on them. The hour of an enemy's calamity should be our

opportunity for seeking to help and proffering reconciliation. We may

find that trouble inclines wanderers to come back to God.

The alteration of the time of keeping the passover from the thirteenth

day of the first month to the same day of the second was in accordance

with the liberty granted in Numbers ix. 10, 11, to persons unclean by

contact with a dead body or in a journey afar off.' The decision to

have the passover was not taken in time to allow of the necessary

removal of uncleanness from the priests nor of the assembling of the

people, and therefore the permission to defer it for a month was taken

advantage of, in order to allow full time for the despatch of the

messengers and the journeys of the farthest northern tribes. It is to

be observed that Hezekiah took his subjects into counsel, since the

step intended was much too great for him to venture on of his own mere

motion. So the overtures went out clothed with the authority of the

whole kingdom of Judah. It was the voice of a nation that sought to woo

back the secessionists.

The messengers were instructed to supplement the official letters of

invitation with earnest entreaties as from the king, of which the gist

is given in verses 6-9. With the skill born of intense desire to draw

the long-parted kingdoms together, the message touches on ancestral

memories, recent bitter experiences, yearnings for the captive

kinsfolk, the instinct of self-preservation, and rises at last into the

clear light of full faith in, and insight into, God's infinite heart of

pardoning pity.

Note the very first words, Ye children of Israel,' and consider the

effect of this frank recognition of the northern kingdom as part of the

undivided Israel. Such recognition might have been misunderstood or

spurned when Samaria was gay and prosperous; but when its palaces were

desolate, the effect of the old name, recalling happier days, must have

been as if the elder brother had come out from the father's house and

entreated the prodigal to come back to his place at the fireside. The

battle would be more than half won if the appeal that was couched in

the very name of Israel was heeded.

Note further how firmly and yet lovingly the sin of the northern

kingdom is touched on. The name of Jehovah as the God of Abraham,

Isaac, and Israel, recalls the ancient days when the undivided people

worshipped Him, and the still more ancient, and, to hearers and

speakers alike, more sacred, days when the patriarchs received wondrous

tokens that He was their God, and they were His people; while the

recurrence of Israel' as the name of Jacob adds force to its previous

use as the name of all His descendants. The possible rejection of the

invitation, on the ground which the men of the north, like the

Samaritan woman, might have taken, that they were true to their

fathers' worship, is cut away by the reminder that that worship was an

innovation, since the fathers of the present generation had been

apostate from the God of their fathers. The appeal to antiquity often

lands men in a bog because it is not carried far enough back. The

fathers' may lead astray, but if the antiquity to which we appeal is

that of which the New Testament is the record, the more conservative we

are, the nearer the truth shall we be.

Again, the message touched on a chord that might easily have given a

jarring note; namely, the misfortunes of the kingdom. But it was done

with so delicate a hand, and so entirely without a trace of rejoicing

in a neighbour's calamities, that no susceptibilities could be ruffled,

while yet the solemn lesson is unfalteringly pointed. He gave them up

to desolation, as ye see.' Behind Assyria was Jehovah, and Israel's

fall was not wholly explained by the disparity between its strength and

the conquerors'. Under and through the play of criminal ambition,

cruelty, and earthly politics, the unseen Hand wrought; and the

teaching of all the Old Testament history is condensed into that one

sad sentence, which points to facts as plain as tragical. In deepest

truth it applies to each of us; for, if we trespass against God, we

draw down evil on our heads with both hands, and shall find that sin

brings the worst desolation--that which sheds gloom over a godless

soul.

We note further the deep true insight into God's character and ways

expressed in this message. There is a very striking variation in the

three designations of Jehovah as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel'

(ver. 6), the god of their [that is, the preceding generation] fathers'

(ver. 7), and your God' (ver. 8). The relation which had subsisted from

of old had not been broken by man's apostasy, Jehovah still was, in a

true sense, their God, even if His relation to them only bound Him not

to leave them unpunished. So their very sufferings proved them His, for

What son is he whom the father chasteneth not?' But strong, sunny

confidence in God shines from the whole message, and reaches its climax

in the closing assurance that He is merciful and gracious. The evil

results of rebellion are not omitted, but they are not dwelt on. The

true magnet to draw wanderers back to God is the loving proclamation of

His love. Unless we are sure that He has a heart tender with all pity,

and open as day to melting charity,' we shall not turn to Him with our

hearts.

The message puts the response which it sought in a variety of ways;

namely, turning to Jehovah, not being stiff-necked, yielding selves to

Jehovah, entering into His sanctuary. More than outward participation

in the passover ceremonial is involved. Submission of will, abandonment

of former courses of action, docility of spirit ready to be directed

anywhere, the habit of abiding with God by communion--all these, the

standing characteristics of the religious life, are at least suggested

by the invitations here. We are all summoned thus to yield ourselves to

God, and especially to do so by surrendering our wills to Him, and to

enter into His sanctuary,' by keeping up such communion with Him as

that, however and wherever occupied, we shall still dwell in the house

of the Lord all the days of our lives.'

And the summons to return unto God is addressed to us all even more

urgently than to Israel. God Himself invites us by the voice of His

providences, by His voice within, and by the voice of Jesus Himself,

who is ever saying to each of us, by His death and passion, by His

resurrection and ascension, Turn ye! turn ye! why will ye die?' and who

has more than endorsed Hezekiah's messengers' assurance that Jehovah

will not turn away His face from' us by His own gracious promise, Him

that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.'

The king's message met a mingled reception. Some mocked, some were

moved and accepted. So, alas! is it with the better message, which is

either a savour of life unto life or of death unto death.' The same

fire melts wax and hardens clay. May it be with all of us as it was in

Judah--that we have one heart, to do the commandment' and to accept the

merciful summons to the great passover!

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A STRANGE REWARD FOR FAITHFULNESS

After these things, and the establishment thereof, Sennacherib, king of

Assyria, came.'--2 CHRON. xxxii. 1.

The Revised Version gives a much more accurate and significant

rendering of a part of these words. It reads: After these things and

this faithfulness, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came.' What are these

things' and this faithfulness'? The former are the whole of the events

connected with the religious reformation in Judah, which King Hezekiah

inaugurated and carried through so brilliantly and successfully. This

faithfulness' directly refers to a word in a couple of verses before

the text: Thus did Hezekiah throughout all Judah; and he wrought that

which was good and right and faithfulness before the Lord his God.'

And, after these things, the re-establishment of religion and this

faithfulness,' though Hezekiah was perfect before God in all ritual

observances and in practical righteousness, and though he was seeking

the Lord his God with all his heart, here is what came of it:--After

this faithfulness came' not blessings or prosperity, but Sennacherib,

king of Assyria'! The chronicler not only tells this as singular, but

one can feel that he is staggered by it. There is a tone of perplexity

and wonder in his voice as he records that this was what followed the

faithful righteousness and heart-devotion of the best king that ever

sat on the throne of Judah. I think that this royal martyr's experience

is really a mirror of the experience of devout men in all ages and a

revelation of the great law and constant processes of the Divine

Providence. And from that point of view I wish to speak now, not only

on the words I have read, but on what follows them.

I. We have here the statement of the mystery.

It is the standing puzzle of the Old Testament, how good men come to be

troubled, and how bad men come to be prosperous. And although we

Christian men and women are a great deal too apt to suppose that we

have outlived that rudimentary puzzle of the religious mind, yet I do

not think by any means that we have. For we hear men, when the rod

falls upon themselves, saying, What have I done that I should be

smitten thus?' or when their friends suffer, saying, What a marvellous

thing it is that such a good man as A, B, or C should have so much

trouble!' or, when widespread calamities strike a community, standing

aghast at the broad and dark shadows that fall upon a nation or a

continent, and wondering what the meaning of all this heaped misery is,

and why the world is thus allowed to run along its course surrounded by

an atmosphere made up of the breath of sighs, and swathed in clouds

which are moist with tears.

My text gives us an illustration in the sharpest form of the mystery.

After these things and this faithfulness, Sennacherib came'--and he

always comes in one shape or another. For, to begin with, a good man's

goodness does not lift him out of the ordinary associations and

contingencies and laws of life. If he has inherited a diseased

constitution, his devotion will not make him a healthy man. If he has

little common sense, his godliness will not make him prosper in worldly

affairs. If he is tied to unfortunate connections, he will have to

suffer. If he happens to be in a decaying branch of business, his

prayers will not make him prosperous. If he falls in the way of

poisonous gas from a sewer, his godliness will not exempt him from an

attack of fever. So all round the horizon we see this: that the godly

man is involved like any other man in the ordinary contingencies and

possible evils of life. Then, have we to say that God has nothing to do

with these?

Again, Hezekiah's story teaches us how second causes are God's

instruments, and He is at the back of everything. There are two sources

of our knowledge of the history of Judah in the time with which we are

concerned. One is the Bible, the other is the Assyrian monuments; and

it is a most curious contrast to read the two narratives of the same

events, agreeing about the facts, but disagreeing utterly in the

spirit. Why? Because the one tells the story from the world's point of

view, and the other tells it from God's point of view. So when you take

the one narrative, it is simply this: There was a conspiracy down in

the south against the political supremacy of Assyria, and a lot of

little confederate kinglets gathered themselves; and Hezekiah, of

Judah, was one, along with So-and-So of such-and-such a petty land, and

they leaned upon Egypt; and I, Sennacherib, came down among them, and

they tumbled to pieces, and that is all.' Then the Bible comes in, and

it says that God ordered all those political complications, and that

they were all the working out of His purposes, and that the axe in His

hand' as Isaiah has it so picturesquely, was this proud king of

Assyria, with his boastful mouth and vainglorious words.

Now, that is the principle by which we have to estimate all the events

that befall us. There are two ways of looking at them. You may look at

them from the under side or from the top side. You may see them as they

appear to men who cannot look beyond their noses and only have concern

with the visible cranks and shafting, or you may look at them from the

engine-room and take account of the invisible power that drives them

all. In the one case you will regard it as a mystery that good men

should have to suffer so; in the other case, you will say, It is the

Lord, let Him do'--even when He does it through Sennacherib and his

like, let Him do what seemeth Him good.'

Then there is another thing to be taken into account--that is, that the

better a man is, the more faithful he is and the more closely he

cleaves to God, and seeks, like this king, to do, with all his heart,

all his work in the service of the House of God and to seek his God,

the more sure is he to bring down upon himself certain forms of trouble

and trial. The rebellion which, from the Assyrian side of the river,

seemed to be a mere political revolt, from the Jordan side of the river

seemed to be closely connected with the religious reformation. And it

was just because Hezekiah and his people came back to God that they

rebelled against the King of Assyria and served him not. If you provoke

Sennacherib, Sennacherib will be down upon you very quickly. That is to

say, being translated, if you will live like Christian men and women

and fling down the gage of battle to the world and to the evil that

lies in every one of us, and say, No, I have nothing to do with you. My

law is not your law, and, God helping me, my practice shall not be your

practice,' then you will find out that the power that you have defied

has a very long arm and a very tight grasp, and you will have to make

up your minds that, in some shape or other, the old law will be

fulfilled about you. Through much tribulation we must enter the

Kingdom.

II. Now, secondly, my text and its context solve the mystery which it

raises.

The chronicler, as I said, wishes us to notice the sequence, strange as

it is, and to wonder at it for a moment, in order that we may be

prepared the better to take in the grand explanation that follows. And

the explanation lies in the facts that ensue.

Did Sennacherib come to destroy? By no means! Here were the results:

first, a stirring to wholesome energy and activity. If annoyances and

troubles and sorrows, great or small, do nothing else for us, they

would be clear and simple gain if they woke us up, for the half of men

pass half of their lives half-asleep. And anybody that has ever come

through a great sorrow and can remember what deep fountains were opened

in his heart that he knew nothing about before, and how powers that

were all unsuspected by himself suddenly came to him, and how life,

instead of being a trivial succession of nothings, all at once became

significant and solemn--any man who can remember that, will feel that

if there were nothing else that his troubles did for him than to shake

him out of torpor and rouse him to a tension of wholesome activity, so

that he cried out:

Call forth thy powers, my soul! and dare

The conflict of unequal war,'

he would have occasion to bless God for the roughest handling. The

tropics are very pleasant for lazy people, but they sap the

constitution and make work impossible; and after a man has lived for a

while in their perpetual summer, he begins to long for damp and mist

and frost and east winds which bring bracing to the system and make him

fit to work. God takes us often into very ungenial climates, and the

vindication of it is that we may be set to active service. That was the

first good thing that Sennacherib's coming did.

The next was that his invasion increased dependence upon God. You will

remember the story of the insolent taunts and vulgar vaunting by him

and his servants, and the one answer that was given: Hezekiah, the

king, and Isaiah the son of Amoz the prophet, prayed and cried to God.'

Ah! dear brethren, any thing that drives us to His breast is blessing.

We may call it evil when we speak from the point of view of the foolish

senses and the quivering heart, but if it blows us into His arms, any

wind, the roughest and the fiercest, is to be welcomed more than lazy

calms or gentle zephyrs. If, realising our own weakness and impotence,

we are made to hang more completely upon Him, then let us be thankful

for whatever has been the means of such a blessed issue. That was the

second good thing that Sennacherib did.

The third good thing that he--not exactly did--but that was done

through him, was that experience of God's delivering power was

enriched. You remember the miracle of the destruction of the army. I

need not dilate upon it. A man who can look back and say, Thou hast

been with me in six troubles,' need never be afraid of the seventh; and

he who has hung upon that strong rope when he has been swinging away

down in the darkness and asphyxiating atmosphere of the pit, and has

been drawn up into the sunshine again, will trust it for all coming

time. If there were no other explanation, the enlarged and deepened

experience of the realities of God's Gospel and of God's grace, which

are bought only by sorrow, would be a sufficient explanation of any

sorrow that any of us have ever had to carry.

Well roars the storm to him who hears

A deeper voice across the storm.'

There are large tracts of Scripture which have no meaning, no

blessedness to us until they have been interpreted to us by losses and

sorrows. We never know the worth of the lighthouse until the November

darkness and the howling winds come down upon us, and then we

appreciate its preciousness.

So, dear friends! the upshot of the whole is just that old teaching,

that if we realised what life is for, we should wonder less at the

sorrows that are in it. For life is meant to make us partakers of His

holiness, not to make us happy. Our happiness is a secondary purpose,

not out of view of the Divine love, but it is not the primary one. And

the direct intention and mission of sorrow, like the direct intention

and mission of joy, are to further that great purpose, that we should

be partakers of His holiness.' Every branch in Me that beareth fruit,

He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.'

III. Lastly, my text suggests a warning against letting prosperity undo

adversity's work.

Hezekiah came bravely through his trials. They did exactly what God

wanted them to do; they drove him to God, they forced him down upon his

knees. When Sennacherib's letter came, he took it to the Temple and

spread it before God, and said, O Lord! it is Thy business. It is

addressed to me, but it is meant for Thee; do Thou answer it.' And so

he received the help that he wanted. But he broke down after that. He

was exalted'; and the allies, his neighbours, that had not lifted a

finger to help him when he needed their help, sent him presents which

would have been a great deal more seasonable when he was struggling for

his life with Sennacherib. What came after (God's ) faithfulness'?

This--his heart was lifted up, and he rendered not according to the

benefit rendered to him.' Therefore the blow had to come down again. A

great many people take refuge in archways when it rains, and run out as

soon as it holds up, and a great many people take religion as an

umbrella, to put down when the sunshine comes. We cross the bridge and

forget it, and when the leprosy is out of us we do not care to go back

and give thanks. Sometimes too, we begin to think, After all, it was we

that killed Sennacherib's army, and not the angel.' And so, like dull

scholars, we need the lesson repeated once, twice, thrice, here a

little and there a little, precept upon precept, line upon line.' There

is none of us that has so laid to heart our past difficulties and

trials that it is safe for God to burn the rod as long as we are in

this life.

Dear friends! do not let it be said of us, In vain have I smitten thy

children. They have received no correction'; but rather let us keep

close to Him, and seek to learn the sweet and loving meaning of His

sharpest strokes. Then the little book, written within and without with

lamentation and woe,' which we all in our turn have to absorb and make

our own, may be bitter in the mouth,' but will be sweet as honey'

thereafter.

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MANASSEH'S SIN AND REPENTANCE

So Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to

do worse than the heathen, whom the Lord had destroyed before the

children of Israel. 10. And the Lord spake to Manasseh, and to his

people: but they would not hearken. 11. Wherefore the Lord brought upon

them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took

Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him

to Babylon. 12. And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his

God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, 13. And

prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his

supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then

Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God. 14. Now after this he built a

wall without the city of David, on the west side of Gihon, in the

valley, even to the entering in at the fish gate, and compassed about

Ophel, and raised it up a very great height, and put captains of war in

all the fenced cities of Judah. 15. And he took away the strange gods,

and the idol out of the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he

had built in the mount of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and

cast them out of the city. 16. And he repaired the altar of the Lord,

and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank offerings, and

commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel.'--2 CHRON. xxxiii.

9-16.

The story of Manasseh's sin and repentance may stand as a typical

example. Its historical authenticity is denied on the ground that it

appears only in this Book of Chronicles. I must leave others to discuss

that matter; my purpose is to bring out the teaching contained in the

story.

The first point in it is the stern indictment against Manasseh and his

people. The experience which has saddened many a humbler home was

repeated in the royal house, where a Hezekiah was followed by a

Manasseh, who scorned all that his father had worshipped, and

worshipped all that his father had loathed. Happily the father's eyes

were closed long before the idolatrous bias of his son could have

disclosed itself. Succeeding to the throne at twelve years of age, he

could not have begun his evil ways at once, and probably would have

been preserved from them if his father had lived long enough to mould

his character. A child of twelve, flung on to a throne, was likely to

catch the infection of any sin that was in the atmosphere. The

narrative specifies two points in which, as he matured in years, and

was confirmed in his course of conduct, he went wrong: first, in his

idolatry; and second, in his contempt of remonstrances and warnings. As

to the former, the preceding context gives a terrible picture. He was

smitten with a very delirium of idolatry, and wallowed in any and every

sort of false worship. No matter what strange god was presented, there

were hospitality, an altar, and an offering for him. Baal, Moloch, the

host of heaven,' wizards, enchanters, anybody who pretended to have any

sort of black art, all were welcome, and the more the better. No doubt,

this eager acceptance of a miscellaneous multitude of deities was

partly reaction from the monotheism of the former reign, but also it

was the natural result of being surrounded by the worshippers of these

various gods; and it was an unconscious confession of the insufficiency

of each and all of them to fill the void in the heart, and satisfy the

needs of the spirit. There are gods many, and lords many,' because they

are insufficient; the Lord our God is one Lord,' because He, in His

single Self, is more than all these, and is enough for any and every

man.

We may note, too, that at the beginning of the chapter Manasseh is said

to have done like unto the abominations of the heathen,' while in verse

9 he is said to have done evil more than did the nations.' When a

worshipper of Jehovah does like the heathen, he does worse than they.

An apostate Christian is more guilty than one who has never tasted the

good word of God,' and is likely to push his sins to a more flagrant

wickedness. The corruption of the best is the worst.' We cannot do what

the world does without being more deeply guilty than they.

The narrative lays stress on the fact that the king's inclination to

idolatry was agreeable to the people. The kings, who fought against it,

had to resist the popular current, but at the least encouragement from

those in high places the nation was ready to slide back. Rulers who

wish to lower the standard of morality or religion have an easy task;

but the people who follow their lead are not free from guilt, though

they can plead that they only followed. The second count in the

indictment is the refusal of king and people to listen to God's

remonstrances. 2 Kings, chap, xxi., gives the prophets' warnings at

greater length. They would not hearken'--can anything madder and sadder

be said of any of us than that? Is it not the very sin of sins, and the

climax of suicidal folly, that God should call and men stop their ears?

And yet how many of us pay no more regard to His voice, in His

providences, in our own consciences, in history, in Scripture, and,

most penetrating and beseeching of all, in Christ, than to idle wind

whistling through an archway! Our own evil deeds stop our ears, and the

stopped ears make further evil deeds more easy.

The second step in this typical story is merciful chastisement, meant

to secure a hearing for God's voice. 2 Kings tells the threat, but not

the fulfilment; Chronicles tells the fulfilment, but not the threat. We

note how emphatically God's hand is recognised behind the political

complications which brought the Assyrians to Jerusalem, and how

particularly it is stated that the invasion was not headed by

Esarhaddon, but by his generals. The place of Manasseh's captivity also

is specified, not as Nineveh, as might have been expected, but as

Babylon. These details, especially the last, look like genuine history.

It is history which carries a lesson. Here is one conspicuous instance

of the divine method, which is working to-day as it did then. God's

hand is behind the secondary causes of events. Our sorrows and

misfortunes' are sent to us by Him, not hurled at us by human hands

only, or occurring by the working of impersonal laws. They are meant to

make us bethink ourselves, and drop evil things from our hands and

hearts. It is best to be guided by His eye, and not need bit and

bridle'; but if we make ourselves stubborn as the mule, which has no

understanding,' it is second best that we should taste the whip, that

it may bring us to run in harness on the road which He wills. If we

habitually looked at calamities as His loving chastisement, intended to

draw us to Himself, we should not have to stand perplexed so often at

what we call the mysteries of His providence.

The next step in the story is the yielding of the sinful heart when

smitten. The worst affliction is an affliction wasted, which does us no

good. And God has often to lament, In vain have I smitten your

children; they received no correction.' Sorrow has in itself no power

to effect the purpose for which it is sent; but all depends on how we

take it. It sometimes makes us hard, bitter, obstinate in clinging to

evil. A heart that has been disciplined by it, and still is

undisciplined, is like iron hammered on an anvil, and made the more

close-grained thereby. But this king took his chastisement wisely. An

accepted sorrow is an angel in disguise, and nothing which drives us to

God is a calamity. Manasseh praying was freer in his chains than ever

he had been in his prosperity. Manasseh humbling himself greatly before

God was higher than when, in the pride of his heart, he shut God out

from it.

Affliction should clear our sight, that we may see ourselves as we are;

and, if we do, there will be an end of high looks, and we shall take

the lowest room.' Thus humbled, we shall pray as the self-confident and

outwardly prosperous cannot do. Sorrow has done its best on us when,

like some strong hand on our shoulders, it has brought us to our knees.

No affliction has yielded its full blessing to us unless it has thus

set us by Manasseh's side.

The next step in the story is the loving answer to the humbled heart,

and the restoration to the kingdom. He was entreated of him.' No doubt,

political circumstances brought about Manasseh's reinstatement, as they

had brought about his captivity, but it was God that brought him again

to his kingdom.' We may not receive again lost good things, but we may

be quite sure that God never fails to hear the cry of the humble, and

that, if there is one voice that more surely reaches His ear and moves

His heart than another, it is the voice of His chastened children, who

cry to Him out of the depths, and there have learned their own sin and

sore need. He will be entreated of them, and, whether He gives back

lost good or not, He will give Himself, in whom all good is

comprehended. Manasseh's experience may be repeated in us.

And the best part of it was, not that he received back his kingdom, but

that then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God.' The name had been

but a name to him, but now it had become a reality. Our traditional,

second-hand belief in God is superficial and largely unreal till it is

deepened and vivified by experience. If we have cried to Him, and been

lightened, then we have a ground of conviction that cannot be shaken.

Formerly we could at most say, I believe in God,' or, I think there is

a God,' but now we can say, I know,' and no criticism nor contradiction

can shake that. Such knowledge is not the knowledge won by the

understanding alone, but it is acquaintance with a living Person, like

the knowledge which loving souls have of each other; and he who has

that knowledge as the issue of his own experience may smile at doubts

and questionings, and say with the Apostle of Love, We know that we are

of God, . . . and we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given

us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true.' Then, if we

have that knowledge, we shall listen to the same Apostle's commandment,

Keep yourselves from idols,' even as the issue of Manasseh's knowledge

of God was that he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the

house of the Lord.'

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JOSIAH

Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned in

Jerusalem one and thirty years. 2. And he did that which was right in

the sight of the Lord, and walked in the ways of David his father, and

declined neither to the right hand, nor to the left. 3. For in the

eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, he began to seek

after the God of David his father: and in the twelfth year he began to

purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the

carved images, and the molten images. 4. And they brake down the altars

of Baalim in his presence; and the images, that were on high above

them, he cut down; and the groves, and the carved images, and the

molten images, he brake in pieces, and made dust of them, and strowed

it upon the graves of them that had sacrificed unto them. 5. And he

burnt the bones of the priests upon their altars, and cleansed Judah

and Jerusalem. 6. And so did he in the cities of Manasseh, and Ephraim,

and Simeon, even unto Naphtali, with their mattocks round about. 7. And

when he had broken down the altars and the groves, and had beaten the

graven images into powder, and cut down all the idols throughout all

the land of Israel, he returned to Jerusalem. 8. Now in the eighteenth

year of his reign, when he had purged the land, and the house, he sent

Shaphan the son of Azaliah, and Maaseiah the governor of the city, and

Joah the son of Joahaz the recorder, to repair the house of the Lord

his God. 9. And when they came to Hilkiah the high priest, they

delivered the money that was brought into the house of God, which the

Levites that kept the doors had gathered of the hand of Manasseh and

Ephraim, and of all the remnant of Israel, and of all Judah and

Benjamin; and they returned to Jerusalem. 10. And they put it in the

hand of the workmen that had the oversight of the house of the Lord,

and they gave it to the workmen that wrought in the house of the Lord,

to repair and amend the house: 11. Even to the artificers and builders

gave they it, to buy hewn stone, and timber for couplings, and to floor

the houses which the kings of Judah had destroyed. 12. And the men did

the work faithfully: and the overseers of them were Jahath and Obadiah,

the Levites, of the sons of Merari; and Zechariah and Meshullam, of the

sons of the Kohathites, to set it forward; and other of the Levites,

all that could skill of instruments of musick. 13. Also they were over

the bearers of burdens, and were overseers of all that wrought the work

in any manner of service: and of the Levites there were scribes, and

officers, and porters.'--2 CHRON. xxxiv. 1-13.

Another boy king, even younger than his grandfather Manasseh had been

at his accession, and another reversal of the father's religion! These

vibrations from idolatry to Jehovah-worship, at the pleasure of the

king, sadly tell how little the people cared whom they worshipped, and

how purely a matter of ceremonies and names both their idolatry and

their Jehovah-worship were. The religion of the court was the religion

of the nation, only idolatry was more congenial than the service of

God. How far the child monarch Josiah had a deeper sense of what that

service meant we cannot decide, but the little outline sketch of him in

verses 2 and 3 is at least suggestive of his having it, and may well

stand as a fair portrait of early godliness.

A child eight years old, who had been lifted on to the throne of a

murdered father, must have had a strong will and a love of goodness to

have resisted the corrupting influences of royalty in a land full of

idols. Here again we see that, great as may be the power of

circumstances, they do not determine character; for it is always open

to us either to determine whether we yield to them or resist them. The

prevailing idolatry influenced the boy, but it influenced him to hate

it with all his heart. So out of the nettle danger we may pluck the

flower safety. The men who have smitten down some evil institution have

generally been brought up so as to feel its full force.

He did that which was right in the eyes of Jehovah'--that may mean

simply that he worshipped Jehovah by outward ceremonies, but it

probably means more; namely, that his life was pure and God-pleasing,

or, as we should say, clean and moral, free from the foul vices which

solicit a young prince. He walked in the ways of David his father'--not

being one of the emancipated' youths who think it manly to throw off

the restraints of their fathers' faith and morals. He turned not aside

to the right hand or to the left'--but marched right onwards on the

road that conscience traced out for him, though tempting voices called

to him from many a side-alley that seemed to lead to pleasant places.

While he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his

father'--at the critical age of sixteen, when Easterns are older than

we, in the flush of early manhood, he awoke to deeper experiences and

felt the need for a closer touch of God. A career thus begun will

generally prelude a life pure, strenuous, and blessed with a clearer

and clearer vision of the God who is always found of them that seek

Him. Such a childhood, blossoming into such a boyhood, and flowering in

such a manhood, is possible to every child among us. It will still

bring forth fruit in old age.'

The two incidents which the passage narrates, the purging of the land

and the repair of the Temple, are told in inverted order in 2 Kings,

but the order here is probably the more accurate, as dates are given,

whereas in 2 Kings, though the purging is related after the Temple

restoration, it is not said to have occurred after. But the order is of

small consequence. What is important is the fiery energy of Josiah in

the work of destruction of the idols. Here, there, everywhere, he

flames and consumes. He darts a flash even into the desolate ruins of

the Israelitish kingdom, where the idols had survived their devotees

and still bewitched the scanty fragments of Israel that remained. The

altars of stone were thrown down, the wooden sun-pillars were cut to

pieces, the metal images were broken and ground to powder. A clean

sweep was made.

A dash of ferocity mingled with contempt appears in Josiah's scattering

the dust' of the images on the graves of their worshippers, as if he

said: There you lie together, pounded idols and dead worshippers,

neither able to help the other!' The same feelings prompted digging up

the skeletons of priests and burning the bones on the very altars that

they had served, thus defiling the altars and executing judgment on the

priests. No doubt there were much violence and a strong strain of the

wrath of man' in all this. Iconoclasts are wont to be violent'; and men

without convictions, or who are partisans of what the iconoclasts are

rooting out, are horrified at their want of moderation.' But though

violence is always unchristian, indifference to rampant evils is not

conspicuously more Christian, and, on the whole, you cannot throttle

snakes in a graceful attitude or without using some force to compress

the sinuous neck.

The restoration of the Temple comes after the cleansing of the land, in

Chronicles, and naturally in the order of events, for the casting out

of idols must always precede the building or repairing of the Temple of

God. Destructive work is very poor unless it is for the purpose of

clearing a space to build the Temple on. Happy the man or the age which

is able to do both! Josiah and Joash worked at restoring the Temple in

much the same fashion, but Josiah had a priesthood more interested than

Joash had.

But we may note one or two points in his restoration. He had put his

personal effort into the preparatory extirpation of idols, but he did

not need to do so now. He could work this time by deputy. And it is

noteworthy that he chose laymen' to carry out the restoration. Perhaps

he knew how Joash had been balked by the knavery of the priests who

were diligent in collecting money, but slow in spending it on the

Temple. At all events, he delegated the work to three highly-placed

officials, the secretary of state, the governor of Jerusalem, and the

official historian.

It appears that for some time a collection had been going on for Temple

repairs; probably it had been begun six years before, when the purging'

of the land began. It had been carried on by the Levites, and had been

contributed to even by the remnant of Israel' in the northern kingdom,

who, in their forlorn weakness, had begun to feel the drawings of

ancient brotherhood and the tie of a common worship. This fund was in

the keeping of the high priest, and the three commissioners were

instructed to require it from him. Here 2 Kings is clearer than our

passage, and shows that what the three officials had mainly to do was

to get the money from Hilkiah, and to hand it over to the

superintendents of the works.

There are two remarkable points in the narrative; one is the

observation that the men did the work faithfully,' which comes in

rather enigmatically here, but in 2 Kings is given as the reason why no

accounts were kept. Not an example to be imitated, and the sure way to

lead subordinates sooner or later to deal unfaithfully; but a pleasant

indication of the spirit animating all concerned.

Surely these men worked as ever in the great Taskmaster's eye.' That is

what makes us work faithfully, whether we have any earthly overseer or

audit or no. Another noteworthy matter is that not only were the

superintendents of the work--the contractors,' as we might

say--Levites, but so were also the inferior superintendents, or, as we

might say, foremen.'

And not only so, but they were those that were skilful with instruments

of music.' What were musicians doing there? Did the building rise

with the sound

Of dulcet symphonies and voices sweet?'

May we not gather from this singular notice the great thought that for

all rearing of the true Temple, harps of praise are no less necessary

than swords or trowels, and that we shall do no right work for God or

man unless we do it as with melody in our hearts? Our lives must be

full of music if we are to lay even one stone in the Temple.

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JOSIAH AND THE NEWLY FOUND LAW

And when they brought out the money that was brought into the house of

the Lord, Hilkiah the priest found a book of the law of the Lord given

by Moses. 15. And Hilkiah answered and said to Shaphan the scribe, I

have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiah

delivered the book to Shaphan. 16 And Shaphan carried the book to the

king, and brought the king word back again, saying, All that was

committed to thy servants, they do it. 17. And they have gathered

together the money that was found in the house of the Lord, and have

delivered it into the hand of the overseers, and to the hand of the

workmen. 18. Then Shaphan the scribe told the king, saying, Hilkiah the

priest hath given me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king. 19.

And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the law, that

he rent his clothes. 20. And the king commanded Hilkiah, and Ahikam the

son of Shaphan, and Abdon the son of Micah, and Shaphan the scribe, and

Asaiah a servant of the king' s, saying, 21. Go, enquire of the Lord

for me, and for them that are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning

the words of the book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord

that is poured out upon us, because our fathers have not kept the word

of the Lord, to do after all that is written in this book. 22. And

Hilkiah, and they that the king had appointed, went to Huldah the

prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvath, the son of Hasrah,

keeper of the wardrobe; (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the college;)

and they spake to her to that effect. 23. And she answered them, Thus

saith the Lord God of Israel, Tell ye the man that sent you to me. 24.

Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and

upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the curses that are written in

the book which they have read before the king of Judah: 25. Because

they have forsaken Me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that

they might provoke Me to anger with all the works of their hands;

therefore My wrath shall be poured out upon this place, and shall not

be quenched. 26. And as for the king of Judah, who sent you to enquire

of the Lord, so shall ye say unto him, Thus saith the Lord God of

Israel concerning the words which thou hast heard; 27. Because thine

heart was tender, and thou didst humble thyself before God, when thou

heardest His words against this place, and against the inhabitants

thereof, and humbledst thyself before Me, and did rendst thy clothes,

and weep before Me; I have even heard thee also, saith the Lord. 28.

Behold, I will gather thee to thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered

to thy grave in peace, neither shall thine eyes see all the evil that I

will bring upon this place, and upon the inhabitants of the same. So

they brought the king word again.'--2 CHRON. xxxiv. 14-28.

About one hundred years separated Hezekiah's restoration from Josiah'

s. Neither was more than a momentary arrest of the strong tide running

in the opposite direction; and Josiah's was too near the edge of the

cataract to last, or to avert the plunge. There is nothing more

tragical than the working of the law which often sets the children's

teeth on edge by reason of the fathers' eating of sour grapes.

I. The first point in this passage is the discovery of the book of the

Law.

The book had been lost before it was found. For how long we do not

know, but the fact that it had been so carelessly kept is eloquent of

the indifference of priests and kings, its appointed guardians.

Lawbreakers have a direct interest in getting rid of lawbooks, just as

shopkeepers who use short yardsticks and light weights are not anxious

the standards should be easily accessible. If we do not make God's law

our guide, we shall wish to put it out of sight, that it may not be our

accuser. What more sad or certain sign of evil can there be than that

we had rather not hear what God the Lord will speak'?

The straightforward story of our passage gives a most natural

explanation of the find. Hilkiah was likely to have had dark corners

cleared out in preparation for repairs and in storing the

subscriptions, and many a mislaid thing would turn up. If it be

possible that the book of the Law should have been neglected (and the

religious corruption of the last hundred years makes that only too

certain), its discovery in some dusty recess is very intelligible, and

would not have been doubted but for the exigencies of a theory. Reading

between the lines' is fascinating, but risky; for the reader is very

likely unconsciously to do what Hilkiah is said to have done--namely,

to invent what he thinks he finds.

Accepting the narrative as it stands, we may see in it a striking

instance of the indestructibleness of God's Word. His law is

imperishable, and its written embodiment seems as if it, too, had a

charmed life. When we consider the perils attending the transmission of

ancient manuscripts, the necessary scarcity of copies before the

invention of printing, the scattering of the Jewish people, it does

appear as if a divine hand had guarded the venerable book. How came

this strange people, who never kept their Law, to swim through all

their troubles, like Caesar with his commentaries between his teeth,

bearing aloft and dry, the Word which they obeyed so badly? Write it

. . . in a book, that it may be for the time to come for ever and

ever.' The permanence of the written Word, the providence that has

watched over it, the romantic history of its preservation through ages

of neglect, and the imperishable gift to the world of an objective

standard of duty, remaining the same from age to age, are all suggested

by this reappearance of the forgotten Law.

It may suggest, too, that honest efforts after reformation are usually

rewarded by clearer knowledge of God's will. If Hilkiah had not been

busy in setting wrong things right, he would not have found the book in

its dark hiding-place. We are told that the coincidence of the

discovery at the nick of time is suspicious. So it is, if you do not

believe in Providence. If you do, the coincidence is but one instance

of His sending gifts of the right sort at the right moment. It is not

the first time nor the last that the attempt to keep God's law has led

to larger knowledge of the law. It is not the first time nor the last

that God has sent to His faithful servants an opportune gift. What the

world calls accidental coincidence deeper wisdom discerns to be the

touch of God's hand.

Again, the discovery reminds us that the true basis of all religious

reform is the Word of God. Josiah had begun to restore the Temple, but

he did not know till he heard the Law read how great the task was which

he had taken in hand. That recovered book gave impulse and direction to

his efforts. The nearest parallel is the rediscovery of the Bible in

the sixteenth century, or, if we may take one incident as a symbol of

the whole, Luther's finding the dusty Latin Bible among the neglected

convent books. The only reformation for an effete or secularised church

is in its return to the Bible. Faded flowers will lift up their heads

when plunged in water. The old Bible, discovered and applied anew, must

underlie all real renovation of dead or moribund Christianity.

II. The next point here is the effect of the rediscovered Law. Shaphan

was closely connected with Josiah, as his office made him a confidant.

It is ordinarily taken for granted that he and the other persons named

in this lesson formed a little knot of earnest Jehovah worshippers,

fully sympathising with the Reformation, and that among them lay the

authorship of the book. But we know nothing about them except what is

told here and in the parallel in Kings. One of them, Ahikam, was a

friend and protector of Jeremiah, and Shaphan the scribe was the father

of another of Jeremiah's friends. They may all have been in accord with

the king, or they may not.

At all events, Shaphan took the book to Josiah. We can picture the

scene--the deepening awe of both men as the whole extent of the

nation's departure from God became clearer and clearer, the tremulous

tones of the reader, and the silent, fixed attention of the listener as

the solemn threatenings came from Shaphan's reluctant, pallid lips.

There was enough in them to touch a harder heart than Josiah' s. We

cannot suppose that, knowing the history of the past, and being

sufficiently enlightened to seek after the God of David his father,' he

did not know in a general way that sin meant sorrow, and national

disobedience national death. But we all have the faculty of blunting

the cutting edge of truth, especially if it has been familiar, so that

some novelty in the manner of its presentation, or even its repetition

without novelty sometimes, may turn commonplace and impotent truth into

a mighty instrument to shake and melt.

So it seems to have been with Josiah. Whether new or old, the Word

found him as it had never done before. The venerable copy from which

Shaphan read, the coincidence of its discovery just then, the dishonour

done to it for so long, may all have helped the impression. However it

arose, it was made. If a man will give God's Word a fair hearing, and

be honest with himself, it will bring him to his knees. No man rightly

uses God's law who is not convinced by it of his sin, and impelled to

that self-abased sorrow of which the rent royal robes were the

passionate expression. Josiah was wise when he did not turn his

thoughts to other people's sins, but began with his own, even whilst he

included others. The first function of the law is to arouse the

knowledge of sin, as Paul profoundly teaches. Without that penitent

knowledge religion is superficial, and reformation merely external.

Unless we abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes,' Scripture has

not done its work on us, and all our reading of it is in vain. Nor is

there any good reason why familiarity with it should weaken its power.

But, alas! it too often does. How many of us would stand in awe of

God's judgments if we heard them for the first time, but listen to them

unmoved, as to thunder without lightning, merely because wo know them

so well! That is a reason for attending to them, not for neglecting.

Josiah's sense of sin led him to long for a further word from God; and

so he called these attendants named in verse 20, and sent them to

enquire of the Lord . . . concerning the words of the book.' What more

did he wish to know? The words were plain enough, and their application

to Israel and him indubitable. Clearly, he could only wish to know

whether there was any possibility of averting the judgments, and, if

so, what was the means. The awakened conscience instinctively feels

that threatenings cannot be God's last words to it, but must have been

given that they might not need to be fulfilled. We do not rightly

sorrow for sin unless it quickens in us a desire for a word from God to

tell us how to escape. The Law prepares for the Gospel, and is

incomplete without it. The soul that sinneth, it shall die,' cannot be

all which a God of pity and love has to say. A faint promise of life

lies in the very fact of threatening death, faint indeed, but

sufficient to awaken earnest desire for yet another word from the Lord.

We rightly use the solemn revelations of God's law when we are driven

by them to cry, What must I do to be saved?' III. So we come to the

last point, the double-edged message of the prophetess. Josiah does not

seem to have told his messengers where to go; but they knew, and went

straight to a very unlikely person, the wife of an obscure man, only

known as his father's son. Where was Jeremiah of Anathoth? Perhaps not

in the city at the time. There had been prophetesses in Israel before.

Miriam, Deborah, the wife of Isaiah, are instances of your daughters'

prophesying; and this embassy to Huldah is in full accord with the high

position which women held in that state, of which the framework was

shaped by God Himself. In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor

female,' and Judaism approximated much more closely to that ideal than

other lands did.

Huldah's message has two parts: one the confirmation of the

threatenings of the Law; one the assurance to Josiah of acceptance of

his repentance and gracious promise of escape from the coming storm.

These two are precisely equivalent to the double aspect of the Gospel,

which completes the Law, endorsing its sentence and pointing the way of

escape.

Note that the former part addresses Josiah as the man that sent you,'

but the latter names him. The embassy had probably not disclosed his

name, and Huldah at first keeps up the veil, since the personality of

the sender had nothing to do with her answer; but when she comes to

speak of pardon and God's favour, there must be no vagueness in the

destination of the message, and the penitent heart must be tenderly

bound up by a word from God straight to itself. The threatenings are

general, but each single soul that is sorry for sin may take as its

very own the promise of forgiveness. God's great Whosoever' is for me

as certainly as if my name stood on the page.

The terrible message of the inevitableness of the destruction hanging

over Jerusalem is precisely parallel with the burden of all Jeremiah's

teaching. It was too late to avert the fall. The external judgments

must come now, for the emphasis of the prophecy is in its last words,

it shall not be quenched.' But that did not mean that repentance was

too late to alter the whole character of the punishment, which would be

fatherly chastisement if meekly accepted. So, too, Jeremiah taught,

when he exhorted submission to the Chaldees.' It is never too late to

seek mercy, though it may be too late to hope for averting the outward

consequences of sin.

As for Josiah, his penitence was accepted, and he was assured that he

would be gathered to his fathers. That expression, as is clear from the

places where it occurs, is not a synonym for either death or burial,

from both of which it is distinguished, but is a dim promise of being

united, beyond the grave, with the fathers, who, in some one condition,

which we may call a place, are gathered into a restful company, and

wander no more as pilgrims and sojourners in this lonely and changeful

life.

Josiah died in battle. Was that going to his grave in peace? Surely

yes! if, dying, he felt God's presence, and in the darkness saw a great

light. He who thus dies, though it be in the thick of battle, and with

his heart's blood pouring from an arrow-wound down on the floor of the

chariot, dies in peace, and into peace.

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THE FALL OF JUDAH

Zedekiah was one and twenty years old when he began to reign, and

reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 12. And he did that which was evil

in the sight of the Lord his God, and humbled not himself before

Jeremiah the prophet speaking from the mouth of the Lord. 13. And he

also rebelled against king Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by

God: but he stiffened his neck, and hardened his heart from turning

unto the Lord God of Israel. 14. Moreover all the chief of the priests,

and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of

the heathen; and polluted the house of the Lord which he had hallowed

in Jerusalem. 15. And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by His

messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because He had compassion

on His people, and on His dwelling-place: 16. But they mocked the

messengers of God, and despised His words, and misused His prophets,

until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no

remedy. 17. Therefore he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees,

who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their

sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or

him that stooped for age: he gave them all into his hand. 18. And all

the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of

the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king, and of his

princes; all these he brought to Babylon. 19. And they burnt the house

of God, and brake down the wall of Jerusalem, and burnt all the palaces

thereof with fire, and destroyed all the goodly vessels thereof. 20.

And them that had escaped from the sword carried he away to Babylon;

where they were servants to him and his sons until the reign of the

kingdom of Persia: 21. To fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of

Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths; for as long as she

lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years.'--2

CHRON. xxxvi. 11-21.

Bigness is not greatness, nor littleness smallness. Nebuchadnezzar's

conquest of Judah was, in his eyes, one of the least important of his

many victories, but it is the only one of them which survives in the

world's memory and keeps his name as a household word. The Jews were a

mere handful, and their country a narrow strip of land between the

desert and the sea; but little Judaea, like little Greece, has taught

the world. The tragedy of its fall has importance quite disproportioned

to its apparent magnitude. Our passage brings together Judah's sin and

Judah's punishment, and we shall best gather the lessons of its fall by

following the order of the text.

Consider the sin. There is nothing more remarkable than the tone in

which the chronicler, like all the Old Testament writers, deals with

the national sin. Patriotic historians make it a point of pride and

duty to gloss over their country's faults, but these singular narrators

paint them as strongly as they can. Their love of their country impels

them to make known to Israel its transgression and to Judah its sin.'

There are tears in their eyes, as who can doubt? But there is no

faltering in their voices as they speak. A higher feeling than

misguided patriotism' moves them. Loyalty to Israel's God forces them

to deal honestly with Israel's sin. That is the highest kind of love of

country, and might well be commended to loudmouthed patriot's in modern

lands.

Look at the piled-up clauses of the long indictment of Judah in verses

12 to 16. Slow, passionless, unsparing, the catalogue enumerates the

whole black list. It is like the long-drawn blast of the angel of

judgment's trumpet. Any trace of heated emotion would have weakened the

impression. The nation's sin was so crimson as to need no heightening

of colour. With like judicial calmness, with like completeness,

omitting nothing, does the book,' which will one day be opened, set

down every man's deeds, and he will be judged according to the things

that are written in this book.' Some of us will find our page sad

reading.

But the points brought out in this indictment are instructive. Judah's

idolatry and trespass after all the abominations of the heathen' is, of

course, prominent, but the spirit which led to their idolatry, rather

than the idolatry itself, is dwelt on. Zedekiah's doing evil in the

sight of the Lord' is regarded as aggravated by his not humbling

himself before Jeremiah, and the head and front of his offending is

that he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart from turning unto the

Lord.' Similarly, the people's sin reaches its climax in their mocking'

and scoffing' at the prophets and despising' God's words by them. So

then, an evil life has its roots in an alienated heart, and the source

of all sin is an obstinate self-will. That is the sulphur-spring from

which nothing but unwholesome streams can flow, and the greatest of all

sins is refusing to hear God's voice when He speaks to us.

Further, this indictment brings out the patient love of God seeking, in

spite of all their deafness, to find a way to the sinners' ears and

hearts. In a bold transference to Him of men's ways, He is said to have

risen early' to send the prophets. Surely that means earnest effort.

The depths of God's heart are disclosed when we are bidden to think of

His compassion as the motive for the prophet's messages and

threatenings. What a wonderful and heart-melting revelation of God's

placableness, wistful hoping against hope, and reluctance to abandon

the most indurated sinner, is given in that centuries-long conflict of

the patient God with treacherous Israel! That divine charity suffered

long and was kind, endured all things and hoped all things.

Consider the punishment. The tragic details of the punishment are

enumerated with the same completeness and suppression of emotion as

those of the sin. The fact that all these were divine judgments brings

the chronicler to the Psalmist's attitude. I was dumb, I opened not my

mouth because Thou didst it.' Sorrow and pity have their place, but the

awed recognition of God's hand outstretched in righteous retribution

must come first. Modern sentimentalists, who are so tenderhearted as to

be shocked at the Christian teachings of judgment, might learn a lesson

here.

The first point to note is that a time arrives when even God can hope

for no amendment and is driven to change His methods. His patience is

not exhausted, but man's obstinacy makes another treatment inevitable.

God lavished benefits and pleadings for long years in vain, till He saw

that there was no remedy.' Only then did He, as if reluctantly forced,

do His work, His strange work.' Behold, therefore, the goodness and

severity' of God, goodness in His long delay, severity in the final

blow, and learn that His purpose is the same though His methods are

opposite.

To the chronicler God is the true Actor in human affairs.

Nebuchadnezzar thought of his conquest as won by his own arm. Secular

historians treat the fall of Zedekiah as simply the result of the

political conditions of the time, and sometimes seem to think that it

could not be a divine judgment because it was brought about by natural

causes. But this old chronicler sees deeper, and to him, as to us, if

we are wise, the history of the world is the judgment of the world.'

The Nebuchadnezzars are God's axes with which He hews down fruitless

trees. They are responsible for their acts, but they are His

instruments, and it is His hand that wields them.

The iron band that binds sin and suffering is disclosed in Judah's

fall. We cannot allege that the same close connection between

godlessness and national disaster is exemplified now as it was in

Israel. Nor can we contend that for individuals suffering is always the

fruit of sin. But it is still true that righteousness exalteth a

nation,' and that by the soul only are the nations great,' in the true

sense of the word. To depart from God is always a bitter and an evil

thing' for communities and individuals, however sweet draughts of

outward prosperity may for a time mask the bitterness. Not armies nor

fleets, not ships, colonies and commerce, not millionaires and trusts,

not politicians and diplomatists, but the fear of the Lord and the

keeping of His commandments, are the true life of a nation. If

Christian men lived up to the ideal set them by Jesus, Ye are the salt

of the land,' and sought more earnestly and wisely to leaven their

nation, they would be doing more than any others to guarantee its

perpetual prosperity.

The closing words of this chapter, not included in the passage, are

significant. They are the first words of the Book of Ezra. Whoever put

them here perhaps wished to show a far-off dawn following the stormy

sunset. He opens a door of hope' in the valley of trouble.' It is an

Old Testament version of God hath not cast away His people whom He

foreknew.' It throws a beam of light on the black last page of the

chronicle, and reveals that God's chastisement was in love, that it was

meant for discipline, not for destruction, that it was educational, and

that the rod was burned when the lesson had been learned. It was

learned, for the Captivity cured the nation of hankering after

idolatry, and whatever defects it brought back from Babylon, it brought

back a passionate abhorrence of all the gods of the nations.

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THE BOOK OF EZRA

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THE EVE OF THE RESTORATION

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the

Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up

the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation

throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, 2. Thus

saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all

the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him a house

at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3. Who is there among you of all His

people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is

in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is the

God), which is in Jerusalem. 4. And whosoever remaineth in any place

where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and

with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, besides the freewill

offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem. 5. Then rose up the

chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the

Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build

the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. 6. And all they that were

about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold,

with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, besides all that

was willingly offered. 7. Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels

of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of

Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods; 8. Even those did

Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the

treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. 9.

And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand

chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives, 10. Thirty basons of gold,

silver basons of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels

a thousand. 11. All the vessels of gold and of silver were five

thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them

of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto

Jerusalem.'--EZRA i. 1-11.

Cyrus captured Babylon 538 B.C., and the first year' here is the first

after that event. The predicted seventy years' captivity had nearly run

out, having in part done their work on the exiles. Colours burned in on

china are permanent; and the furnace of bondage had, at least, effected

this, that it fixed monotheism for ever in the inmost substance of the

Jewish people. But the bulk of them seem to have had little of either

religious or patriotic enthusiasm, and preferred Babylonia to Judea. We

are here told of the beginning of the return of a portion of the

exiles--forty-two thousand, in round numbers.

The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus.' That unveils the deepest

cause of what fell into place, to the superficial observers, as one

among many political events of similar complexion. We find among the

inscriptions a cylinder written by order of Cyrus, which shows that he

reversed the Babylonian policy of deporting conquered nations. All

their peoples,' says he, in reference to a number of nations of whom he

found members in exile in Babylonia, I assembled and restored to their

lands and the gods . . . whom Nabonidos . . . had brought into Babylon,

I settled in peace in their sanctuaries' (Sayce, Fresh Light from the

Ancient Monuments, p. 148). It was, then, part of a wider movement,

which sent back Zerubbabel and his people to Jerusalem, and began the

rebuilding of the Temple. No doubt, Cyrus had seen that the old plan

simply brought an element of possible rebellion into the midst of the

country, and acted on grounds of political prudence.

But our passage digs deeper to find the true cause. Cyrus was God's

instrument, and the statesman's insight was the result of God's

illumination. The divine causality moves men, when they move

themselves. It was not only in the history of the chosen people that

God's purpose is wrought out by more or less conscious and willing

instruments. The principle laid down by the writer of this book is of

universal application, and the true philosophy of history' must

recognise as underlying all other so-called causes and forces the one

uncaused Cause, of whose purposes kings and politicians are the

executants, even while they freely act according to their own

judgments, and, it may be, in utter unconsciousness of Him. It concerns

our tranquillity and hopefulness, in the contemplation of the

bewildering maze and often heart-breaking tragedy of mundane affairs,

to hold fast by the conviction that God's unseen Hand moves the pieces

on the board, and presides over all the complications. The difference

between sacred' and profane' history is not that one is under His

direct control, and the other is not. What was true of Cyrus and his

policy is as true of England. Would that politicians and all men

recognised the fact as clearly as this historian did!

I. Cyrus's proclamation sounds as if he were a Jehovah-worshipper, but

it is to be feared that his religion was of a very accommodating kind.

It used to be said that, as a Persian, he was a monotheist, and would

consequently be in sympathy with the Jews; but the same cylinder

already quoted shatters that idea, and shows him to have been a

polytheist, ready to worship the gods of Babylon. He there ascribes his

conquest to Merodach, the great lord,' and distinctly calls himself

that god's worshipper.' Like other polytheists, he had room in his

pantheon for the gods of other nations, and admitted into it the

deities of the conquered peoples.

The use of the name Jehovah' would, no doubt, be most simply accounted

for by the supposition that Cyrus recognised the sole divinity of the

God of Israel; but that solution conflicts with all that is known of

him, and with his characterisation in Isaiah xlv. as not knowing'

Jehovah. More probably, his confession of Jehovah as the God of heaven

was consistent in his mind with a similar confession as to Bel-Merodach

or the supreme god of any other of the conquered nations. There is,

however no improbability in the supposition that the prophecies

concerning him in Isaiah xlv, may have been brought to his knowledge,

and be referred to in the proclamation as the charge' given to him to

build Jehovah's Temple. But we must not exaggerate the depth or

exclusiveness of his belief in the God of the Jews.

Cyrus's profession of faith, then, is an example of official and

skin-deep religion, of which public and individual life afford

plentiful instances in all ages and faiths. If we are to take their own

word for it, most great conquerors have been very religious men, and

have asked a blessing over many a bloody feast. All religions are

equally true to cynical politicians, who are ready to join in

worshipping Jehovah, Jove, or Lord,' as may suit their policy. Nor is

it only in high places that such loosely worn professions are found.

Perhaps there is no region of life in which insincerity, which is often

quite unconscious, is so rife as in regard to religious belief. But

unless my religion is everything, it is nothing. All in all, or not at

all,' is the requirement of the great Lover of souls. What a winnowing

of chaff from wheat there would be, if that test could visibly separate

the mass which is gathered on His threshing-floor, the Church!

Cyrus's belief in Jehovah illustrates the attitude which was natural to

a polytheist, and is so difficult for us to enter into. A vague belief

in One Supreme, above all other gods, and variously named by different

nations, is buried beneath mountains of myths about lesser gods, but

sometimes comes to light in many pagan minds. This blind creed, if

creed it can be called, is joined with the recognition of deities

belonging to each nation, whose worship is to be co-extensive with the

race of which they are patrons, and who may be absorbed into the

pantheon of a conqueror, just as a vanquished king may be allowed an

honourable captivity at the victor's capital. Thus Cyrus could in a

sense worship Jehovah, the God of Israel, without thereby being

rebellious to Merodach.

There are people, even among so-called Christians, who try the same

immoral and impossible division of what must in its very nature be

wholly given to One Supreme. To serve God and mammon' is demonstrably

an absurd attempt. The love and trust and obedience which are worthy of

Him must be wholehearted, whole-souled, whole-willed. It is as

impossible to love God with part of one's self as it is for a husband

to love his wife with half his heart, and another woman with the rest.

To divide love is to slay it. Cyrus had some kind of belief in Jehovah;

but his own words, so wonderfully recovered in the inscription already

referred to, proved that he had not listened to the command, Him only

shalt thou serve.' That command grips us as closely as it did the Jews,

and is as truly broken by thousands calling themselves Christians as by

any idolaters.

The substance of the proclamation is a permission to return to any one

who wished to do so, a sanction of the rebuilding of the Temple, and an

order to the native inhabitants to render help in money, goods, and

beasts. A further contribution towards the building was suggested as a

free-will offering.' The return, then, was not to be at the expense of

the king, nor was any tax laid on for it; but neighbourly goodwill,

born of seventy years of association, was invoked, and, as we find, not

in vain. God had given the people favour in the eyes of those who had

carried them captive.

II. The long years of residence in Babylonia had weakened the

homesickness which the first generation of captives had, no doubt,

painfully experienced, and but a small part of them cared to avail

themselves of the opportunity of return. One reason is frankly given by

Josephus: Many remained in Babylon, not wishing to leave their

possessions behind them.' The heads of the fathers' houses [who may

have exercised some sort of government among the captives], the priests

and Levites,' made the bulk of the emigrants; but in each class it was

only those whose spirit God had stirred up' (as he had done Cyrus')

that were devout or patriotic enough to face the wrench of removal and

the difficulties of repeopling a wasted land. There was nothing to

tempt any others, and the brave little band had need of all their

fortitude. But no heart in which the flame of devotion burned, or in

which were felt the drawings of that passionate love of the city and

soil where God dwelt (which in the best days of the nation was

inseparable from devotion), could remain behind. The departing

contingent, then, were the best part of the whole; and the lingerers

were held back by love of ease, faint-heartedness, love of wealth, and

the like ignoble motives.

How many of us have had great opportunities offered for service, which

we have let slip in like manner! To have doors opened which we are too

lazy, too cowardly, too much afraid of self-denial, to enter, is the

tragedy and the crime of many a life. It is easier to live among the

low levels of the plain of Babylon, than to take to the dangers and

privations of the weary tramp across the desert. The ruins of Jerusalem

are a much less comfortable abode than the well-furnished houses which

have to be left. Prudence says, Be content where you are, and let other

people take the trouble of such mad schemes as rebuilding the Temple.'

A thousand excuses sing in our ears, and we let the moment in which

alone some noble resolve is possible slide past us, and the rest of

life is empty of another such. Neglected opportunities, unobeyed calls

to high deeds, we all have in our lives. The saddest of all words is,

It might have been.' How much wiser, happier, nobler, were the daring

souls that rose to the occasion, and flung ease and wealth and

companionship behind them, because they heard the divine command

couched in the royal permission, and humbly answered, Here am I; send

me'!

III. The third point in the passage is singular--the inventory of the

Temple vessels returned by Cyrus. As to its particulars, we need only

note that Sheshbazzar is the same as Zerubbabel; that the exact

translation of some of the names of the vessels is doubtful; and that

the numbers given under each head do not correspond with the sum total,

the discrepancy indicating error somewhere in the numbers.

But is not this dry enumeration a strange item to come in the forefront

of the narrative of such an event? We might have expected some kind of

production of the enthusiasm of the returning exiles, some account of

how they were sent on their journey, something which we should have

felt worthier of the occasion than a list of bowls and nine-and-twenty

knives. But it is of a piece with the whole of the first part of this

Book of Ezra, which is mostly taken up with a similar catalogue of the

members of the expedition. The list here indicates the pride and joy

with which the long hidden and often desecrated vessels were received.

We can see the priests and Levites gazing at them as they were brought

forth, their hearts, and perhaps their eyes, filling with sacred

memories. The Lord had turned again the captivity of Zion,' and these

sacred vessels lay there, glittering before them, to assure them that

they were not as them that dream.' Small things become great when they

are the witnesses of a great thing.

We must remember, too, how strong a hold the externals of worship had

on the devout Jew. His faith was much more tied to form than ours ought

to be, and the restoration of the sacrificial implements as a pledge of

the re-establishment of the Temple worship would seem the beginning of

a new epoch of closer relation to Jehovah. It is almost within the

lifetime of living men that all Scotland was thrilled with emotion by

the discovery, in a neglected chamber, of a chest in which lay,

forgotten, the crown and sceptre of the Stuarts. A like wave of feeling

passed over the exiles as they had given back to their custody these

Temple vessels. Sacreder ones are given into our hands, to carry across

a more dangerous desert. Let us hear the charge, Be ye clean, that bear

the vessels of the Lord,' and see that we carry them, untarnished and

unlost, to the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.'

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ALTAR AND TEMPLE

And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in

the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to

Jerusalem. 2. Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren

the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and

builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings

thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. 3. And

they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of

the people of those countries; and they offered burnt offerings thereon

unto the Lord, even burnt offerings morning and evening. 4. They kept

also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily

burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of

every day required; 5. And afterward offered the continual burnt

offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the Lord

that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a

freewill offering unto the Lord. 6. From the first day of the seventh

month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the Lord. But the

foundation of the Temple of the Lord was not yet laid. 7. They gave

money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink,

and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees

from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had

of Cyrus king of Persia. 8. Now in the second year of their coming unto

the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel

the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of

their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come

out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from

twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of

the Lord. 9. Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel

and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, to set forward the workmen

in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their

brethren the Levites. 10. And when the builders laid the foundation of

the Temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with

trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise

the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. 11. And they

sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord;

because He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And

all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord,

because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. 12. But many

of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient

men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house

was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted

aloud for joy: 13. So that the people could not discern the noise of

the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the

people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar

off.'--EZRA iii. 1-13.

What an opportunity of picturesque' writing the author of this book has

missed by his silence about the incidents of the march across the

dreary levels from Babylon to the verge of Syria! But the very silence

is eloquent. It reveals the purpose of the book, which is to tell of

the re-establishment of the Temple and its worship. No doubt the tone

of the whole is somewhat prosaic, and indicative of an age in which the

externals of worship bulked largely; but still the central point of the

narrative was really the centre-point of the events. The austere

simplicity of biblical history shows the real points of importance

better than more artistic elaboration would do.

This passage has two main incidents--the renewal of the sacrifices, and

the beginning of rebuilding the Temple.

The date given in verse 1 is significant. The first day of the seventh

month was the commencement of the great festival of tabernacles, the

most joyous feast of the year, crowded with reminiscences from the

remote antiquity of the Exodus, and from the dedication of Solomon's

Temple. How long had passed since Cyrus' decree had been issued we do

not know, nor whether his first year' was reckoned by the same

chronology as the Jewish year, of which we here arrive at the seventh

month. But the journey across the desert must have taken some months,

and the previous preparations could not have been suddenly got through,

so that there can have been but a short time between the arrival in

Judea and the gathering together as one man to Jerusalem.'

There was barely interval enough for the returning exiles to take

possession of their ancestral fields before they were called to leave

them unguarded and hasten to the desolate city. Surely their glad and

unanimous obedience to the summons, or, as it may even have been, their

spontaneous assemblage unsummoned, is no small token of their ardour of

devotion, even if they were somewhat slavishly tied to externals. It

would take a good deal to draw a band of new settlers in our days to

leave their lots and set to putting up a church before they had built

themselves houses.

The leaders of the band of returned exiles demand a brief notice. They

are Jeshua, or Joshua, and Zerubbabel. In verse 2 the ecclesiastical

dignitary comes first, but in verse 8 the civil. Similarly in Ezra ii.

2, Zerubbabel precedes Jeshua. In Haggai, the priest is pre-eminent; in

Zechariah the prince. The truth seems to be that each was supreme in

his own department, and that they understood each other cordially, or,

Zechariah says, the counsel of peace' was between them both.' It is

sometimes bad for the people when priests and rulers lay their heads

together; but it is even worse when they pull different ways, and

subjects are torn in two by conflicting obligations.

Jeshua was the grandson of Seraiah, the unfortunate high-priest whose

eyes Nebuchadnezzar put out after the fall of Jerusalem. His son

Jozadak succeeded to the dignity, though there could be no sacrifices

in Babylon, and after him his son Jeshua. He cannot have been a young

man at the date of the return; but age had not dimmed his enthusiasm,

and the high-priest was where he ought to have been, in the forefront

of the returning exiles. His name recalls the other Joshua, likewise a

leader from captivity and the desert; and, if we appreciate the

significance attached to names in Scripture, we shall scarcely suppose

it accidental that these two, who had similar work to do, bore the same

name as the solitary third, of whom they were pale shadows, the greater

Joshua, who brings His people from bondage into His own land of peace,

and builds the Temple.

Zerubbabel (Sown in Babylon') belonged to a collateral branch of the

royal family. The direct Davidic line through Solomon died with the

wretched Zedekiah and Jeconiah, but the descendants of another son of

David' s, Nathan, still survived. Their representative was one

Salathiel, who, on the failure of the direct line, was regarded as the

son of Jeconiah' (1 Chron. iii. 17). He seems to have had no son, and

Zerubbabel, who was really his nephew (1 Chron. iii. 19), was legally

adopted as his son. In this makeshift fashion, some shadow of the

ancient royalty still presided over the restored people. We see

Zerubbabel better in Haggai and Zechariah than in Ezra, and can discern

the outline of a strong, bold, prompt nature. He had a hard task, and

he did it like a man. Patient, yet vigorous, glowing with enthusiasm,

yet clear-eyed, self-forgetful, and brave, he has had scant justice

done him, and ought to be a very much more familiar and honoured figure

than he is. Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou

shalt become a plain.' Great mountains only become plains before men of

strong wills and fixed faith.

There is something very pathetic in the picture of the assembled people

groping amid the ruins on the Temple hill, to find the bases,' the

half-obliterated outlines, of the foundations of the old altar of burnt

offerings. What memories of Araunah's threshing-floor, and of the

hovering angel of destruction, and of the glories of Solomon's

dedication, and of the long centuries during which the column of smoke

had gone up continually from that spot, and of the tragical day when

the fire was quenched, and of the fifty years of extinction, must have

filled their hearts! What a conflict of gladness and sorrow must have

troubled their spirits as the flame again shot upwards from the hearth

of God, cold for so long!

But the reason for their so quickly rearing the altar is noteworthy. It

was because fear was upon them because of the people of the countries.'

The state of the Holy Land at the return must be clearly comprehended.

Samaria and the central district were in the hands of bitter enemies.

Across Jordan in the east, down on the Philistine plain in the west,

and in the south where Edom bore sway, eager enemies sulkily watched

the small beginnings of a movement which they were interested in

thwarting. There was only the territory of Judah and Benjamin left free

for the exiles, and they had reason for their fears; for their

neighbours knew that if restitution was to be the order of the day,

they would have to disgorge a good deal. What was the defence against

such foes which these frightened men thought most impregnable? That

altar!

No doubt, much superstition mingled with their religion. Haggai leaves

us under no illusions as to their moral and spiritual condition. They

were no patterns of devoutness or of morality. But still, what they did

carries an eternal truth; and they were reverting to the original terms

of Israel's tenure of their land when they acted on the conviction that

their worship of Jehovah according to His commandment was their surest

way of finding shelter from all their enemies. There are differences

plain enough between their condition and ours; but it is as true for us

as ever it was for them, that our safety is in God, and that, if we

want to find shelter from impending dangers, we shall be wiser to

betake ourselves to the altar and sit suppliant there than to make

defences for ourselves. The ruined Jerusalem was better guarded by that

altar than if its fallen walls had been rebuilt.

The whole ritual was restored, as the narrative tells with obvious

satisfaction in the enumeration. To us this punctilious attention to

the minutiae of sacrificial worship sounds trivial. But we equally err

if we try to bring such externalities into the worship of the Christian

Church, and if we are blind to their worth at an earlier stage.

There cannot be a temple without an altar, but there may be an altar

without a temple. God meets men at the place of sacrifice, even though

there be no house for His name. The order of events here teaches us

what is essential for communion with God. It is the altar. Sacrifice

laid there is accepted, whether it stand on a bare hill-top, or have

round it the courts of the Lord's house.

The second part of the passage narrates the laying of the foundations

of the Temple. There had been contracts entered into with masons and

carpenters, and arrangements made with the Phoenicians for timber, as

soon as the exiles had returned; but of course some time elapsed before

the stone and timber were sufficient to make a beginning with. Note in

verse 7 the reference to Cyrus' grant as enabling the people to get

these stores together. Whether the whole preparations, or only the

transport of cedar wood, is intended to be traced to the influence of

that decree, there seems to be a tacit contrast, in the writer's mind,

with the glorious days when no heathen king had to be consulted, and

Hiram and Solomon worked together like brothers. Now, so fallen are we,

that Tyre and Sidon will not look at us unless we bring Cyru's rescript

in our hands!

If the years' in verses 1 and 8 are calculated from the same beginning,

some seven months were spent in preparation, and then the foundation

was laid. Two things are noted--the humble attempt at making some kind

of a display on the occasion, and the conflict of feeling in the

onlookers. They had managed to get some copies of the prescribed

vestments; and the narrator emphasises the fact that the priests were

in their apparel,' and that the Levites had cymbals, so that some

approach to the pomp of Solomon's dedication was possible. They did

their best to adhere to the ancient prescriptions, and it was no mere

narrow love of ritual that influenced them. However we may breathe a

freer air of worship, we cannot but sympathise with that earnest

attempt to do everything according to the order of David king of

Israel.' Not only punctiliousness as to ritual, but the magnetism of

glorious memories, prescribed the reproduction of that past. Rites long

proscribed become very sacred, and the downtrodden successors of mighty

men will cling with firm grasp to what the greater fathers did.

The ancient strain which still rings from Christian lips, and bids fair

to be as eternal as the mercies which it hymns, rose with strange

pathos from the lips of the crowd on the desolate Temple mountain,

ringed about by the waste solitudes of the city: For He is good, for

His mercy endureth for ever toward Israel.' It needed some faith to

sing that song then, even with the glow of return upon them. What of

all the weary years? What of the empty homesteads, and the surrounding

enemies, and the brethren still in Babylon? No doubt some at least of

the rejoicing multitude had learned what the captivity was meant to

teach, and had come to bless God, both for the long years of exile,

which had burned away much dross, and for the incomplete work of

restoration, surrounded though they were with foes, and little as was

their strength to fight. The trustful heart finds occasion for

unmingled praise in the most mingled cup of joy and sorrow.

There can have been very few in that crowd who had seen the former

Temple, and their memories of its splendour must have been very dim.

But partly remembrance and partly hearsay made the contrast of the past

glories and the present poverty painful. Hence that pathetic and

profoundly significant incident of the blended shouts of the young and

tears of the old. One can fancy that each sound jarred on the ears of

those who uttered the other. But each was wholly natural to the years

of the two classes. Sad memories gather, like evening mists, round aged

lives, and the temptation of the old is unduly to exalt the past, and

unduly to depreciate the present. Welcoming shouts for the new befit

young lips, and they care little about the ruins that have to be carted

off the ground for the foundations of the temple which they are to have

a hand in building. However imperfect, it is better to them than the

old house where the fathers worshipped.

But each class should try to understand the other's feelings. The

friends of the old should not give a churlish welcome to the new, nor

those of the new forget the old. It is hard to blend the two, either in

individual life or in a wider sphere of thought or act. The seniors

think the juniors revolutionary and irreverent; the juniors think the

seniors fossils. It is possible to unite the shout of joy and the

weeping. Unless a spirit of reverent regard for the past presides over

the progressive movements of this or any day, they will not lay a solid

foundation for the temple of the future. We want the old and the young

to work side by side, if the work is to last and the sanctuary is to be

ample enough to embrace all shades of character and tendencies of

thought. If either the grey beards of Solomon's court or the hot heads

of Rehoboam's get the reins in their hands, they will upset the

chariot. That mingled sound of weeping and joy from the Temple hill

tells a more excellent way.

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BUILDING IN TROUBLOUS TIMES

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children

of the captivity builded the temple unto the Lord God of Israel; 2.

Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said

unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and

we do sacrifice unto Him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assur,

which brought us up hither. 3. But Zerubbabel, and Joshua, and the rest

of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing

to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together

will build unto the Lord God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of

Persia hath commanded us. 4. Then the people of the land weakened the

hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, 5. And

hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the

days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of

Persia.'--EZRA iv. 1-5.

Opposition began as soon as the foundations were laid, as is usually

the case with all great attempts to build God's house. It came from the

Samaritans, the mingled people who were partly descendants of the

ancient remnant of the northern kingdom, left behind after the removal

by deportation of the bulk of its population, and partly the

descendants of successive layers of immigrants, planted in the empty

territory by successive Assyrian and Babylonian kings. Esar-haddon was

the first who had sent colonists, about one hundred and thirty years

before the return. The writer calls the Samaritans the adversaries,'

though they began by offers of friendship and alliance. The name

implies that these offers were perfidious, and a move in the struggle.

One can easily understand that the Samaritans looked with suspicion on

the new arrivals, the ancient possessors of the land, coming under the

auspices of the new dynasty, and likely to interfere with their

position if not reduced to inferiority or neutralised somehow. The

proposal to unite in building the Temple was a political move; for, in

old-world ideas, co-operation in Temple-building was incorporation in

national unity. The calculation, no doubt, was that if the returning

exiles could be united with the much more numerous Samaritans, they

would soon be absorbed in them. The only chance for the smaller body

was to keep itself apart, and to run the risk of its isolation.

The insincere request was based on an untruth, for the Samaritans did

not worship Jehovah as the Jews, but along with their own gods (2 Kings

xvii. 25-41). To divide His dominion with others was to dethrone Him

altogether. It therefore became an act of faithfulness to Jehovah to

reject the entangling alliance. To have accepted it would have been

tantamount to frustrating the very purpose of the return, and

consenting to be muzzled about the sin of idolatry. But the chief

lesson which exile had burned in on the Jewish mind was a loathing of

idolatry, which is in remarkable contrast to the inclination to it that

had marked their previous history. So one answer only was possible, and

it was given with unwelcome plainness of speech, which might have been

more courteous, and not less firm. It flatly denied any common ground;

it claimed exclusive relation to our God,' which meant, not yours'; it

underscored the claim by reiterating that Jehovah was the God of

Israel'; it put forward the decree of Cyrus, as leaving no option but

to confine the builders to the people whom it had empowered to build.

Now, it is easy to represent this as a piece of impolitic narrowness,

and to say that its surly bigotry was rightly punished by the evils

that it brought down on the returning exiles. The temper of much

flaccid Christianity at present delights to expand in a lazy and

foolish liberality,' which will welcome anybody to come and take a hand

at the building, and accepts any profession of unity in worship. But

there is no surer way of taking the earnestness out of Christian work

and workers than drafting into it a mass of non-Christians, whatever

their motives may be. Cold water poured into a boiling pot will soon

stop its bubbling, and bring down its temperature. The churches are

clogged and impeded, and their whole tone lowered and chilled, by a

mass of worldly men and women. Nothing is gained, and much is in danger

of being lost, by obliterating the lines between the church and the

world. The Jew who thought little of the difference between the

Samaritan worship with its polytheism, and his own monotheism, was in

peril of dropping to the Samaritan level. The Samaritan who was

accepted as a true worshipper of Jehovah, though he had a bevy of other

gods in addition, would have been confirmed in his belief that the

differences were unimportant. So both would have been harmed by what

called itself liberality,' and was in reality indifference.

No doubt, Zerubbabel had counted the cost of faithfulness, and he soon

had to pay it. The would-be friends threw off the mask, and, as they

could not hinder by pretending to help, took a plainer way to stop

progress. All the weapons that Eastern subtlety and intrigue could use

were persistently employed to weaken the hands' of the builders, and

the most potent of all methods, bribery to Persian officials, was

freely used. The opponents triumphed, and the little community began to

taste the bitterness of high hopes disappointed and noble enterprises

frustrated. How differently things had turned out from the expectations

with which the company had set forth from Babylon! The rough awakening

to realities disillusions us all when we come to turn dreams into

facts. The beginning of laying the Temple foundations is put in 536

B.C.; the first year of Darius was 522. How soon after the commencement

of the work the Samaritan tricks succeeded we do not know, but it must

have been some time before the death of Cyrus in 529. For weary years

then the sanguine band had to wait idly, and no doubt enthusiasm died

out: they had enough to do in keeping themselves alive, and in holding

their own amidst enemies. They needed, as we all do, patience, and a

willingness to wait for God's own time to fulfil His own promise.

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THE NEW TEMPLE AND ITS WORSHIP

And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the

prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo: and

they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God

of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and

Artaxerxes king of Persia. 15. And this house was finished on the third

day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of

Darius the king. 16. And the children of Israel, the priests, and the

Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the

dedication of this house of God with joy, 17. And offered at the

dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams,

four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve

he-goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. 18. And they

set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses,

for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the

book of Moses. 19. And the children of the captivity kept the passover

upon the fourteenth day of the first month. 20. For the priests and the

Levites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the

passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren

the priests, and for themselves. 21. And the children of Israel, which

were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated

themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to

seek the Lord God of Israel, did eat, 22. And kept the feast of

unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the Lord had made them

joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to

strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of

Israel.'--EZRA. vi. 14-22.

There are three events recorded in this passage,--the completion of the

Temple, its dedication, and the keeping of the passover some weeks

thereafter. Four years intervene between the resumption of building and

its successful finish, much of which time had been occupied by the

interference of the Persian governor, which compelled a reference to

Darius, and resulted in his confirmation of Cyrus' charter. The king's

stringent orders silenced opposition, and seem to have been loyally,

however unwillingly, obeyed. About twenty-three years passed between

the return of the exiles and the completion of the Temple.

I. The prosperous close of the long task (vers. 14, 15). The narrative

enumerates three points in reference to the completion of the Temple

which are very significant, and, taken together, set forth the stimulus

and law and helps of work for God.

It is expressive of deep truth that first in order is named, as the

cause of success, the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah.' Practical

men,' no doubt, then as always, set little store by the two prophets'

fiery words, and thought that a couple of masons would have done more

for the building than they did. The contempt for ideas' is the mark of

shallow and vulgar minds. Nothing is more practical than principles and

motives which underlie and inform work, and these two prophets did more

for building the Temple by their words than an army of labourers with

their hands. There are diversities of operations,' and it is not given

to every man to handle a trowel; but no good work will be prosperously

accomplished unless there be engaged in it prophets who rouse and

rebuke and hearten, and toilers who by their words are encouraged and

saved from forgetting the sacred motives and great ends of their work

in the monotony and multiplicity of details.

Still more important is the next point mentioned. The work was done

according to the commandment of the God of Israel.' There is peculiar

beauty and pathos in that name, which is common in Ezra. It speaks of

the sense of unity in the nation, though but a fragment of it had come

back. There was still an Israel, after all the dreary years, and in

spite of present separation. God was still its God, though He had

hidden His face for so long. An inextinguishable faith, wistful but

assured, in His unalterable promise, throbs in that name, so little

warranted by a superficial view of circumstances, but so amply

vindicated by a deeper insight. His commandment' is at once the warrant

and the standard for the work of building. In His service we are to be

sure that He bids, and then to carry out His will whoever opposes.

We are to make certain that our building is according to the pattern

showed in the mount,' and, if so, to stick to it in every point. There

is no room for more than one architect in rearing the temple. The

working drawings must come from Him. We are only His workmen. And

though we may know no more of the general plan of the structure than

the day-labourer who carries a hod does, we must be sure that we have

His orders for our little bit of work, and then we may be at rest even

while we toil. They who build according to His commandment build for

eternity, and their work shall stand the trial by fire. That motive

turns what without it were but wood, hay, stubble,' into gold and

silver and precious stones.'

The last point is that the work was done according to the commandment

of the heathen kings. We need not discuss the chronological difficulty

arising from the mention of Artaxerxes here. The only king of that name

who can be meant reigned fifty years after the events here narrated.

The mention of him here has been explained by the consideration that he

contributed to the maintenance, though not to the building, of the

Temple.' Whatever is the solution, the intention of the mention of the

names of the friendly monarchs is plain. The king's heart is in the

hand of the Lord as the watercourses; He turneth it whithersoever He

will.' The wonderful providence, surpassing all hopes, which gave the

people favour in the eyes of them that carried them captive,' animates

the writer's thankfulness, while he recounts that miracle that the

commandment of God was re-echoed by such lips. The repetition of the

word in both clauses underscores, as it were, the remarkable

concurrence.

II. The dedication of the Temple (vers. 16-18). How long the dedication

was after the completion is not specified. The month Adar was the last

of the Jewish year, and corresponded nearly with our March. Probably

the ceremonial of dedication followed immediately on the completion of

the building. Probably few, if any, of the aged men, who had wept at

the founding, survived to see the completion of the Temple. A new

generation had no such sad contrasts of present lowliness and former

glory to shade their gladness. So many dangers surmounted, so many long

years of toil interrupted and hope deferred, gave keener edge to joy in

the fair result of them all.

We may cherish the expectation that our long tasks, and often

disappointments, will have like ending if they have been met and done

in like spirit, having been stimulated by prophets and commanded by

God. It is not wholesome nor grateful to depreciate present blessings

by contrasting them with vanished good. Let us take what God gives

to-day, and not embitter it by remembering yesterday with vain regret.

There is a remembrance of the former more splendid Temple in the name

of the new one, which is thrice repeated in the passage,--this house.'

But that phrase expresses gratitude quite as much as, or more than,

regret. The former house is gone, but there is still this house,' and

it is as truly God's as the other was. Let us grasp the blessings we

have, and be sure that in them is continued the substance of those we

have lost.

The offerings were poor, if compared with Solomon's two and twenty

thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep' (1 Kings viii.

63), and no doubt the despisers of the day of small things,' whom

Zechariah had rebuked, would be at their depreciating work again. But

if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a

man hath, and not according to that he hath not.' The thankfulness of

the offerers, not the number of their bullocks and rams, made the

sacrifice well pleasing. But it would not have been so if the exiles'

resources had been equal to the great King' s. How many cattle had they

in their stalls at home, not how many they brought to the Temple, was

the important question. The man who says, Oh! God accepts small

offerings,' and gives a mite while he keeps talents, might as well keep

his mite too; for certainly God will not have it.

A significant part of the offerings was the twelve he-goats, according

to the number of the tribes of Israel.' These spoke of the same

confidence as we have already noticed as being expressed by the

designation of the God of Israel.' Possibly scattered members of all

the tribes had come back, and so there was a kind of skeleton framework

of the nation present at the dedication; but, whether that be so or

not, that handful of people was not Israel. Thousands of their brethren

still lingered in exile, and the hope of their return must have been

faint. Yet God's promise remained, and Israel was immortal. The tribes

were still twelve, and the sacrifices were still theirs. A thrill of

emotion must have touched many hearts as the twelve goats were led up

to the altar. So an Englishman feels as he looks at the crosses on the

Union Jack.

But there was more than patriotism in that sacrifice. It witnessed to

unshaken faith. And there was still more expressed in it than the

offerers dreamed; for it prophesied of that transformation of the

national into the spiritual Israel, in virtue of which the promises

remain true, and are inherited by the Church of Christ in all lands.

The re-establishment of the Temple worship with the appointment of

priests and Levites, according to the ancient ordinance, naturally

followed on the dedication.

III. The celebration of the Passover (vers. 19-22). It took place on

the fourteenth day of the first month, and probably, therefore, very

soon after the dedication. They kept the feast, . . . for the priests

and Levites were purified together.' The zeal of the sacerdotal class

in attending to the prescriptions for ceremonial purity made it

possible that the feast should be observed. How much of real devotion,

and how much of mere eagerness to secure their official position,

mingled with this zeal, cannot be determined. Probably there was a

touch of both. Scrupulous observance of ritual is easy religion,

especially if one's position is improved by it. But the connection

pointed out by the writer is capable of wide applications. The true

purity and earnestness of preachers and teachers of all degrees has

much to do with their hearers' and scholars' participation in the

blessings of the Gospel. If priests are not pure, they cannot kill the

passover. Earnest teachers make earnest scholars. Foul hands cannot

dispense the bread of life.

There is a slight deviation from the law in the ritual as here stated,

since it was prescribed that each householder should kill the passover

lamb for his house. But from the time of Hezekiah the Levites seem to

have done it for the congregation (2 Chron. xxx. 17), and afterwards

for the priests also (2 Chron. xxxv. 11, 14).

Verse 21 tells that not only the returned exiles, but also all such as

had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen

of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel,' ate the passover. It may

be questioned whether these latter were Israelites, the descendants of

the residue who had not been deported, but who had fallen into idolatry

during the exile, or heathens of the mixed populations who had been

settled in the vacant country. The emphasis put on their turning to

Israel and Israel's God seems to favour the latter supposition. But in

any case, the fact presents us with an illustration of the proper

effect of the presence anywhere of a company of God's true worshippers.

If we purify ourselves, and keep the feast of the true passover with

joy as well as purity, we shall not want for outsiders who will

separate themselves from the more subtle and not less dangerous

idolatries of modern life, to seek the Lord God of Israel. If His

Israel is what it ought to be, it will attract. A bit of scrap-iron in

contact with a magnet is a magnet. They who live in touch with Him who

said, I will draw all men unto Me' will share His attractive power in

the measure of their union with Him.

The week after the passover feast was, according to the ritual,

observed as the feast of unleavened bread. The narrative touches

lightly on the ceremonial, and dwells in conclusion on the joy of the

worshippers and its cause. They do well to be glad whom God makes glad.

All other joy bears in it the seeds of death. It is, in one aspect, the

end of God's dealings, that we should be glad in Him. Wise men will not

regard that as a less noble end than making us pure; in fact, the two

are united. The blessed God' is glad in our gladness when it is His

gladness.

Notice the exulting wonder with which God's miracle of mercy is

reported in its source and its glorious result. The heart of the king

was turned to them, and no power but God's could have done that. The

issue of that divine intervention was the completed Temple, in which

once more the God of that Israel which He had so marvellously restored

dwelt in the midst of His people.

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GOD THE JOY-BRINGER

They kept the feast . . . seven days with joy; for the Lord had made

them joyful.'--EZRA vi. 22.

Twenty years of hard work and many disappointments and dangers had at

last, for the Israelites returning from the captivity, been crowned by

the completion of the Temple. It was a poor affair as compared with the

magnificent house that had stood upon Zion; and so some of them

despised the day of small things.' They were ringed about by enemies;

they were feeble in themselves; there was a great deal to darken their

prospects and to sadden their hearts; and yet, when memories of the

ancient days came back, and once more they saw the sacrificial smoke

rising from the long cold and ruined altar, they rejoiced in God, and

they kept the passover amid the ruins, as my text tells us, for the

seven days' of the statutory period with joy,' because, in spite of

all, the Lord had made them joyful.'

I think if we take this simple saying we get two or three thoughts, not

altogether irrelevant to universal experience, about the true and the

counterfeit gladnesses possible to us all.

I. Look at that great and wonderful thought--God the joy-maker.

We do not often realise how glad God is when we are glad, and how

worthy an object of much that He does is simply the prosperity and the

blessedness of human hearts. The poorest creature that lives has a

right to ask from God the satisfaction of its instincts, and every man

has a claim on God--because he is God's creature--to make him glad. God

honours all cheques legitimately drawn on Him, and answers all claims,

and regards Himself as occupied in a manner entirely congruous with His

magnificence and His infinitude, when He stoops to put some kind of

vibrating gladness into the wings of a gnat that dances for an hour in

the sunshine, and into the heart of a man that lives his time for only

a very little longer.

God is the Joy-maker. There are far more magnificent and sublime

thoughts about Him than that; but I do not know that there is any that

ought to come nearer to our hearts, and to silence more of our

grumblings and of our distrust, than the belief that the gladness of

His children is an end contemplated by Him in all that He does. Whether

we think it of small importance or no, He does not think it so, that

all mankind should rejoice in Himself. And this is a marvellous

revelation to break out of the very heart of that comparatively hard

system of ancient Judaism. The Lord hath made them joyful.'

Turning away from the immediate connection of these words, let me

remind you of the great outlines of the divine provision for gladdening

men's hearts. I was going to say that God had only one way of making us

glad; and perhaps that is in the deepest sense true. That way is by

putting Himself into us. He gives us Himself to make us glad; for

nothing else will do it--or, at least, though there may be many

subordinate sources of joy, if there be in the innermost shrine of our

spirits an empty place, where the Shekinah ought to shine, no other

joys will suffice to settle and to rejoice the soul. The secret of all

true human well-being is close communion with God; and when He looks at

the poorest of us, desiring to make us blessed, He can but say, I will

give Myself to that poor man; to that ignorant creature; to that

wayward and prodigal child; to that harlot in her corruption; to that

worldling in his narrow godlessness; I will give Myself, if they will

have Me.' And thus, and only thus, does He make us truly, perfectly,

and for ever glad.

Besides that, or rather as a sequel and consequence of that, there come

such other God-given blessings as these to which my text refers. What

were the outward reasons for the restored exiles' gladness? The Lord

had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king . . . unto them

to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of

Israel.'

So, then, He pours into men's lives by His providences the secondary

and lower gifts which men, according to changing circumstances, need;

and He also satisfies the permanent physical necessities of all orders

of beings to whom He has given life. He gives Himself for the spirit;

He gives whatever is contributory to any kind of gladness; and if we

are wise we shall trace all to Him. He is the Joy-giver; and that man

has not yet understood either the sanctity of life or the full

sweetness of its sweetest things unless he sees, written over every one

of them, the name of God, their giver. Your common mercies are His love

tokens, and they all come to us, just as the gifts of parents to their

children do, with this on the fly-leaf, With a father's love.' Whatever

comes to God's child with that inscription, surely it ought to kindle a

thrill of gladness. That the king of Assyria's heart is turned'; shall

we thank the king of Assyria? Yes and No! For it was God who turned'

it. Oh! to carry the quiet confidence of that thought into all our

daily life, and see His name written upon everything that contributes

to make us blessed. God is the true Source and Maker of every joy.

And by the side of that we must put this other thought--there are

sources of joy with which He has nothing to do. There are people who

are joyful--and there are some of them listening now--not because God

made them joyful, but because the world, the devil, and the flesh' have

given them ghastly caricatures of the true gladness. And these rival

sources of blessedness, the existence of which my text suggests, are

the enemies of all that is good and noble in us and in our joys. God

made these men joyful, and so their gladness was wholesome.

II. Note the consequent obligation and wisdom of taking our God-given

joys.

They kept the feast with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful.' Then

it is our obligation to accept and use what it is His blessedness to

give. Be sure you take Him. When He is waiting to pour all His love

into your heart, and all His sweetness into your sensitive spirit, to

calm your anxieties, to deepen your blessedness, to strengthen

everything that is good in you, to be to you a stay in the midst of

crumbling prosperity, and a Light in the midst of gathering darkness,

be sure that you take the joy that waits your acceptance. Do not let it

be said that, when the Lord Christ has come down from heaven, and lived

upon earth, and gone back to heaven, and sent His Spirit to dwell in

you, you lock the door against the entrance of the joy-bringing

Messenger, and are sad and restless and discontented because you have

shut out the God who desires to abide in your hearts.

They kept the feast with joy, because the Lord had made them joyful.'

Oh! how many Christian men and women there are, who in the midst of the

abundant and wonderful provision for continual cheerfulness and

buoyancy of spirit given to them in the promises of the Gospel, in the

gifts of Christ, in the indwelling of the Divine Spirit, do yet go

through life creeping and sad, burdened and anxious, perplexed and at

their wits' end, just because they will not have the God who yearns to

come to them, or at least will not have Him in anything like the

fullness and the completeness in which He desires to bestow Himself. If

God gives, surely we are bound to receive. It is an obligation upon

Christian men and women, which they do not sufficiently realise, to be

glad, and it is a commandment needing to be reiterated. Rejoice in the

Lord always; and again I say, rejoice.' Would that Christian experience

in this generation was more alive to the obligation and the blessedness

of perpetual joy arising from perpetual communion with Him.

Further, another obligation is to recognise Him in all common mercies,

because He is at the back of them all. Let them always proclaim Him to

us. Oh! if we did not go through the world blinded to the real Power

that underlies all its motions, we should feel that everything was

vocal to us of the loving-kindness of our Father in heaven. Link Him,

dear friend! with everything that makes your heart glad; with

everything pleasant that comes to you. There is nothing good or sweet

but it flows from Him. There is no common delight of flesh or sense, of

sight or taste or smell, no little enjoyment that makes the moment pass

more brightly, no drop of oil that eases the friction of the wheels of

life, but it may be elevated into greatness and nobleness, and will

then first be understood in its true significance, if it is connected

with Him. God does not desire to be put away high up on a pedestal

above our lives, as if He regulated the great things and the trifles

regulated themselves; but He seeks to come, as air into the lungs, into

every particle of the mass of life, and to fill it all with His own

purifying presence.

Recognise Him in common joys. If, when we sit down to partake of them,

we would say to ourselves, The Lord has made us joyful,' all our home

delights, all our social pleasures, all our intellectual and all our

sensuous ones--rest and food and drink and all other goods for the

body--they would all be felt to be great, as they indeed are. Enjoyed

in Him, the smallest is great; without Him, the greatest is small. The

Lord made them joyful'; and what is large enough for Him to give ought

not to be too small for us to receive with recognition of His hand.

Another piece of wholesome counsel in this matter is--Be sure that you

use the joys which God does give. Many good people seem to think that

it is somehow devout and becoming to pitch most of their songs in a

minor key, and to be habitually talking about trials and

disappointments, and a desert land,' and Brief life is here our

portion,' and so on, and so on. There are two ways in which you can

look at the world and at everything that befalls you. There is enough

in everybody's life to make him sad if he sulkily selects these things

to dwell upon. There is enough in everybody's life to make him

continually glad if he wisely picks out these to think about. It

depends altogether on the angle at which you look at your life what you

see in it. For instance, you know how children do when they get a bit

of a willow wand into their possession. They cut off rings of bark, and

get the switch alternately white and black, white and black, and so on

right away to the tip. Whether will you look at the white rings or the

black ones? They are both there. But if you rightly look at the black

you will find out that there is white below it, and it only needs a

very little stripping off of a film to make it into white too. Or, to

put it into simpler words, no Christian man has the right to regard

anything that God's Providence brings to him as such unmingled evil

that it ought to make him sad. We are bound to rejoice in the Lord

always.'

I know how hard it is, but sure am I that it is possible for a man, if

he keeps near Jesus Christ, to reproduce Paul's paradox of being

sorrowful yet always rejoicing,' and even in the midst of darkness and

losses and sorrows and blighted hopes and disappointed aims to rejoice

in the Lord, and to keep the feast with gladness, because the Lord has

made him joyful.' Nor do we discharge our duty, unless side by side

with the sorrow which is legitimate, which is blessed, strengthening,

purifying, calming, moderating, there is also joy unspeakable and full

of glory.'

Again, be sure that you limit your delights to God-made joys. Too many

of us have what parts of our nature recognise as satisfaction, and are

glad to have, apart from Him. There is nothing sadder than the joys

that come into a life, and do not come from God. Oh! let us see to it

that we do not fill our cisterns with poisonous sewage when God is

waiting to fill them with the pure river of the water of life.' Do not

let us draw our blessedness from the world and its evils. Does my joy

help me to come near to God? Does it interfere with my communion with

Him? Does it aid me in the consecration of myself? Does my conscience

go with it when my conscience is most awake? Do I recognise Him as the

Giver of the thing that is so blessed? If we can say Yes! to these

questions, we can venture to believe that our blessedness comes from

God, and leads to God, however homely, however sensuous and material

may be its immediate occasion. But if not, then the less we have to do

with such sham gladness the better. Even in laughter the heart is

sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.' The alternative

presented for the choice of each of us is whether we will have surface

joy and a centre of dark discontent, or surface sorrow and a centre of

calm blessedness. The film of stagnant water on a pond full of

rottenness simulates the glories of the rainbow, in which pure sunshine

falls upon the pure drops, but it is only painted corruption after all,

a sign of rotting; and if a man puts his lips to it it will kill him.

Such is the joy which is apart from God. It is the crackling of thorns

under a pot'--the more fiercely they burn the sooner they are ashes.

And, on the other hand, these things have I spoken unto you that My joy

might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.'

It is not for seven days' that we keep the feast' if God has made us

joyful,' but for all the rest of the days of time, and for the endless

years of the calm gladnesses of the heavens.

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HEROIC FAITH

I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to

help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the

king, saying, The hand of our God is upon them all for good that seek

Him. . .. 23. So we fasted and besought our God for this. . .. 31. The

hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the

enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. 32. And we came to

Jerusalem.'--EZRA viii. 22, 23, 31, 32.

The memory of Ezra the scribe has scarcely had fairplay among

Bible-reading people. True, neither his character nor the incidents of

his life reach the height of interest or of grandeur belonging to the

earlier men and their times. He is no hero, or prophet; only a scribe;

and there is a certain narrowness as well as a prosaic turn about his

mind, and altogether one feels that he is a smaller man than the

Elijahs and Davids of the older days. But the homely garb of the scribe

covered a very brave devout heart, and the story of his life deserves

to be more familiar to us than it is.

This scrap from the account of his preparations for the march from

Babylon to Jerusalem gives us a glimpse of a high-toned faith, and a

noble strain of feeling. He and his company had a long weary journey of

four months before them. They had had little experience of arms and

warfare, or of hardships and desert marches, in their Babylonian homes.

Their caravan was made unwieldy and feeble by the presence of a large

proportion of women and children. They had much valuable property with

them. The stony desert, which stretches unbroken from the Euphrates to

the uplands on the east of Jordan, was infested then as now by wild

bands of marauders, who might easily swoop down on the encumbered march

of Ezra and his men, and make a clean sweep of all which they had. And

he knew that he had but to ask and have an escort from the king that

would ensure their safety till they saw Jerusalem. Artaxerxes' surname,

the long-handed,' may have described a physical peculiarity, but it

also expressed the reach of his power; his arm could reach these

wandering plunderers, and if Ezra and his troop were visibly under his

protection, they could march secure. So it was not a small exercise of

trust in a higher Hand that is told us here so simply. It took some

strength of principle to abstain from asking what it would have been so

natural to ask, so easy to get, so comfortable to have. But, as he

says, he remembered how confidently he has spoken of God's defence, and

he feels that he must be true to his professed creed, even if it

deprives him of the king's guards. He halts his followers for three

days at the last station before the desert, and there, with fasting and

prayer, they put themselves in God's hand; and then the band, with

their wives and little ones, and their substance,--a heavily-loaded and

feeble caravan,--fling themselves into the dangers of the long, dreary,

robber-haunted march. Did not the scribe's robe cover as brave a heart

as ever beat beneath a breastplate?

That symbolic phrase, the hand of our God,' as expressive of the divine

protection, occurs with remarkable frequency in the books of Ezra and

Nehemiah, and though not peculiar to them, is yet strikingly

characteristic of them. It has a certain beauty and force of its own.

The hand is of course the seat of active power. It is on or over a man

like some great shield held aloft above him, below which there is safe

hiding. So that great Hand bends itself over us, and we are secure

beneath its hollow. As a child sometimes carries a tender-winged

butterfly in the globe of its two hands that the bloom on the wings may

not be ruffled by fluttering, so He carries our feeble, unarmoured

souls enclosed in the covert of His Almighty hand. Who hath measured

the waters in the hollow of His hand?' Who hath gathered the wind in

His fists?' In that curved palm where all the seas lie as a very little

thing, we are held; the grasp that keeps back the tempests from their

wild rush, keeps us, too, from being smitten by their blast. As a

father may lay his own large muscular hand on his child's tiny fingers

to help him, or as Elisha put his hands on the king's hands,' that the

contact might strengthen him to shoot the arrow of the Lord's

deliverance,' so the hand of our God is upon us to impart power as well

as protection; and our bow abides in strength,' when the arms of our

hands are made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.' That

was Ezra's faith, and that should be ours.

Note Ezra's sensitive shrinking from anything like inconsistency

between his creed and his practice. It was easy to talk about God's

protection when he was safe behind the walls of Babylon; but now the

pinch had come. There was a real danger before him and his unwarlike

followers. No doubt, too, there were plenty of people who would have

been delighted to catch him tripping; and he felt that his cheeks would

have tingled with shame if they had been able to say, Ah! that is what

all his fine professions come to, is it? He wants a convoy, does he? We

thought as much. It is always so with these people who talk in that

style. They are just like the rest of us when the pinch comes.' So,

with a high and keen sense of what was required by his avowed

principles, he will have no guards for the road. There was a man whose

religion was at any rate not a fair-weather religion. It did not go off

in fine speeches about trusting to the protection of God, spoken from

behind the skirts of the king, or from the middle of a phalanx of his

soldiers. He clearly meant what he said, and believed every word of it

as a prose fact, which was solid enough to build conduct on.

I am afraid a great many of us would rather have tried to reconcile our

asking for a band of horsemen with our professed trust in God's hand;

and there would have been plenty of excuses very ready about using

means as well as exercising faith, and not being called upon to abandon

advantages, and not pushing a good principle to Quixotic lengths, and

so on, and so on. But whatever truth there is in such considerations,

at any rate we may well learn the lesson of this story--to be true to

our professed principles; to beware of making our religion a matter of

words; to live, when the time for putting them into practice comes, by

the maxims which we have been forward to proclaim when there was no

risk in applying them; and to try sometimes to look at our lives with

the eyes of people who do not share our faith, that we may bring our

actions up to the mark of what they expect of us. If the Church' would

oftener think of what the world' looks for from it, it would seldomer

have cause to be ashamed of the terrible gap between its words and its

deeds.

Especially in regard to this matter of trust in an unseen Hand, and

reliance on visible helps, we all need to be very rigid in our

self-inspection. Faith in the good hand of God upon us for good should

often lead to the abandonment, and always to the subordination, of

material aids. It is a question of detail, which each man must settle

for himself as each occasion arises, whether in any given case

abandonment or subordination is our duty. This is not the place to

enter on so large and difficult a question. But, at all events, let us

remember, and try to work into our own lives, that principle which the

easy-going Christianity of this day has honeycombed with so many

exceptions, that it scarcely has any whole surface left at all; that

the absolute surrender and forsaking of external helps and goods is

sometimes essential to the preservation and due expression of reliance

on God.

There is very little fear of any of us pushing that principle to

Quixotic lengths. The danger is all the other way. So it is worth while

to notice that we have here an instance of a man's being carried by a

certain lofty enthusiasm further than the mere law of duty would take

him. There would have been no harm in Ezra's asking an escort, seeing

that his whole enterprise was made possible by the king's support. He

would not have been leaning on an arm of flesh' by availing himself of

the royal troops, any more than when he used the royal firman. But a

true man often feels that he cannot do the things which he might

without sin do. All things are lawful for me, but all things are not

expedient,' said Paul. The same Apostle eagerly contended that he had a

perfect right to money support from the Gentile Churches; and then, in

the next breath, flamed up into, I have used none of these things, for

it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying

void.' A sensitive spirit, or one profoundly stirred by religious

emotion, will, like the apostle whose feet were moved by love, far

outrun the slower soul, whose steps are only impelled by the thought of

duty. Better that the cup should run over than that it should not be

full. Where we delight to do His will, there will often be more than a

scrupulously regulated enough; and where there is not sometimes that

more,' there will never be enough.

Give all thou canst; high Heaven rejects the lore

Of nicely calculated less or more.'

What shall we say of people who profess that God is their portion, and

are as eager in the scramble for money as anybody? What kind of a

commentary will sharp-sighted, sharp-tongued observers have a right to

make on us, whose creed is so unlike theirs, while our lives are

identical? Do you believe, friends! that the hand of our God is upon

all them for good that seek Him'? Then, do you not think that racing

after the prizes of this world, with flushed cheeks and labouring

breath, or longing, with a gnawing hunger of heart, for any earthly

good, or lamenting over the removal of creatural defences and joys, as

if heaven were empty because some one's place here is, or as if God

were dead because dear ones die, may well be a shame to us, and a taunt

on the lips of our enemies? Let us learn again the lesson from this old

story,--that if our faith in God is not the veriest sham, it demands

and will produce, the abandonment sometimes and the subordination

always, of external helps and material good.

Notice, too, Ezra's preparation for receiving the divine help. There,

by the river Ahava, he halts his company like a prudent leader, to

repair omissions, and put the last touches to their organisation before

facing the wilderness. But he has another purpose also. I proclaimed a

fast there, to seek of God a right way for us.' There was no

foolhardiness in his courage; he was well aware of all the possible

dangers on the road; and whilst he is confident of the divine

protection, he knows that, in his own quiet, matter-of-fact words, it

is given to all them that seek Him.' So his faith not only impels him

to the renunciation of the Babylonian guard, but to earnest

supplication for the defence in which he is so confident. He is sure it

will be given--so sure, that he will have no other shield; and yet he

fasts and prays that he and his company may receive it. He prays

because he is sure that he will receive it, and does receive it because

he prays and is sure.

So for us, the condition and preparation on and by which we are

sheltered by that great Hand, is the faith that asks, and the asking of

faith. We must forsake the earthly props, but we must also believingly

desire to be upheld by the heavenly arms. We make God responsible for

our safety when we abandon other defence, and commit ourselves to Him.

With eyes open to our dangers, and full consciousness of our own

unarmed and unwarlike weakness, let us solemnly commend ourselves to

Him, rolling all our burden on His strong arms, knowing that He is able

to keep that which we have committed to Him. He will accept the trust,

and set His guards about us. As the song of the returning exiles, which

may have been sung by the river Ahava, has it: My help cometh from the

Lord. The Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon thy right

hand.'

So our story ends with the triumphant vindication of this Quixotic

faith. A flash of joyful feeling breaks through the simple narrative,

as it tells how the words spoken before the king came true in the

experience of the weaponless pilgrims: The hand of our God was upon us,

and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in

wait by the way; and we came to Jerusalem.' It was no rash venture that

we made. He was all that we hoped and asked. Through all the weary

march He led us. From the wild, desert-born robbers, that watched us

from afar, ready to come down on us, from ambushes and hidden perils,

He kept us, because we had none other help, and all our hope was in

Him. The ventures of faith are ever rewarded. We cannot set our

expectations from God too high. What we dare scarcely hope now we shall

one day remember. When we come to tell the completed story of our

lives, we shall have to record the fulfilment of all God's promises,

and the accomplishment of all our prayers that were built on these.

Here let us cry, Be Thy hand upon us.' Here let us trust, Thy hand will

be upon us. Then we shall have to say, The hand of our God was upon

us,' and as we look from the watch-towers of the city, on the desert

that stretches to its very walls, and remember all the way by which He

led us, we shall rejoice over His vindication of our poor faith, and

praise Him that not one thing hath failed of all the things which the

Lord our God spake concerning us.'

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THE CHARGE OF THE PILGRIM PRIESTS

Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them . . . at Jerusalem, in the

chambers of the house of the Lord.'--EZRA viii. 29.

The little band of Jews, seventeen hundred in number, returning from

Babylon, had just started on that long pilgrimage, and made a brief

halt in order to get everything in order for their transit across the

desert; when their leader Ezra, taking count of his men, discovers that

amongst them there are none of the priests or Levites. He then takes

measures to reinforce his little army with a contingent of these, and

entrusts to their special care a very valuable treasure in gold, and

silver, and sacred vessels, which had been given to them for use in the

house of the Lord. The words which I have taken as text are a portion

of the charge which he gave to those twelve priestly guardians of the

precious things, that were to be used in worship when they got back to

the Temple. Watch and keep them, until ye weigh them in the chambers of

the house of the Lord.'

So I think I may venture, without being unduly fanciful, to take these

words as a type of the injunctions which are given to us Christian

people; and to see in them a striking and picturesque representation of

the duties that devolve upon us in the course of our journey across the

desert to the Temple-Home above.

And to begin with, let me remind you, for a moment or two, what the

precious treasure is which is thus entrusted to our keeping and care.

We can scarcely, in such a connection and with such a metaphor, forget

the words of our Lord about a certain king that went to receive his

kingdom, and to return; who called together his servants, and gave to

each of them according to their several ability, with the injunction to

trade upon that until he came. The same metaphor which our Master

employed lies in this story before us--in the one case, sacrificial

vessels and sacred treasures; in the other case, the talents out of the

rich possessions of the departing king.

Nor can we forget either the other phase of the same figure which the

Apostle employs when he says to his own son' and substitute, Timothy:

That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost

which dwelleth in us,' nor that other word to the same Timothy, which

says: O Timothy! keep that which was committed to thy trust, and avoid

profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science, falsely so

called.' In these quotations, the treasure, and the rich deposit, is

the faith once delivered to the saints; the solemn message of love and

peace in Jesus Christ, which was entrusted, first of all to those

preachers, but as truly to every one of Christ's disciples.

So, then, the metaphor is capable of two applications. The first is to

the rich treasure and solemn trust of our own nature, of our own souls;

the faculties and capacities, precious beyond all count, rich beyond

all else that a man has ever received. Nothing that you have is half so

much as that which you are. The possession of a soul that knows and

loves, and can obey; that trusts and desires; that can yearn and reach

out to Jesus Christ, and to God in Christ; of a conscience that can

yield to His command; and faculties of comprehending and understanding

what comes to them from Jesus Christ--that is more than any other

possession, treasure, or trust. That which you and I carry with us--the

infinite possibilities of these awful spirits of ours--the tremendous

faculties which are given to every human soul, and which, like a candle

plunged into oxygen, are meant to burn far more brightly under the

stimulus of Christian faith and the possession of God's truth, are the

rich deposit committed to our charge. You priests of the living God,

you men and women, you say that you are Christ' s, and therefore are

consecrated to a nobler priesthood than any other--to you is given this

solemn charge: That good thing which is committed unto thee, keep by

the Holy Ghost that dwelleth in you.' The precious treasure of your own

natures, your own hearts, your own understandings, wills, consciences,

desires--keep these, until they are weighed in the house of the Lord in

Jerusalem.

And in like manner, taking the other aspect of the metaphor--we have

given to us, in order that we may do something with it, that great

deposit and treasure of truth, which is all embodied and incarnated in

Jesus Christ our Lord. It is bestowed upon us that we may use it for

ourselves, and in order that we may carry it triumphantly all through

the world. Possession involves responsibility always. The word of

salvation is given to us. If we go tampering with it, by erroneous

apprehension, by unfair usage, by failing to apply it to our own daily

life; then it will fade and disappear from our grasp. It is given to us

in order that we may keep it safe, and carry it high up across the

desert, as becomes the priests of the most high God.

The treasure is first--our own selves--with all that we are and may be,

under the stimulating and quickening influence of His grace and Spirit.

The treasure is next--His great word of salvation, once delivered unto

the saints, and to be handed on, without diminution or alteration in

its fair perspective and manifold harmonies, to the generations that

are to come. So, think of yourselves as the priests of God, journeying

through the wilderness, with the treasures of the Temple and the

vessels of the sacrifice for your special deposit and charge.

Further, I touch on the command, the guardianship that is here set

forth. Watch ye, and keep them.' That is to say, I suppose, according

to the ordinary idiom of the Old Testament, Watch, in order that you

may keep.' Or to translate it into other words: The treasure which is

given into our hands requires, for its safe preservation, unceasing

vigilance. Take the picture of my text: These Jews were four months,

according to the narrative, in travelling from their first station upon

their journey to Jerusalem across the desert. There were enemies lying

in wait for them by the way. With noble self-restraint and grand

chivalry, the leader of the little band says: I was ashamed to require

of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen, to help us against the

enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand

of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him; but His power and

His wrath is against all that forsake Him.' And so they would not go to

him, cap in hand, and ask him to give them a guard to take care of

them; but We fasted and besought our God for this; and He was intreated

of us.'

Thus the little company, without arms, without protection, with nothing

but a prayer and a trust to make them strong, flung themselves into the

pathless desert with all those precious things in their possession; and

all the precaution which Ezra took was to lay hold of the priests in

the little party, and to say: Here! all through the march do you stick

by these precious things. Whoever sleeps, do you watch. Whoever is

careless, be you vigilant. Take these for your charge, and remember I

weigh them here before we start, and they will be all weighed again

when we get there. So be alert.'

And is not that exactly what Christ says to us? Watch; keep them; be

vigilant, that ye may keep; and keep them, because they will be weighed

and registered when you arrive there.'

I cannot do more than touch upon two or three of the ways in which this

charge may be worked out, in its application for ourselves, beginning

with that first one which is implied in the words of the

text--unslumbering vigilance; then trust, like the trust which is

glorified in the context, depending only on the good hand of our God

upon us'; then purity, because, as Ezra said, Ye are holy unto the

Lord. The vessels are holy also'; and therefore ye are the fit persons

to guard them. And besides these, there is, in our keeping our trust, a

method which does not apply to the incident before us; namely, use, in

order to their preservation.

That is to say, first of all, no slumber; not a moment's relaxation; or

some of those who lie in wait for us on the way will be down upon us,

and some of the precious things will go. While all the rest of the

wearied camp slept, the guardians of the treasure had to outwatch the

stars. While others might straggle on the march, lingering here or

there, or resting on some patch of green, they had to close up round

their precious charge; others might let their eyes wander from the

path, they had ever to look to their charge. For them the journey had a

double burden, and unslumbering vigilance was their constant duty.

We likewise have unslumberingly and ceaselessly to watch over that

which is committed to our charge. For, depend upon it, if for an

instant we turn away our heads, the thievish birds that flutter over us

will be down upon the precious seed that is in our basket, or that we

have sown in the furrows, and it will be gone. Watch, that ye may keep.

And then, still further, see how in this story before us there are

brought out very picturesquely, and very simply, deeper lessons still.

It is not enough that a man shall be for ever keeping his eye upon his

own character and his own faculties, and seeking sedulously to

cultivate and improve them, as he that must give an account. There must

be another look than that. Ezra said, in effect, Not all the cohorts of

Babylon can help us; and we do not want them. We have one strong hand

that will keep us safe'; and so he, and his men, with all this mass of

wealth, so tempting to the wild robbers that haunted the road, flung

themselves into the desert, knowing that all along it there were, as he

says, such as lay in wait for them.' His confidence was: God will bring

us all safe out to the end there; and we shall carry every glittering

piece of the precious things that we brought out of Babylon right into

the Temple of Jerusalem.' Yet he says, Watch ye and keep them.'

What does that come to in reference to our religious experience? Why

this: Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is

God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of His own good

pleasure.' You do not need these external helps. Fling yourself wholly

upon His keeping hand, and also watch and keep yourselves. I know in

whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep that which I have

committed unto Him against that day,' is the complement of the other

words, That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy

Ghost.'

So guardianship is, first, unceasing vigilance; and then it is lowly

trust. And besides that, it is punctilious purity. I said unto them, Ye

are holy unto the Lord; the vessels are holy unto the Lord. Watch ye,

and keep them.'

It was fitting that priests should carry the things that belonged to

the Temple. No other hands but consecrated hands had a right to touch

them. To none other guardianship but the guardianship of the possessors

of a symbolic and ceremonial purity, could the vessels of a symbolic

and ceremonial worship be entrusted; and to none others but the

possessors of real and spiritual holiness can the treasures of the true

Temple, of an inward and spiritual worship, be entrusted. Be ye clean

that bear the vessels of the Lord,' said Isaiah using a kindred

metaphor. The only way to keep our treasure undiminished and

untarnished, is to keep ourselves pure and clean.

And, lastly, we have to exercise a guardianship which not only means

unslumbering vigilance, lowly trust, punctilious purity, but also

requires the constant use of the treasure.

Watch ye, and keep them.' Although the vessels which those priests bore

through the desert were used for no service during all the weary march,

they weighed just the same when they got to the end as at the

beginning; though, no doubt, even their fine gold had become dim and

tarnished through disuse. But if we do not use the vessels that are

entrusted to our care, they will not weigh the same. The man that

wrapped up his talent in the napkin, and said, Lo, there thou hast that

is thine,' was too sanguine. There was never an unused talent rolled up

in a handkerchief yet, but when it was taken out and put into the

scales it was lighter than when it was committed to the keeping of the

earth. Gifts that are used fructify. Capacities that are strained to

the uttermost increase. Service strengthens the power for service; and

just as the reward for work is more work, the way for making ourselves

fit for bigger things is to do the things that are lying by us. The

blacksmith's arm, the sailor's eye, the organs of any piece of

handicraft, as we all know, are strengthened by exercise; and so it is

in this higher region.

And so, dear brethren, take these four words--vigilance, trust, purity,

exercise. Watch ye, and keep them, until they are weighed in the

chambers of the House of the Lord.'

And, lastly, think of that weighing in the House of the Lord. Cannot

you see the picture of the little band when they finally reach the goal

of their pilgrimage; and three days after they arrived, as the

narrative tells us, went up into the Temple, and there, by number and

by weight, rendered up their charge, and were clear of their

responsibility? And the first came and said, Lord, thy pound hath

gained ten pounds. And he said, Well, thou good servant, because thou

hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten

cities.'

Oh! how that thought of the day when they would empty out the rich

treasure upon the marble pavement, and clash the golden vessels into

the scales, must have filled their hearts with vigilance during all the

weary watches, when desert stars looked down upon the slumbering

encampment, and they paced wakeful all the night. And how the thought,

too, must have filled their hearts with joy, when they tried to picture

to themselves the sigh of satisfaction, and the sense of relief with

which, after all the perils, their feet would stand within thy gates, O

Jerusalem,' and they would be able to say, That which thou hast given

us, we have kept, and nothing of it is lost.'

A lifetime would be a small expenditure to secure that; and though it

cannot be that you and I will meet the trial and the weighing of that

great day without many failures and much loss, yet we may say: I know

in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep my

deposit--whether it be in the sense of that which I have committed unto

Him, or in the sense of that which He has committed unto me--against

that day.' We may hope that, by His gracious help and His pitying

acceptance, even such careless stewards and negligent watchers as we

are, may lay ourselves down in peace at the last, saying, I have kept

the faith,' and may be awakened by the word, Well done! good and

faithful servant.'

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THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

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A REFORMER'S SCHOOLING

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the

month Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace,

2. That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah;

and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left

of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. 3. And they said unto me,

The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in

great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken

down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. 4. And it came to

pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned

certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, 5. And

said, I beseech Thee, O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God,

that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him and observe His

commandments: 6. Let Thine ear now be attentive, and Thine eyes open,

that Thou mayest hear the prayer of Thy servant, which I pray before

Thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel Thy servants, and

confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned

against Thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. 7. We have

dealt very corruptly against Thee, and have not kept the commandments,

nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which Thou commandedst Thy servant

Moses. 8. Remember, I beseech Thee, the word that Thou commandedst Thy

servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad

among the nations: 9. But if ye turn unto Me, and keep My commandments,

and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part

of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them

unto the place that I have chosen to set My name there. 10. Now these

are Thy servants and Thy people, whom Thou hast redeemed by Thy great

power, and by Thy strong hand. 11. O Lord, I beseech Thee, let now

Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant, and to the prayer

of Thy servants, who desire to fear Thy name: and prosper, I pray Thee,

Thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For

I was the king's cupbearer.'--NEH. i. 1-11.

The date of the completion of the Temple is 516 B.C.; that of

Nehemiah's arrival 445 B.C. The colony of returned exiles seems to have

made little progress during that long period. Its members settled down,

and much of their enthusiasm cooled, as we see from the reforms which

Ezra had to inaugurate fourteen years before Nehemiah. The majority of

men, even if touched by spiritual fervour, find it hard to keep on the

high levels for long. Breathing is easier lower down. As is often the

case, a brighter flame of zeal burned in the bosoms of sympathisers at

a distance than in those of the actual workers, whose contact with hard

realities and petty details disenchanted them. Thus the impulse to

nobler action came, not from one of the colony, but from a Jew in the

court of the Persian king.

This passage tells us how God prepared a man for a great work, and how

the man prepared himself.

I. Sad tidings and their effect on a devout servant of God (vs. 1-4).

The time and place are precisely given. The month Chislev' corresponds

to the end of November and beginning of December. The twentieth year'

is that of Artaxerxes (Neh. ii. 1). Shushan,' or Susa, was the royal

winter residence, and the palace' was a distinct quarter of the city,

occupying an artificial eminence.' Note the absence of the name of the

king. Nehemiah is so familiar with his greatness that he takes for

granted that every reader can fill the gaps. But, though the omission

shows how large a space the court occupied in his thoughts, a true

Jewish heart beat below the courtier's robe. That flexibility which

enabled them to stand as trusted servants of the kings of many lands,

and yet that inflexible adherence to, and undying love of, Israel, has

always been a national characteristic. We can think of this youthful

cup-bearer as yearning for one glimpse of the mountains round about

Jerusalem' while he filled his post in Shushan.

His longings were kindled into resolve by intercourse with a little

party of Jews from Judaea, among whom was his own brother. They had

been to see how things went there, and the fact that one of them was a

member of Nehemiah's family seems to imply that the same sentiments

belonged to the whole household. Eager questions brought out sorrowful

answers. The condition of the remnant' was one of great affliction and

reproach,' and the ground of the reproach was probably (Neh. ii. 17;

iv. 2-4) the still ruined fortifications.

It has been supposed that the breaking down of the walls and burning of

the gates, mentioned in verse 3, were recent, and subsequent to the

events recorded in Ezra; but it is more probable that the project for

rebuilding the defences, which had been stopped by superior orders

(Ezra iv. 12-16), had not been resumed, and that the melancholy ruins

were those which had met the eyes of Zerubbabel nearly a hundred years

before. Communication between Shushan and Jerusalem cannot have been so

infrequent that the facts now borne in on Nehemiah might not have been

known before. But the impression made by facts depends largely on their

narrator, and not a little on the mood of the hearer. It was one thing

to hear general statements, and another to sit with one's brother, and

see through his eyes the dismal failure of the remnant' to carry out

the purpose of their return. So the story, whether fresh or repeated

with fresh force, made a deep dint in the young cupbearer's heart, and

changed his life's outlook. God prepares His servants for their work by

laying on their souls a sorrowful realisation of the miseries which

other men regard, and they themselves have often regarded, very

lightly. The men who have been raised up to do great work for God and

men, have always to begin by greatly and sadly feeling the weight of

the sins and sorrows which they are destined to remove. No man will do

worthy work at rebuilding the walls who has not wept over the ruins.

So Nehemiah prepared himself for his work by brooding over the tidings

with tears, by fasting and by prayer. There is no other way of

preparation. Without the sad sense of men's sorrows, there will be no

earnestness in alleviating them, nor self-sacrificing devotion; and

without much prayer there will be little consciousness of weakness or

dependence on divine help.

Note the grand and apparently immediate resolution to throw up

brilliant prospects and face a life of danger and suffering and toil.

Nehemiah was evidently a favourite with the king, and had the ball at

his foot. But the ruins on Zion were more attractive to him than the

splendours of Shushan, and he willingly flung away his chances of a

great career to take his share of affliction and reproach.' He has

never had justice done him in popular estimation. He is not one of the

well-known biblical examples of heroic self-abandonment; but he did

just what Moses did, and the eulogium of the Epistle to the Hebrews

fits him as well as the lawgiver; for he too chose rather to suffer

with the people of God than to enjoy pleasures for a season.' So must

we all, in our several ways, do, if we would have a share in building

the walls of the city of God.

II. The prayer (vs. 5-11). The course of thought in this prayer is very

instructive. It begins with solemnly laying before God His own great

name, as the mightiest plea with Him, and the strongest encouragement

to the suppliant. That commencement is no mere proper invocation,

conventionally regarded as the right way of beginning, but it expresses

the petitioner's effort to lay hold on God's character as the ground of

his hope of answer. The terms employed remarkably blend what Nehemiah

had learned from Persian religion and what from a better source. He

calls upon Jehovah, the great name which was the special possession of

Israel. He also uses the characteristic Persian designation of the God

of heaven,' and identifies the bearer of that name, not with the god to

whom it was originally applied, but with Israel's Jehovah. He takes the

crown from the head of the false deity, and lays it at the feet of the

God of his fathers. Whatsoever names for the Supreme Excellence any

tongues have coined, they all belong to our God, in so far as they are

true and noble. The modern science of comparative religion' yields many

treasures which should be laid up in Jehovah's Temple.

But the rest of the designations are taken from the Old Testament, as

was fitting. The prayer throughout is full of allusions and quotations,

and shows how this cupbearer of Artaxerxes had fed his young soul on

God's word, and drawn thence the true nourishment of high and holy

thoughts and strenuous resolutions and self-sacrificing deeds. Prayers

which are cast in the mould of God's own revelation of Himself will not

fail of answer. True prayer catches up the promises that flutter down

to us, and flings them up again like arrows.

The prayer here is all built, then, on that name of Jehovah, and on

what the name involves, chiefly on the thought of God as keeping

covenant and mercy. He has bound Himself in solemn, irrefragable

compact, to a certain line of action. Men know where to have Him,' if

we may venture on the familiar expression. He has given us a chart of

His course, and He will adhere to it. Therefore we can go to Him with

our prayers, so long as we keep these within the ample space of His

covenant, and ourselves within its terms, by loving obedience.

The petition that God's ears might be sharpened and His eyes open to

the prayer is cast in a familiar mould. It boldly transfers to Him not

only the semblance of man's form, but also the likeness of His

processes of action. Hearing the cry for help precedes active

intervention in the case of men's help, and the strong imagery of the

prayer conceives of similar sequence in God. But the figure is

transparent, and the anthropomorphism' so plain that no mistakes can

arise in its interpretation.

Note, too, the light touch with which the suppliant's relation to God

(Thy servant') and his long-continued cry (day and night') are but just

brought in for a moment as pleas for a gracious hearing. The prayer is

for Thy servants the children of Israel,' in which designation, as the

next clauses show, the relation established by God, and not the conduct

of men, is pleaded as a reason for an answer.

The mention of that relation brings at once to Nehemiah's mind the

terrible unfaithfulness to it which had marked, and still continued to

mark, the whole nation. So lowly confession follows (vs. 6, 7).

Unprofitable servants they had indeed been. The more loftily we think

of our privileges, the more clearly should we discern our sins. Nothing

leads a true heart to such self-ashamed penitence as reflection on

God's mercy. If a man thinks that God has taken him for a servant, the

thought should bow him with conscious unworthiness, not lift him in

self-satisfaction. Nehemiah's confession not only sprung from the

thought of Israel's vocation, so poorly fulfilled, but it also laid the

groundwork for further petitions. It is useless to ask God to help us

to repair the wastes if we do not cast out the sins which have made

them. The beginning of all true healing of sorrow is confession of

sins. Many promising schemes for the alleviation of national and other

distresses have come to nothing because, unlike Nehemiah' s, they did

not begin with prayer, or prayed for help without acknowledging sin.

And the man who is to do work for God and to get God to bless his work

must not be content with acknowledging other people's sins, but must

always say, We have sinned,' and not seldom say, I have sinned.' That

penitent consciousness of evil is indispensible to all who would make

their fellows happier. God works with bruised reeds. The sense of

individual transgression gives wonderful tenderness, patience amid

gainsaying, submission in failure, dependence on God in difficulty, and

lowliness in success. Without it we shall do little for ourselves or

for anybody else.

The prayer next reminds God of His own words (vs. 8, 9), freely quoted

and combined from several passages (Lev. xxvi. 33-45; Deut. iv. 25-31,

etc.). The application of these passages to the then condition of

things is at first sight somewhat loose, since part of the people were

already restored; and the purport of the prayer is not the restoration

of the remainder, but the deliverance of those already in the land from

their distresses. Still, the promise gives encouragement to the prayer

and is powerful with God, inasmuch as it could not be said to have been

fulfilled by so incomplete a restoration as that as that at present

realised. What God does must be perfectly done; and His great word is

not exhausted so long as any fuller accomplishment of it can be

imagined.

The reminder of the promise is clinched (v. 10) by the same appeal as

formerly to the relation to Himself into which God had been pleased to

bring the nation, with an added reference to former deeds, such as the

Exodus, in which His strong hand had delivered them. We are always sure

of an answer if we ask God not to contradict Himself. Since He has

begun He will make an end. It will never be said of Him that He began

to build and was not able to finish.' His past is a mirror in which we

can read His future. The return from Babylon is implied in the Exodus.

A reiteration of earlier words follows, with the addition that Nehemiah

now binds, as it were, his single prayer in a bundle with those of the

like-minded in Israel. He gathers single ears into a sheaf, which he

brings as a wave-offering.' And then, in one humble little sentence at

the end, he puts his only personal request. The modesty of the man is

lovely. His prayer has been all for the people. Remarkably enough,

there is no definite petition in it. He never once says right out what

he so earnestly desires, and the absence of specific requests might be

laid hold of by sceptical critics as an argument against the

genuineness of the prayer. But it is rather a subtle trait, on which no

forger would have been likely to hit. Sometimes silence is the very

result of entire occupation of mind with a thought. He says nothing

about the particular nature of his request, just because he is so full

of it. But he does ask for favour in the eyes of this man,' and that he

may be prospered this day.'

So this was his morning prayer on that eventful day, which was to

settle his life's work. The certain days of solitary meditation on his

nation's griefs had led to a resolution. He says nothing about his long

brooding, his slow decision, his conflicts with lower projects of

personal ambition. He burns his own smoke,' as we all should learn to

do. But he asks that the capricious and potent will of the king may be

inclined to grant his request. If our morning supplication is Prosper

Thy servant this day,' and our purposes are for God's glory, we need

not fear facing anybody. However powerful Artaxerxes was, he was but

this man,' not God. The phrase does not indicate contempt or

undervaluing of the solid reality of his absolute power over Nehemiah,

but simply expresses the conviction that the king, too, was a subject

of God' s, and that his heart was in the hand of Jehovah, to mould as

He would. The consciousness of dependence on God and the habit of

communion with Him give a man a clear sight of the limitations of

earthly dignities, and a modest boldness which is equally remote from

rudeness and servility.

Thus prepared for whatever might be the issue of that eventful day, the

young cupbearer rose from his knees, drew a long breath, and went to

his work. Well for us if we go to ours, whether it be a day of crisis

or of commonplace, in like fashion! Then we shall have like defence and

like calmness of heart.

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THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL EVILS

It came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept,

and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of

heaven.'--NEH. i. 4.

Ninety years had passed since the returning exiles had arrived at

Jerusalem. They had encountered many difficulties which had marred

their progress and cooled their enthusiasm. The Temple, indeed, was

rebuilt, but Jerusalem lay in ruins, and its walls remained as they had

been left, by Nebuchadnezzar's siege, some century and a half before. A

little party of pious pilgrims had gone from Persia to the city, and

had come back to Shushan with a sad story of weakness and despondency,

affliction and hostility. One of the travellers had a brother, a youth

named Nehemiah, who was a cup-bearer in the court of the Persian king.

Living in a palace, and surrounded with luxury, his heart was with his

brethren; and the ruins of Jerusalem were dearer to him than the pomp

of Shushan.

My text tells how the young cupbearer was affected by the tidings, and

how he wept and prayed before God. The accurate dates given in this

book show that this period of brooding contemplation of the miseries of

his brethren lasted for four months. Then he took a great resolution,

flung up brilliant prospects, identified himself with the afflicted

colony, and asked for leave to go and share, and, if it might be, to

redress, the sorrows which had made so deep a dint upon his heart.

Now, I think that this vivid description, drawn by himself, of the

emotions excited in Nehemiah by his countrymen's sorrows, which

influenced his whole future, contains some very plain lessons for

Christian people, the observance of which is every day becoming more

imperative by reason of the drift of public opinion, and the new

prominence which is being given to so-called social questions.' I wish

to gather up one or two of these lessons for you now.

I. First, then, note the plain Christian duty of sympathetic

contemplation of surrounding sorrows. Nehemiah might have made a great

many very good excuses for treating lightly the tidings that his

brother had brought him. He might have said: Jerusalem is a long way

off. I have my own work to do; it is no part of my business to rebuild

the walls of Jerusalem. I am the King's cupbearer. They went with their

eyes open, and experience has shown that the people who knew when they

were well off, and stayed where they were, were a great deal wiser.'

These were not his excuses. He let the tidings fill his heart, and burn

there.

Now, the first condition of sympathy is knowledge; and the second is

attending to what we do know. Nehemiah had probably known, in a kind of

vague way, for many a day how things were going in Palestine.

Communications between it and Persia were not so difficult but that

there would come plenty of Government despatches; and a man at

headquarters who had the ear of the monarch, was not likely to be

ignorant of what was going on in that part of his dominions. But there

is all the difference between hearing vague general reports, and

sitting and hearing your own brother tell you what he had seen with his

own eyes. So the impression which had existed before was all

inoperative until it was kindled by attention to the facts which all

the time had been, in some degree, known.

Now, how many of us are there that know--and don't know--what is going

on round about us in the slums and back courts of this city? How many

of us are there who are habitually ignorant of what we actually know,

because we never, as we say, give heed' to it. I did not think of

that,' is a very poor excuse about matters concerning which there is

knowledge, whether there is thought or not. And so I want to press upon

all you Christian people the plain duty of knowing what you do know,

and of giving an ample place in your thoughts to the stark staring

facts around us.

Why! loads of people at present seem to think that the miseries, and

hideous vices, and sodden immorality, and utter heathenism, which are

found down amongst the foundations of every civic community are as

indispensable to progress as the noise of the wheels of a train is to

its advancement, or as the bilge-water in a wooden ship is to keep its

seams tight. So we prate about civilisation,' which means turning men

into cities. If agglomerating people into these great communities,

which makes so awful a feature of modern life, be necessarily attended

by such abominations as we live amongst and never think about, then,

better that there had never been civilisation in such a sense at all.

Every consideration of communion with and conformity to Jesus Christ,

of loyalty to His words, of a true sense of brotherhood and of lower

things--such as self-interest--every consideration demands that

Christian people shall take to their hearts, in a fashion that the

churches have never done yet, the condition of England question,' and

shall ask, Lord! what wouldst Thou have me to do?' I do not care to

enter upon controversy raised by recent utterances, the motive of which

may be worthy of admiration, though the expression cannot be acquitted

of the charge of exaggeration, to the effect that the Christian

churches as a whole have been careless of the condition of the people.

It is not true in its absolute sense. I suppose that, taking the

country over, the majority of the members of, at all events the

Nonconformist churches and congregations, are in receipt of weekly

wages or belong to the upper ranks of the working-classes, and that the

lever which has lifted them to these upper ranks has been God's Gospel.

I suppose it will be admitted that the past indifference with which we

are charged belonged to the whole community, and that the new sense of

responsibility which has marked, and blessedly marked, recent years, is

largely owing to political and other causes which have lately come into

operation. I suppose it will not be denied that, to a very large

extent, any efforts which have been made in the past for the social,

intellectual, and moral, and religious elevation of the people have had

their impulse, and to a large extent their support, both pecuniary and

active, from Christian churches and individuals. All that is perfectly

true and, I believe, undeniable. But it is also true that there remains

an enormous, shameful, dead mass of inertness in our churches, and

that, unless we can break up that, the omens are bad, bad for society,

worse for the church. If cholera is raging in the slums, the suburbs

will not escape. If the hovels are infected, the mansions will have to

pay their tribute to the disease. If we do not recognise the

brotherhood of the suffering and the sinful, in any other

fashion--Then,' as a great teacher told us a generation ago now, and

nobody paid any attention to him, then they will begin and show you

that they are your brethren by killing some of you.' And so

self-preservation conjoins with loftier motives to make this

sympathetic observation of the surrounding sorrows the plainest of

Christian duties.

II. Secondly, such a realisation of the dark facts is indispensable to

all true work for alleviating them.

There is no way of helping men out by bearing what they bear. No man

will ever lighten a sorrow of which he has not himself felt the

pressure. Jesus Christ's Cross, to which we are ever appealing as the

ground of our redemption and the anchor of our hope, is these, thank

God! But it is more than these. It is the pattern for our lives, and it

lays down, with stringent accuracy and completeness, the enduring

conditions of helping the sinful and the sorrowful. The saviours of

society' have still, in lower fashion, to be crucified. Jesus Christ

would never have been the Lamb of God that bore away the sins of the

world' unless He Himself had taken our infirmities and borne our

sicknesses.' No work of any real use will be done except by those whose

hearts have bled with the feeling of the miseries which they set

themselves to cure.

Oh! we all want a far fuller realisation of that sympathetic spirit of

the pitying Christ, if we are ever to be of any use in the world, or to

help the miseries of any of our brethren. Such a sorrowful and

participating contemplation of men's sorrows springing from men's sins

will give tenderness to our words, will give patience, will soften our

whole bearing. Help that is flung to people, as you might fling a bone

to a dog, hurts those whom it tries to help, and patronising help is

help that does little good, and lecturing help does little more. You

must take blind beggars by the hand if you are going to make them see;

and you must not be afraid to lay your white, clean fingers upon the

feculent masses of corruption in the leper's glistening whiteness if

you are going to make him whole. Go down in order to lift, and remember

that without sympathy there is no sufficient help, and without

communion with Christ there is no sufficient sympathy.

III. Thirdly, such realisation of surrounding sorrows should drive to

communion with God.

Nehemiah wept and mourned, and that was well. But between his weeping

and mourning and his practical work there had to be still another link

of connection. He wept and mourned,' and because he was sad he turned

to God, and I fasted and prayed certain days.' There he got at once

comfort for his sorrows, his sympathies, and deepening of his

sympathies, and thence he drew inspiration that made him a hero and a

martyr. So all true service for the world must begin with close

communion with God.

There was a book published several years since which made a great noise

in its little day, and called itself The Service of Man, which service

it proposed to substitute for the effete conception of worship as the

service of God. The service of man is, then, best done when it is the

service of God. I suppose nowadays it is old-fashioned' and narrow,'

which is the sin of sins at present, but I for my part have very little

faith in the persistence and wide operation of any philanthropic

motives except the highest--namely, compassion caught from Jesus

Christ. I do not believe that you will get men, year in and year out,

to devote themselves in any considerable numbers to the service of man

unless you appeal to this highest of motives. You may enlist a little

corps--and God forbid that I should deny such a plain fact--of selecter

spirits to do purely secular alleviative work, with an entire ignoring

of Christian motives, but you will never get the army of workers that

is needed to grapple with the facts of our present condition, unless

you touch the very deepest springs of conduct, and these are to be

found in communion with God. All the rest is surface drainage. Get down

to the love of God, and the love of men therefrom, and you have got an

Artesian well which will bubble up unfailingly.

And I have not much faith in remedies which ignore religion, and are

brought, without communion with God, as sufficient for the disease. I

do not want to say one word that might seem to depreciate what are good

and valid and noble efforts in their several spheres. There is no need

for antagonism--rather, Christian men are bound by every consideration

to help to the utmost of their power, even in the incomplete attempts

that are made to grapple with social problems. There is room enough for

us all. But sure I am that until grapes and waterbeds cure smallpox,

and a spoonful of cold water puts out Vesuvius, you will not cure the

evils of the body politic by any lesser means than the application of

the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We hear a great deal to-day about a social gospel,' and I am glad of

the conception, and of the favour which it receives. Only let us

remember that the Gospel is social second, and individual first. And

that if you get the love of God and obedience to Jesus Christ into a

man's heart it will be like putting gas into a balloon, it will go up,

and the man will get out of the slums fast enough; and he will not be a

slave to the vices of the world much longer, and you will have done

more for him and for the wide circle that he may influence than by any

other means. I do not want to depreciate any helpers, but I say it is

the work of the Christian church to carry to the world the only thing

that will make men deeply and abidingly happy, because it will make

them good.

IV. And so, lastly, such sympathy should be the parent of a noble,

self-sacrificing life. Look at the man in our text. He had the ball at

his feet. He had the entree of a court, and the ear of a king.

Brilliant prospects were opening before him, but his brethren's

sufferings drew him, and with a noble resolution of self-sacrifice, he

shut himself out from the former and went into the wilderness. He is

one of the Scripture characters that never have had due honour--a hero,

a saint, a martyr, a reformer. He did, though in a smaller sphere, the

very same thing that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews magnified

with his splendid eloquence, in reference to the great Lawgiver, And

chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God,' and to turn

his back upon the dazzlements of a court, than to enjoy the pleasures

of sin for a season,' whilst his brethren were suffering.

Now, dear friends! the letter of the example may be put aside; the

spirit of it must be observed. If Christians are to do the work that

they can do, and that Christ has put them into this world that they may

do, there must be self-sacrifice with it. There is no shirking that

obligation, and there is no discharging our duty without it. You and I,

in our several ways, are as much under the sway of that absolute law,

that if a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it brings forth

fruit,' as ever was Jesus Christ or His Apostles. I have nothing to say

about the manner of the sacrifice. It is no part of my business to

prescribe to you details of duty. It is my business to insist on the

principles which must regulate these, and of these principles in

application to Christian service there is none more stringent than--I

will not offer unto my God burnt-offering of that which doth cost me

nothing.'

I am sure that, under God, the great remedy for social evils lies

mainly here, that the bulk of professing Christians shall recognise and

discharge their responsibilities. It is not ministers, city

missionaries, Bible-women, or any other paid people that can do the

work. It is by Christian men and by Christian women, and, if I might

use a very vulgar distinction which has a meaning in the present

connection, very specially by Christian ladies, taking their part in

the work amongst the degraded and the outcasts, that our sorest

difficulties and problems will be solved. If a church does not face

these, well, all I can say is, its light will go out; and the sooner

the better. If thou forbear to deliver them that are appointed to

death, and say, Behold! I knew it not, shall not He that weigheth the

hearts consider it, and shall He not render to every man according to

his work?' And, on the other hand, there are no blessings more rich,

select, sweet, and abiding, than are to be found in sharing the sorrow

of the Man of Sorrows, and carrying the message of His pity and His

redemption to an outcast world. If thou draw out thy soul to the

hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul, the Lord shall satisfy thy

soul; and thou shalt be as a watered garden, and as a spring of water

whose waters fail not.'

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OVER AGAINST HIS HOUSE'

The priests repaired every one over against his house.'--NEH. iii. 28.

The condition of our great cities has lately been forced upon public

attention, and all kinds of men have been offering their panaceas. I am

not about to enter upon that discussion, but I am glad to seize the

opportunity of saying one or two things which I think very much need to

be said to individual Christian people about their duty in the matter.

Every man over against his house' is the principle I desire to commend

to you as going a long way to solve the problem of how to sweeten the

foul life of our modern cities.

The story from which my text is taken does not need to detain us long.

Nehemiah and his little band of exiles have come back to a ruined

Jerusalem. Their first care is to provide for their safety, and the

first step is to know the exact extent of their defencelessness. So we

have the account of Nehemiah's midnight ride amongst the ruins of the

broken walls. And then we read of the co-operation of all classes in

the work of reconstruction. Many hands made light work.' Men and women,

priests and nobles, goldsmiths, apothecaries, merchants, all seized

trowel or spade, and wheeled and piled. One man puts up a long length

of wall, another can only manage a little bit; another undertakes the

locks, bolts, and bars for the gates. Roughly and hastily the work is

done. The result, of course, is very unlike the stately structures of

Solomon's or of Herod's time, but it is enough for shelter. We can

imagine the sigh of relief with which the workers looked upon the

completed circle of their rude fortifications.

The principle of division of labour in our text is repeated several

times in this list of the builders. It was a natural one; a man would

work all the better when he saw his own roof mutely appealing to be

defended, and thought of the dear ones that were there. But I take

these words mainly as suggesting some thoughts applicable to the duties

of Christian people in view of the spiritual wants of our great cities.

I. I need not do more than say a word or two about the ruins which need

repair. If I dwell rather upon the dark side than on the bright side of

city life I shall not be understood, as forgetting that the very causes

which intensify the evil of a great city quicken the good--the friction

of multitudes and the impetus thereby given to all kinds of mental

activity. Here amongst us there is much that is admirable and

noble--much public spirit, much wise and benevolent expenditure of

thought and toil for the general good, much conjoint action by men of

different parties, earnest antagonism and earnest co-operation, and a

free, bracing intellectual atmosphere, which stimulates activity. All

that is true, though, on the other hand, it is not good to live always

within hearing of the clatter of machinery and the strife of tongues;

and the wisdom that is born of solitary meditation and quiet thought is

less frequently met with in cities than is the cleverness that is born

of intercourse with men, and newspaper reading.

But there is a tragic other side to all that, which mostly we make up

our minds to say little about and to forget. The indifference which has

made that ignorance possible, and has in its turn been fed by the

ignorance, is in some respects a more shocking phenomenon than the

vicious life which it has allowed to rot and to reek unheeded.

Most of us have got so familiarised with the evils that stare us in the

face every time we go out upon the pavements, that we have come to

think of them as being inseparable from our modern life, like the noise

of a carriage wheel from its rotation. And is it so then? Is it indeed

inevitable that within a stone's throw of our churches and chapels

there should be thousands of men and women that have never been inside

a place of worship since they were christened; and have no more

religion than a horse? Must it be that the shining structure of our

modern society, like an old Mexican temple, must be built upon a layer

of living men, flung in for a foundation? Can it not be helped that

there should be streets in our cities into which it is unfit for a

decent woman to go by day alone, and unsafe for a brave man to venture

after nightfall? Must men and women huddle together in dens where

decency is as impossible as it is for swine in a sty? Is it an

indispensable part of our material progress and wonderful civilisation

that vice and crime and utter irreligion and hopeless squalor should go

with it? Can all that bilge water really not be pumped out of the ship?

If it be so, then I venture to say that, to a very large extent,

progress is a delusion, and that the simple life of agricultural

communities is better than this unwholesome aggregation of men.

The beginning of Nehemiah's work of repair was that sad midnight ride

round the ruined walls. So there is a solemn obligation laid on

Christian people to acquaint themselves with the awful facts, and then

to meditate on them, till sacred, Christ-like compassion, pressing

against the flood-gates of the heart, flings them open, and lets out a

stream of helpful pity and saving deeds.

II. So much for my first point. My second is--the ruin is to be

repaired mainly by the old Gospel of Jesus Christ. Far be it from me to

pit remedies against each other. The causes are complicated, and the

cure must be as manifold as the causes. For my own part I believe that,

in regard to the condition of the lowest of our outcast population,

drink and lust have done it almost all, and that for all but an

infinitesimal portion of it, intemperance is directly or indirectly the

cause. That has to be fought by the distinct preaching of abstinence,

and by the invoking of legislative restrictions upon the traffic.

Wretched homes have to be dealt with by sanitary reform, which may

require municipal and parliamentary action. Domestic discomfort has to

be dealt with by teaching wives the principles of domestic economy. The

gracious influence of art and music, pictures and window-gardening, and

the like, will lend their aid to soften and refine. Coffee taverns,

baths and wash-houses, workmen's clubs, and many other agencies are

doing real and good work. I for one say, God speed to them all,' and

willingly help them so far as I can.

But, as a Christian man, I believe that I know a thing that if lodged

in a man's heart will do pretty nearly all which they aspire to do; and

whilst I rejoice in the multiplied agencies for social elevation, I

believe that I shall best serve my generation, and I believe that

ninety-nine out of a hundred of you will do so too, by trying to get

men to love and fear Jesus Christ the Saviour. If you can get His love

into a man's heart, that will produce new tastes and new inclinations,

which will reform, and sweeten, and purify faster than anything else

does.

They tell us that Nonconformist ministers are never seen in the slums;

well, that is a libel! But I should like to ask why it is that the

Roman Catholic priest is seen there more than the Nonconformist

minister? Because the one man's congregation is there, and the other

man's is not--which, being translated into other words, is this: the

religion of Jesus Christ mostly keeps people out of the slums, and

certainly it will take a man out of them if once it gets into his

heart, more certainly and quickly than anything else will.

So, dear friends! if we have in our hearts and in our hands this great

message of God's love, we have in our possession the germ out of which

all things that are lovely and of good report will grow. It will

purify, elevate, and sweeten society, because it will make individuals

pure and strong, and homes holy and happy. We do not need to draw

comparisons between this and other means of reparation, and still less

to feel any antagonism to them or the benevolent men who work them; but

we should fix it in our minds that the principles of Christ's Gospel

adhered to by individuals, and therefore by communities, would have

rendered such a condition of things impossible, and that the true

repair of the ruin wrought by evil and ignorance, in the single soul,

in the family, the city, the nation, the world, is to be found in

building anew on the One Foundation which God has laid, even Jesus

Christ, the Living Stone, whose pure life passes into all that are

grounded and founded on Him.

III. Lastly, this remedy is to be applied by the individual action of

Christian men and women on the people nearest them.

The priests repaired every one over against his house.' We are always

tempted, in the face of large disasters, to look for heroic and large

remedies, and to invoke corporate action of some sort, which is a great

deal easier for most of us than the personal effort that is required.

When a great scandal and danger like this of the condition of the lower

layers of our civic population is presented before men, for one man

that says, What can I do?' there are twenty who say, Somebody should do

something. Government should do something. The Corporation should do

something. This, that, or the other aggregate of men should do

something.' And the individual calmly and comfortably slips his neck

out of the collar and leaves it on the shoulders of these abstractions.

As I have said, there are plenty of things that need to be done by

these somebodies. But what they do (they will be a long time in doing

it), when they do get to work will only touch the fringe of the

question, and the substance and the centre of it you can set to work

upon this very day if you like, and not wait for anybody either to set

you the example or to show you the way.

If you want to do people good you can; but you must pay the price for

it. That price is personal sacrifice and effort. The example of Jesus

Christ is the all-instructive one in the case. People talk about Him

being their Pattern, but they often forget that whatever more there was

in Christ's Cross and Passion there was this in it:--the

exemplification for all time of the one law by which any reformation

can be wrought on men--that a sympathising man shall give himself to do

it, and that by personal influence alone men will be drawn and won from

out of the darkness and filth. A loving heart and a sympathetic word,

the exhibition of a Christian life and conduct, the fact of going down

into the midst of evil and trying to lift men out of it, are the

old-fashioned and only magnets by which men are drawn to purer and

higher life. That is God's way of saving the world--by the action of

single souls on single souls. Masses of men can neither save nor be

saved. Not in groups, but one by one, particle by particle, soul by

soul, Christ draws men to Himself, and He does His work in the world

through single souls on fire with His love, and tender with pity

learned of Him.

So, dear friends! do not think that any organisation, any corporate

activity, any substitution of vicarious service, will solve the

problem. It will not. There is only one way of doing it, the old way

that we must tread if we are going to do anything for God and our

fellows: The priests repaired every one over against his house.'

Let me briefly point out some very plain and obvious things which bear

upon this matter of individual action. Let me remind you that if you

are a Christian man you have in your possession the thing which will

cure the world's woe, and possession involves responsibility. What

would you think of a man that had a specific for some pestilence that

was raging in a city, and was contented to keep it for his own use, or

at most for his family's use, when his brethren were dying by the

thousand, and their corpses polluting the air? And what shall we say of

men and women who call themselves Christians, who have some faith in

that great Lord and His mighty sacrifice; who know that the men they

meet with every day of their lives are dying for want of it, and who

yet themselves do absolutely nothing to spread His name, and to heal

men's hurts? What shall we say? God forbid that we should say they are

not Christians! but God forbid that anybody should flatter them with

the notion that they are anything but most inconsistent Christians!

Still further, need I remind you that if we have found anything in

Jesus Christ which has been peace and rest for ourselves, Christ has

thereby called us to this work? He has found and saved us, not only for

our own personal good. That, of course, is the prime purpose of our

salvation, but not its exclusive purpose. He has saved us, too, in

order that the Word may be spread through us to those beyond. The

Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three

measures of meal until the whole was leavened,' and every little bit of

the dough, as it received into itself the leaven, and was transformed,

became a medium for transmitting the transformation to the next

particle beyond it and so the whole was at last permeated by the power.

We get the grace for ourselves that we may pass it on; and as the

Apostle says: God hath shined into our hearts that we might give the

light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus

Christ.'

And you can do it, you Christian men and women, every one of you, and

preach Him to somebody. The possession of His love gives the

commission; ay! and it gives the power. There is nothing so mighty as

the confession of personal experience. Do not you think that when that

first of Christian converts, and first of Christian preachers went to

his brother, all full of what he had discovered, his simple saying, We

have found the Messias,' was a better sermon than a far more elaborate

proclamation would have been? My brother! if you have found Him, you

can say so; and if you can say so, and your character and your life

confirm the words of your lips, you will have done more to spread His

name than much eloquence and many an orator. All can preach who can

say, We have found the Christ.'

The last word I have to say is this: there is no other body that can do

it but you. They say:--What an awful thing it is that there are no

churches or chapels in these outcast districts!' If there were they

would be what the churches and chapels are now--half empty. Bricks and

mortar built up into ecclesiastical forms are not the way to evangelise

this or any other country. It is a very easy thing to build churches

and chapels. It is not such an easy thing--I believe it is an

impossible thing (and that the sooner the Christian church gives up the

attempt the better)--to get the godless classes into any church or

chapel. Conducted on the principles upon which churches and chapels

must needs at present be conducted, they are for another class

altogether; and we had better recognise it, because then we shall feel

that no multiplication of buildings like this in which we now are, for

instance, is any direct contribution to the evangelisation of the waste

spots of the country, except in so far as from a centre like this there

ought to go out much influence which will originate direct missionary

action in places and fashions adapted to the outlying community.

Professional work is not what we want. Any man, be he minister,

clergyman, Bible-reader, city missionary, who goes among our godless

population with the suspicion of pay about him is the weaker for that.

What is needed besides is that ladies and gentlemen that are a little

higher up in the social scale than these poor creatures, should go to

them themselves; and excavate and work. Preach, if you like, in the

technical sense; have meetings, I suppose, necessarily; but the

personal contact is the thing, the familiar talk, the simple exhibition

of a loving Christian heart, and the unconventional proclamation in

free conversation of the broad message of the love of God in Jesus

Christ. Why, if all the people in this chapel who can do that would do

it, and keep on doing it, who can tell what an influence would come

from some hundreds of new workers for Christ? And why should the

existence of a church in which the workers are as numerous as the

Christians be an Utopian dream? It is simply the dream that perhaps a

church might be conceived to exist, all the members of which had found

out their plainest, most imperative duty, and were really trying to do

it.

No carelessness, no indolence, no plea of timidity or business shift

the obligation from your shoulders if you are a Christian. It is your

business, and no paid agents can represent you. You cannot buy

yourselves substitutes in Christ's army, as they used to do in the

militia, by a guinea subscription. We are thankful for the money,

because there are kinds of work to be done that unpaid effort will not

do. But men ask for your money; Jesus Christ asks for yourself, for

your work, and will not let you off as having done your duty because

you have paid your subscription. No doubt there are some of you who,

from various circumstances, cannot yourselves do work amongst the

masses of the outcast population. Well, but you have got people by your

side whom you can help. The question which I wish to ask of my

Christian brethren and sisters now is this: Is there a man, woman, or

child living to whom you ever spoke a word about Jesus Christ? Is

there? If not, do not you think it is time that you began?

There are people in your houses, people that sit by you in your

counting-house, on your college benches, who work by your side in mill

or factory or warehouse, who cross your path in a hundred ways, and God

has given them to you that you may bring them to Him. Do you set

yourself, dear brother, to work and try to bring them. Oh! if you lived

nearer Jesus Christ you would catch the sacred fire from Him; and like

a bit of cold iron lying beside a magnet, touching Him, you would

yourselves become magnetic and draw men out of their evil and up to

God.

Let me commend to you the old pattern: The priests repaired every one

over against his house'; and beseech you to take the trowel and spade,

or anything that comes handiest, and build, in the bit nearest you,

some living stones on the true Foundation.

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DISCOURAGEMENTS AND COURAGE

Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against

them day and night, because of them. 10. And Judah said, The strength

of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so

that we are not able to build the wall. 11. And our adversaries said,

They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them,

and slay them, and cause the work to cease. 12. And it came to pass,

that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten

times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon

you. 13. Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on

the higher places, I even set the people after their families with

their swords, their spears, and their bows. 14. And I looked and rose

up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the

people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and

terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters,

your wives, and your houses. 15. And it came to pass, when our enemies

heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to

nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his

work. 16. And it came to pass from that time forth, that the half of my

servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the

spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers

were behind all the house of Judah. 17. They which builded on the wall,

and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one

of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a

weapon. 18. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his

side, and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me. 19.

And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the

people, The work is great and large, and we are separated upon the

wall, one far from another. 20. In what place therefore ye hear the

sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight

for us. 21. So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the

spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared.'--NEH.

iv. 9-21.

Common hatred has a wonderful power of uniting former foes. Samaritans,

wild Arabs of the desert, Ammonites, and inhabitants of Ashdod in the

Philistine plain would have been brought together for no noble work,

but mischief and malice fused them for a time into one. God's work is

attacked from all sides. Herod and Pilate can shake hands over their

joint antagonism.

This passage paints vividly the discouragements which are apt to dog

all good work, and the courage which refuses to be discouraged, and

conquers by bold persistence. The first verse (v. 9) may stand as a

summary of the whole, though it refers to the preceding, not to the

following, verses. The true way to meet opposition is twofold--prayer

and prudent watchfulness. Pray to God, and keep your powder dry,' is

not a bad compendium of the duty of a Christian soldier. The union of

appeal to God with the full use of common sense, watchfulness, and

prudence, would dissipate many hindrances to successful service.

I. In verses 10-12 Nehemiah tells, in his simple way, of the

difficulties from three several quarters which threatened to stop his

work. He had trouble from the workmen, from the enemies, and from the

mass of Jews not resident in Jerusalem. The enthusiasm of the builders

had cooled, and the magnitude of their task began to frighten them.

Verse 6 tells us that the wall was completed unto the half of it'; that

is, to one-half the height, and half-way through is just the critical

time in all protracted work. The fervour of beginning has passed; the

animation from seeing the end at hand has not sprung up. There is a

dreary stretch in the centre, where it takes much faith and

self-command to plod on unfainting. Half-way to Australia from England

is the region of sickening calms. It is easier to work in the fresh

morning or in the cool evening than at midday. So in every great

movement there are short-winded people who sit down and pant very soon,

and their prudence croaks out undeniable facts. No doubt strength does

become exhausted; no doubt there is much rubbish' (literally dust').

What then? The conclusion drawn is not so unquestionable as the

premises. We cannot build the wall' Why not? Have you not built half of

it? And was not the first half more embarrassed by rubbish than the

second will be?

It is a great piece of Christian duty to recognise difficulties, and

not be cowed by them. The true inference from the facts would have

been, so that we must put all our strength into the work, and trust in

our God to help us.' We may not be responsible for discouragements

suggesting themselves, but we are responsible for letting them become

dissuasives. Our one question should be, Has God appointed the work? If

so, it has to be done, however little our strength, and however

mountainous the accumulations of rubbish.

The second part in the trio was taken by the enemies--Sanballat and

Tobiah and the rest. They laid their plans for a sudden swoop down on

Jerusalem, and calculated that, if they could surprise the builders at

their work, they would have no weapons to show fight with, and so would

be easily despatched. Killing the builders was but a means; the desired

end is significantly put last (v. 11), as being the stopping of the

abhorred work. But killing the workmen does not cause the work to cease

when it is God's work, as the history of the Church in all ages shows.

Conspirators should hold their tongues. It was not a hopeful way of

beginning an attack, of which the essence was secrecy and suddenness,

to talk about it. A bird of the air carries the matter.'

The third voice is that of the Jews in other parts of the land, and

especially those living on the borders of Samaria, next door to

Sanballat. Verse 12 is probably best taken as in the Revised Version,

which makes Ye must return to us' the imperative and often-repeated

summons from these to the contingents from their respective places of

abode, who had gone up to Jerusalem to help in building. Alarms of

invasion made the scattered villagers wish to have all their men

capable of bearing arms back again to defend their own homes. It was a

most natural demand, but in this case, as so often, audacity is truest

prudence; and in all high causes there come times when men have to

trust their homes and dear ones to God's protection. The necessity is

heartrending, and we may well pray that we may not be exposed to it;

but if it clearly arises, a devout man can have no doubt of his duty.

How many American citizens had to face it in the great Civil War! And

how character is ennobled by even so severe a sacrifice!

II. The calm heroism of Nehemiah and his wise action in the emergency

are told in verses 13-15. He made a demonstration in force, which at

once showed that the scheme of a surprise was blown to pieces. It is

difficult to make out the exact localities in which he planted his men.

The lower places behind the wall' probably means the points at which

the new fortifications were lowest, which would be the most exposed to

assault; and the higher places' (Auth. Ver.), or open places' (Rev.

Ver.), describes the same places from another point of view. They

afforded room for posting troops because they were without buildings.

At any rate, the walls were manned, and the enemy would have to deal,

not with unarmed labourers, but with prepared soldiers. The work was

stopped, and trowel and spade exchanged for sword and spear. And I

looked,' says Nehemiah. His careful eye travelled over the lines, and,

seeing all in order, he cheered the little army with ringing words. He

had prayed (Neh. i. 5) to the great and terrible God,' and now he bids

his men remember Him, and thence draw strength and courage. The only

real antagonist of fear is faith. If we can grasp God, we shall not

dread Sanballat and his crew. Unless we do, the world is full of

dangers which it is not folly to fear.

Note, too, that the people are animated for the fight by reminding them

of the dear ones whose lives and honour hung on the issue. Nothing is

said about fighting for God and His Temple and city, but the motives

adduced are not less sacred. Family love is God's best of earthly

gifts, and, though it is sometimes duty to forget thine own people, and

thy father's house,' as we have just seen, nothing short of these

highest obligations can supersede the sweet one of straining every

nerve for the well-being of dear ones in the hallowed circle of home.

So the plan of a sudden rush came to nothing. It does not appear that

the enemy was in sight; but the news of the demonstration soon reached

them, and was effectual. Prompt preparation against possible dangers is

often the means of turning them aside. Watchfulness is indispensable to

vigour of Christian character and efficiency of work. Suspicion is

hateful and weakening; but a man who tries to serve God in such a world

as this had need to be like the living creatures in the Revelation,

having eyes all over.' Blessed is the man that [in that sense] feareth

always.'

The upshot of the alarm is very beautifully told: We returned all of us

to the wall, every one unto his work.' No time was wasted in

jubilation. The work was the main thing, and the moment the

interruption was ended, back to it they all went. It is a fine

illustration of persistent discharge of duty, and of that most valuable

quality, the ability and inclination to keep up the main purpose of a

life continuous through interruptions, like a stream of sweet water

running through a bog.

III. The remainder of the passage tells us of the standing arrangements

made in consequence of the alarm (vs. 16-21). First we hear what

Nehemiah did with his own special servants,' whether these were slaves

who had accompanied him from Shushan (as Stanley supposes), or his

body-guard as a Persian official. He divided them into two parts--one

to work, one to watch. But he did not carry out this plan with the mass

of the people, probably because it would have too largely diminished

the number of builders. So he armed them all. The labourers who carried

stones, mortar, and the like, could do their work after a fashion with

one hand, and so they had a weapon in the other. If they worked in

pairs, that would be all the easier. The actual builders needed both

hands, and so they had swords stuck in their girdles. No doubt such

arrangements hindered progress, but they were necessary. The lesson

often drawn from them is no doubt true, that God's workers must be

prepared for warfare as well as building. There have been epochs in

which that necessity was realised in a very sad manner; and the Church

on earth will always have to be the Church militant. But it is well to

remember that building is the end, and fighting is but the means. The

trowel, not the sword, is the natural instrument. Controversy is second

best--a necessity, no doubt, but an unwelcome one, and only permissible

as a subsidiary help to doing the true work, rearing the walls of the

city of God.

He that soundeth the trumpet was by me.' The gallant leader was

everywhere, animating by his presence. He meant to be in the thick of

the fight, if it should come. And so he kept the trumpeter by his side,

and gave orders that when he sounded all should hurry to the place; for

there the enemy would be, and Nehemiah would be where they were. The

work is great and large, and we are separated . . . one far from

another.' How naturally the words lend themselves to the old lesson so

often drawn from them! God's servants are widely parted, by distance,

by time, and, alas! by less justifiable causes. Unless they draw

together they will be overwhelmed, taken in detail, and crushed. They

must rally to help each other against the common foe.

Thank God! the longing for manifest Christian unity is deeper to-day

than ever it was. But much remains to be done before it is adequately

fulfilled in the recognition of the common bond of brotherhood, which

binds us all in one family, if we have one Father. English and American

Christians are bound to seek the tightening of the bonds between them

and to set themselves against politicians who may seek to keep apart

those who both in the flesh and in the spirit are brothers. All

Christians have one great Captain; and He will be in the forefront of

every battle. His clear trumpet-call should gather all His servants to

His side.

The closing verse tells again how Nehemiah's immediate dependants

divided work and watching, and adds to the picture the continuousness

of their toil from the first grey of morning till darkness showed the

stars and ended another day of toil. Happy they who thus from morn till

noon, from noon till dewy eve,' labour in the work of the Lord! For

them, every new morning will dawn with new strength, and every evening

be calm with the consciousness of something attempted, something done.'

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AN ANCIENT NONCONFORMIST

. . . So did not I, because of the fear of God.'--NEH. v. 15.

I do not suppose that the ordinary Bible-reader knows very much about

Nehemiah. He is one of the neglected great men of Scripture. He was no

prophet, he had no glowing words, he had no lofty visions, he had no

special commission, he did not live in the heroic age. There was a

certain harshness and dryness; a tendency towards what, when it was

more fully developed, became Pharisaism, in the man, which somewhat

covers the essential nobleness of his character. But he was brave,

cautious, circumspect, disinterested; and he had Jerusalem in his

heart.

The words that I have read are a little fragment of his autobiography

which deal with a prosaic enough matter, but carry in them large

principles. When he was appointed governor of the little colony of

returned exiles in Palestine, he found that his predecessors, like

Turkish pashas and Chinese mandarins to-day, had been in the habit of

squeezing' the people of their Government, and that they had

requisitioned sufficient supplies of provisions to keep the governor's

table well spread. It was the custom. Nobody would have wondered if

Nehemiah had conformed to it; but he felt that he must have his hands

clean. Why did he not do what everybody else had done in like

circumstances? His answer is beautifully simple: Because of the fear of

God.' His religion went down into the little duties of common life, and

imposed upon him a standard far above the maxims that were prevalent

round about him. And so, if you will take these words, and disengage

them from the small matter concerning which they were originally

spoken, I think you will find in them thoughts as to the attitude which

we should take to prevalent practices, the motive which should impel us

to a sturdy non-compliance, and the power which will enable us to walk

on a solitary road. So did not I, because of the fear of God.' Now,

then, these are my three points:--

I. The attitude to prevalent practices.

Nehemiah would not conform. And unless you can say No!' and do it very

often, your life will be shattered from the beginning. That

non-compliance with customary maxims and practices is the beginning,

or, at least, one of the foundation-stones, of all nobleness and

strength, of all blessedness and power. Of course it is utterly

impossible for a man to denude himself of the influences that are

brought to bear upon him by the circumstances in which he lives, and

the trend of opinion, and the maxims and practices of the world, in the

corner, and at the time, in which his lot is cast. But, on the other

hand, be sure of this, that unless you are in a very deep and not at

all a technical sense of the word, Nonconformists,' you will come to no

good. None! It is so easy to do as others do, partly because of

laziness, partly because of cowardice, partly because of the

instinctive imitation which is in us all. Men are gregarious. One great

teacher has drawn an illustration from a flock of sheep, and says that

if we hold up a stick, and the first of the flock jumps over it, and

then if we take away the stick, all the rest of the flock will jump

when they come to the point where the first did so. A great many of us

adopt our creeds and opinions, and shape our lives for no better reason

than because people round us are thinking in a certain direction, and

living in a certain way. It saves a great deal of trouble, and it

gratifies a certain strange instinct that is in us all, and it avoids

dangers and conflicts that we should, when we are at Rome, do as the

Romans do. So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

Now, brethren! I ask you to take this plain principle of the necessity

of non-compliance (which I suppose I do not need to do much to

establish, because, theoretically, we most of us admit it), and apply

it all round the circumference of your lives. Apply it to your

opinions. There is no tyranny like the tyranny of a majority in a

democratic country like ours. It is quite as harsh as the tyranny of

the old-fashioned despots. Unless you resolve steadfastly to see with

your own eyes, to use your own brains, to stand on your own feet, to be

a voice and not an echo, you will be helplessly enslaved by the fashion

of the hour, and the opinions that prevail.

What everybody says'--perhaps--is true.' What most people say, at any

given time, is very likely to be false. Truth has always lived with

minorities, so do not let the current of widespread opinion sweep you

away, but try to have a mind of your own, and not to be brow-beaten or

overborne because the majority of the people round about you are giving

utterance, and it may be unmeasured utterance, to any opinions.

Now, there is one direction in which I wish to urge that

especially--and now I speak mainly to the young men in my

congregation--and that is, in regard to the attitude that so many

amongst us are taking to Christian truth. If you have honestly thought

out the subject to the best of your ability, and have come to

conclusions diverse from those which men like me hold dearer than their

lives, that is another matter. But I know that very widely there is

spread to-day the fashion of unbelief. So many influential men, leaders

of opinion, teachers and preachers, are giving up the old-fashioned

Evangelical faith, that it takes a strong man to say that he sticks by

it. It is a poor reason to give for your attitude, that unbelief is in

the air, and nobody believes those old doctrines now. That may be.

There are currents of opinion that are transitory, and that is one of

them, depend upon it. But at all events do not be fooled out of your

faith, as some of you are tending to be, for no better reason than

because other people have given it up. An iceberg lowers the

temperature all round it, and the iceberg of unbelief is amongst us

to-day, and it has chilled a great many people who could not tell why

they have lost the fervour of their faith.

On the other hand, let me remind you that a mere traditional religion,

which is only orthodox because other people are so, and has not

verified its beliefs by personal experience, is quite as deleterious as

an imitative unbelief. Doubtless, I speak to some who plume themselves

on never having been affected by these currents of popular opinion,'

but whose unblemished and unquestioned orthodoxy has no more vitality

in it than the other people's heterodoxy. The one man has said, What is

everywhere always, and by all believed, I believe'; and the other man

has said, What the select spirits of this day disbelieve, I

disbelieve,' and the belief of one and the unbelief of the other are

equally worthless, and really identical.

But it is not only, nor mainly, in reference to opinion that I would

urge upon you this nonconformity with prevalent practices as the

measure of most that is noble in us. I dare not talk to you as if I

knew much about the details of Manchester commercial life, but I can

say this much, that it is no excuse for shady practices in your trade

to say, It is the custom of the trade, and everybody does it.' Nehemiah

might have said: There never was a governor yet but took his forty

shekels a day's worth'--about L. 1,800 of our money--of provisions from

these poor people, and I am not going to give it up because of a

scruple. It is the custom, and because it is the custom I can do it.' I

am not going into details. It is commonly understood that preachers

know nothing about business; that may be true, or it may not. But this,

I am sure, is a word in season for some of my friends this evening--do

not hide behind the trade. Come out into the open, and deal with the

questions of morality involved in your commercial life, as you will

have to deal with them hereafter, by yourself. Never mind about other

people. Oh,' but you say, that involves loss.' Very likely! Nehemiah

was a poorer man because he fed all these one hundred and fifty Jews at

his table, but he did not mind that. It may involve loss, but you will

keep God, and that is gain.

Turn this searchlight in another direction. I see a number of young

people in my congregation at this moment, young men who are perhaps

just beginning their career in this city, and who possibly have been

startled when they heard the kind of talk that was going on at the next

desk, or from the man that sits beside them on the benches at College.

Do not be tempted to follow that multitude to do evil. Unless you are

prepared to say No!' to a great deal that will be pushed into your face

in this great city, as sure as you are living you will make shipwreck

of your lives. Do you think that in the forty years and more that I

have stood here I have not seen successive generations of young men

come into Manchester? I could people many of these pews with the faces

of such, who came here buoyant, full of hope, full of high resolves,

and with a mother's benediction hanging over their heads, and who got

into a bad set, and had not the strength to say No,' and they went down

and down and down, and then presently somebody asked, Where is

so-and-so?' Oh! his health broke down, and he has gone home to die.'

His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth'--and he made shipwreck

of prospects and of life, because he did not pull himself together when

the temptation came, and say, So did not I, because of the fear of

God.'

II. Now let me ask you to turn with me to the second thought that my

text suggests to me; that is, The motive that impels to this sturdy

non-compliance.

Nehemiah puts it in Old Testament phraseology, the fear of God'; the

New Testament equivalent is the love of Christ.' And if you want to

take the power and the life out of both phrases, in order to find a

modern conventional equivalent, you will say religion.' I prefer the

old-fashioned language. The love of Christ' impels to this

non-compliance. Now, my point is this, that Jesus Christ requires from

each of us that we shall abstain, restrict ourselves, refuse to do a

great many things that are being done round us.

I need not remind you of how continually He spoke about taking up the

cross. I need not do more than just remind you of His parable of the

two ways, but ask you, whilst you think of it, to note that all the

characteristics of each of the ways which He sets forth are given by

Him as reasons for refusing the one and walking in the other. For

example, Enter ye in at the strait gate, for strait is the gate'--that

is a reason for going in; and narrow is the way'--that is a reason for

going in; and few there be that find it'--that is a reason for going

in. Wide is the gate'--that is a reason for stopping out; and broad is

the way'--that is a reason for stopping out; and many there be that go

in thereat'--that is a reason for stopping out. Is not that what I

said, that the minority is generally right and the majority wrong? Just

because there are so many people on the path, suspect it, and expect

that the path with fewer travellers is probably the better and the

higher.

But to pass from that, what did Jesus Christ mean by His continual

contrast between His disciples and the world? What did He mean by the

world'? This fair universe, with all its possibilities of help and

blessing, and all its educational influences? By no means. He meant by

the world' the aggregate of things and men considered as separate from

God. And when He applied the term to men only, He meant by it very much

what we mean when we talk about society. Society is not organised on

Christian principles; we all know that, and until it is, if a man is

going to be a Christian he must not conform to the world. Know ye not

that whosoever is a friend of the world is an enemy of God.'

I would press upon you, dear friends! that our Christianity is nothing

unless it leads us to a standard, and a course of conduct in conformity

with that standard, which will be in diametrical opposition to a great

deal of what is patted on the back, and petted and praised by society.

Now, there is an easy-going kind of Christianity which does not

recognise that, and which is in great favour with many people to-day,

and is called liberality' and breadth,' and conciliating and commending

Christianity to outsiders,' and I know not what besides. Well, Christ's

words seem to me to come down like a hammer upon that sort of thing.

Depend upon it, the world'--I mean by that the aggregate of godless men

organised as they are in society--does not think much of these

trimmers. It may dislike an out-and-out Christian, but it knows him

when it sees him, and it has a kind of hostile respect for him which

the other people will never get. You remember the story of the man that

was seeking for a coachman, and whose question to each applicant was,

How near can you drive to the edge of a precipice?' He took the man who

said: I would keep away from it as far as I could.' And the so-called

Christian people that seem to be bent on showing how much their lives

can be made to assimilate to the lives of men that have no sympathy

with their creeds, are like the rash Jehus that tried to go as near the

edge as they could. But the consistent Christian will keep as far away

from it as he can. There are some of us who seem as if we were most

anxious to show that we, whose creed is absolutely inconsistent with

the world's practices, can live lives which are all but identical with

these practices. Jesus Christ says, through the lips of His Apostle,

what He often said in other language by His own lips when He was here

on earth: Be ye not conformed to the world.'

Surely such a command as that, just because it involves difficulty,

self-restraint, self-denial, and sometimes self-crucifixion, ought to

appeal, and does appeal, to all that is noble in humanity, in a fashion

that that smooth, easy-going gospel of living on the level of the

people round us never can do. For remember that Christ's commandment

not to be conformed to the world is the consequence of His commandment

to be conformed to Himself. Thus did not I' comes second; This one

thing I do' comes first. You will misunderstand the whole genius of the

Gospel if you suppose that, as a law of life, it is perpetually pulling

men short up, and saying: Don't, don't, don't! There is a Christianity

of that sort which is mainly prohibition and restriction, but it is not

Christ's Christianity. He begins by enjoining: This do in remembrance

of Me,' and the man that has accepted that commandment must necessarily

say, as he looks out on the world, and its practices: So did not I,

because of the fear of God.'

III. And now one last word--my text not only suggests the motive which

impels to this non-compliance, but also the power which enables us to

exercise it.

The fear of God,' or, taking the New Testament equivalent, the love of

Christ,' makes it possible for a man, with all his weakness and

dependence on surroundings, with all his instinctive desire to be like

the folk that are near him, to take that brave attitude, and to refuse

to be one of the crowd that runs after evil and lies. I have no time to

dwell upon this aspect of my subject, as I should be glad to have done.

Let me sum up in a sentence or two what I would have said. Christ will

enable you to take this necessary attitude because, in Himself He gives

you the Example which it is always safe to follow. The instinct of

imitation is planted in us for a good end, and because it is in us,

examples of nobility appeal to us. And because it is in us Jesus Christ

has lived the life that it is possible for, and therefore incumbent on,

us to live. It is safe to imitate Him, and it is easy not to do as men

do, if once our main idea is to do as Christ did.

He makes it possible for us, because He gives the strongest possible

motive for the life that He prescribes. As the Apostle puts it, Ye are

bought with a price, be not the servants of men.' There is nothing that

will so deliver us from the tyranny of majorities, and of what we call

general opinion and ordinary custom, as to feel that we belong to Him

because He died for us. Men become very insignificant when Christ

speaks, and the charter of our freedom from them lies in our redemption

by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ being our Redeemer is our Judge, and moment by moment He

is estimating our conduct, and judging our actions as they are done.

With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you or of man's

judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord.' Never mind what the people

round you say; you do not take your orders from them, and you do not

answer to them. Like some official abroad, appointed by the Crown, you

do not report to the local authorities; you report to headquarters, and

what He thinks about you is the only important thing. So the fear of

man which bringeth a snare' dwindles down into very minute dimensions

when we think of the Pattern, the Redeemer and the Judge to whom we

give account.

And so, dear friends! if we will only open our hearts, by quiet humble

faith, for the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives, then we shall be

able to resist, to refuse compliance, to stand firm, though alone. The

servant of Christ is the master of all men. All things are yours,

whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas--all are yours, and ye are Christ'

s.'

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READING THE LAW WITH TEARS AND JOY

And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the

street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the

scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had

commanded to Israel. 2. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the

congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with

understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. 3. And he read

therein before the street that was before the water gate, from the

morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that

could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto

the book of the law. 4. And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of

wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood

Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiah, and

Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand Pedaiah, and Mishael,

and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. 5.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was

above all the people); and when he opened it, all the people stood up:

6. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people

answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their

heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 7. Also

Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jemin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah,

Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites,

caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their

place. 8. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and

gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. 9. And

Nehemiah, which is the Tirashatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and

the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day

is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people

wept, when they heard the words of the law. 10. Then he said unto them,

Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto

them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord:

neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength. 11. So

the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the

day is holy; neither be ye grieved. 12. And all the people went their

way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great

mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto

them.'--NEH. viii. 1-12.

The wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, which

was the sixth month. The events recorded in this passage took place on

the first day of the seventh month. The year is not given, but the

natural inference is that it was the same as that of the finishing of

the wall; namely, the twentieth of Artaxerxes. If so, the completion of

the fortifications to which Nehemiah had set himself, was immediately

followed by this reading of the law, in which Ezra takes the lead. The

two men stand in a similar relative position to that of Zerubbabel and

Joshua, the one representing the civil and the other the religious

authority.

According to Ezra vii. 9, Ezra had gone to Jerusalem about thirteen

years before Nehemiah, and had had a weary time of fighting against the

corruptions which had crept in among the returned captives. The arrival

of Nehemiah would be hailed as bringing fresh, young enthusiasm, none

the less welcome and powerful because it had the king's authority

entrusted to it. Evidently the two men thoroughly understood one

another, and pulled together heartily. We heard nothing about Ezra

while the wall was being built. But now he is the principal figure, and

Nehemiah is barely mentioned. The reasons for Ezra's taking the

prominent part in the reading of the law are given in the two titles by

which he is designated in two successive verses (vers. 1, 2). He was

the scribe' and also the priest,' and in both capacities was the

natural person for such a work.

The seventh month was the festival month of the year, its first day

being that of the Feast of trumpets, and the great Feast of tabernacles

as well as the solemn day of atonement occurring in it. Possibly, the

prospect of the coming of the times for these celebrations may have led

to the people's wish to hear the law, that they might duly observe the

appointed ceremonial. At all events, the first thing to note is that it

was in consequence of the people's wish that the law was read in their

hearing. Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah originated the gathering together.

They obeyed a popular impulse which they had not created. We must not,

indeed, give the multitude credit for much more than the wish to have

their ceremonial right. But there was at least that wish, and possibly

something deeper and more spiritual. The walls were completed; but the

true defence of Israel was in God, and the condition of His defending

was Israel's obedience to His law. The people were, in some measure,

beginning to realise that condition with new clearness, in consequence

of the new fervour which Nehemiah had brought.

It is singular that, during his thirteen years of residence, Ezra is

not recorded to have promulgated the law, though it lay at the basis of

the drastic reforms which he was able to carry through. Probably he had

not been silent, but the solemn public recitation of the law was felt

to be appropriate on occasion of completing the wall. Whether the

people had heard it before, or, as seems implied, it was strange to

them, their desire to hear it may stand as a pattern for us of that

earnest wish to know God's will which is never cherished in vain. He

who does not intend to obey does not wish to know the law. If we have

no longing to know what the will of the Lord is, we may be very sure

that we prefer our own to His. If we desire to know it, we shall desire

to understand the Book which contains so much of it. Any true religion

in the heart will make us eager to perceive, and willing to be guided

by, the will of God, revealed mainly in Scripture, in the Person,

works, and words of Jesus, and also in waiting hearts by the Spirit,

and in those things which the world calls circumstances' and faith

names providences.'

II. Verses 2-8 appear to tell the same incidents twice over--first,

more generally in verses 2 and 8, and then more minutely. Such expanded

repetition is characteristic of the Old Testament historical style. It

is somewhat difficult to make sure of the real circumstances. Clearly

enough there was a solemn assembly of men, women, and children in a

great open space outside one of the gates, and there, from dawn till

noon, the law was read and explained. But whether Ezra read it all,

while the Levites named in verse 7 explained or paraphrased or

translated it, or whether they all read in turns, or whether there were

a number of groups, each of which had a teacher who both read and

expounded, is hard to determine. At all events, Ezra was the principal

figure, and began the reading.

It was a picturesque scene. The sun, rising over the slopes of Olivet,

would fall on the gathered crowd, if the water-gate was, as is

probable, on the east or south-east side of the city. Beneath the fresh

fortifications probably, which would act as a sounding-board for the

reader, was set up a scaffold high above the crowd, large enough to

hold Ezra and thirteen supporters--principal men, no doubt--seven on

one side of him and six on the other. Probably a name has dropped out,

and the numbers were equal. There, in the morning light, with the new

walls for a background, stood Ezra on his rostrum, and amid reverent

silence, lifted high the sacred roll. A common impulse swayed the

crowd, and brought them all to their feet--token at once of respect and

obedient attention. Probably many of them had never seen a sacred roll.

To them all it was comparatively unfamiliar. No wonder that, as Ezra's

voice rose in prayer, the whole assembly fell on their faces in

adoration, and every lip responded Amen! amen!'

Much superstition may have mingled with the reverence. No doubt, there

was then what we are often solemnly warned against now, bibliolatry.

But in this time of critical investigation it is not the divine element

in Scripture which is likely to be exaggerated; and few are likely to

go wrong in the direction of paying too much reverence to the Book in

which, as is still believed, God has revealed His will and Himself.

While welcoming all investigations which throw light on its origin or

its meaning, and perfectly recognising the human element in it, we

should learn the lesson taught by that waiting crowd prone on their

faces, and blessing God for His word. Such attitude must ever precede

reading it, if we are to read aright.

Hour after hour the recitation went on. We must let the question of the

precise form of the events remain undetermined. It is somewhat singular

that thirteen names are enumerated as of the men who stood by Ezra, and

thirteen as those of the readers or expounders. It may be the case that

the former number is complete, though uneven, and that there was some

reason unknown for dividing the audience into just so many sections.

The second set of thirteen was not composed of the same men as the

first. They seem to have been Levites, whose office of assisting at the

menial parts of the sacrifices was now elevated into that of setting

forth the law. Probably the portions read were such as bore especially

on ritual, though the tears of the listeners are sufficient proof that

they had heard some things that went deeper than that.

The word rendered distinctly' in the Revised Version (margin, with an

interpretation) is ambiguous, and may either mean that the Levites

explained or that they translated the words. The former is the more

probable, as there is no reason to suppose that the audience, most of

whom had been born in the land, were ignorant of Hebrew. But if the

ritual had been irregularly observed, and the circle of ideas in the

law become unfamiliar, many explanations would be necessary. It strikes

one as touching and strange that such an assembly should be needed

after so many centuries of national existence. It sums up in one vivid

picture the sin and suffering of the nation. To observe that law had

been the condition of their prosperity. To bind it on their hearts

should have been their delight and would have been their life; and

here, after all these generations, the best of the nation are

assembled, so ignorant of it that they cannot even understand it when

they hear it. Absorption with worldly things has an awful power of

dulling spiritual apprehension. Neglect of God's law weakens the power

of understanding it.

This scene was in the truest sense a revival.' We may learn the true

way of bringing men back to God; namely, the faithful exposition and

enforcement of God's will and word. We may learn, too, what should be

the aim of public teachers of religion; namely, first and foremost, the

clear setting forth of God's truth. Their first business is to give the

sense, so that they understand the reading'; and that, not for merely

intellectual purposes, but that, like the crowd outside the water-gate

on that hot noonday, men may be moved to penitence, and then lifted to

the joy of the Lord.

The first day of the seventh month was the Feast of trumpets; and when

the reading was over, and its effects of tears and sorrow for

disobedience were seen, the preachers changed their tone, to bring

consolation and exhort to gladness. Nehemiah had taken no part in

reading the law, as Ezra the priest and his Levites were more

appropriately set to that. But he joins them in exhorting the people to

dry their tears, and go joyfully to the feast. These exhortations

contain many thoughts universally applicable. They teach that even

those who are most conscious of sin and breaches of God's law should

weep indeed, but should swiftly pass from tears to joy. They do not

teach how that passage is to be effected; and in so far they are

imperfect, and need to be supplemented by the New Testament teaching of

forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But in their clear

discernment that sorrow is not meant to be a permanent characteristic

of religion, and that gladness is a more acceptable offering than

tears, they teach a valuable lesson, needed always by men who fancy

that they must atone for their sins by their own sadness, and that

religion is gloomy, harsh, and crabbed.

Further, these exhortations to festal gladness breathe the

characteristic Old Testament tone of wholesome enjoyment of material

good as a part of religion. The way of looking at eating and drinking

and the like, as capable of being made acts of worship, has been too

often forgotten by two kinds of men--saints who have sought sanctity in

asceticism; and sensualists who have taken deep draughts of such

pleasures without calling on the name of the Lord, and so have failed

to find His gifts a cup of salvation. It is possible to eat and drink

and see God' as the elders of Israel did on Sinai.

Further, the plain duty of remembering the needy while we enjoy God's

gifts is beautifully enjoined here. The principle underlying the

commandment to send portions to them for whom nothing is

provided'--that is, for whom no feast has been dressed--is that all

gifts are held in trust, that nothing is bestowed on us for our own

good only, but that we are in all things stewards. The law extends to

the smallest and to the greatest possessions. We have no right to feast

on anything unless we share it, whether it be festal dainties or the

bread that came down from heaven. To divide our portion with others is

the way to make our portion greater as well as sweeter.

Further, the joy of the Lord is your strength.' By strength here seems

to be meant a stronghold. If we fix our desires on God, and have

trained our hearts to find sweeter delights in communion with Him than

in any earthly good, our religion will have lifted us above mists and

clouds into clear air above, where sorrows and changes will have little

power to affect us. If we are to rejoice in the Lord, it will be

possible for us to rejoice always,' and that joy will be as a refuge

from all the ills that flesh is heir to. Dwelling in God, we shall

dwell safely, and be far from the fear of evil.

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THE JOY OF THE LORD

The joy of the Lord is your strength.'--NEH. viii. 10.

Judaism, in its formal and ceremonial aspect, was a religion of

gladness. The feast was the great act of worship. It is not to be

wondered at, that Christianity, the perfecting of that ancient system,

has been less markedly felt to be a religion of joy; for it brings with

it far deeper and more solemn views about man in his nature, condition,

responsibilities, destinies, than ever prevailed before, under any

system of worship. And yet all deep religion ought to be joyful, and

all strong religion assuredly will be so.

Here, in the incident before us, there has come a time in Nehemiah's

great enterprise, when the law, long forgotten, long broken by the

captives, is now to be established again as the rule of the

newly-founded commonwealth. Naturally enough there comes a remembrance

of many sins in the past history of the people; and tears not

unnaturally mingle with the thankfulness that again they are a nation,

having a divine worship and a divine law in their midst. The leader of

them, knowing for one thing that if the spirits of his people once

began to flag, they could not face nor conquer the difficulties of

their position, said to them, This day is holy unto the Lord: this

feast that we are keeping is a day of devout worship; therefore mourn

not, nor weep: go your way; eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send

portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared; neither be ye sorry,

for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' You will make nothing of it

by indulgence in lamentation and in mourning. You will have no more

power for obedience, you will not be fit for your work, if you fall

into a desponding state. Be thankful and glad; and remember that the

purest worship is the worship of God-fixed joy, the joy of the Lord is

your strength.' And that is as true, brethren! with regard to us, as it

ever was in these old times; and we, I think, need the lesson contained

in this saying of Nehemiah' s, because of some prevalent tendencies

amongst us, no less than these Jews did. Take some simple thoughts

suggested by this text which are both important in themselves and

needful to be made emphatic because so often forgotten in the ordinary

type of Christian character. They are these. Religious Joy is the

natural result of faith. It is a Christian duty. It is an important

element in Christian strength.

I. Joy in the Lord is the natural result of Christian Faith.

There is a natural adaptation or provision in the Gospel, both by what

it brings to us and by what it takes away from us, to make a calm, and

settled, and deep gladness, the prevalent temper of the Christian

spirit. In what it gives us, I say, and in what it takes away from us.

It gives us what we call well a sense of acceptance with God, it gives

us God for the rest of our spirits, it gives us the communion with Him

which in proportion as it is real, will be still, and in proportion as

it is still, will be all bright and joyful. It takes away from us the

fear that lies before us, the strifes that lie within us, the desperate

conflict that is waged between a man's conscience and his inclinations,

between his will and his passions, which tears the heart asunder, and

always makes sorrow and tumult wherever it comes. It takes away the

sense of sin. It gives us, instead of the torpid conscience, or the

angrily-stinging conscience--a conscience all calm from its

accusations, with all the sting drawn out of it:--for quiet peace lies

in the heart of the man that is trusting in the Lord. The Gospel works

joy, because the soul is at rest in God; joy, because every function of

the spiritual nature has found now its haven and its object; joy,

because health has come, and the healthy working of the body or of the

spirit is itself a gladness; joy, because the dim future is painted

(where it is painted at all) with shapes of light and beauty, and

because the very vagueness of these is an element in the greatness of

its revelation. The joy that is in Christ is deep and abiding. Faith in

Him naturally works gladness.

I do not forget that, on the other side, it is equally true that the

Christian faith has as marked and almost as strong an adaptation to

produce a solemn sorrow--solemn, manly, noble, and strong. As

sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,' is the rule of the Christian life. If

we think of what our faith does; of the light that it casts upon our

condition, upon our nature, upon our responsibilities, upon our sins,

and upon our destinies, we can easily see how, if gladness be one part

of its operation, no less really and truly is sadness another.

Brethren! all great thoughts have a solemn quiet in them, which not

unfrequently merges into a still sorrow. There is nothing more

contemptible in itself, and there is no more sure mark of a trivial

nature and a trivial round of occupations, than unshaded gladness, that

rests on no deep foundations of quiet, patient grief; grief, because I

know what I am and what I ought to be; grief, because I have learnt the

exceeding sinfulness of sin'; grief, because, looking out upon the

world, I see, as other men do not see, hell-fire burning at the back of

the mirth and the laughter, and know what it is that men are hurrying

to! Do you remember who it was that stood by the side of the one poor

dumb man, whose tongue He was going to loose, and looking up to heaven,

sighed before He could say, Be opened'? Do you remember that of Him it

is said, God hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy

fellows'; and also, a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief'? And

do you not think that both these characteristics are to be repeated in

the operations of His Gospel upon every heart that receives it? And if,

by the hopes it breathes into us, by the fears that it takes away from

us, by the union with God that it accomplishes for us, by the

fellowship that it implants in us, it indeed anoints us all with the

oil of gladness'; yet, on the other hand, by the sense of mine own sin

that it teaches me; by the conflict with weakness which it makes to be

the law of my life; by the clear vision which it gives me of the law of

my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into

subjection'; by the intensity which it breathes into all my nature, and

by the thoughts that it presents of what sin leads to, and what the

world at present is, the Gospel, wheresoever it comes, will infuse a

wise, valiant sadness as the very foundation of character. Yes, joy,

but sorrow too! the joy of the Lord, but sorrow as we look on our own

sin and the world's woe! the head anointed with the oil of gladness,

but also crowned with thorns!

These two are not contradictory. These two states of mind, both of them

the natural operations of any deep faith, may co-exist and blend into

one another, so as that the gladness is sobered, and chastened, and

made manly and noble; and that the sorrow is like some thundercloud,

all streaked with bars of sunshine, that pierce into its deepest

depths. The joy lives in the midst of the sorrow; the sorrow springs

from the same root as the gladness. The two do not clash against each

other, or reduce the emotion to a neutral indifference, but they blend

into one another; just as, in the Arctic regions, deep down beneath the

cold snow, with its white desolation and its barren death, you will

find the budding of the early spring flowers and the fresh green grass;

just as some kinds of fire burn below the water; just as, in the midst

of the barren and undrinkable sea, there may be welling up some little

fountain of fresh water that comes from a deeper depth than the great

ocean around it, and pours its sweet streams along the surface of the

salt waste. Gladness, because I love, for love is gladness; gladness,

because I trust, for trust is gladness; gladness, because I obey, for

obedience is a meat that others know not of, and light comes when we do

His will! But sorrow, because still I am wrestling with sin; sorrow,

because still I have not perfect fellowship; sorrow, because mine eye,

purified by my living with God, sees earth, and sin, and life, and

death, and the generations of men, and the darkness beyond, in some

measure as God sees them! And yet, the sorrow is surface, and the joy

is central; the sorrow springs from circumstance, and the gladness from

the essence of the thing;--and therefore the sorrow is transitory, and

the gladness is perennial. For the Christian life is all like one of

those sweet spring showers in early April, when the rain-drops weave

for us a mist that hides the sunshine; and yet the hidden sun is in

every sparkling drop, and they are all saturated and steeped in its

light. The joy of the Lord' is the natural result and offspring of all

Christian faith.

II. And now, secondly, the joy of the Lord' or rejoicing in God, is a

matter of Christian duty.

It is a commandment here, and it is a command in the New Testament as

well. Neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' I

need not quote to you the frequent repetitions of the same injunction

which the Apostle Paul gives us, Rejoice in the Lord always, and again

I say, Rejoice'; Rejoice evermore,' and the like. The fact that this

joy is enjoined us suggests to us a thought or two, worth looking at.

You may say with truth, My emotions of joy and sorrow are not under my

own control: I cannot help being glad and sad as circumstances

dictate.' But yet here it lies, a commandment. It is a duty, a thing

that the Apostle enjoins; in which, of course, is implied, that somehow

or other it is to a large extent within one's own power, and that even

the indulgence in this emotion, and the degree to which a Christian

life shall be a cheerful life, is dependent in a large measure on our

own volitions, and stands on the same footing as our obedience to God's

other commandments.

We can to a very great extent control even our own emotions; but then,

besides, we can do more than that. It may be quite true, that you

cannot help feeling sorrowful in the presence of sorrowful thoughts,

and glad in the presence of thoughts that naturally kindle gladness.

But I will tell you what you can do or refrain from doing--you can

either go and stand in the light, or you can go and stand in the

shadow. You can either fix your attention upon, and make the

predominant subject of your religious contemplations, a truth which

shall make you glad and strong, or a half-truth, which shall make you

sorrowful, and therefore weak. Your meditations may either centre

mainly upon your own selves, your faults and failings, and the like; or

they may centre mainly upon God and His love, Christ and His grace, the

Holy Spirit and His communion. You may either fill your soul with

joyful thoughts, or though a true Christian, a real, devout,

God-accepted believer, you may be so misapprehending the nature of the

Gospel, and your relation to it, its promises and precepts, its duties

and predictions, as that the prevalent tinge and cast of your religion

shall be solemn and almost gloomy, and not lighted up and irradiated

with the felt sense of God's presence--with the strong, healthy

consciousness that you are a forgiven and justified man, and that you

are going to be a glorified one.

And thus far (and it is a long way) by the selection or the rejection

of the appropriate and proper subjects which shall make the main

portion of our religious contemplation, and shall be the food of our

devout thoughts, we can determine the complexion of our religious life.

Just as you inject colouring matter into the fibres of some anatomical

preparation; so a Christian may, as it were, inject into all the veins

of his religious character and life, either the bright tints of

gladness or the dark ones of self-despondency; and the result will be

according to the thing that he has put into them. If your thoughts are

chiefly occupied with God, and what He has done and is for you, then

you will have peaceful joy. If, on the other hand, they are bent ever

on yourself and your own unbelief, then you will always be sad. You can

make your choice.

Christian men, the joy of the Lord is a duty. It is so because, as we

have seen, it is the natural effect of faith, because we can do much to

regulate our emotions directly, and much more to determine them by

determining what set of thoughts shall engage us. A wise and strong

faith is our duty. To keep our emotional nature well under control of

reason and will is our duty. To lose thoughts of ourselves in God's

truth about Himself is our duty. If we do these things, we cannot fail

to have Christ's joy remaining in us, and making ours full. If we have

not that blessed possession abiding with us, which He lived and died to

give us, there is something wrong in us somewhere.

It seems to me that this is a truth which we have great need, my

friends, to lay to heart. It is of no great consequence that we should

practically confute the impotent old sneer about religion as being a

gloomy thing. One does not need to mind much what some people say on

that matter. The world would call the joy of the Lord' gloom, just as

much as it calls godly sorrow' gloom. But we are losing for ourselves a

power and an energy of which we have no conception, unless we feel that

joy is a duty, and unless we believe that not to be joyful in the Lord

is, therefore, more than a misfortune, it is a fault.

I do not forget that the comparative absence of this happy, peaceful

sense of acceptance, harmony, oneness with God, springs sometimes from

temperament, and depends on our natural disposition. Of course the

natural character determines to a large extent the perspective of our

conceptions of Christian truth, and the colouring of our inner

religious life. I do not mean to say, for a moment, that there is one

uniform type to which all must be conformed, or they sin. There is

indeed one type, the perfect manhood of Jesus, but it is all

comprehensive, and each variety of our fragmentary manhood finds its

own perfecting, and not its transmutation to another fashion of man, in

being conformed to Him. Some of us are naturally fainthearted, timid,

sceptical of any success, grave, melancholy, or hard to stir to any

emotion. To such there will be an added difficulty in making quiet

confident joy any very familiar guest in their home or in their place

of prayer. But even such should remember that the powers of the world

to come,' the energies of the Gospel, are given to us for the very

express purpose of overcoming, as well as of hallowing, natural

dispositions. If it be our duty to rejoice in the Lord, it is no

sufficient excuse to urge for not responding to the reiterated call, I

myself am disposed to sadness.'

Whilst making all allowances for the diversities of character, which

will always operate to diversify the cast of the inner life in each

individual, we think that, in the great majority of instances, there

are two things, both faults, which have a great deal more to do with

the absence of joy from much Christian experience, than any unfortunate

natural tendency to the dark side of things. The one is, an actual

deficiency in the depth and reality of our faith; and the other is, a

misapprehension of the position which we have a right to take and are

bound to take.

There is an actual deficiency in our faith. Oh, brethren! it is not to

be wondered at that Christians do not find that the Lord with them is

the Lord their strength and joy, as well as the Lord their

righteousness'; when the amount of their fellowship with Him is so

small, and the depth of it so shallow, as we usually find it. The first

true vision that a sinful soul has of God, the imperfect beginnings of

religion, usually are accompanied with intense self-abhorrence, and

sorrowing tears of penitence. A further closer vision of the love of

God in Jesus Christ brings with it joy and peace in believing.' But the

prolongation of these throughout life requires the steadfast

continuousness of gaze towards Him. It is only where there is much

faith and consequent love that there is much joy. Let us search our own

hearts. If there is but little heat around the bulb of the thermometer,

no wonder that the mercury marks a low degree. If there is but small

faith, there will not be much gladness. The road into Giant Despair's

castle is through doubt, which doubt comes from an absence, a sinful

absence, in our own experience, of the felt presence of God, and the

felt force of the verities of His Gospel.

But then, besides that, there is another fault: not a fault in the

sense of crime or sin, but a fault (and a great one) in the sense of

error and misapprehension. We as Christians do not take the position

which we have a right to take and that we are bound to take. Men

venture themselves upon God's word as they do on doubtful ice, timidly

putting a light foot out, to feel if it will bear them, and always

having the tacit fear, Now, it is going to crack!' You must cast

yourselves on God's Gospel with all your weight, without any hanging

back, without any doubt, without even the shadow of a suspicion that it

will give--that the firm, pure floor will give, and let you through

into the water! A Christian shrink from saying what the Apostle said, I

know in whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep

that which I have committed to Him until that day'! A Christian fancy

that salvation is a future thing, and forget that it is a present

thing! A Christian tremble to profess assurance of hope,' forgetting

that there is no hope strong enough to bear the stress of a life's

sorrows, which is not a conviction certain as one's own existence!

Brethren! understand that the Gospel is a Gospel which brings a present

salvation; and try to feel that it is not presumption, but simply

acting out the very fundamental principle of it, when you are not

afraid to say, I know that my Redeemer is yonder, and I know that He

loves me!' Try to feel, I say, that by faith you have a right to take

that position, Now, we know that we are the sons of God'; that you have

a right to claim for yourselves, and that you are falling beneath the

loftiness of the gift that is given to you unless you do claim for

yourselves, the place of sons, accepted, loved, sure to be glorified at

God's right hand. Am I teaching presumption? am I teaching

carelessness, or a dispensing with self-examination? No, but I am

saying this: If a man have once felt, and feel, in however small and

feeble a degree, and depressed by whatsoever sense of daily

transgressions, if he feel, faint like the first movement of an

imprisoned bird in its egg, the feeble pulse of an almost imperceptible

and fluttering faith beat--then that man has a right to say, God is

mine!'

As one of our great teachers, little remembered now said, Let me take

my personal salvation for granted'--and what? and be idle?' No; and

work from it.' Ay, brethren! a Christian is not to be for ever asking

himself, Am I a Christian?' He is not to be for ever looking into

himself for marks and signs that he is. He is to look into himself to

discover sins, that he may by God's help cast them out, to discover

sins that shall teach him to say with greater thankfulness, What a

redemption this is which I possess!' but he is to base his convictions

that he is God's child upon something other than his own

characteristics and the feebleness of his own strength. He is to have

joy in the Lord' whatever may be his sorrow from outward things. And I

believe that if Christian people would lay that thought to heart, they

would understand better how the natural operation of the Gospel is to

make them glad, and how rejoicing in the Lord is a Christian duty.

III. And now with regard to the other thought that still remains to be

considered, namely, that rejoicing in the Lord is a source of

strength,--I have already anticipated, fragmentarily, nearly all that I

could have said here in a more systematic form. All gladness has

something to do with our efficiency; for it is the prerogative of man

that his force comes from his mind, and not from his body. That old

song about a sad heart tiring in a mile, is as true in regard to the

Gospel, and the works of Christian people, as in any other case. If we

have hearts full of light, and souls at rest in Christ, and the wealth

and blessedness of a tranquil gladness lying there, and filling our

being; work will be easy, endurance will be easy, sorrow will be

bearable, trials will not be so very hard, and above all temptations we

shall be lifted, and set upon a rock. If the soul is full, and full of

joy, what side of it will be exposed to the assault of any temptation?

If the appeal be to fear, the gladness that is there is an answer. If

the appeal be to passion, desire, wish for pleasure of any sort, there

is no need for any more-the heart is full. And so the gladness which

rests in Christ will be a gladness which will fit us for all service

and for all endurance, which will be unbroken by any sorrow, and, like

the magic shield of the old legends, invisible, impenetrable, in its

crystalline purity will stand before the tempted heart, and will repel

all the fiery darts of the wicked.'

The joy of the Lord is your strength,' my brother! Nothing else is. No

vehement resolutions, no sense of his own sinfulness, nor even contrite

remembrance of past failures, ever yet made a man strong. It made him

weak that he might become strong, and when it had done that it had done

its work. For strength there must be hope, for strength there must be

joy. If the arm is to smite with vigour, it must smite at the bidding

of a calm and light heart. Christian work is of such a sort as that the

most dangerous opponent to it is simple despondency and simple sorrow.

The joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Well, then! there are two questions: How comes it that so much of the

world's joy is weakness? and how comes it that so much of the world's

notion of religion is gloom and sadness? Answer them for yourselves,

and remember: you are weak unless you are glad; you are not glad and

strong unless your faith and hope are fixed in Christ, and unless you

are working from and not towards the sense of pardon, from and not

towards the conviction of acceptance with God!

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SABBATH OBSERVANCE

In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath,

and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and

figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on

the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they

sold victuals. 16. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought

fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children

of Judah, and in Jerusalem. 17. Then I contended with the nobles of

Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and

profane the sabbath day? 18. Did not your fathers thus, and did not our

God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more

wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath, 19. And it came to pass,

that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I

commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should

not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at

the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath

day. 20. So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged

without Jerusalem once or twice. 21. Then I testified against them, and

said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will

lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the

sabbath. 22. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse

themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify

the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare

me according to the greatness of Thy mercy.'--NEH. xiii. 15-22.

Many religious and moral reformations depend for their vitality on one

man, and droop if his influence be withdrawn. It was so with Nehemiah's

work. He toiled for twelve years in Jerusalem, and then returned for

certain days' to the king at Babylon. The length of his absence is not

given; but it was long enough to let much of his work be undone, and to

give him much trouble to restore it to the condition in which he had

left it. This last chapter of his book is but a sad close for a record

which began with such high hope, and tells of such strenuous,

self-sacrificing effort. The last page of many a reformer's history has

been, like Nehemiah' s, a sad account of efforts to stem the ebbing

tide of enthusiasm and the flowing tide of worldliness. The heavy stone

is rolled a little way up hill, and, as soon as one strong hand is

withdrawn, down it tumbles again to its old place. The evanescence of

great men's work makes much of the tragedy of history.

Our passage is particularly concerned with Nehemiah's efforts to

enforce Sabbath observance. The rest of the chapter is occupied with

similar efforts to set right other irregularities of a ceremonial

character, such as the exclusion of Gentiles from the Temple, the

exaction of the portions of the Levites,' and the like. The passage

falls into three parts--the abuse (vs. 15, 16), the vigorous remedies

(vs. 17-22), and the prayer (v. 22).

I. The abuse consisted in Sabbath work and trading. Nehemiah found, on

his return, that the people in Judaea'--that is, in the country

districts--carried on their farm labour and also brought their produce

to market to Jerusalem on the Sabbath. So he testified against them in

the day wherein they sold victuals'; that is, probably meaning that he

warned them either in person or by messengers before taking further

steps. Not only did Jews break the sacred day, but they let heathen do

so too. The narrative tells, with a kind of horror, the many

aggravations of this piece of wickedness. They'--Gentiles with whom

contact defiled--sold on the Sabbath'--the day of rest--to the children

of Judah'--God's people--in Jerusalem'--the Holy City. It was a

many-barrelled crime. Tyre was far from Jerusalem, and one does not see

how fish could have been brought in good condition. Perhaps their

perishableness was the excuse for allowing their sale on the Sabbath,

as is sometimes the case in fishing-villages even in Sabbath-keeping

Scotland. Such was the abuse with which Nehemiah struggled.

It is easy to pooh-pooh his crusade against Sabbath labour as mere

scrupulousness about externals. But it is a blunder and an injustice to

a noble character if we forget that the stage of revelation at which he

stood necessarily made him more dependent on externals than Christians

are or should be. But his vindication does not need such

considerations. He had a truer insight into what active men needed for

vigorous working days, and what devout men needed for healthy religion,

than many moderns who smile at his eagerness about mere externalisms.'

It is easy to ridicule the Jewish Sabbath and the Puritan Sunday.' No

doubt there have been and are well-meant but mistaken efforts to insist

on too rigid observance. No doubt it has been often forgotten by good

people that the Christian Lord's Day is not the Jewish Sabbath. Of

course the religious observance of the day is not a fit subject for

legislation. But the need for a seventh day of rest is impressed on our

physical and intellectual nature; and devout hearts will joyfully find

their best rest in Christian worship and service. The vigour of

religious life demands special seasons set apart for worship. Unless

there be such reservoirs along the road, there will be but a thin

trickle of a brook by the way. It is all very well to talk about

religion diffused through the life, but it will not be so diffused

unless it is concentrated at certain times.

They are no benefactors to the community who seek to break down and

relax the stringency of the prohibition of labour. If once the idea

that Sunday is a day of amusement take root, the amusement of some will

require the hard work of others, and the custom of work will tend to

extend, till rest becomes the exception, and work the rule. There never

was a time when men lived so furiously fast as now. The pace of modern

life demands Sunday rest more than ever. If a railway car is run

continually it will wear out sooner than if it were laid aside for a

day or two occasionally; and if it is run at express speed it will need

the rest more. We are all going at top speed; and there would be more

breakdowns if it were not for that blessed institution which some

people think they are promoting the public good by destroying--a

seventh day of rest.

Our great trading centres in England have the same foreign element to

complicate matters as Nehemiah had to deal with. The Tyrian fishmongers

knew and cared nothing for Israel's Jehovah or Sabbath, and their

presence would increase the tendency to disregard the day. So with us,

foreigners of many nationalities, but alike in their disregard of our

religious observances, leaven the society, and help to mould the

opinions and practices, of our great cities. That is a very real source

of danger in regard to Sabbath observance and many other things; and

Christian people should be on their guard against it.

II. The vigorous remedies applied by Nehemiah were administered first

to the rulers. He sent for the nobles, and laid the blame at their

doors. Ye profane the day,' said he. Men in authority are responsible

for crimes which they could check, but prefer to wink at. Nehemiah

seems to trace all the national calamities to the breach of the

Sabbath; but of course he is simply laying stress on the sin about

which he is speaking, as any man who sets himself earnestly to work to

fight any form of evil is apt to do. Then the men who are not in

earnest cry out about exaggeration.' Many other sins besides

Sabbath-breaking had a share in sending Israel into captivity; and if

Nehemiah had been fighting with idolatrous tendencies he would have

isolated idolatry as the cause of its calamities, just as, when

fighting against Sabbath-breaking, he emphasises that sin.

Nehemiah was governor for the Persian king, and so had a right to rate

these nobles. In this day the people have the same right, and there are

many social sins for which they should arraign civic and other

authorities. Christian principles unflinchingly insisted on by

Christian people, and brought to bear, by ballot-boxes and other

persuasive ways, on what stands for conscience in some high places,

would make a wonderful difference on many of the abominations of our

cities. Go to the nobles' first, and lay the burden on the backs that

ought to carry it.

Then Nehemiah took practical measures by shutting the city gates on the

eve of the Sabbath, and putting some of his own servants as a watch.

The thing seems to have been done without any notice; so when the

country folk came in, as usual, on the Sabbath, they could not get into

the city, and camped outside, making a visible temptation to the

citizens, to slip out and do a little business, if they could manage to

elude the guards. Once or twice this happened; and then Nehemiah

himself seems to have taken them in hand, with a very plain and

sufficiently emphatic warning: If ye do so again, I will lay hands on

you.'

Of course, from that time they came no more on the Sabbath,' as was

natural after such a volley. A man with a good strong will is apt to

get his own way, even when he is not clothed with the authority of a

governor. Then Nehemiah strengthened the guard, or perhaps withdrew his

own servants and substituted for them Levites, whose official position

would put them in full sympathy with his efforts. That priestly guard

would be inflexible, and with its appointment the abuse appears to have

been crushed.

The example of Nehemiah's enforcing Sabbath observance is not to be

taken as a pattern for Christian communities, without many limitations.

But it appears to the present writer that it is perfectly legitimate

for the civil power to insist upon, and if necessary to enforce, the

observance of Sunday as a day of rest; and that, since legitimate, it

is for the well-being of the community that it should do so. Tyrians

might believe anything they chose, and use the day of rest as they

thought proper, so long as they did not sell fish on it. We do not

interfere with religious convictions when we enjoin Sunday observance.

Nehemiah's argument has sometimes to be used, even about such a matter:

If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.'

The methods adopted may yield suggestions for all who would aim at

reforming abuses or public immoralities. One most necessary step is to

cut off, as far as possible, opportunities for the sin. There will be

no trade if you shut the gates the night before. There will be little

drunkenness if there are no liquor shops. It is quite true that people

cannot be made virtuous by legislation, but it is also true that they

may be saved from temptations to become vicious by it.

Another hint comes from Nehemiah's vigorous word to the country folk

outside the wall. There is need for very strong determination and much

sanctified obstinacy in fighting popular abuses. They die hard. It is

permissible to invoke the aid of the lawful authority. But a man with

strong convictions and earnest purpose will be able to impress his

convictions on a mass, even if he have no guards at his back. The one

thing needful for Christian reformers is, not the power to appeal to

force, but the force which they can carry within them. And it is better

when the traders love the Sabbath too well to wish to drive bargains on

it, than when they are hindered from doing as they wish by Nehemiah's

strong will or formidable threats.

Once more, the guard of Levites may suggest that the execution of

measures for the reformation of manners or morals is best entrusted to

those who are in sympathy with them. Levites made faithful watchmen.

Many a promising measure for reformation has come to nothing because

committed to the hands of functionaries who did not care for its

success. The instruments are almost as important as the measures which

they carry out.

III. Nehemiah's prayer occurs thrice in this chapter, at the close of

each section recounting his reforming acts. In the first instance (v.

14) it is most full, and puts very plainly the merit of good deeds as a

plea with God. The same thing is implied in its form in verse 22. But

while, no doubt, the tone of the prayer is startling to us, and is not

such as should be offered now by Christians, it but echoes the

principle of retribution which underlies the law. This do, and thou

shalt live,' was the very foundation of Nehemiah's form of God's

revelation. We do not plead our own merits, because we are not under

the law, but under grace, and the principle underlying the gospel is

life by impartation of unmerited mercy and divine life. But the law of

retribution still remains valid for Christians in so far as that God

will never forget any of their works, and will give them full

recompense for their work of faith and labour of love. Eternal life

here and hereafter is wholly the gift of God; but that fact does not

exclude the notion of the recompense of reward' from the Christian

conception of the future. It becomes not us to present our good deeds

before the Judge, since they are stained and imperfect, and the

goodness in them is His gift. But it becomes Him to crown them with His

gracious approbation, and to proportion the cities ruled in that future

world to the talents faithfully used here. We need not be afraid of

obscuring the truth that we are saved not of works, lest any man should

boast,' though we insist that a Christian man is rewarded according to

his works.

Nehemiah had no false notion of his own goodness; for, while he asked

for recompense for these good deeds of his, he could not but add, Spare

me according to the greatness of Thy mercy.' He who asks to be spared'

must know himself in peril of destruction; and he who invokes mercy'

must think that, if he were dealt with according to justice, he would

be in evil case. So the consciousness of weakness and sin is an

integral part of this prayer, and that takes all the apparent

self-righteousness out of the previous petition. However worthy of and

sure of reward a Christian man's acts of love and efforts for the

spread of God's honour may be, the doer of them must still be looking

for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.'

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THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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THE NET SPREAD

After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of

Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all

the princes that were with him. 2. And all the king's servants, that

were in the king's gate, bowed, and reverenced Haman: for the king had

so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him

reverence. 3. Then the king's servants which were in the king's gate,

said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment? 4.

Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened

not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters

would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew. 5. And when Haman

saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full

of wrath. 6. And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for

they had showed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to

destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of

Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai. 7. In the first month, that is,

the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur,

that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to

month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar. 8. And Haman said

unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and

dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and

their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's

laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. 9. If

it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I

will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have

the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries. 10.

And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the

son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. 11. And the king said

unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with

them as it seemeth good to thee.'--ESTHER iii. 1-11.

The stage of this passage is filled by three strongly marked and

strongly contrasted figures: Mordecai, Haman, and Ahasuerus; a sturdy

nonconformist, an arrogant and vindictive minister of state, and a

despotic and careless king. These three are the visible persons, but

behind them is an unseen and unnamed Presence, the God of Israel, who

still protects His exiled people.

We note, first, the sturdy nonconformist. The reverence' which the king

had commanded his servants to show to Haman was not simply a sign of

respect, but an act of worship. Eastern adulation regarded a monarch as

in some sense a god, and we know that divine honours were in later

times paid to Roman emperors, and many Christians martyred for refusing

to render them. The command indicates that Ahasuerus desired Haman to

be regarded as his representative, and possessing at least some

reflection of godhead from him. European ambassadors to Eastern courts

have often refused to prostrate themselves before the monarch on the

ground of its being degradation to their dignity; but Mordecai stood

erect while the crowd of servants lay flat on their faces, as the great

man passed through the gate, because he would have no share in an act

of worship to any but Jehovah. He might have compromised with

conscience, and found some plausible excuses if he had wished. He could

have put his own private interpretation on the prostration, and said to

himself, I have nothing to do with the meaning that others attach to

bowing before Haman. I mean by it only due honour to the second man in

the kingdom.' But the monotheism of his race was too deeply ingrained

in him, and so he kept a stiff backbone' and bowed not down.'

That his refusal was based on religious scruples is the natural

inference from his having told his fellow-porters that he was a Jew.

That fact would explain his attitude, but would also isolate him still

more. His obstinacy piqued them, and they reported his contumacy to the

great man, thus at once gratifying personal dislike, racial hatred, and

religious antagonism, and recommending themselves to Haman as

solicitous for his dignity. We too are sometimes placed in

circumstances where we are tempted to take part in what may be called

constructive idolatry. There arise, in our necessary co-operation with

those who do not share in our faith, occasions when we are expected to

unite in acts which we are thought very straitlaced for refusing to do,

but which, conscience tells us, cannot be done without practical

disloyalty to Jesus Christ. Whenever that inner voice says Don't,' we

must disregard the persistent solicitations of others, and be ready to

be singular, and run any risk rather than comply. So did not I, because

of the fear of God,' has to be our motto, whatever fellow-servants may

say. The gate of Ahasuerus's palace was not a favourable soil for the

growth of a devout soul, but flowers can bloom on dunghills, and there

have been saints' in Caesar's household.'

Haman is a sharp contrast to Mordecai. He is the type of the unworthy

characters that climb or crawl to power in a despotic monarchy,

vindictive, arrogant, cunning, totally oblivious of the good of the

subjects, using his position for his own advantage, and ferociously

cruel. He had naturally not noticed the one erect figure among the

crowd of abject ones, but the insignificant Jew became important when

pointed out. If he had bowed, he would have been one more nobody, but

his not bowing made him somebody who had to be crushed. The childish

burst of passion is very characteristic, and not less true to life is

the extension of the anger and thirst for vengeance to all the Jews

that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.' They were the

people of Mordecai,' and that was enough. He thought scorn to lay hands

on Mordecai alone.' What a perverted notion of personal dignity which

thought the sacrifice of the one offender beneath it, and could only be

satisfied by a blood-bath into which a nation should be plunged! Such

an extreme of frantic lust for murder is only possible in such a state

as Ahasuerus's Persia, but the prostitution of public position to

personal ends, and the adoption of political measures at the bidding of

wounded vanity, and to gratify blind hatred of a race, is possible

still, and it becomes all Christian men to use their influence that the

public acts of their nation shall be clear of that taint.

Haman was as superstitious as cruel, and so he sought for auguries from

heaven for his hellish purpose, and cast the lot to find the favourable

day for bringing it about. He is not the only one who has sought divine

approval for wicked public acts. Religion has been used to varnish many

a crime, and Te Deums sung for many a victory which was little better

than Haman's plot.

The crafty denunciation of the Jews to the king is a good specimen of

the way in which a despot is hoodwinked by his favourites, and made

their tool. It was no doubt true that the Jews' laws were diverse from

those of every people,' but it was not true that they did not keep the

king's laws,' except in so far as these required worship of other gods.

In all their long dispersion they have been remarkable for two

things,--their tenacious adherence to the Law, so far as possible in

exile, and their obedience to the law of the country of their sojourn.

No doubt, the exiles in Persian territory presented the same

characteristics. But Haman has had many followers in resenting the

distinctiveness of the Jew, and charging on them crimes of which they

were innocent. From Mordecai onwards it has been so, and Europe is

to-day disgraced by a crusade against them less excusable than Haman'

s. Hatred still masks itself under the disguise of political

expediency, and says, It is not for the king's profit to suffer them.'

But the true half of the charge was a eulogium, for it implied that the

scattered exiles were faithful to God's laws, and were marked off by

their lives. That ought to be true of professing Christians. They

should obviously be living by other principles than the world adopts.

The enemy's charge shall turn unto you for a testimony.' Happy shall we

be if observers are prompted to say of us that our laws are diverse'

from those of ungodly men around us!

The great bribe which Haman offered to the king is variously estimated

as equal to from three to four millions sterling. He, no doubt,

reckoned on making more than that out of the confiscation of Jewish

property. That such an offer should have been made by the chief

minister to the king, and that for such a purpose, reveals a depth of

corruption which would be incredible if similar horrors were not

recorded of other Eastern despots. But with Turkey still astonishing

the world, no one can call Haman's offer too atrocious to be true.

Ahasuerus is the vain-glorious king known to us as Xerxes. His conduct

in the affair corresponds well enough with his known character. The

lives of thousands of law-abiding subjects are tossed to the favourite

without inquiry or hesitation. He does not even ask the name of the

certain people,' much less require proof of the charge against them.

The insanity of weakening his empire by killing so many of its

inhabitants does not strike him, nor does he ever seem to think that he

has duties to those under his rule. Careless of the sanctity of human

life, too indolent to take trouble to see things with his own eyes,

apparently without the rudiments of the idea of justice, he wallowed in

a sty of self-indulgence, and, while greedy of adulation and the

semblance of power, let the reality slip from his hands into those of

the favourite, who played on his vices as on an instrument, and pulled

the strings that moved the puppet. We do not produce kings of that sort

nowadays, but King Demos has his own vices, and is as easily blinded

and swayed as Ahasuerus. In every form of government, monarchy or

republic, there will be would-be leaders, who seek to gain influence

and carry their objects by tickling vanity, operating on vices,

calumniating innocent men, and the other arts of the demagogue. Where

the power is in the hands of the people, the people is very apt to take

its responsibilities as lightly as Ahasuerus did his, and to let itself

be led blindfold by men with personal ends to serve, and hiding them

under the veil of eager desire for the public good. Christians should

play the citizen as it becomes the gospel of Christ,' and take care

that they are not beguiled into national enmities and public injustice

by the specious talk of modern Hamans.

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ESTHER'S VENTURE

Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai:

11. All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do

know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king

into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put

him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden

sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto

the king these thirty days. 12. And they told to Mordecai Esther's

words. 13. Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with

thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the

Jews. 14. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then

shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another

place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who

knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

15. Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, 16. Go, gather

together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me,

and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my

maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is

not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. 17. So Mordecai

went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal

apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against

the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal

house, over against the gate of the house. 2. And it was so, when the

king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained

favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre

that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the

sceptre. 3. Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther?

and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the

kingdom.'--ESTHER iv. 10-17; v. 1-3.

Patriotism is more evident than religion in the Book of Esther. To turn

to it after the fervours of prophets and the continual recognition of

God in history which marks the other historical books, is like coming

down from heaven to earth, as Ewald says. But that difference in tone

probably accurately represents the difference between the saints and

heroes of an earlier age and the Jews in Persia, in whom national

feeling was stronger than devotion. The picture of their

characteristics deducible from this Book shows many of the traits which

have marked them ever since,--accommodating flexibility, strangely

united with unbending tenacity; a capacity for securing the favour of

influential people, and willingness to stretch conscience in securing

it; reticence and diplomacy; and, beneath all, unquenchable devotion to

Israel, which burns alike in the politic Mordecai and the lovely

Esther.

There is not much audible religion in either, but in this lesson

Mordecai impressively enforces his assurance that Israel cannot perish,

and his belief in Providence setting people in their places for great

unselfish ends; and Esther is ready to die, if need be, in trying to

save her people, and thinks that fasting and prayer will help her in

her daring attempt. These two cousins, unlike in so much, were alike in

their devotion to Israel; and though they said little about their

religion, they acted it, which is better.

It is very like Jews that the relationship between Mordecai and Esther

should have been kept dark. Nobody but one or two trusted servants knew

that the porter was the queen's cousin, and probably her Jewish birth

was also unknown. Secrecy is, no doubt, the armour of oppressed

nations; but it is peculiarly agreeable to the descendants of Jacob,

who was a master of the art. There must have been wonderful

self-command on both sides to keep such a secret, and true affection,

to preserve intercourse through apparent indifference.

Our passage begins in the middle of Esther's conversation with the

confidential go-between, who told her of the insane decree for the

destruction of the Jews, and of Mordecai's request that she should

appeal to the king. She reminds him of what he knew well enough, the

law that unsummoned intruders into the presence are liable to death;

and adds what, of course, he did not know, that she had not been

summoned for a month. We need not dwell on this ridiculously arrogant

law, but may remark that the substantial accuracy of the statement is

confirmed by classical and other authors, and may pause for a moment to

note the glimpse given here of the delirium of self-importance in which

these Persian kings lived, and to see in it no small cause of their

vices and disasters. What chance of knowing facts or of living a

wholesome life had a man shut off thus from all but lickspittles and

slaves? No wonder that the victims of such dignity beat the sea with

rods, when it was rude enough to wreck their ships! No wonder that they

wallowed in sensuality, and lost pith and manhood! No wonder that

Greece crushed their unwieldy armies and fleets!

And what a glimpse into their heart-emptiness and degradation of sacred

ties is given in the fact that Esther the queen had not seen Ahasuerus

for a month, though living in the same palace, and his favourite wife!

No doubt, the experiences of exile had something to do in later ages

with the decided preference of the Jew for monogamy.

But, passing from this, we need only observe how clearly Esther sees

and how calmly she tells Mordecai the tremendous risk which following

his counsel would bring. Note that she does not refuse. She simply puts

the case plainly, as if she invited further communication. This is how

things stand. Do you still wish me to run the risk?' That is poor

courage which has to shut its eyes in order to keep itself up to the

mark. Unfortunately, the temperament which clearly sees dangers and

that which dares them are not often found together in due proportion,

and so men are over-rash and over-cautious. This young queen with her

clear eyes saw, and with her brave heart was ready to face, peril to

her life. Unless we fully realise difficulties and dangers beforehand,

our enthusiasm for great causes will ooze out at our fingers' ends at

the first rude assault of these. So let us count the cost before we

take up arms, and let us take up arms after we have counted the cost.

Cautious courage, courageous caution, are good guides. Either alone is

a bad one.

Mordecai's grand message is a condensed statement of the great reasons

which always exist for self-sacrificing efforts for others' good. His

words are none the less saturated with devout thought because they do

not name God. This porter at the palace gate had not the tongue of a

psalmist or of a prophet. He was a plain man, not uninfluenced by his

pagan surroundings, and perhaps he was careful to adapt his message to

the lips of the Gentile messenger, and therefore did not more

definitely use the sacred name.

It is very striking that Mordecai makes no attempt to minimise Esther's

peril in doing as he wished. He knew that she would take her life in

her hand, and he expects her to be willing to do it, as he would have

been willing. It is grand when love exhorts loved ones to a course

which may bring death to them, and lifelong loneliness and quenched

hopes to it. Think of Mordecai's years of care over and pride in his

fair young cousin, and how many joys and soaring visions would perish

with her, and then estimate the heroic self-sacrifice he exercised in

urging her to her course.

His first appeal is on the lowest ground. Pure selfishness should send

her to the king; for, if she did not go, she would not escape the

common ruin. So, on the one hand, she had to face certain destruction;

and, on the other, there were possible success and escape. It may seem

unlikely that the general massacre should include the favourite queen,

and especially as her nationality was apparently a secret. But when a

mob has once tasted blood, its appetite is great and its scent keen,

and there are always informers at hand to point to hidden victims. The

argument holds in reference to many forms of conflict with national and

social evils. If Christian people allow vice and godlessness to riot

unchecked, they will not escape the contagion, in some form or other.

How many good men's sons have been swept away by the immoralities of

great cities! How few families there are in which there is not one

dead,' the victim of drink and dissipation! How the godliness of the

Church is cooled down by the low temperature around! At the very

lowest, self-preservation should enlist all good men in a sacred war

against the sins which are slaying their countrymen. If smallpox breaks

out in the slums, it will come uptown into the grand houses, and the

outcasts will prove that they are the rich man's brethren by infecting

him, and perhaps killing him.

Mordecai goes back to the same argument in the later part of his

answer, when he foretells the destruction of Esther and her father's

house. There he puts it, however, in a rather different light. The

destruction is not now, as before, her participation in the common

tragedy, but her exceptional ruin while Israel is preserved. The

unfaithful one, who could have intervened to save, and did not, will

have a special infliction of punishment. That is true in many

applications. Certainly, neglect to do what we can do for others does

always bring some penalty on the slothful coward; and there is no more

short-sighted policy than that which shirks plain duties of beneficence

from regard to self.

But higher considerations than selfish ones are appealed to. Mordecai

is sure that deliverance will come. He does not know whence, but come

it will. How did he arrive at that serene confidence? Certainly because

he trusted God's ancient promises, and believed in the

indestructibility of the nation which a divine hand protected. How does

such a confidence agree with fear of destruction'? The two parts of

Mordecai's message sound contradictory; but he might well dread the

threatened catastrophe, and yet be sure that through any disaster

Israel as a nation would pass, cast down, no doubt, but not destroyed.

How did it agree with his earnestness in trying to secure Esther's

help? If he was certain of the issue, why should he have troubled her

or himself? Just for the same reason that the discernment of God's

purposes and absolute reliance on these stimulate, and do not paralyse,

devout activity in helping to carry them out. If we are sure that a

given course, however full of peril and inconvenience, is in the line

of God's purposes, that is a reason for strenuous effort to carry it

out. Since some men are to be honoured to be His instruments, shall not

we be willing to offer ourselves? There is a holy and noble ambition

which covets the dignity of being used by Him. They who believe that

their work helps forward what is dear to God's heart may well do with

their might what they find to do, and not be too careful to keep on the

safe side in doing it. The honour is more than the danger. Here am I;

take me,' should be the Christian feeling about all such work.

The last argument in this noble summary of motives for self-sacrifice

for others' good is the thought of God's purpose in giving Esther her

position. It carries large truth applicable to us all. The source of

all endowments of position, possessions, or capacities, is God. His

purpose in them all goes far beyond the happiness of the receiver.

Dignities and gifts of every sort are ours for use in carrying out His

great designs of good to our fellows. Esther was made queen, not that

she might live in luxury and be the plaything of a king, but that she

might serve Israel. Power is duty. Responsibility is measured by

capacity. Obligation attends advantages. Gifts are burdens. All men are

stewards, and God gives His servants their talents,' not for selfish

squandering or hoarding, but to trade with, and to pay the profits to

Him. This penetrating insight into the source and intention of all

which we have, carries a solemn lesson for us all.

The fair young heroine's soul rose to the occasion, and responded with

a swift determination to her older cousin's lofty words. Her pathetic

request for the prayers of the people for whose sake she was facing

death was surely more than superstition. Little as she says about her

faith in God, it obviously underlay her courage. A soul that dares

death in obedience to His will and in dependence on His aid,

demonstrates its godliness more forcibly in silence than by many

professions.

If I perish, I perish!' Think of the fair, soft lips set to utter that

grand surrender, and of all the flowery and silken cords which bound

the young heart to life, so bright and desirable as was assured to her.

Note the resolute calmness, the Spartan brevity, the clear sight of the

possible fatal issue, the absolute submission. No higher strain has

ever come from human lips. This womanly soul was of the same stock as a

Miriam, a Deborah, Jephthah's daughter; and the same fire burned in

her,--utter devotion to Israel because entire consecration to Israel's

God. Religion and patriotism were to her inseparable. What was her

individual life compared with her people's weal and her God's will? She

was ready without a murmur to lay her young radiant life down. Such

ecstasy of willing self-sacrifice raises its subject above all fears

and dissolves all hindrances. It may be wrought out in uneventful

details of our small lives, and may illuminate these as truly as it

sheds imperishable lustre over the lovely figure standing in the palace

court, and waiting for life or death at the will of a sensual tyrant.

The scene there need not detain us. We can fancy Esther's beating heart

putting fire in her cheek, and her subdued excitement making her beauty

more splendid as she stood. What a contrast between her and the

arrogant king on his throne! He was a voluptuary, ruined morally by

unchecked licence,--a monster, as he could hardly help being, of lust,

self will, and caprice. She was at that moment an incarnation of

self-sacrifice and pure enthusiasm. The blind world thought that he was

the greater; but how ludicrous his condescension, how vulgar his pomp,

how coarse his kindness, how gross his prodigal promises by the side of

the heroine of faith, whose life he held in his capricious hand!

How amazed the king would have been if he had been told that one of his

chief titles to be remembered would be that moment's interview!

Ahasuerus is the type of swollen self-indulgence, which always degrades

and coarsens; Esther is the type of self-sacrifice which as uniformly

refines, elevates, and arrays with new beauty and power. If we would

reach the highest nobleness possible to us, we must stand with Esther

at the gate, and not envy or imitate Ahasuerus on his gaudy throne. He

that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for My

sake and the gospel' s, the same shall find it.'

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MORDECAI AND ESTHER

For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there

enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but

thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether

thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?'--ESTHER iv. 14.

All Christians are agreed in holding the principles which underlie our

missionary operations. They all believe that the world is a fallen

world, that without Christ the fallen world is a lost world, that the

preaching of the Gospel is the way to bring Christ to those who need

Him, that to the Church is committed the ministry of reconciliation.

These are the grand truths from which the grand missionary enterprise

has sprung. It is not my intention to enlarge on them now. But in this

and in all cases, there are secondary motives besides, and inferior to

those which are derived from the real fundamental principles. We are

stimulated to action not only because we hold certain great principles,

but because they are reinforced by certain subordinate considerations.

It is the duty of all Christians to promote the missionary cause on the

lofty grounds already referred to. Besides that, it may be in a special

way our duty for some additional reasons drawn from peculiarities in

our condition. Circumstances do not make duties, but they may bring a

special weight of obligation on us to do them. Times again do not make

duties, but they too make a thing a special duty now. The consideration

of consequences may not decide us in matters of conscience, but it may

allowably come in to deter us from what is on higher grounds a sin to

be avoided, or a good deed to be done. Success or failure is an

alternative that must not be thought of when we are asking ourselves,

Ought I to do this?' but when we have answered that question, we may go

to work with a lighter heart and a firmer hand if we are sure that we

are not going to fail.

All these are inferior considerations which do not avail to determine

duty and do not go deep enough to constitute the real foundation of our

obligation. They are considerations which can scarcely be shut out, and

should be taken in determining the weight of our obligation, in shaping

the selection of our duties, in stimulating the zeal and sedulousness

with which we do what we know to be right.

To a consideration of some of these secondary reasons for energy in the

work of missions I ask your attention. The verse which I have selected

for my text is spoken by Mordecai to Esther, when urging her to her

perilous patriotism. It singularly blends the statesman and the

believer. He sees that if she selfishly refuses to identify herself

with her people, in their calamity, the wave that sweeps them away will

not be stayed outside her royal dwelling; he knows too much of courts

to think that she can stand against that burst of popular fury should

it break out. But he looks on as a devout man believing God's promises,

and seeing past all instruments; he warns her that deliverance and

enlargement shall arise.' He is no fatalist; he believes in man's work,

therefore he urges her to let herself be the instrument by which God's

work shall be done. He is no atheist; he believes in God's sovereign

power and unchangeable faithfulness, therefore he looks without dismay

to the possibility of her failure. He knows that if she is idle, all

the evil will come on her head, who has been unfaithful, and that in

spite of that God's faithfulness shall not be made of none effect. He

believes that she has been raised to her position for God's sake, for

her brethren's sake, not her own.

Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as

this?' There speaks the devout statesman, the court-experienced

believer. He has seen favourites tended and tossed aside, viziers

powerful and beheaded, kings half deified and deserted in their utmost

need. Sitting at the gate there, he has seen generations of Hamans go

out and in; he has seen the craft, the cruelty, the lusts which have

been the apparent causes of the puppets' rise and fall, and he has

looked beyond it all and believed in a Hand that pulled the wires, in a

King of Kings who raiseth up one and setteth down another. So he

believes that his Esther has come to the kingdom by God's appointment,

to do God's work at God's time. And these convictions keep him calm and

stir her.

We may find here a series of considerations having a special bearing on

this missionary work. To them I ask your attention.

I. God gives us our position that we may use it for His cause, for the

spread of the Gospel.

In most general terms.

(a) No man has anything for his own sake--no man liveth to himself. We

come to the kingdom for others. Here we touch the foundation of all

authority; we learn the awful burden of all talents, the dreadful

weight of every gift.

(b) No man receives the Gospel for his own sake. We are not

non-conductors, but stand all linked hand in hand. We are members of

the body that the blood may flow freely through us. For no loftier

reason did God light the candle than that it might give light. We are

beacons kindled to transmit, till every sister light flashes back the

ray.

(c) We especially have received a position in the world for the

conversion of the world. Our national character and position unite that

of the Jew in his two stages--we are set to be the light of the world,'

and we are tribes of the wandering foot.' Our history, all, has tended

to this function, our local position, our laws, our commerce. We are

citizens of a nation which as a nest has found the riches' of the

peoples. In every land our people dwell.

Think of our colonies. Think that we are brought into contact with

heathen, whether we will or not. We cannot help influencing them.

Through you the name of God is blasphemed amongst the Gentiles.' Think

of our sailors. Why this position? What is plainer than that all this

is in order that the Gospel might be spread? God has ever let the

Gospel follow in the tracks made for it by commercial law.

This object does not exclude others. Our language, our literature, our

other rich spiritual treasures, we hold them all that we may impart.

But remember that all these other good things that England has will

spread themselves with little effort, people will be glad to get them.

But the Gospel will not be spread so. It must be taken to those who do

not want it. It must be held forth with outstretched hands to a

disobedient and gainsaying people.' It is found of them that seek it

not.

Like the Lord we must go to the wanderers, we must find them as they

lie panting and thirsty in the wild wilderness. Therefore Christian men

must make special earnest efforts or the work will not be done. They

must be as the dew that tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons

of men.'

And again, such action does not involve approval of the means by which

such a position has become ours. Mordecai knew what vile passions had

been at work to put Esther there, and did not forget poor Vashti, and

we have no need to hide conviction that England's place has often been

won by wrong, been kept by violence and fraud, that, as she has strode

to empire, her foot has trodden on many a venerable throne unjustly

thrown down, and her skirts have been dabbled with the blood of poor

innocents,' splashed there with her armed hoof. Be it so!--Still! Thou

makest the wrath of man to praise Thee.' Still--we are debtors both to

the Greek and barbarian,' and all the more debtors because of ills

inflicted. God has laid on us a solemn responsibility. Over all the

dust of base intrigues, and the smoke of bloody battles, and the hubbub

of busy commerce, His hand has been working, and though we have been

sinful, He has given us a place and a power, mighty and awful. We have

received these not for our own glory, not that we should boast of our

dominion, not that we should gather tribute of gain and glory from

subject peoples, not even that we should carry to them the great though

lesser blessings of language, united order, peaceful commerce, sway

over brute nature, but that we should give them what will make them

men--Christ.

We have a work to do, an awful work. To us all as Christians, to us

especially as citizens of this land and members of this race, to us and

to our brethren across the Atlantic the message comes, by our history,

our manners, etc., as plainly as if it were written in every wave that

beats around our coast. Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord.'

II. God lays upon us special missionary work by the special

characteristics of the times.

Such a time as this!' Was there ever such a time?

Look at the condition of heathenism. It is everywhere tottering. The

idols are on the beasts, Bel boweth down.' The grim gods sit half

famished already. There is a crack in every temple wall. Mahommedanism,

Buddhism, Brahminism--they are none of them progressive. They are none

of them vital. Think how only the Gospel outleaps space and time. How

all these systems are of time and devoured by it, as Saturn eats his

own children. They are of the things that can be shaken, and their

being shaken makes more certain the remaining of the things that cannot

be shaken.

Look at the fields open. India, China, Japan, Africa, in a word, The

field is the world' in a degree in which it never was before. Such a

time'--a time of seething, and we can determine the cosmos; a plastic

time, and we can mould it; it is a deluge, push the ark boldly out and

ransom some.

III. If we neglect the voice of God's providence, harm comes on us.

The gifts unimproved are apt to be lost. One knows not all the

conditions on which England holds her sway, nor do we fathom the

strange way in which spiritual characteristics are inwrought with

material interests. But we believe in a providential government of the

world, and of this we may be very sure, that all advantages not used

for God are held by a very precarious tenure.

The fact is that selfishness is the ruin of any people. When you have a

Christian' nation not using their position for God's glory, they are

using it for their own sakes; and that indicates a state of mind which

will lead to numberless other evils in their relation to men, many of

which have a direct tendency to rob them of their advantages. For

instance, a selfish nation will never hold conquests with a firm grasp.

If we do not bind subject peoples to us by benefits, we shall repel

them by hatreds. Think of India and its lessons, or of South Africa and

its. We have seen the tide of material prosperity ebb away from many a

nation and land, and I for my part believe in the Hand of God in

history, and believe that the tide follows the motions of the heavens.

The history of the Jewish people is not an exception to the laws of

God's government of the world, but a specimen of it. They who were made

a hearth in which the embers of divine truth were kept in a dark world,

when they began to think that they had the truth in order that they

might be different from other people, and forgot that they were

different from others in order that they might first preserve and then

impart the truth to all, lost the light and heat of it, stiffened into

formal hypocrisy and malice and all uncharitableness, and then the

Roman sword smote their national life in twain.

Whatever is not used for God becomes a snare first, then injures the

possessors, and tends to destroy the possessors. The march of

Providence goes on. Its purposes will be effected. Whatever stands in

the way will be mowed remorselessly down, if need be. Helps that have

become hindrances will go. The kingdoms of this world will have to

fall; and if we are not helping and hasting the coming of the Lord we

shall be destroyed by the brightness of His coming. The chariot rolls

on. For men and for nations there is only the choice of yoking

themselves to the car, and finding themselves borne along rather than

bearing it, and partaking the triumph, or of being crushed beneath its

awful wheels as they bound along their certain road, bearing Him who

rides forth prosperously because of truth and meekness and

righteousness.'

IV. Though we be unfaithful, God's purpose of mercy to the world shall

be accomplished.

Deliverance and enlargement shall arise from another place.' So it is

certain that God from eternity has willed that all flesh should see His

salvation. He loves the heathen better than we do. Christ has died not

for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world. God hath made

of one blood all nations of men. The race is one in its need. The race

is one in its goal. The Gospel is fit for all men. The Gospel is

preached to all men. The Gospel shall yet be received by a world, and

from every corner of a believing earth will rise one roll of praise to

one Father, and the race shall be one in its hopes, one in its Lord,

one in faith, one in baptism, one in one God and Father of us all. That

grand unity shall certainly come. That true unity and fraternity shall

be realised. The blissful wave of the knowledge of the Lord shall cover

and hide and flow rejoicingly over all national distinctions. In that

day Israel shall be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, a blessing

in the midst of the earth.'

This is as certain as the efficacy of a Saviour's blood can make it, as

certain as the universal adaptation and design of a preached Gospel can

make it, as certain as the oneness of human nature can make it, as

certain as the power of a Comforter who shall convince the world of

sin, of righteousness, and judgment can make it, as certain as the

misery of man can make it, as certain as the promises of God who cannot

lie can make it, as certain as His faithfulness who hangs the rainbow

in the heavens and enters into an everlasting covenant with all the

earth can make it.

And this accumulation of certainties does not depend on the

faithfulness of men. In the width of that mighty result the failure of

some single agent may be eliminated. Nay, more, though all men failed,

God hath instruments, and will use them Himself, if need were.

Only we may share the triumph and partake of the blessed result. Decide

for yourself, what share you will have in that marvellous day. Let your

work be such as that it shall abide. Stonehenge, cathedrals, temples

stand when all else has passed away. Work for God abides and outlasts

everything beside, and the smallest service for Him is only made to

flash forth light by the glorifying and revealing fires of that awful

day which will burn up the wood, the hay, and the stubble, and flow

with beautifying brightness and be flashed back with double splendour

from the gold, the silver, and the precious stones,' the abiding

workmanship of devout hearts in that everlasting tabernacle which shall

not be taken down, the ransomed souls builded together, ransomed by our

preaching, and builded up together for a temple of God by the Spirit.'

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THE NET BROKEN

And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet,

and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the

Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews. 4. Then

the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose,

and stood before the king, 5. And said, If it please the king, and if I

have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the

king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the

letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he

wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces: 6. For

how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how

can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred? 7. Then the king

Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen, and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold,

I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon

the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews. 8. Write ye also

for the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king's name, and seal it with

the king's ring: for the writing which is written in the king's name,

and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse. 15. And Mordecai

went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and

white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen

and purple: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad. 16. The Jews

had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour. 17. And in every

province, and in every city, whithersoever the king's commandment and

his decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day.

And many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the

Jews fell upon them.'--ESTHER viii. 3-8,15-17.

The spirit of this passage may perhaps be best caught by taking the

three persons appearing in it, and the One who does not appear, but

acts unseen through them all.

I. The heroine of the whole book and of this chapter is Esther, one of

the sweetest and noblest of the women of Scripture. The orphan girl who

had grown up into beauty under the care of her uncle Mordecai, and was

lifted suddenly from sheltered obscurity into the fierce light that

beats upon a throne,' like some flower culled in a shady nook and set

in a king's bosom, was true to her childhood's protector and to her

people, and kept her sweet, brave gentleness unspoiled by the rapid

elevation which ruins so many characters. Her Jewish name of Hadassah

(myrtle') well befits her, for she is clothed with unostentatious

beauty, pure and fragrant as the blossoms that brides twine in their

hair. But, withal, she has a true woman's courage which is always ready

to endure any evil and dare any danger at the bidding of her heart. She

took her life in her hand when she sought an audience of Ahasuerus

uninvited, and she knew that she did. Nothing in literature is nobler

than her quiet words, which measure her danger without shrinking, and

front it without heroics: If I perish, I perish!'

The danger was not past, though she was queen and beloved; for a

despot's love is a shifting sand-bank, which may yield anchorage

to-day, and to-morrow may be washed away. So she counted not her life

dear unto herself when, for the second time, as in our passage, she

ventured, uninvited, into the king's presence. The womanly courage that

risks life for love's sake is nobler than the soldier's that feels the

lust of battle maddening him.

Esther's words to the king are full of tact. She begins with what seems

to have been the form of address prescribed by custom, for it is used

by her in her former requests (chap. v. 8; vii. 3). But she adds a

variation of the formula, tinged with more personal reference to the

king's feeling towards her, as well as breathing entire submission to

his estimate of what was fitting. If the thing seem right before the

king,' appeals to the sense of justice that lay dormant beneath the

monarch's arbitrary will; and I be pleasing in his eyes,' drew him by

the charm of her beauty. She avoided making the king responsible for

the plot, and laid it at the door of the dead and discredited Haman. It

was his device, and since he had fallen, his policy could be reversed

without hurting the king's dignity. And then with fine tact, as well as

with a burst of genuine feeling, she flings all her personal influence

into the scale, and seeks to move the king, not by appeals to his

justice or royal duty, but to his love for her, which surely could not

bear to see her suffer. One may say that it was a low motive to appeal

to, to ask the despot to save a people in order to keep one woman from

sorrow; and so it was. It was Ahasuerus's fault that such a reason had

more weight with him than nobler ones. It was not Esther's that she

used her power over him to carry her point. She used the weapons that

she had, and that she knew would be efficacious. The purpose for which

she used them is her justification.

Esther may well teach her sisters to-day to be brave and gentle, to use

their influence over men for high purposes of public good, to be the

inspirers of their husbands, lovers, brothers, for all noble thinking

and doing; to make the cause of the oppressed their own, to be the

apostles of mercy and the hinderers of wrong, to keep true to their

early associations if prosperity comes to them, and to cherish sympathy

with their nation so deep that they cannot endure to see the evil that

shall come unto them' without using all their womanly influence to

avert it.

II. Ahasuerus plays a sorry part beside Esther. He knows no law but his

own will, and that is moved, not by conscience or reason, but by

ignoble passions and sensual desires. He tosses his subjects' lives as

trivial gifts to any who ask for them. Haman's wife knew that he had

only to speak to the king,' and Mordecai would be hanged; Haman had no

difficulty in securing the royal mandate for the murder of all the

Jews. Sated with the indulgence of low desires, he let all power slip

from his idle hands, and his manhood was rotted away by wallowing in

the pigsty of voluptuousness. But he was tenacious of the semblance of

authority, and demanded the appearance of abject submission from the

servants' who were his masters. He yielded to Esther's prayer as

lightly as to Haman's plot. Whether the Jews were wiped out or not

mattered nothing to him, so long as he had no trouble in the affair.

To shift all responsibility off his own shoulders on to somebody else's

was his one aim. He was as untrue to his duty when he gave his signet

to Mordecai, and bade him and Esther do as they liked, as when he had

given it to Haman. And with all this slothful indifference to his duty,

he was sensitive to etiquette, and its cobwebs held him whom the cords

of his royal obligations could not hold. It mattered not to him that

the edict which he allowed Mordecai to promulgate practically lit the

flames of civil war. He had washed his hands of the whole business.

It is a hideous picture of an Eastern despot, and has been said to be

unhistorical and unbelievable. But the world has seen many examples of

rulers whom the possession of unlimited and irresponsible power has

corrupted in like fashion. And others than rulers may take the warning

that to live to self is the mother of all sins and crimes; that no man

can safely make his own will and his own passions his guides; that

there is no slavery so abject as that of the man who is tyrannised by

his lower nature; that there is a temptation besetting us all to take

the advantages and neglect the duties of our position, and that to

yield to it is sure to end in moral ruin. We are all kings, even if our

kingdom be only our own selves, and we shall rule wisely only if we

rule as God's viceroys, and think more of duty than of delight.

III. Mordecai is a kind of duplicate of Joseph, and embodies valuable

lessons. Contented acceptance of obscurity and neglect of his services,

faithfulness to his people and his God in the foul atmosphere of such a

court, wise reticence, patient discharge of small duties, undoubting

hope when things looked blackest fed by stedfast faith in God,

unchangedness of character and purpose when lifted to supreme dignity,

the use of influence and place, not for himself, but for his

people,--all these are traits which may be imitated in any life. We

should be the same men, whether we sit unnoticed among the lackeys at

the gate, or are bearing the brunt of the hatred of powerful foes, or

are clothed in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown

of gold.' These gauds were nothing to Mordecai, and earthly honours

should never turn our heads. He valued power because it enabled him to

save his brethren, and we should cultivate the same spirit. The

political world, with its fierce struggles for personal ends, its often

disregard of the public good, and its use of place and power for making

a pile' or helping relations up, would be much the better for some

infusion of the spirit of Mordecai.

IV. But we must not look only at the visible persons and forces. This

book of Esther does not say much about God, but His presence broods

over it all, and is the real spring that moves the movers that are

seen. It is all a lesson of how God works out His purposes through men

that seem to themselves to be working out theirs. The king's criminal

abandonment to lust and luxury, Haman's meanly personal pique, Esther's

beauty, the fall of the favourite, the long past services of Mordecai,

even the king's sleepless night, are all threads in the web, and God is

the weaver. The story raises the whole question of the standing miracle

of the co-existence and co-operation of the divine and the human. Man

is free and responsible, God is sovereign and all-pervading. He makes

the wrath of man to praise Him, and with the remainder thereof He

girdeth Himself.' To-day, as then, He is working out His deep designs

through men whom He has raised up, though they have not known Him. Amid

the clash of contending interests and worldly passions His solemn

purpose steadily advances to its end, like the irresistible ocean

current, which persists through all storms that agitate the surface,

and draws them into the drift of its silent trend. Ahasuerus, Haman,

Esther, Mordecai, are His instruments, and yet each of them is the doer

of his or her deed, and has to answer to Him for it.

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THE BOOK OF JOB

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SORROW THAT WORSHIPS

Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither:

the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the

Lord.'--JOB i. 21.

This book of Job wrestles with the problem of the meaning of the

mystery of sorrow. Whether history or a parable, its worth is the same,

as tortured hearts have felt for countless centuries, and will feel to

the end. Perhaps no picture that was ever painted is grander and more

touching than that of the man of Uz, in the antique wealth and

happiness of his brighter days, rich, joyful, with his children round

him, living in men's honour, and walking upright before God. Then come

the dramatic completeness and suddenness of his great trials. One day

strips him of all, and stripped of all he rises to a loftier dignity,

for there is a majesty as well as an isolation in his sorrow.

How many spirits tossed by afflictions have found peace in these words!

How many quivering lips have tried to utter their grave, calm accents!

To how many of us are they hallowed by memories of times when they

stood between us and despair!

They seem to me to say everything that can be said about our trials and

losses, to set forth the whole truth of the facts, and to present the

whole series of feelings with which good men may and should be

exercised.

I. The vindication of sorrow.

He rent his clothes'--the signs and tokens of inward desolation and

loss.

It is worth our while to stay for one moment with the thought that we

are meant to feel grief. God sends sorrows in order that they may pain.

Sorrow has its manifold uses in our lives and on our hearts. It is

natural. That is enough. God set the fountain of tears in our souls. We

are bidden not to despise the chastening of the Lord.' It is they who

are exercised' thereby to whom the chastisement is blessed.

It is sanctioned by Christ. He wept. He bade the women of Jerusalem

weep for themselves and for their children.

Religion does not destroy the natural emotions--sorrow as little as any

other. It guides, controls, curbs, comforts, and brings blessings out

of it. So do not aim at an impossible stoicism, but permit nature to

have its way, and look at the picture of this manly sorrow of

Job's--calm, silent, unless when stung by the undeserved reproaches of

these three orthodox liars for God,' and going to God and worshipping.

II. The recognition of loss and sorrow as the law of life.

Naked came I out of my mother's womb.'

We need not dwell on the figure mother,' suggesting the grave as the

kindly mother's bosom that gathers us all in, and the thought that

perhaps gleams forth that death, too, is a kind of birth.

But the truth picturesquely set forth is just the old and simple

one--that all possessions are transient.

The naked self gets clothed and lapped round with possessions, but they

are all outside of it, apart from its individuality. It has been

without them. It will be without them. Death at the end will rob us of

them all.

The inevitable law of loss is fixed and certain. We are losing

something every moment--not only possessions, but all our dearest ties

are knit but for a time, and sure to be snapped. They go, and then

after a while we go.

The independence of each soul of all its possessions and relations is

as certain as the loss of them. They may go and we are made naked, but

still we exist all the same. We have to learn the hard lesson which

sounds so unfeeling, that we can live on in spite of all losses.

Nothing, no one, is necessary to us.

All this is very cold and miserable; it is the standing point of law

and necessity. An atheist could say it. It is the beginning of the

Christian contemplation of life, but only the beginning.

III. The recognition of God in the law.

The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.' That is a step far beyond

the former. To bring in the thought of the Lord makes a world of

difference.

The tendency is to look only at the second cause. In Job's case there

were two classes of agencies, men, Chaldeans and Sabeans, and natural

causes, fire and wind, but he did not stop with these.

The grand corrective of that tendency lies in the full theistic idea,

that God is the sole cause of all. The immanence of Deity in all things

and events is our refuge from the soul-crushing tyranny of the reign of

law.

That devout recognition of God in law is eminently to be made in regard

to death, as Job does in the text: The number of his months is with

Thee.' Death is not any more nor any less under His control than all

other human incidents are. It has no special sanctity, nor abnormally

close connection with His will, but it no more is exempt from such

connection than all the other events of life. The connection is real.

He opens the gate of the grave and no man shuts. He shuts, and no man

opens.

Job did not forget the Lord's gifts even while he was writhing under

the stroke of His withdrawings. Alas! that it should so often need

sorrow to bear into our hearts that we owe all to Him, but even then,

if not before, it is well to remember how much good we have received of

the Lord, and the remembrance should not be a sorrow's crown of

sorrow,' but a thankful one.

IV. The thankful resignation to God's loving administration of the law.

The preceding words might be said with mere submission to an

irresistible power, but this last sentence climbs to the highest of the

true Christian idea. It recognises in loss and sorrow a reason for

praise.

Why?

Because we may be sure that all loss is for our good.

Because we may be sure that all loss is from a loving God. In loss of

dear ones, our gain is in drawing nearer to God, in being taught more

to long for heaven. In our relation to them, a loftier love, a

hallowing of all the past. Their gain is in their entrance to heaven,

and all the glory that they have reached.

This blessing of God for loss is not inconsistent with sorrow, but

anticipates the future when we shall know all and bless Him for all.

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THE PEACEABLE FRUITS OF SORROWS RIGHTLY BORNE

Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not

thou the chastening of the Almighty: 18. For He maketh sore, and

bindeth up: He woundeth, and His hands make whole. 19. He shall deliver

thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee. 20.

In famine He shall redeem thee from death: and in war from the power of

the sword. 21. Thou shalt be hid from the scourge of the tongue:

neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh. 22. At

destruction and famine thou shalt laugh: neither shalt thou be afraid

of the beasts of the earth. 23. For thou shalt be in league with the

stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with

thee. 24. And thou shalt know that thy tabernacle shall be in peace;

and thou shalt visit thy habitation, and shalt not sin. 25. Thou shalt

know also that thy seed shall be great, and thine offspring as the

grass of the earth. 26. Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age,

like as a shock of corn cometh in in his season. 27. Lo this, we have

searched it, so it is; hear it, and know thou it for thy good.'--JOB v.

17-27.

The close of the Book of Job shows that his friends' speeches were

defective, and in part erroneous. They all proceeded on the assumption

that suffering was the fruit of sin--a principle which, though true in

general, is not to be unconditionally applied to specific cases. They

all forgot that good men might be exposed to it, not as punishment, nor

even as correction, but as trial, to know what was in their hearts.'

Eliphaz is the best of the three friends, and his speeches embody much

permanent truth, and rise, as in this passage, to a high level of

literary and artistic beauty. There are few lovelier passages in

Scripture than this glowing description of the prosperity of the man

who accepts God's chastisements; and, on the whole, the picture is

true. But the underlying belief in the uniform coincidence of inward

goodness and outward good needs to be modified by the deeper teaching

of the New Testament before it can be regarded as covering all the

facts of life.

Eliphaz is gathering up, in our passage, the threads of his speech. He

bases upon all that he has been saying the exhortation to Job to be

thankful for his sorrows. With a grand paradox, he declares the man who

is afflicted to be happy. And therein he strikes an eternally true

note. It is good to be made to drink a cup of sorrow. Flesh calls pain

evil, but spirit knows it to be good. The list of our blessings is not

only written in bright inks, but many are inscribed in black. And the

reason why the sad heart should be a happy heart is because, as Eliphaz

believed, sadness is God's fatherly correction, intended to better the

subject of it. Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth,' says the Epistle to

the Hebrews, in full accord with Eliphaz.

But his well-meant and true words flew wide of their mark, for two

reasons. They were chillingly didactic, and it is vinegar upon nitre to

stand over an agonised soul and preach platitudes in an unsympathetic

voice. And they assumed unusual sin in Job as the explanation of his

unparalleled pains, while the prologue tells us that his sufferings

were not fruits of his sin, but trials of his righteousness. He was

horrified at Job's words, which seemed to him full of rebellion and

irreverence; and he made no allowance for the wild cries of an agonised

heart when he solemnly warned the sufferer against despising' God's

chastening. A more sympathetic ear would have detected the accent of

faith in the groans.

The collocation, in verse 18, of making sore and binding up, does not

merely express sequence, but also purpose. The wounding is in order to

healing. The wounds are merciful surgery; and their intention is

health, like the cuts that lay open an ulcer, or the scratches for

vaccination. The view of suffering in these two verses is not complete,

but it goes far toward completeness in tracing it to God, in asserting

its disciplinary intention, in pointing to the divine healing which is

meant to follow, and in exhorting to submission. We may recall the

beautiful expansion of that exhortation in Hebrews, where faint not' is

added to despise not,' so including the two opposite and yet closely

connected forms of misuse of sorrow, according as we stiffen our wills

against it, and try to make light of it, or yield so utterly to it as

to collapse. Either extreme equally misses the corrective purpose of

the grief.

On this general statement follows a charming picture of the blessedness

which attends the man who has taken his chastisement rightly. After the

thunderstorm come sunshine and blue, and the song of birds. But, lovely

as it is, and capable of application in many points to the life of

every man who trustfully yields to God's will, it must not be taken as

a literally and absolutely true statement of God's dealings with His

children. If so regarded, it would hopelessly be shattered against

facts; for the world is full of instances of saintly men and women who

have not experienced in their outward lives such sunny calm and

prosperity stretching to old age as are here promised. Eliphaz is not

meant to be the interpreter of the mysteries of Providence, and his

solution is decisively rejected at the close. But still there is much

in this picture which finds fulfilment in all devout lives in a higher

sense than his intended meaning.

The first point is that the devout soul is exempt from calamities which

assail those around it. These are such as are ordinarily in Scripture

recognised as God's judgments upon a people. Famine and war devastate,

but the devout soul abides in peace, and is satisfied. Now it is not

true that faith and submission make a wall round a man, so that he

escapes from such calamities. In the supernatural system of the Old

Testament such exemptions were more usual than with us, though this

very Book of Job and many a psalm show that devout hearts had even then

to wrestle with the problem of the prosperity of the wicked and the

indiscriminate fall of widespread calamities on the good and bad.

But in its deepest sense (which, however, is not Eliphaz's sense) the

faithful man is saved from the evils which he, in common with his

faithless neighbour, experiences. Two men are smitten down by the same

disease, or lie dying on a battlefield, shattered by the same shell,

and the one receives the fulfilment of the promise, there shall no evil

touch thee,' and the other does not. For the evil in the evil is all

sucked out of it, and the poison is wiped off the arrow which strikes

him who is united to God by faith and submission. Two women are

grinding at the same millstone, and the same blow kills them both; but

the one is delivered, and the other is not. They who pass through an

evil, and are not drawn away from God by it, but brought nearer to Him,

are hid from its power. To die may be our deliverance from death.

Eliphaz's promises rise still higher in verses 22 and 23, in which is

set forth a truth that in its deepest meaning is of universal

application. The wild beasts of the earth and the stones of the field

will be in league with the man who submits to God's will. Of course the

beasts come into view as destructive, and the stones as injuring the

fertility of the fields. There is, probably, allusion to the story of

Paradise and the Fall. Man's relation to nature was disturbed by sin;

it will be rectified by his return to God. Such a doctrine of the

effects of sin in perverting man's relation to creatures runs all

through Scripture, and is not to be put aside as mere symbolism.

But the large truth underlying the words here is that, if we are

servants of God, we are masters of everything. All things work together

for good to them that love God.' All things serve the soul that serves

God; as, on the other hand, all are against him that does not, and the

stars in their courses fight against' those who fight against Him. All

things are ours, if we are Christ' s. The many mediaeval legends of

saints attended by animals, from St. Jerome and his lion downwards to

St. Francis preaching to the birds, echo the thoughts here. A gentle,

pure soul, living in amity with dumb creatures, has wonderful power to

attract them. They who are at peace with God can scarcely be at war

with any of God's creatures. Gentleness is stronger than iron bands.

Cords of love' draw most surely.

Peace and prosperity in home and possessions are the next blessings

promised (ver. 24). Thou shalt visit [look over] thy household, and

shalt miss nothing.' No cattle have strayed or been devoured by evil

beasts, or stolen, as all Job's had been. Alas! Eliphaz knew nothing

about commercial crises, and the great system of credit by which one

scoundrel's fall may bring down hundreds of good men and patient

widows, who look over their possessions and find nothing but worthless

shares. Yet even for those who find all at once that the herd is cut

off from the stall, their tabernacle may still be in peace, and though

the fold be empty they may miss nothing, if in the empty place they

find God. That is what Christians may make out of the words; but it is

not what was originally meant by them.

In like manner the next blessing, that of a numerous posterity, does

not depend on moral or religious condition, as Eliphaz would make out,

and in modern days is not always regarded as a blessing. But note the

singular heartlessness betrayed in telling Job, all whose flocks and

herds had been carried off, and his children laid dead in their

festival chamber, that abundant possessions and offspring were the

token of God's favour. The speaker seems serenely unconscious that he

was saying anything that could drive a knife into the tortured man. He

is so carried along on the waves of his own eloquence, and so absorbed

in stringing together the elements of an artistic whole, that he

forgets the very sorrows which he came to comfort. There are not a few

pious exhorters of bleeding hearts who are chargeable with the same

sin. The only hand that will bind up without hurting is a hand that is

sympathetic to the finger-tips. No eloquence or poetic beauty or

presentation of undeniable truths will do as substitutes for that.

The last blessing promised is that which the Old Testament places so

high in the list of good things--long life. The lovely metaphor in

which that promise is couched has become familiar to us all. The ripe

corn gathered into a sheaf at harvest-time suggests festival rather

than sadness. It speaks of growth accomplished, of fruit matured, of

the ministries of sun and rain received and used, and of a joyful

gathering into the great storehouse. There is no reference in the

speech to the uses of the sheaf after it is harvested, but we can

scarcely avoid following its history a little farther than the grave'

which to Eliphaz seems the garner. Are all these matured powers to have

no field for action? Were all these miracles of vegetation set in

motion only in order to grow a crop which should be reaped, and there

an end? What is to be done with the precious fruit which has taken so

long time and so much cultivation to grow? Surely it is not the

intention of the Lord of the harvest to let it rot when it has been

gathered. Surely we are grown here and ripened and carried hence for

something.

But that is not in our passage. This, however, may be drawn from

it--that maturity does not depend on length of days; and, however

Eliphaz meant to promise long life, the reality is that the devout soul

may reckon on complete life, whether it be long or short. God will not

call His children home till their schooling is done; and, however green

and young the corn may seem to our eyes, He knows which heads in the

great harvest-field are ready for removal, and gathers only these. The

child whose little coffin may be carried under a boy's arm may be ripe

for harvesting. Not length of days, but likeness to God, makes

maturity; and if we die according to the will of God, it cannot but be

that we shall come to our grave in a full age, whatever be the number

of years carved on our tombstones.

The speech ends with a somewhat self-complacent exhortation to the

poor, tortured man: We have searched it, so it is.' We wise men pledge

our wisdom and our reputation that this is true. Great is authority. An

ounce of sympathy would have done more to commend the doctrine than a

ton of dogmatic self-confidence. Hear it, and know thou it for

thyself.' Take it into thy mind. Take it into thy mind and heart, and

take it for thy good. It was a frosty ending, exasperating in its air

of patronage, of superior wisdom, and in its lack of any note of

feeling. So, of course, it set Job's impatience alight, and his next

speech is more desperate than his former. When will well-meaning

comforters learn not to rub salt into wounds while they seem to be

dressing them?

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TWO KINDS OF HOPE

Whose hope shall be cut off, and whose trust shall be a spider's

web.'--JOB viii. 14.

And hope maketh not ashamed.'--ROMANS v. 5.

These two texts take opposite sides. Bildad was not the wisest of Job's

friends, and he gives utterance to solemn commonplaces with partial

truth in them. In the rough it is true that the hope of the ungodly

perishes, and the limits of the truth are concealed by the splendour of

the imagery and the perfection of artistic form in which the well-worn

platitude is draped. The spider's web stretched glittering in the dewy

morning on the plants, shaking its threaded tears in the wind, the flag

in the dry bed of a nullah withering while yet green, the wall on which

leaning a man will fall, are vivid illustrations of hopes that collapse

and fail. But my other text has to do with hopes that do not fail. Paul

thinks that he knows of hope that maketh not ashamed, that is, which

never disappoints. Bildad was right if he was thinking, as he was, of

hopes fixed on earth; the Apostle was right, for he was thinking of

hopes set on God. It is a commonplace that hope springs immortal in the

human breast'; it is equally a commonplace that hopes are disappointed.

What is the conclusion from these two universal experiences? Is it the

cynical one that it is all illusion, or is it that somewhere there must

be an object on which hope may twine its tendrils without fear? God has

given the faculty, and we may be sure that it is not given to be for

ever balked. We must hope. Our hope may be our worst enemy; it may and

should be our purest joy.

Let us then simply consider these two sorts of hope, the earthly and

the heavenly, in their working in the three great realms of life,

death, and eternity.

I. In life.

The faculty is inseparable from man's consciousness of immortality and

of an indefinitely expansible nature which ever makes him discontented

with the present. It has great purposes to perform in strengthening him

for work, in helping him over sorrows, in making him buoyant and

elastic, in painting for him the walls of the dungeon, and hiding for

him the weight of the fetters.

But for what did he receive this great gift? Mainly that he might pass

beyond the temporal and hold converse with the skies. Its true sphere

is the unseen future which is at God's right hand.

We may run a series of antitheses, e.g.--

Earthly hope is so uncertain that its larger part is often fear.

Heavenly hope is fixed and sure. It is as certain as history.

Earthly hope realised is always less blessed than we expected. How

universal the experience that there is little to choose between a

gratified and a frustrated hope! The wonders inside the caravan are

never so wonderful as the canvas pictures outside.

Heavenly hopes ever surpass the most rapturous anticipation. The half

hath not been told.'

Earthly hopes are necessarily short-winged. They are settled one way or

another, and sink hull down below our horizon.

Heavenly hope sets its object far off, and because a lifetime only

attains it in part, it blesses a lifetime and outlasts it.

II. Hope in death.

That last hour ends for us all alike our earthly joys and relations.

The slow years slip away, and each bears with it hopes that have been

outlived, whether fulfilled or disappointed. One by one the lights that

we kindle in our hall flicker out, and death quenches the last of them.

But there is one light that burns on clear through the article of

death, like the lamp in the magician's tomb. The righteous hath hope in

his death.' We can each settle for ourselves whether we shall carry

that radiant angel with her white wings into the great darkness, or

shall sadly part with her before we part with life. To the earthly soul

that last earthly hour is a black wall beyond which it cannot look. To

the God-trusting soul the darkness is peopled with bright-faced hopes.

III. Hope in eternity.

It is not for our tongues to speak of what must, in the natural working

out of consequences, be the ultimate condition of a soul which has not

set its hopes on the God who alone is the right Object of the blessed

but yet awful capacity of hoping, when all the fleeting objects which

it sought as solace and mask of its own true poverty are clean gone

from its grasp. Dante's tremendous words are more than enough to move

wholesome horror in any thinking soul: Leave hope behind, all ye who

enter here.' They are said to be unfeeling, grim, and mediaeval,

incredible in this enlightened age; but is there any way out of them,

if we take into account what our nature is moulded to need and cling

to, and what godless' men have done with it?

But let us turn to the brighter of these texts. Hope maketh not

ashamed.' There will be an internal increase of blessedness, power,

purity in that future, a fuller possession of God, a reaching out after

completer likeness to Him. So if we can think of days in that calm

state where time will be no more, to-morrow shall be as this day and

much more abundant,' and the angel Hope, who kept us company through

all the weary marches of earth, will attend on us still, only having

laid aside the uncertainty that sometime veiled her smiles, but

retaining all the buoyant eagerness for the ever unfolding wonders

which gave us courage and cheer in the days of our flesh.

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JOB'S QUESTION, JESUS' ANSWER

If a man die, shall he live again?'--JOB xiv. 14.

. . . I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in Me,

though he were dead, yet shall he live: 26. And whosoever liveth and

believeth in Me shall never die.'--JOHN xi. 25, 26.

Job's question waited long for an answer. Weary centuries rolled away;

but at last the doubting, almost despairing, cry put into the mouth of

the man of sorrows of the Old Testament is answered by the Man of

Sorrows of the New. The answer in words is this second text which may

almost be supposed to allude to the ancient question. The answer, in

fact, is the resurrection of Christ. Apart from this answer there is

none.

So we may take these two texts to help us to grasp more clearly and

feel more profoundly what the world owes to that great fact which we

are naturally led to think of to-day.

I. The ancient and ever returning question.

The Book of Job is probably a late part of the Old Testament. It deals

with problems which indicate some advance in religious thought. Solemn

and magnificent, and for the most part sad; it is like a Titan

struggling with large problems, and seldom attaining to positive

conclusions in which the heart or the head can rest in peace. Here all

Job's mind is clouded with a doubt. He has just given utterance to an

intense longing for a life beyond the grave. His abode in Sheol is

thought of as in some sense a breach in the continuity of his

consciousness, but even that would be tolerable, if only he could be

sure that, after many days, God would remember him. Then that longing

gives way before the torturing question of the text, which dashes aside

the tremulous hope with its insistent interrogation. It is not denial,

but it is a doubt which palsies hope. But though he has no certainty,

he cannot part with the possibility, and so goes on to imagine how

blessed it would be if his longing were fulfilled. He thinks that such

a renewed life would be like the release' of a sentry who had long

stood on guard; he thinks of it as his swift, joyous answer' to God's

summons, which would draw him out from the sad crowd of pale shadows

and bring him back to warmth and reality. His hope takes a more daring

flight still, and he thinks of God as yearning for His creature, as His

creature yearns for Him, and having a desire to the work of His hands,'

as if His heaven would be incomplete without His servant. But the

rapture and the vision pass, and the rest of the chapter is all clouded

over, and the devout hope loses its light. Once again it gathers

brightness in the twenty-first chapter, where the possibility flashes

out starlike, that after my skin hath been thus destroyed, yet from my

flesh shall I see God.'

These fluctuations of hope and doubt reveal to us the attitude of

devout souls in Israel at a late era of the national life. And if they

show us their high-water mark, we need not suppose that similar souls

outside the Old Testament circle had solid certainty where these had

but a variable hope. We know how large a development the doctrine of a

future life had in Assyria and in Egypt, and I suppose we are entitled

to say that men have always had the idea of a future. They have always

had the thought, sometimes as a fear, sometimes as a hope, but never as

a certainty. It has lacked not only certainty but distinctness. It has

lacked solidity also, the power to hold its own and sustain itself

against the weighty pressure of intrusive things seen and temporal.

But we need not go to the ends of the earth or to past generations for

examples of a doubting, superficial hold of the truth that man lives

through death and after it. We have only to look around us, and, alas!

we have only to look within us. This age is asking the question again,

and answering it in many tones, sometimes of indifferent disregard,

sometimes flaunting a stark negative without reasoned foundation,

sometimes with affirmatives with as little reason as these negatives.

The modern world is caught in the rush and whirl of life, has its own

sorrows to front, its own battles to fight, and large sections of it

have never come as near an answer to Job's question as Job did.

II. Christ's all-sufficing answer.

He gave it there, by the grave of Lazarus, to that weeping sister, but

He spoke these great words of calm assurance to all the world. One

cannot but note the difference between His attitude in the presence of

the great Mystery and that of all other teachers. How calmly,

certainly, and confidently He speaks!

Mark that Jesus, even at that hour of agony, turns Martha's thoughts to

Himself. What He is is the all-important thing for her to know. If she

understands Him, life and death will have no insoluble problems nor any

hopelessness for her. I am the Resurrection and the Life.' She had

risen in her grief to a lofty height in believing that even now'--at

this moment when help is vain and hope is dead--whatsoever thou wilt

ask of God, God will give it thee,' but Jesus offers to her a loftier

conception of Him when He lays a sovereign hand on resurrection and

life, and discloses that both inhere in Him, and from Him flow to all

who shall possess them. He claims to have in Himself the fountain of

life, in all possible senses of the word, as well as in the special

sense relevant at that sad hour. Further, He tells Martha that by faith

in Him any and all may possess that life. And then He majestically goes

on to declare that the life which He gives is immune from, and

untouched by, death. The believer shall live though he dies, the living

believer shall never die. It is clear that, in these two great

statements, to die is used in two different meanings, referring in the

former case to the physical fact, and in the latter carrying a heavier

weight of significance, namely the pregnant sense which it usually has

in this Gospel, of separation from God and consequently from the true

life of the soul. Physical death is not the termination of human life.

The grim fact touches only the surface life, and has nothing to do with

the essential, personal being. He that believes on Jesus, and he only,

truly lives, and his union with Jesus secures his possession of that

eternal life, which victoriously persists through the apparent,

superficial change which men call death. Nothing dies but the death

which surrounds the faithful soul. For it to die is to live more fully,

more triumphantly, more blessedly. So though the act of physical death

remains, its whole character is changed. Hence the New Testament

euphemisms for death are much more than euphemisms. Men christen it by

names which drape its ugliness, because they fear it so much, but Faith

can play with Leviathan, because it fears it not at all. Hence such

names as sleep,' exodus,' are tokens of the victory won for all

believers by Jesus. He will show Martha the hope for all His followers

which begins to dawn even in the calling of her brother back from the

grip of death. And He shows us the great truth that His being the Life'

necessarily involved His being also the Resurrection,' for His

life-communicating work could not be accomplished till His

all-quickening vitality had flowed over into, and flooded with its own

conquering tides, not only the spirit which believes but its humble

companion, the soul, and its yet humbler, the body. A bodily life is

essential to perfect manhood, and Jesus will not stay His hand till

every believer is full-summed in all his powers, and is perfect in

body, soul, and spirit, after the image of Him who redeemed Him.

III. The pledge for the truth of the answer.

The words of Jesus are only words. These precious words, spoken to that

one weeping sister in a little Jewish village, and which have brought

hope to millions ever since, are as baseless as all the other dreams

and longings of the heart, unless Jesus confirms them by fact. If He

did not rise from the dead, they are but another of the noble, exalted,

but futile delusions of which the world has many others. If Christ be

not risen, His words of consolation are swelling words of emptiness;

His whole claims are ended, and the age-old question which Job asked is

unanswered still, and will always remain unanswered. If Christ be not

risen, the hopeless colloquy between Jehovah and the prophet sums up

all that can be said of the future life: Son of man, can these bones

live?' And I answered, O Lord God, Thou knowest!'

But Christ's resurrection is a fact which, taken in connection with His

words while on earth, endorses these and establishes His claims to be

the Declarer of the name of God, the Saviour of the world. It gives us

demonstration of the continuity of life through and after death. Taken

along with His ascension, which is but, so to speak, the prolongation

of the point into a line, it declares that a glorified body and an

abode in a heavenly home are waiting for all who by faith become here

partakers in Jesus and are quickened by sharing in His life.

So in despite of sense and doubt and fear, notwithstanding teachers

who, like the supercilious philosophers on Mars Hill, mock when they

hear of a resurrection from the dead, we should rejoice in the great

light which has shined into the region of the shadow of death, we

should clasp His divine and most faithful answer to that old,

despairing question, as the anchor of our souls, and lift up our hearts

in thanksgiving in the triumphant challenge, O death! where is thy

sting? O grave! where is thy victory?'

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KNOWLEDGE AND PEACE

Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace: thereby good shall come

unto thee.'--JOB xxii. 21.

In the sense in which the speaker meant them, these words are not true.

They mean little more than It pays to be religious.' What kind of

notion of acquaintance with God Eliphaz may have had, one scarcely

knows, but at any rate, the whole meaning of the text on his lips is

poor and selfish.

The peace promised is evidently only outward tranquillity and freedom

from trouble, and the good that is to come to Job is plainly mere

worldly prosperity. This strain of thought is expressed even more

clearly in that extraordinary bit of bathos, which with solemn irony

the great dramatist who wrote this book makes this Eliphaz utter

immediately after the text, The Almighty shall be thy defence and--thou

shalt have plenty of silver!' It has not been left for commercial

Englishmen to recommend religion on the ground that it produces

successful merchants and makes the best of both worlds.

These friends of Job's all err in believing that suffering is always

and only the measure of sin, and that you can tell a man's great guilt

by observing his great sorrows. And so they have two main subjects on

which they preach at their poor friend, pouring vitriol into his

wounds: first, how wicked he must be to be so haunted by sorrows;

second, how surely he will be delivered if he will only be religious

after their pattern, that is, speak platitudes of conventional devotion

and say, I submit.

This is the meaning of our text as it stands. But we may surely find a

higher sense in which it is true and take that to heart.

I. What is acquainting oneself with God?

The first thing to note is that this acquaintance depends on us. So

then there must have been a previous objective manifestation on His

part. Of course there must be a God to know, and there must be a way of

knowing Him. For us Jesus Christ is the Revealer. What men know of God

apart from Him is dim, shadowy, indistinct; it lacks certainty, and so

is not knowledge. I venture to say that there is nothing between

cultivated men and the loss of certain knowledge of God and conviction

of His Being, but the historical revelation of Jesus Christ. The Christ

reveals the inmost character of God, and that not in words but in

deeds. Without Him no man knows God; No man knoweth the Father save the

Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal Him.'

So then the objective revelation having been made, we must on our part

embrace that revelation as ours. The act of so accepting begins with

the familiar act of faith, which includes both an exercise of the

understanding, as it embraces the facts of Christ's revelation of the

Father, and of the will as it casts itself upon and submits to Him. But

that exercise of faith is but the point which has to be drawn out into

a golden line, woven into the whole length of a life. And it is in the

continuity of that line that the average Christian so sadly fails, and

because of that failure his acquaintance with God is so distant. How

little time or thought we give to the character of God as revealed in

Jesus Christ! We must be on intimate terms with Him. To know God, as to

know a man, we must live with' Him, must summer and winter with Him,

must bring Him into the pettinesses of daily life, must let our love

set to Him, must be in sympathy with Him, our wills being tuned to make

harmony with His, our whole nature being in accord with His. That is

work more than enough for a lifetime, enough to task it, enough to

bless it.

II. The peace of acquaintance with God.

Eliphaz meant nothing more than mere earthly tranquillity and exemption

from trouble, but his words are true in a far loftier region.

Knowledge of God as He really is brings peace, because His heart is

full of love. We do but need to know the actual state of the heart of

God towards us to be lapped and folded in peace that nothing outside of

God and ourselves can destroy. If we lived under the constant

benediction of the deepest truth in the universe, God is love,' our

peace would be full. That is enough, if we believe it to bring peace.

The thought of God which alarms and terrifies cannot be a true thought.

But, alas! in proportion as we know ourselves, it becomes difficult to

believe that God is love. The stings of conscience hiss prophecies to

us of that in God which cannot but be antagonistic to that in us which

conscience condemns. Only when our thought of God is drawn from the

revelation of Him in Jesus Christ, does it become possible for any man

to grasp in one act of his consciousness the conviction, I am a sinner,

and the conquering conviction, God is Love, and only Love to me. So the

old exhortation, Acquaint thyself with God and be at peace,' comes to

be in Christian language: Behold God in Jesus, and thou shalt possess

the peace of God to keep thy heart and mind.'

Knowledge of God gives peace, because in it we find the satisfaction of

our whole nature. Thereby we are freed from the unrest of tumultuous

passions and storms of self-will. The internecine war between the

better and the worse selves within ceases to rage, and when we have

become God's friends, that in us which is meant to rule rules, and that

in us which is meant to serve serves, and the inner kingdom is no

longer torn asunder but is harmonised with itself.

Knowledge of God brings peace amid all changes, for he who has God for

his continual Companion draws little of his supplies from without, and

can be tranquil when the seas roar and are troubled and the mountains

are cast into the midst of the sea. He bears all his treasures with

him, and need fear no loss of any real good. And at last the angel of

peace will lead us through the momentary darkness and guide us, after a

passing shadow on our path, into the land of peace wherein we trusted,'

while yet in the land of warfare. Jesus still whispers the ancient

salutation with which He greeted the company in the upper room on the

evening of the day of resurrection, as He comes to His servants here,

and it will be His welcome to them when He receives them above.

III. The true good from acquaintance with God.

As we have already said, Eliphaz was only thinking, on Old Testament

lines, that prosperity in material things was the theocratic reward of

allegiance to Jehovah. He was rubbing vitriol into Job's sores, and

avowedly regarding him as a fear-inspiring instance of the converse

principle. But we have a better meaning breathed into his words, since

Jesus has taught us what is the true good for a man all the days of his

life. Acquaintance with God is, not merely procures, good. To know Him,

to clasp Him to our hearts as our Friend, our Infinite Lover, our

Source of all peace and joy, to mould our wills to His and let Him

dominate our whole selves, to seek our wellbeing in Him alone--what

else or more can a soul need to be filled with all good? Acquaintance

with God brings Him in all His sufficiency to inhabit else empty

hearts. It changes the worst, according to the judgment of sense, into

the best, transforming sorrow into loving discipline, interpreting its

meaning, fitting us to bear it, and securing to us its blessings. To

him that is a friend of God,

All is right that seems most wrong

If it be His sweet will.'

To be acquainted with God is the quintessence of good. This is life

eternal, to know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou

hast sent.'

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WHAT LIFE MAY BE MADE

For then shalt thou have thy delight in the Almighty, and shalt lift up

thy face unto God. 27. Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He

shall hear thee, and thou shalt pay thy vows. 28. Thou shalt also

decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee: and the light

shall shine upon thy ways. 29. When men are cast down, then thou shalt

say, . . . lifting up; and He shall save the humble person.'--JOB xxii.

26-29.

These words are a fragment of one of the speeches of Job's friends, in

which the speaker has been harping on the old theme that affliction is

the consequence and evidence of sin. He has much ado to square his

theory with facts, and especially with the fact which brought him to

Job's dunghill. But he gets over the difficulty by the simple method of

assuming that, since his theory must be true, there must be unknown

facts which vindicate it in Job's case; and since affliction is a sign

of sin, Job's afflictions are proof that he has been a sinner. So he

charges him with grossest crimes, without a shadow of other reason; and

after having poured this oil of vitriol into his wounds by way of

consolation, he advises him to be good, on the decidedly low and

selfish ground that it will pay.

His often-quoted exhortation, Acquaint thyself with God, and be at

peace: thereby good shall come unto thee,' is, in his meaning of it, an

undisguised appeal to purely selfish considerations, and its promise is

not in accordance with facts. Whether that saying is noble and true or

ignoble and false, depends on the meanings attached to peace' and

good.' A similar flaw mars the words of our text, as understood by the

speaker. But they can be raised to a higher level than that on which he

placed them, and regarded as describing the sweet and wonderful

prerogatives of the devout life. So understood, they may rebuke and

stimulate and encourage us to make our lives conformed to the ideal

here.

I. I note, first, that life may be full of delight and confidence in

God.

Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Almighty, and shalt lift up thy

face unto God.' Now when we delight' in a thing or a person, we

recognise that that thing, or person, fits into a cleft in our hearts,

and corresponds to some need in our natures. We not only recognise its

good, sweetness, and adaptation to ourselves, but we actually possess

in real fruition the sweetness that we recognise, and the good which we

apprehend in it. And so these things, the recognition of the supreme

sweetness and all-perfect adaptation and sufficiency of God to all that

I need; the suppression of tastes and desires which may conflict with

that sweetness, and the actual enjoyment and fruition of the sweetness

and preciousness which I apprehend--these things are the very heart of

a man's religion. Without delight in God, there is no real religion.

The bulk of men are so sunken and embruted in animal tastes and

sensuous desires and fleeting delights, that they have no care for the

pure and calm joys which come to those who live near God. But above

these stand the men, of whom there are a good many amongst us, whose

religion is a matter of fear or of duty or of effort. And above them

there stand the men who serve because they trust God, but whose

religion is seeking rather than finding, and either from deficient

consecration or from false conceptions of Him and of their relation to

Him, is overshadowed by an unnatural and unwholesome gloom. And all

these kinds of religion, the religion of fear, of duty, of effort, of

seeking, and of doubt fighting with faith, are at the best wofully

imperfect, and are, some of them, radically erroneous types of the

religious life. He is the truly devout man who not only knows God to be

great and holy, but feels Him to be sweet and sufficient; who not only

fears, but loves; who not only seeks and longs, but possesses; or, in

one word, true religion is delighting in God.

So herein is supplied a very sharp test for us. Do our tastes and

inclinations set towards Him, and is He better to us than anything

beside? Is God to me my dearest faith, the very home of my heart, to

which I instinctively turn? Is the brightness of my day the light of

His face? Is He the gladness of my joy? Is my Christianity a mill-horse

round of service that I am not glad to render? Do I worship because I

think it is duty, and are my prayers compulsory and mechanical; or do I

worship because my heart goes out to Him? And is my life calm and sweet

because I delight in the Lord'?

The next words of my text will help us to answer. Thou shalt lift up

thy face unto God.' That is a clear enough metaphor to express frank

confidence of approach to Him. The head hangs down in the consciousness

of demerit and sin. Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me,' wailed

the Psalmist, so that I am not able to look up.' But it is possible for

men to go into God's presence with a sense of peace, and to hold up

their heads before their Judge and look Him in the eyes and not be

afraid. And unless we have that confidence in Him, not because of our

merits, but because of His certain love, there will be no delight in

the Lord.' And there will be no such confidence in Him unless we have

access with confidence by faith' in that Christ who has taken away our

sins, and prepared the way for us into the Father's presence, and by

whose death and sacrifice, and by it alone, we sinful men, with open

face and uplifted foreheads, can stand to receive upon our visage the

full beams of His light, and expatiate and be glad therein. There is no

religion worth naming, of which the inmost characteristic is not

delight in God. There is no delighting in God' possible for sinful men

unless they can come to Him with frank confidence, and there is no such

confidence possible for us unless we apprehend by faith, and thereby

make our own, the great work of Jesus Christ our Lord.

II. So, secondly, note, such a life of delighting in God will be

blessed by the frankest intercourse with Him.

Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee, and thou

shalt pay thy vows.' These are three stages of this blessed communion

that is possible for men. And note, prayer is not regarded in this

aspect as duty, nor is it even dwelt upon as privilege, but as being

the natural outcome and issue of that delighting in God and confident

access to Him which have preceded. That is to say, if a man really has

set his heart on God, and knows that in Him is all that he needs, then,

of course, he will tell Him everything. As surely as the sunshine draws

out the odours from the opening petals of the flowers, will the warmth

of the felt divine light and love draw from our hearts the sweet

confidence, which it is impossible not to give to Him in whom we

delight.

If you have to be driven to prayer by a sense of duty, and if there be

no impulse in your heart whispering ever to you, Tell your Love about

it!' you have much need to examine into the reality, and certainly into

the depth of your religion. For as surely as instinctive impulse, which

needs no spurring from conscience or will, leads us to breathe our

confidences to those that we love best, and makes us restless whilst we

have a secret hid from them, so surely will a true love to God make it

the most natural thing in the world to put all our circumstances,

wants, and feeling into the shape of prayers. They may be in briefest

words. They may scarcely be vocalised at all, but there will be, if

there be a true love to Him, an instinctive turning to Him in every

circumstance; and the single-worded cry, if it be no more, for help is

sufficient. The arrow may be shot towards Heaven, though it be but

slender and short, and it will reach its goal.

For my text goes on to the second stage, He shall hear thee.' That was

not true as Eliphaz meant it. But it is true if we remember the

preceding conditions. The fundamental passage, which I suppose

underlies part, at least, of our text, is that great word in the psalm,

Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of

thine heart.' Does that mean that if a man loves God he may get

everything he wants? Yes! and No! If it is supposed to mean that our

religion is a kind of key to God's storehouse, enabling us to go in

there and rifle it at our pleasure, then it is not true; if it means

that a man who delights himself in God will have his supreme desire set

upon God, and so will be sure to get it, then it is true. Fulfil the

conditions and you are sure of the promise. If our prayer in its

deepest essence be Not my will, but Thine,' it will be answered. When

the desires of our heart are for God, and for conformity to His will,

as they will be when we delight ourselves in Him,' then we get our

heart's desires. There is no promise of our being able to impose our

wills upon God, which would be a calamity, and not a blessing, but a

promise that they who make Him their joy and their desire will never be

defrauded of their desire nor robbed of their joy.

And so the third stage of this frank intercourse comes. Thou shalt pay

thy vows.' All life may become a thank-offering to God for the benefits

that have flowed unceasing from His hands. First a prayer, then the

answer, then the rendered thank-offering. Thus, in swift alternation

and reciprocity, is carried on the commerce between Heaven and earth,

between man and God. The desires rise to Heaven, but Heaven comes down

to earth first; and prayer is not the initial stage, but the second, in

the process. God first gives His promise, and the best prayer is the

catching up of God's promise and tossing it back again whence it came.

Then comes the second downward motion, which is the answer to prayer,

in blessing, and on it follows, finally, the reflection upwards, in

thankful surrender and service, of the love that has descended on us,

in answer to our desires. So like sunbeams from a mirror, or heat from

polished metal, backwards and forwards, in continual alternation and

reciprocation of influence and of love, flash and travel bright gleams

between the soul and God. Truth springs out of the earth, and

righteousness looks down from Heaven. Our God shall give that which is

good, and the earth shall yield her increase.' Is there any other life

of which such alternation is the privilege and the joy?

III. Then thirdly, such a life will neither know failure nor darkness.

Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee,

and the light shall shine upon thy ways.' Then is my will to be

omnipotent, and am I to be delivered from the experiences of

disappointments and failures and frustrated plans that are common to

all humanity, and an essential part of its discipline, because I am a

Christian man? Eliphaz may have meant that, but we know something far

nobler. Again, I say, remember the conditions precedent. First of all,

there must be the delight in God, and the desire towards Him, the

submission of the will to Him, and the waiting before Him for guidance.

I decree a thing--if I am a true Christian, and in the measure in which

I am--only when I am quite sure that God has decreed it. And it is only

His decrees, registered in the chancery of my will, of which I may be

certain that they shall be established. There will be no failures to

the man whose life's purpose is to serve God, and to grow like Him; but

if our purpose is anything less than that, or if we go arbitrarily and

self-willedly resolving and saying, Thus I will; thus I command; let my

will stand instead of all reason,' we shall have our contemptuous

decrees' disestablished many a time. If we run our heads against stone

walls in that fashion, the walls will stand, and our heads will be

broken. To serve Him and to fall into the line of His purpose, and to

determine nothing, nor obstinately want anything until we are sure that

it is His will--that is the secret of never failing in what we

undertake.

We must understand a little more deeply than we are apt to do what is

meant by success,' before we predict unfailing success for any man. But

if we have obeyed the commandment from the psalm already quoted, which

may be again alluded to in the words of my text--Commit thy way unto

the Lord; trust also in Him'--we shall inherit the ancient promise, and

He shall bring it to pass.' All things work together for good to them

that love God,' and in the measure of our love to Him are our

discernment and realisation of what is truly good. Religion gives no

screen to keep the weather off us, but it gives us an insight into the

truth that storms and rain are good for the only crop that is worth

growing here. If we understand what we are here for, we shall be very

slow to call sorrow evil, and to crown joy with the exclusive title of

blessing and good; and we shall have a deeper canon of interpretation

for the words of my text than he who is represented as speaking them

ever dreamed of.

So with the promise of light to shine upon our paths. It is the light

which never was on sea or land,' and not the material light which

sense-bound eyes can see. That may all go. But if we have God in our

hearts, there will be a light upon our way which knows no variableness,

neither shadow of turning.' The Arctic winter, sunless though it be,

has a bright heaven radiant with myriad stars, and flashing with

strange lights born of no material or visible orb. And so you and I, if

we delight ourselves in the Lord,' will have an unsetting sun to light

our paths; and at eventide,' and in the mirkest midnight, there will be

light' in the darkness.

IV. Lastly, such a life will be always hopeful, and finally crowned

with deliverance.

When they'--that is, the ways that he has been speaking about--when

they are cast down, thou shalt say, Lifting up.' That is an exclamation

or a prayer, and we might simply render, thou shalt say, Up!' Even in

so blessed a life as has been described, times will come when the path

plunges downwards into some valley of the shadow of death.' But even

then the traveller will bate no jot of hope. He will in his heart say

Up!' even while sense says Down!' either as expressing indomitable

confidence and good cheer in the face of depressing circumstances, or

as pouring out a prayer to Him who has showed him great and sore

troubles' that He would bring him up again from the depths of the

earth.' The devout life is largely independent of circumstances, and is

upheld and calmed by a quiet certainty that the general trend of its

path is upward, which enables it to trudge hopefully down an occasional

dip in the road.

Such an obstinate hopefulness and cheery confidence are the natural

result of the experiences already described in the text. If we delight

in God, hold communion with Him and have known Him as answering prayer,

prospering our purposes and illuminating our paths, how shall we not

hope? Nothing need depress nor perturb those whose joys and treasures

are safe above the region of change and loss. If our riches are there

where neither moth, rust, nor thieves can reach, our hearts will be

there also, and an inward voice will keep singing, Lift up your heart.'

It is the prerogative of experience to light up the future. It is the

privilege of Christian experience to make hope certainty. If we live

the life outlined in these verses we shall be able to bring June into

December, and feel the future warmth whilst our bones are chilled with

the present cold. When the paths are made low, thou shalt say, Up!'

And the end will vindicate such confidence. For the issue of all will

be, He will save the humble person'; namely, the man who is of the

character described, and who is lowly of eyes' in conscious

unworthiness, even while he lifts up his face to God in confidence in

his Father's love. The saving' meant here is, of course, temporary and

temporal deliverance from passing outward peril. But we may permissibly

give it wider and deeper meaning. Continuous partial deliverances lead

on to and bring about final full salvation.

We read that into the words, of course. But nothing less than a

complete and conclusive deliverance can be the legitimate end of the

experience of the Christian life here. Absurdity can no further go than

to suppose that a soul which has delighted itself in God, and looked in

His face with frank confidence, and poured out his desires to Him, and

been the recipient of numberless answers, and the seat of numberless

thank-offerings, has travelled along life's common way in cheerful

godliness, has had the light of heaven shining on the path, and has

found an immortal hope springing as the natural result of present

experience, shall at the last be frustrated of all, and lie down in

unconscious sleep, which is nothingness. If that were the end of a

Christian life, then the pillared firmament were rottenness, and

earth's base built on stubble.' No, no! A heaven of endless blessedness

and close communion with God is the only possible ending to the facts

of the devout life on earth.

We have such a life offered to us all and made possible through faith

in Jesus Christ, in whom we may delight ourselves in the Lord, by whom

we have access with confidence,' who is Himself the light of our hope,

the answer of our prayers, the joy of our hearts, and who will deliver

us from every evil work' as we travel along the road; and save us' at

last into His heavenly kingdom,' where we shall be joined to the

Delight of our souls, and drink for evermore of the fountain of life.

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THE END OF THE LORD'

Then Job answered the Lord, and said, 2. I know that Thou canst do

every thing, and that no thought can he withholden from Thee. 3. Who is

he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that

I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. 4.

Hear, I beseech Thee, and I will speak: I will demand of Thee, and

declare Thou unto me. 5. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the

ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee. 6. Wherefore I abhor myself, and

repent in dust and ashes. 7. And it was so, that after the Lord had

spoken these words unto Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, My

wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have

not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job hath. 8.

Therefore take unto you now seven bullocks and seven rams, and go to My

servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and My

servant Job shall pray for you: for him will I accept: lest I deal with

you after your folly, in that ye have not spoken of Me the thing which

is right, like My servant Job. 9. So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad

the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went, and did according as the

Lord commanded them: the Lord also accepted Job. 10. And the Lord

turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the

Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.'--JOB xlii. 1-10.

The close of the Book of Job must be taken in connection with its

prologue, in order to get the full view of its solution of the mystery

of pain and suffering. Indeed the prologue is more completely the

solution than the ending is; for it shows the purpose of Job's trials

as being, not his punishment, but his testing. The whole theory that

individual sorrows were the result of individual sins, in the support

of which Job's friends poured out so many eloquent and heartless

commonplaces, is discredited from the beginning. The magnificent

prologue shows the source and purpose of sorrow. The epilogue in this

last chapter shows the effect of it in a good man's character, and

afterwards in his life.

So we have the grim thing lighted up, as it were, at the two ends.

Suffering comes with the mission of trying what stuff a man is made of,

and it leads to closer knowledge of God, which is blessed; to lowlier

self-estimation, which is also blessed; and to renewed outward

blessings, which hide the old scars and gladden the tortured heart.

Job's final word to God is in beautiful contrast with much of his

former unmeasured utterances. It breathes lowliness, submission, and

contented acquiescence in a providence partially understood. It does

not put into Job's mouth a solution of the problem, but shows how its

pressure is lightened by getting closer to God. Each verse presents a

distinct element of thought and feeling.

First comes, remarkably enough, not what might have been expected,

namely, a recognition of God's righteousness, which had been the

attribute impugned by Job's hasty words, but of His omnipotence. God

can do everything,' and none of His thoughts' or purposes can be

restrained' (Rev. Ver.). There had been frequent recognitions of that

attribute in the earlier speeches, but these had lacked the element of

submission, and been complaint rather than adoration. Now, the same

conviction has different companions in Job's mind, and so has different

effects, and is really different in itself. The Titan on his rock, with

the vulture tearing at his liver, sullenly recognised Jove's power, but

was a rebel still. Such had been Job's earlier attitude, but now that

thought comes to him along with submission, and so is blessed. Its

recurrence here, as in a very real sense a new conviction, teaches us

how old beliefs may flash out into new significance when seen from a

fresh point of view, and how the very same thought of God may be an

argument for arraigning and for vindicating His providence.

The prominence given, both in the magnificent chapters in which God

answers Job out of the whirlwind and in this final confession, to power

instead of goodness, rests upon the unspoken principle that the divine

nature is not a segment, but a circle. Any one divine attribute implies

all others. Omnipotence cannot exist apart from righteousnes's

(Davidson's Job, Cambridge Bible for Schools). A mere naked omnipotence

is not God. If we rightly understand His power, we can rest upon it as

a Hand sustaining, not crushing, us. He doeth all things well' is a

conviction as closely connected with I know that Thou canst do all

things' as light is with heat.

The second step in Job's confession is the acknowledgment of the

incompleteness of his and all men's materials and capacities for

judging God's providence. Verse 3 begins with quoting God's rebuke (Job

xxxviii. 2). It had cut deep, and now Job makes it his own confession.

We should thus appropriate as our own God's merciful indictments, and

when He asks, Who is it?' should answer with lowliness, Lord, it is I.'

Job had been a critic; he is a worshipper. He had tried to fathom the

bottomless, and been angry because his short measuring-line had not

reached the depths. But now he acknowledges that he had been talking

about what passed his comprehension, and also that his words had been

foolish in their rashness.

Is then the solution of the whole only that old commonplace of the

unsearchableness of the divine judgments? Not altogether; for the

prologue gives, if not a complete, yet a real, key to them. But still,

after all partial solutions, there remains the inscrutable element in

them. The mystery of pain and suffering is still a mystery; and while

general principles, taught us even more clearly in the New Testament

than in this book, do lighten the weight of all this unintelligible

world,' we have still to take Job's language as the last word on the

matter, and say, How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past

finding out!'

For individuals, and on the wider field of the world, God's way is in

the sea; but that does not bewilder those who also know that it is also

in the sanctuary. Job's confession as to his rash speeches is the best

estimate of many elaborate attempts to vindicate the ways of God to

man.' It is better to trust than to criticise, better to wait than to

seek prematurely to understand.

Verse 4, like verse 3, quotes the words of God (Job xxxviii. 3; xl. 7).

They yield a good meaning, if regarded as a repetition of God's

challenge, for the purpose of disclaiming any such presumptuous

contest. But they are perhaps better understood as expressing Job's

longing, in his new condition of humility, for fuller light, and his

new recognition of the way to pierce to a deeper understanding of the

mystery, by illumination from God granted in answer to his prayer. He

had tried to solve his problem by much, and sometimes barely reverent,

thinking. He had racked brain and heart in the effort, but he has

learned a more excellent way, as the Psalmist had, who said, When I

thought, in order to know this, it was too painful for me, until I went

into the sanctuary of God; then understood I.' Prayer will do more for

clearing mysteries than speculation, however acute, and it will change

the aspect of the mysteries which it does not clear from being awful to

being solemn--veils covering depths of love, not clouds obscuring the

sun.

The centre of all Job's confession is in verse 5, which contrasts his

former and present knowledge of God, as being mere hearsay before, and

eyesight now. A clearer understanding, but still more, a sense of His

nearness, and an acquaintance at first hand, are implied in the bold

words, which must not be interpreted of any outward revelation to

sense, but of the direct, full, thrilling consciousness of God which

makes all men's words about Him seem poor. That change was the master

transformation in Job's case, as it is for us all. Get closer to God,

realise His presence, live beneath His eye and with your eyes fixed on

Him, and ancient puzzles will puzzle no longer, and wounds will cease

to smart, and instead of angry expostulation or bewildered attempts at

construing His dealings, there will come submission, and with

submission, peace.

The cure for questionings of His providence is experience of His

nearness, and blessedness therein. Things that loomed large dwindle,

and dangers melt away. The landscape is the same in shadow and

sunshine; but when the sun comes out, even snow and ice sparkle, and

tender beauty starts into visibility in grim things. So, if we see God,

the black places of life are lighted; and we cease to feel the pressure

of many difficulties of speculation and practice, both as regards His

general providence and His revelation in law and gospel.

The end of the whole matter is Job's retractation of his words and his

repentance. I abhor' has no object expressed, and is better taken as

referring to the previous speeches than to myself.' He means thereby to

withdraw them all. The next clause, I repent in dust and ashes,'

carries the confession a step farther. He recognises guilt in his rash

speeches, and bows before his God confessing his sin. Where are his

assertions of innocence gone? One sight of God has scattered them, as

it ever does. A man who has learned his own sinfulness will find few

difficulties and no occasions for complaint in God's dealings with him.

If we would see aright the meaning of our sorrows, we must look at them

on our knees. Get near to God in heart-knowledge of Him, and that will

teach our sinfulness, and the two knowledges will combine to explain

much of the meaning of sorrow, and to make the unexplained residue not

hard to endure.

The epilogue in prose which follows Job's confession, tells of the

divine estimate of the three friends, of Job's sacrifice for them, and

of his renewed outward prosperity. The men who had tried to vindicate

God's righteousness are charged with not having spoken that which is

right; the man who has passionately impugned it is declared to have

thus spoken. No doubt, Eliphaz and his colleagues had said a great many

most excellent, pious things, and Job as many wild and untrue ones. But

their foundation principle was not a true representation of God's

providence, since it was the uniform connection of sin with sorrow, and

the accurate proportion which these bore to each other.

Job, on the other hand, had spoken truth in his denials of these

principles, and in his longings to have the righteousness of God set in

clear relation to his own afflictions. We must remember, too, that the

friends were talking commonplaces learned by rote, while Job's words

came scalding hot from his heart. Most excellent truth may be so spoken

as to be wrong; and it is so, if spoken heartlessly, regardless of

sympathy, and flung at sufferers like a stone, rather than laid on

their hearts as a balm. God lets a true heart dare much in speech; for

He knows that the sputter and foam prove that the heart's deeps boil in

earnest.'

Job is put in the place of intercessor for the three--a profound

humiliation for them and an honour for him. They obeyed at once,

showing that they have learned their lesson, as well as Job his. An

incidental lesson from that final picture of the sufferer become the

priest requiting accusations with intercession, is the duty of

cherishing kind feelings and doing kind acts to those who say hard

things of us. It would be harder for some of us to offer sacrifices for

our Eliphazes than to argue with them. And yet another is that sorrow

has for one of its purposes to make the heart more tender, both for the

sorrows and the faults of others.

Note, too, that it was when Job prayed for his friends' that the Lord

turned his captivity. That is a proverbial expression, bearing witness,

probably, to the deep traces left by the Exodus, for reversing

calamity. The turning-point was not merely the confession, but the act,

of beneficence. So, in ministering to others, one's own griefs may be

soothed.

The restoration of outward good in double measure is not meant as the

statement of a universal law of Providence, and still less as a

solution of the problem of the book. But it is putting the truth that

sorrows, rightly borne, yield peaceable fruit at the last, in the form

appropriate to the stage of revelation which the whole book represents;

that is, one in which the doctrine of immortality, though it sometimes

rises before Job's mind as an aspiration of faith, is not set in full

light.

To us, living in the blaze of light which Jesus Christ has let into the

darkness of the future, the end of the Lord' is that heaven should

crown the sorrows of His children on earth. We can speak of light,

transitory affliction working out an eternal weight of glory. The book

of Job is expressing substantially the same expectation, when it paints

the calm after the storm and the restoration in double portion of

vanished blessings. Many desolate yet trusting sufferers know how

little such an issue is possible for their grief, but if they have more

of God in clearer sight of Him, they will find empty places in their

hearts and homes filled.

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THE PROVERBS

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A YOUNG MAN'S BEST COUNSELLOR

The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel; 2. To know

wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; 3. To

receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity;

4. To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and

discretion, 5. A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a

man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: 6. To understand

a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their

dark sayings. 7. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge:

but fools despise wisdom and instruction. 8. My son, hear the

instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: 9.

For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about

thy neck. 10. My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. 11. If

they say, Come with us, let us lay wait for blood, let us lurk privily

for the innocent without cause: 12. Let us swallow them up alive as the

grave; and whole, as those that go down into the pit: 13. We shall find

all precious substance, we shall fill our houses with spoil: 14. Cast

in thy lot among us; let us all have one purse: 15. My son, walk not

thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path: 16. For

their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood. 17. (Surely in

vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird:) 18. And they lay wait

for their own blood; they lurk privily for their own lives. 19. So are

the ways of every one that is greedy of gain; which taketh away the

life of the owners thereof.'--PROVERBS i. 1-19.

This passage contains the general introduction to the book of Proverbs.

It falls into three parts--a statement of the purpose of the book (vs.

1-6); a summary of its foundation principles, and of the teachings to

which men ought to listen (vs. 7-9); and an antithetic statement of the

voices to which they should be deaf (vs. 10-19).

I. The aim of the book is stated to be twofold--to enable men,

especially the young, to know wisdom,' and to help them to discern the

words of understanding'; that is, to familiarise, by the study of the

book, with the characteristics of wise teachings, so that there may be

no mistaking seducing words of folly for these. These two aims are

expanded in the remaining verses, the latter of them being resumed in

verse 6, while the former occupies the other verses.

We note how emphatically the field in which this wisdom is to be

exercised is declared to be the moral conduct of life. Righteousness

and judgment and equity' are wise dealing,' and the end of true wisdom

is to practise these. The wider horizon of modern science and

speculation includes much in the notion of wisdom which has no bearing

on conduct. But the intellectual progress (and conceit) of to-day will

be none the worse for the reminder that a man may take in knowledge

till he is ignorant, and that, however enriched with science and

philosophy, if he does not practise righteousness, he is a fool.

We note also the special destination of the book--for the young. Youth,

by reason of hot blood and inexperience, needs such portable medicines

as are packed in these proverbs, many of them the condensation into a

vivid sentence of world-wide truths. There are few better guides for a

young man than this book of homely sagacity, which is wisdom about the

world without being tainted by the bad sort of worldly wisdom. But

unfortunately those who need it most relish it least, and we have for

the most part to rediscover its truths for ourselves by our own, often

bitter, experience.

We note, further, the clear statement of the way by which incipient

wisdom' will grow, and of the certainty of its growth if it is real. It

is the wise man' who will increase in learning,' the man of

understanding' who attains unto sound counsels.' The treasures are

thrown away on him who has no heart for them. You may lavish wisdom on

the fool,' and it will run off him like water off a rock, fertilising

nothing, and stopping outside him.

The Bible would not have met all our needs, nor gone with us into all

regions of our experience, if it had not had this book of shrewd,

practical common-sense. Christianity is the perfection of common sense.

Godliness hath promise of the life which now is.' The wisdom of the

serpent, which Jesus enjoins, has none of the serpent's venom in it. It

is no sign of spirituality of mind to be above such mundane

considerations as this book urges. If we hold our heads too high to

look to our road and our feet, we are sure to fall into a pit.

II. Verses 7-9 may be regarded as a summary statement of the principle

on which the whole book is based, and of the duty which it enjoins. The

principle is that true wisdom is based on religion, and the duty is to

listen to parental instruction. My son,' is the address of a teacher to

his disciples, rather than of a father to his child. The characteristic

Old Testament designation of religion as the fear of Jehovah'

corresponds to the Old Testament revelation of Him as the Holy

One,--that is, as Him who is infinitely separated from creatural being

and limitations. Therefore is He to be had in reverence of all' who

would be about Him'; that fear of reverential awe in which no slavish

dread mingles, and which is perfectly consistent with aspiration,

trust, and love. The Old Testament reveals Him as separate from men;

the New Testament reveals Him as united to men in the divine man,

Christ Jesus. Therefore its keynote is the designation of religion as

the love of God'; but that name is no contradiction of the earlier, but

the completion of it.

That fear is the beginning or basis of wisdom, because wisdom is

conceived of as God's gift, and the surest way to get it is to ask of

God' (Jas. i. 5). Religion is, further, the foundation of wisdom,

inasmuch as irreligion is the supreme folly of creatures so dependent

on God, and so hungering after Him in the depths of their being, as we

are. In whatever directions a godless man may be wise, in the most

important matter of all, his relations to God, he is unwise, and the

epitaph for all such is Thou fool!'

Further, religion is the fountain of wisdom, in the sense of the word

in which this book uses it, since it opens out into principles of

action, motives, and communicated powers, which lead to right

apprehension and willing discharge of the duties of life. Godless men

may be scientists, philosophers, encyclopaedias of knowledge, but for

want of religion, they blunder in the direction of their lives, and

lack wisdom enough to keep them from wrecking the ship on the rocks.

The Israelitish parent was enjoined to teach his or her children the

law of the Lord. Here the children are enjoined to listen to the

instruction. Reverence for traditional wisdom was characteristic of

that state of society, and since a divine revelation stood at the

beginning of the nation's history, it was not unreasonable to look back

for light. Nowadays, a belief's being our fathers' is with many a

reason for not making it ours. But perhaps that is no more rational

than the blind adherence to the old with which this emancipated

generation reproaches its predecessors. Possibly there are some old

lamps' better than the new ones now hawked about the streets by so many

loud-voiced vendors. The youth of this day have much need of the

exhortation to listen to the instruction' (by which is meant, not only

teaching by word, but discipline by act) of their fathers, and to the

gentler voice of the mother telling of law in accents of love. These

precepts obeyed will be fairer ornaments than jewelled necklaces and

wreathed chaplets.

III. On one side of the young man are those who would point him to the

fear of Jehovah; on the other are seducing whispers, tempting him to

sin. That is the position in which we all stand. It is not enough to

listen to the nobler voice. We have resolutely to stop our ears to the

baser, which is often the louder. Facile yielding to the cunning

inducements which strew every path, and especially that of the young,

is fatal. If we cannot say No' to the base, we shall not say Yes' to

the noble voice. To be weak is generally to be wicked; for in this

world the tempters are more numerous, and to sense and flesh, more

potent than those who invite to good.

The example selected of such enticers is not of the kind that most of

us are in danger from. But the sort of inducements held out are in all

cases substantially the same. Precious substance' of one sort or

another is dangled before dazzled eyes; jovial companionship draws

young hearts. The right or wrong of the thing is not mentioned, and

even murder and robbery are presented as rather pleasant excitement,

and worth doing for the sake of what is got thereby. Are the desirable

consequences so sure? Is there no chance of being caught red-handed,

and stoned then and there, as a murderer? The tempters are discreetly

silent about that possibility, as all tempters are. Sin always

deceives, and its baits artfully hide the hook; but the cruel barb is

there, below the gay silk and coloured dressing, and it--not the false

appearance of food which lured the fish--is what sticks in the bleeding

mouth.

The teacher goes on, in verses 15 to 19, to supply the truth which the

tempters tried to ignore. He does so in three weighty sentences, which

strip the tinsel off the temptation, and show its real ugliness. The

flowery way to which they coax is a way of evil'; that should be enough

to settle the question. The first thing to ask about any course is not

whether it is agreeable or disagreeable, but Is it right or wrong?

Verse 17 is ambiguous, but probably the net' means the tempters' speech

in verses 11 to 14, and the bird' is the young man supposed to be

addressed. The sense will then be, Surely you are not foolish enough to

fly right into the meshes, and to go with your eyes open into so

transparent sin!'

Verse 18 points to the grim possibility already referred to, that the

would-be murderers will be caught and executed. But its lesson is wider

than that one case, and declares the great solemn truth that all sin is

suicide. Who ever breaks God's law slays himself.

What is true about covetousness,' as verse 19 tells, is true about all

kinds of sin--that it takes away the life of those who yield to it,

even though it may also fill their purses, or in other ways may gratify

their desires. Surely it is folly to pursue a course which, however it

may succeed in its immediate aims, brings real death, by separation

from God, along with it. He is not a very wise man who ties his gold

round him when the ship founders. He is not parted from his treasure

certainly, but it helps to sink him. We may get what we want by

sinning, but we get also what we did not want or reckon on--that is,

eternal death. This their way is their folly.' Yet, strange to tell,

their posterity approve their sayings,' and follow their doings.

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WISDOM'S CALL

Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: 21. She

crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates:

in the city she uttereth her words, saying, 22. How long, ye simple

ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorners delight in their

scorning, and fools hate knowledge? 23. Turn you at my reproof: behold,

I will pour out my Spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto

you. 24. Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my

hand, and no man regarded; 25. But ye have set at nought all my

counsel, and would none of my reproof: 26. I also will laugh at your

calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; 27. When your fear cometh

as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when

distress and anguish cometh upon you. 28. Then shall they call upon me,

but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not

find me: 29. For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear

of the Lord: 30. They would none of my counsel; they despised all my

reproof. 31. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way,

and be filled with their own devices. 32. For the turning away of the

simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them.

33. But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet

from fear of evil.'--PROVERBS i. 20-33.

Our passage begins with a striking picture. A fair and queenly woman

stands in the crowded resorts of men, and lifts up a voice of sweet

entreaty--authoritative as well as sweet. Her name is Wisdom. The word

is in the plural in the Hebrew, as if to teach that in this serene and

lovely form all manifold wisdoms are gathered and made one. Who then is

she? It is easy to say a poetical personification,' but that does not

add much to our understanding. It is clear that this book means much

more by Wisdom than a human quality merely; for august and divine

attributes are given to her, and she is the co-eternal associate of God

Himself. Dwelling in His bosom, she thence comes forth to inspire all

human good deeds, to plead evermore with men, to enrich those who

listen to her with choicest gifts. Intellectual clearness, moral

goodness, religious devotion, are all combined in the idea of Wisdom as

belonging to men.

The divine source of all, and the correspondence between the human and

the divine nature, are taught in the residence of this personified

Wisdom with God before she dwelt with men. The whole of the manifold

revelations, by which God makes known any part of His will to men, are

her voice. Especially the call contained in the Old Testament

revelation is the summons of Wisdom. But whether the writer of this

book had any inkling of deeper truth still, or not, we cannot but

connect the incomplete personification of divine Wisdom here with its

complete incarnation in a Person who is the power of God and the wisdom

of God,' and who embodies the lineaments of the grand picture of a

Wisdom crying in the streets, even while it is true of Him that He does

not strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets';

for the crying, which is denied to be His, is ostentatious and noisy,

and the crying which is asserted to be hers is the plain, clear,

universal appeal of divine love as well as wisdom. The light of Christ

lighteth every man that cometh into the world.'

The call of Wisdom in this passage begins with remonstrance and plain

speech, giving their right names to men who neglect her voice. The

first step in delivering men from evil--that is, from foolish--courses

is to put very clearly before them the true character of their acts,

and still more of their inclinations. Gracious offers and rich promises

come after; but the initial message of Wisdom to such men as we are

must be the accusation of folly. When she is come, she will convict the

world of sin.'

The three designations of men in verse 22 are probably arranged so as

to make a climax. First come the simple,' or, as the word means, open.'

There is a sancta simplicitas, a holy ignorance of evil, which is

sister to the highest wisdom. It is well to be ignorant as well as

innocent of much transgression'; and there is no more mistaken and

usually insincere excuse for going into foul places than the plea that

it is best to know the evil and so choose the good. That knowledge

comes surely and soon enough without our seeking it. But there is a

fatal simplicity, open-eared, like Eve, to the Tempter's whisper, which

believes the false promises of sin, and as Bunyan has taught us, is

companion of sloth and presumption.

Next come scorners,' who mock at good. A man must have gone a long way

down hill before he begins to gibe at virtue and godliness. But the

descent is steep, though the distance is long; and the simple' who

begins to do what is wrong will come to sneer at what is right.

Then last comes the fool,' the name which, in Proverbs, is shorthand

for mental stupidity, moral obstinacy, and dogged godlessness,--a foul

compound, but one which is realised oftener than we think. A great many

very superior intellects, cultivated ladies and gentlemen, university

graduates, and the like, would be unceremoniously set down by divine

wisdom as fools; and surely if account is taken of the whole compass

and duration of our being, and of all our relations to things and

persons seen and unseen, nothing can be more stupid than godlessness,

however cultured. The word literally means coarse or thick, and may

suggest the idea of stolid insensibility as the last stage in the

downward progress.

But note that the charge is directed, not against deeds, but

dispositions. Perverted love and perverted hatred underlie acts. The

simple love simplicity, preferring to be unwarned against evil; the

scorner finds delight in letting his rank tongue blossom into speech;

and the false direction given to love gives a fatal twist to its

corresponding hate, so that the fool detests knowledge' as a thief the

policeman's lantern. You cannot love what you should loathe, without

loathing what you should love. Inner longings and revulsions settle

character and acts.

Verse 23 passes into entreaty; for it is vain to rouse conscience by

plain speech, unless something is offered to make better life possible.

The divine Wisdom comes with a rod, but also with gifts; but if the rod

is kissed, the rewards are possessed. The relation of clauses in verse

23 is that the first is the condition of the fulfilment of the second

and third. If we turn at her reproof, two great gifts will be bestowed.

Her spirit within will make us quick to hear and receive her words

sounding without. Whatever other good follows on yielding to the call

of divine Wisdom (and the remaining early chapters of Proverbs

magnificently detail the many rich gifts that do follow), chief of all

are spirits swift to hear and docile to obey her voice, and then actual

communications to purged ears. Outward revelation without prepared

hearts is water spilt upon rock. Prepared hearts without a message to

them would be but multiplication of vain longings; and God never

stultifies Himself, or gives mouths without sending meat to fill them.

To the submissive spirit, there will not lack either disposition to

hear or clear utterance of His will.

But now comes a pause. Wisdom has made her offers in the crowded

streets, and amid all the noise and bustle her voice has rung out. What

is the result? Nothing. Not a head has been turned, nor an eye lifted.

The bustle goes on as before. They bought, they sold,' as if no voice

had spoken. So, after the disappointed waiting of Wisdom, her voice

peals out again, but this time with severity in its tones. Note how, in

verses 24 and 25, the sin of sins against the pleading Wisdom of God is

represented as being simple indifference. Ye refused,' no man

regarded,' set at nought,' would none of'--these are the things which

bring down the heavy judgments. It does not need violent opposition or

black crime to wreck a soul. Simply doing nothing when God speaks is

enough to effect destruction. There is no need to lift up angry arms in

hostility. If we keep them hanging listless by our sides, it is

sufficient. The gift escapes us, if we simply keep our hands shut or

held behind our backs. Alas, for ears which have not heard, for seeing

eyes which have not seen because they loved evil simplicity and hated

knowledge!

Then note the terrible retribution. That is an awful picture of the

mocking laughter of Wisdom, accompanying the rush of the whirlwind and

the groans of anguish and shrieks of terror. It is even more solemn and

dreadful than the parallel representations in Psalm ii., for there the

laughter indicates God's knowledge that the schemes of opponents are

vain, but here it figures pleasure in calamities. Of course it is to be

remembered that the Wisdom thus represented is not to be identified

with God; but still the imagery is startling, and needs to be taken

along with declarations that God has no pleasure in the death of the

sinner,' and to be interpreted as indicating, with daring

anthropomorphism, the inevitable character of the destruction,' and the

uselessness of appeals to the Wisdom once despised. But we joyfully

remember that the Incarnate Wisdom, fairer than the ancient

personification, wept over the city which He knew must perish.

Verses 28-31 carry on the picture of too late repentance and inevitable

retribution. They who let Wisdom cry, and paid no heed, shall cry to

her in their turn, and be unnoticed. They whom she vainly sought shall

vainly seek for her. Actions have their consequences, which are not

annihilated because the doers do not like them. Thoughts have theirs;

for the foolish not only eat of the fruit of their ways or doings, but

are filled with their own devices or counsels. Whatsoever a man soweth,

that shall he also reap.' That inexorable law works, deaf to all cries,

in the field of earthly life, both as regards condition and character;

and that field of its operation is all that the writer of this book has

in view. He is not denying the possibility of forgiveness, nor the

efficacy of repentance, nor is he asserting that a penitent soul ever

seeks God in vain; but he is declaring that it is too late to cry out

for deliverance from consequences of folly when the consequences have

us in their grip, and that wishes for deliverance are vain, though

sighs of repentance are not. We cannot reap where we have not sowed. We

must reap what we have. If we are such sluggards that we will not

plough in winter by reason of the cold,' we shall beg in harvest and

have nothing.'

But though the writer had probably only this life in view, Jesus Christ

has extended the teaching to the next, when He has told of those who

will seek to enter in and not be able. The experience of the fruits of

their godlessness will make godless men wish to escape eating the

fruits--and that wish shall be vain. It is not for us to enlarge on

such words, but it is for us all to lay them to heart, and to take heed

that we listen now to the beseeching call of the heavenly Wisdom in its

tenderest and noblest form, as it appeared in Christ, the Incarnate

Word.

Verses 32 and 33 generalise the preceding promises and warnings in a

great antithesis. The backsliding [or, turning away] of the simple

slays them.' There is allusion to Wisdom's call in verse 23. The simple

had turned, but in the wrong direction--away from and not towards her.

To turn away from heavenly Wisdom is to set one's face toward

destruction. It cannot be too earnestly reiterated that we must make

our choice of one of two directions for ourselves--either towards God,

to seek whom is life, to find whom is heaven; or away from Him, to turn

our backs on whom is to embrace unrest, and to be separate from whom is

death. The security of fools,' by which is meant, not their safety, but

their fancy that they are safe, destroys them.' No man is in such

danger as the careless man of the world who thinks that he is all

right. A traveller along the edge of a precipice in the night, who goes

on as if he walked a broad road and takes no heed to his footing, will

soon repent his rashness at the bottom, mangled and bruised. A man who

in this changing world fancies that he sits as a king, and sees no

sorrow, will have a rude wakening. A moment's heed saves hours of pain.

The alternative to this suicidal folly is in listening to Wisdom's

call. Whoever does that will dwell safely,' not in fancied but real

security; and in his quiet heart there need be no unrest from feared

evils, for he will have hold of a charm which turns evils into good,

and with such a guide he cannot go astray, nor with such a defender be

wounded to death, nor with such a companion ever be solitary. If Christ

be our Light, we shall not walk in darkness. If He be our Wisdom, we

shall not err. If He be our Life, we shall never see death. If He is

our Good, we shall fear no evil.

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THE SECRET OF WELL-BEING

My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments. 2.

For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee.

3. Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck;

write them upon the table of thine heart: 4. So shalt thou find favour

and good understanding in the sight of God and man. 5. Trust in the

Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

6. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths. 7.

Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord, and depart from evil. 8.

It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones. 9. Honour the

Lord with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine

increase: 10. So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses

shall burst out with new wine.'--PROVERBS iii. 1-10.

The first ten verses of this passage form a series of five couplets,

which enforce on the young various phases of goodness by their tendency

to secure happiness or blessedness of various sorts. The underlying

axiom is that, in a world ruled by a good Being, obedience must lead to

well-being; but while that is in the general true, exceptions do occur,

and good men do encounter evil times. Therefore the glowing promises of

these verses are followed by two verses which deal with the explanation

of good men's afflictions, as being results and tokens of God's

fatherly love.

The first couplet is general in character. It inculcates obedience to

the precepts of the teacher, and gives as reason the assurance that

thereby long life and peace will be secured. True to the Old Testament

conception of revelation as a law, the teacher sets obedience in the

forefront. He is sure that his teaching contains the sufficient guide

for conduct, and coincides with the divine will. He calls, in the first

instance, for inward willing acceptance of His commandments; for it is

the heart, not primarily the hands, which he desires should keep' them.

The mother of all graces of conduct is the bowing of the will to divine

authority. The will is the man, and where it ceases to lift itself up

in self-sacrificing and self-determining rebellion, and dissolves into

running waters of submission, these will flow through the life and make

it pure. To obey self is sin, to obey God is righteousness. The issues

of such obedience are length of days . . . and peace.'

Even if we allow for the difference between the Old and the New

Testaments, it remains true that a life conformed to God's will tends

to longevity, and that many forms of sin do shorten men's days. Passion

and indulged appetites eat away the very flesh, and many a man's bones

are full of the sin of his youth.' The profligate has usually a short

life,' whether he succeeds in making it merry' or not.

Peace' is a wide word, including all well-being. Ease-loving Orientals,

especially when living in warlike times, naturally used the phrase as a

shorthand expression for all good. Busy Westerns, torn by the

distractions and rapid movement of modern life, echo the sigh for

repose which breathes in the word. There is no joy but calm,' and the

sure way to deepest peace is to give up self-will and live in

obedience.

The second couplet deals with our relations to one another, and puts

forward the two virtues of loving-kindness and truth'--that is truth,

or faithfulness--as all-inclusive. They are the two which are often

jointly ascribed to God, especially in the Psalms. Our attitude to one

another should be moulded in God's to us all. The tiniest crystal has

the same facets and angles as the largest. The giant hexagonal pillars

of basalt, like our Scottish Staffa, are identical in form with the

microscopic crystals of the same substance. God is our Pattern;

goodness is likeness to Him.

These graces are to be bound about the neck, perhaps as an ornament,

but more probably as a yoke by which the harnessed ox draws its burden.

If we have them, they will fit us to bear one another's burdens, and

will lead to all human duties to our fellows.

These graces are also to be written on the table of the heart'; that

is, are to be objects of habitual meditation with aspiration. If so,

they will come to sight in life. He who practises them will find favour

with God and man,' for God looks with complacency on those who display

the right attitude to men; and men for the most part treat us as we

treat them. There are surly natures which are not won by kindness, like

black tarns among the hills, that are gloomy even in sunshine, and

requite evil for good; but the most of men reflect our feelings to

them.

Good understanding' is another result. It is found' when it is

attributed to us, so that the expression substantially means that the

possessors of these graces will win the reputation of being really

wise, not only in the fallible judgment of men, but before the pure

eyes of the all-seeing God. Really wise policy coincides with

loving-kindness and truth.

The remaining couplets refer to our relations to God. The New Testament

is significantly anticipated in the pre-eminence given to trust; that

is, faith. Nor less significant and profound is the association of

self-distrust with trust in the Lord. The two things are inseparable.

They are but the under and upper sides of one thing, or like the two

growths that come from a seed--one striking downwards becomes the root;

one piercing upwards becomes the stalk. The double attitude of trust

and distrust finds expression in acknowledging Him in all our ways;

that is, ordering our conduct under a constant consciousness of His

presence, in accordance with His will, and in dependence on His help.

Such a relation to God will certainly, and with no exceptions, issue in

His directing our paths,' by which is meant that He will be not only

our Guide, but also our Roadmaker, showing us the way and clearing

obstacles from it. Calm certitude follows on willingness to accept

God's will, and whoever seeks only to go where God sends him will

neither be left doubtful whither he should go, nor find his road

blocked.

The fourth couplet is, in its first part, in inverted parallelism with

the third; for it begins with self-distrust, and proceeds thence to

fear of the Lord,' which corresponds to, and is, in fact, but one phase

of, trust in Him. It is the reverent awe which has no torment, and is

then purest when faith is strongest. It necessarily leads to departing

from evil. Morality has its roots in religion. There is no such magnet

to draw men from sin as the happy fear of God, which is likewise faith.

Whoever separates devoutness from purity of life, this teacher does

not. He knows nothing of religion which permits association with

iniquity. Such conduct will tend to physical well-being, and in a

deeper sense will secure soundness of life. Godlessness is the true

sickness. He only is healthy who has a healthy, because healed, soul.

The fifth couplet appears at first as being a drop to a lower region. A

regulation of the Mosaic law may strike some as out of place here. But

it is to be remembered that our modern distinction of ceremonial and

moral law was non-existent for Israel, and that the command has a wider

application than to Jewish tithes. To honour God with our substance' is

not necessarily to give it away for religious purposes, but to use it

devoutly and as He approves.

Christianity has more to say about the distribution, as well as the

acquisition, of wealth, than professing Christians, especially in

commercial communities, practically recognise. This precept grips us

tight, and is much more than a ceremonial regulation. Many causes

besides the devout use of property tend to wealth in our highly

artificial state of society. The world tries to get it by shrewdness,

unscrupulousness, and by many other vices which are elevated to the

rank of virtues; but he who honours the Lord in getting and spending

will generally have as much as his true needs and regulated desires

require.

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THE GIFTS OF HEAVENLY WISDOM

My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of His

correction: 12. For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth; even as a

father the son in whom he delighteth. 13. Happy is the man that findeth

wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. 14. For the merchandise

of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof

than fine gold. 15. She is more precious than rubies: and all the

things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. 16. Length of

days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. 17.

Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. 18. She

is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every

one that retaineth her. 19. The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth;

by understanding hath He established the heavens. 20. By His knowledge

the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew. 21. My son,

let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion:

22. So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. 23.

Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble.

24. When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie

down, and thy sleep shall be sweet.'--PROVERBS iii. 11-24.

The repetition of the words my son' at the beginning of this passage

marks a new section, which extends to verse 20, inclusively, another

section being similarly marked as commencing in verse 21. The fatherly

counsels of these early chapters are largely reiterations of the same

ideas, being line upon line. To write the same things to you, to me

indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.' Many strokes drive the

nail home. Exhortations to get Wisdom, based upon the blessings she

brings, are the staple of the whole. If we look carefully at the

section (vers. 11-20), we find in it a central core (vers. 13-18),

setting forth the blessings which Wisdom gives, preceded by two verses,

inculcating the right acceptance of God's chastisements which are one

chief means of attaining Wisdom, and followed by two verses (vers. 19,

20), which exalt her as being divine as well as human. So the

portraiture of her working in humanity is framed by a prologue and

epilogue, setting forth two aspects of her relation to God; namely,

that she is imparted by Him through the discipline of trouble, and that

she dwells in His bosom and is the agent of His creative work.

The prologue, then, points to sorrow and trouble, rightly accepted, as

one chief means by which we acquire heavenly Wisdom. Note the profound

insight into the meaning of sorrows. They are instruction' and

reproof.' The thought of the Book of Job is here fully incorporated and

assimilated. Griefs and pains are not tokens of anger, nor punishments

of sin, but love-gifts meant to help to the acquisition of wisdom. They

do not come because the sufferers are wicked, but in order to make them

good or better. Tempests are meant to blow us into port. The lights are

lowered in the theatre that fairer scenes may become visible on the

thin screen between us and eternity. Other supports are struck away

that we may lean hard on God. The voice of all experience of earthly

loss and bitterness is, Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get

Wisdom.' God himself becomes our Schoolmaster, and through the voice of

the human teacher we hear His deeper tones saying, My son, despise not

the chastening.'

Note, too, the assurance that all discipline is the fruit of Fatherly

love. How many sad hearts in all ages these few words have calmed and

braced! How sharp a test of our childlike spirit our acceptance of

them, when our own hearts are sore, is! How deep the peace which they

bring when really believed! How far they go to solve the mystery of

pain, and turn darkness into a solemn light!

Note, further, that the words despise' and be weary' both imply rather

rejection with loathing, and thus express unsubmissive impatience which

gets no good from discipline. The beautiful rendering of the

Septuagint, which has been made familiar by its adoption in Hebrews,

makes the two words express two opposite faults. They despise' who

steel their wills against the rod, and make as if they did not feel the

pain; they faint' who collapse beneath the blows, which they feel so

much that they lose sight of their purpose. Dogged insensibility and

utter prostration are equally harmful. He who meets life's teachings,

which are a Father's correction, with either, has little prospect of

getting Wisdom.

Then follows the main part of this section (vers. 13-18),--the praise

of Wisdom as in herself most precious, and as bestowing highest good.

The man that findeth Wisdom' reminds us of the peasant in Christ's

parable, who found treasure hidden in a field, and the merchandise' in

verse 14, of the trader seeking goodly pearls. But the finding in verse

13 is not like the rustic's in the parable, who was seeking nothing

when a chance stroke of his plough or kick of his heel laid bare the

glittering gold. It is the finding which rewards seeking. The figure of

acquiring by trading, like that of the pearl-merchant in the companion

parable, implies pains, effort, willingness to part with something in

order to attain.

The nature of the price is not here in question. We know who has said,

I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire.' We buy heavenly

Wisdom when we surrender ourselves. The price is desire to possess, and

willingness to accept as an undeserved, unearned gift. But that does

not come into view in our lesson. Only this is strongly put in it--that

this heavenly Wisdom outshines all jewels, outweighs all wealth, and is

indeed the only true riches. Rubies' is probably rather to be taken as

corals,' which seem to have been very highly prized by the Jews, and,

no doubt, found their way to them from the Indian Ocean via the Red

Sea. The word rendered things thou canst desire' is better taken as

meaning jewels.'

This noble and conclusive depreciation of material wealth in comparison

with Wisdom, which is not merely intellectual, but rests on the fear of

the Lord, and is goodness as well as understanding, never needed

preaching with more emphasis than in our day, when more and more the

commercial spirit invades every region of life, and rich men are the

aristocrats and envied types of success. When will England and America

believe the religion which they profess, and adjust their estimates of

the best things accordingly? How many so-called Christian parents would

think their son mad if he said, I do not care about getting rich; my

goal is to be wise with God's Wisdom'? How few of us order our lives on

the footing of this old teacher's lesson, and act out the belief that

Wisdom is more than wealth! The man who heaps millions together, and

masses it, fails in life, however a vulgar world and a nominal church

may admire and glorify him. The man who wins Wisdom succeeds, however

bare may be his cupboard, and however people may pity him for having

failed in life, because he has not drawn prizes in the Devil's lottery.

His blank is a prize, and their prizes are blanks. This decisive

subordination of material to spiritual good is too plainly duty and

common sense to need being dwelt upon; but, alas! like a great many

other most obvious, accepted truths, it is disregarded as universally

as believed.

The inseparable accompaniments of Wisdom are next eloquently described.

The picture is the poetical clothing of the idea that all material good

will come to him who despises it all and clasps Wisdom to his heart.

Some things flow from Wisdom possessed as usual consequences; some are

inseparable from her. The gift in her right hand is length of days;

that in her left, which, by its position, is suggested as inferior to

the former, is wealth and honour--two goods which will attend the long

life. No doubt such promises are to be taken with limitations; but

there need be no doubt that, on the whole, loyal devotion to and real

possession of heavenly Wisdom do tend in the direction of lengthening

lives, which are by it delivered from vices and anxieties which cut

many a career short, and of gathering round silver hairs reverence and

troops of friends.

These are the usual consequences, and may be fairly brought into view

as secondary encouragements to seek Wisdom. But if she is sought for

the sake of getting these attendant blessings, she will not be found.

She must be loved for herself, not for her dowry, or she will not be

won. At the same time, the overstrained and fantastic morality, which

stigmatises regard to the blessed results of a religious life as

selfishness, finds no support in Scripture, as it has none in common

sense. Would there were more of such selfishness!

Sometimes Wisdom's hands do not hold these outward gifts. But the

connection between her and the next blessings spoken of is inseparable.

Her ways are pleasantness and peace. In keeping'--not for keeping--her

commandments is great reward.' Inward delight and deep tranquillity of

heart attend every step taken in obedience to Wisdom. The course of

conduct so prescribed will often involve painful crucifying of the

lower nature, but its pleasure far outweighs its pain. It will often be

strewn with sharp flints, or may even have red-hot ploughshares laid on

it, as in old ordeal trials; but still it will be pleasant to the true

self. Sin is a blunder as well as a crime, and enlightened

self-interest would point out the same course as the highest law of

Wisdom. In reality, duty and delight are co-extensive. They are two

names for one thing--one taken from consideration of its obligation;

the other, from observation of its issues. Calm pleasures there abide.'

The only complete peace, which fills and quiets the whole man, comes

from obeying Wisdom, or what is the same thing, from following Christ.

There is no other way of bringing all our nature into accord with

itself, ending the war between conscience and inclination, between

flesh and spirit. There is no other way of bringing us into amity with

all circumstances, so that fortunate or adverse shall be recognised as

good, and nothing be able to agitate us very much. Peace with

ourselves, the world, and God, is always the consequence of listening

to Wisdom.

The whole fair picture is summed up in verse 18: She is a tree of life

to them that lay hold upon her.' This is a distinct allusion to the

narrative of Genesis. The flaming sword of the cherub guard is

sheathed, and access to the tree, which gives immortal life to those

who eat, is open to us. Mark how that great word life' is here

gathering to itself at least the beginnings of higher conceptions than

those of simple existence. It is swelling like a bud, and preparing to

open and disclose the perfect flower, the life which stands in the

knowledge of God and the Christ whom He has sent. Jesus, the incarnate

Wisdom, is Himself the Tree of Life in the midst of the paradise of

God.' The condition of access to it is laying hold' by the outstretched

hand of faith, and keeping hold with holy obstinacy of grip, in spite

of all temptations to slack our grasp. That retaining is the condition

of true blessedness.

Verses 19 and 20 invest the idea of Wisdom with still loftier

sublimity, since they declare that it is an attribute of God Himself by

which creation came into being. The meaning of the writer is

inadequately grasped if we take it to be only that creation shows God's

Wisdom. This personified Wisdom dwells with God, is the agent of

creation, comes with invitations to men, may be possessed by them, and

showers blessings on them. The planet Neptune was divined before it was

discovered, by reason of perturbations in the movements of the exterior

members of the system, unaccountable unless some great globe of light,

hitherto unseen, were swaying them in their orbits. Do we not see here

like influence streaming from the unrisen light of Christ?

Personification prepares for Incarnation. There is One who has been

with the Father from the beginning, by whom all things came into being,

whose voice sounds to all, who is the Tree of Life, whom we may all

possess, and with whose own peace we may be peaceful and blessed for

evermore.

Verses 21-24 belong to the next section of the great discourse or hymn.

They add little to the preceding. But we may observe the earnest

exhortation to let wisdom and understanding be ever in sight. Eyes are

apt to stray and clouds to hide the sun. Effort is needed to counteract

the tendency to slide out of consciousness, which our weakness imposes

on the most certain and important truths. A Wisdom which we do not

think about is as good or as bad as non-existent for us. One prime

condition of healthy spiritual life is the habit of meditation, thereby

renewing our gaze upon the facts of God's revelation and the bearing of

these on our conduct.

The blessings flowing from Wisdom are again dilated on, from a somewhat

different point of view. She is the giver of life. And then she adorns

the life she gives. One has seen homely faces so refined and glorified

by the fair soul that shone through them as to be, as it were, the face

of an angel.' Gracefulness should be the outward token of inward grace.

Some good people forget that they are bound to adorn the doctrine.' But

they who have drunk most deeply of the fountain of Wisdom will find

that, like the fabled spring, its waters confer strange loveliness.

Lives spent in communion with Jesus will be lovely, however homely

their surroundings, and however vulgar eyes, taught only to admire

staring colours, may find them dull. The world saw no beauty that they

should desire Him,' in Him whom holy souls and heavenly angels and the

divine Father deemed fairer than the sons of men'!

Safety and firm footing in active life will be ours if we walk in

Wisdom's ways. He who follows Christ's footsteps will tread surely, and

not fear foes. Quiet repose in hours of rest will be his. A day filled

with happy service will be followed by a night full of calm slumber,

Whether we sleep or wake, we live' with Him; and, if we do both,

sleeping and waking will be blessed, and our lives will move on gently

to the time when days and nights shall melt into one, and there will be

no need for repose; for there will be no work that wearies and no hands

that droop. The last lying down in the grave will be attended with no

terrors. The last sleep there shall be sweet; for it will really be

awaking to the full possession of the personal Wisdom, who is our

Christ, our Life in death, our Heaven in heaven.

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THE TWO PATHS

Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of thy life shall

be many. 11. I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee

in right paths. 12. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened;

and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. 13. Take fast hold of

instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life. 14. Enter

not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. 15.

Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away. 16. For they

sleep not, except they have done mischief; and their sleep is taken

away, unless they cause some to fall. 17. For they eat the bread of

wickedness, and drink the wine of violence. 18. But the path of the

just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the

perfect day. 19. The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at

what they stumble.'--PROVERBS iv. 10-19.

This passage includes much more than temperance or any other single

virtue. It is a perfectly general exhortation to that practical wisdom

which walks in the path of righteousness. The principles laid down here

are true in regard to drunkenness and abstinence, but they are intended

to receive a wider application, and to that wider application we must

first look. The theme is the old, familiar one of the two paths, and

the aim is to recommend the better way by setting forth the contrasted

effects of walking in it and in the other.

The general call to listen in verse 10 is characteristically enforced

by the Old Testament assurance that obedience prolongs life. That is a

New Testament truth as well; for there is nothing more certain than

that a life in conformity with God's will, which is the same thing as a

life in conformity with physical laws, tends to longevity. The

experience of any doctor will show that. Here in England we have

statistics which prove that total abstainers are a long-lived people,

and some insurance offices construct their tables accordingly.

After that general call to listen comes, in verse 11, the description

of the path in which long life is to be found. It is the way of

Wisdom'--that is, that which Wisdom prescribes, and in which therefore

it is wise to walk. It is always foolish to do wrong. The rough title

of an old play is The Devil is an Ass, and if that is not true about

him, it is absolutely true about those who listen to his lies. Sin is

the stupidest thing in the universe, for it ignores the plainest facts,

and never gets what it flings away so much to secure.

Another aspect of the path is presented in the designation paths of

uprightness,' which seems to be equivalent to those which belong to, or

perhaps which consist of, uprightness. The idea of straightness or

evenness is the primary meaning of the word, and is, of course,

appropriate to the image of a path. In the moral view, it suggests how

much more simple and easy a course of rectitude is than one of sin. The

one goes straight and unswerving to its end; the other is crooked,

devious, intricate, and wanders from the true goal. A crooked road is a

long road, and an up-and-down road is a tiring road. Wisdom's way is

straight, level, and steadily approaches its aim.

In verse 13 the image of the path is dropped for the moment, and the

picture of the way of uprightness and its travellers is translated into

the plain exhortation to keep fast hold of instruction,' which is

substantially equivalent to the queenly Wisdom of these early chapters

of Proverbs. The earnestness of the repeated exhortations implies the

strength of the forces that tend to sweep us, especially those of us

who are young, from our grasp of that Wisdom. Hands become slack, and

many a good gift drops from nerveless fingers; thieves abound who will

filch away instruction,' if we do not resolutely hold tight by it. Who

would walk through the slums of a city holding jewels with a careless

grasp, and never looking at them? How many would he have left if he

did? We do not need to do anything to lose instruction. If we will only

do nothing to keep it, the world and our own hearts will make sure that

we lose it. And if we lose it, we lose ourselves; for she is thy life,'

and the mere bodily life, that is lived without her, is not worth

calling the life of a man.

Verses 14 to 17 give the picture of the other path, in terrible

contrast with the preceding. It is noteworthy that, while in the former

the designation was the path of uprightness' or of wisdom,' and the

description therefore was mainly of the characteristics of the path,

here the designation is the path of the wicked,' and the description is

mainly of the travellers on it. Righteousness was dealt with, as it

were, in the abstract; but wickedness is too awful and dark to be

painted thus, and is only set forth in the concrete, as seen in its

doers. Now, it is significant that the first exhortation here is of a

negative character. In contrast with the reiterated exhortations to

keep wisdom, here are reiterated counsels to steer clear of evil. It is

all about us, and we have to make a strong effort to keep it at

arm's-length. Whom resist' is imperative. True, negative virtue is

incomplete, but there will be no positive virtue without it. We must be

accustomed to say No,' or we shall come to little good. An outer belt

of firs is sometimes planted round a centre of more tender and valuable

wood to shelter the young trees; so we have to make a fence of

abstinences round our plantation of positive virtues. The decalogue is

mostly prohibitions. So did not I, because of the fear of God' must be

our motto. In this light, entire abstinence from intoxicants is seen to

be part of the way of Wisdom.' It is one, and, in the present state of

England and America, perhaps the most important, of the ways by which

we can turn from' the path of the wicked and pass on.'

The picture of the wicked in verses 16 and 17 is that of very grossly

criminal sinners. They are only content when they have done harm, and

delight in making others as bad as themselves. But, diabolical as such

a disposition is, one sees it only too often in full operation. How

many a drunkard or impure man finds a fiendish pleasure in getting hold

of some innocent lad, and putting him up to a thing or two,' which

means teaching him the vices from which the teacher has ceased to get

much pleasure, and which he has to spice with the condiment of seeing

an unaccustomed sinner's eagerness! Such people infest our streets, and

there is only one way for a young man to be safe from them,--avoid,

pass not by, turn from, and pass on.' The reference to bread' and wine'

in verse 17 seems simply to mean that the wicked men's living is won by

their wickedness,' which procures bread, and by their violence,' which

brings them wine. It is the way by which these are obtained that is

culpable. We may contrast this foul source of a degraded living with

verse 13, where instruction' is set forth as the life' of the upright.

Verses 18 and 19 bring more closely together the two paths, and set

them in final, forcible contrast. The phrase the perfect day' might be

rendered, vividly though clumsily, the steady of the day'--that is,

noon, when the sun seems to stand still in the meridian. So the image

compares the path of the just to the growing brightness of morning

dawn, becoming more and more fervid and lustrous, till the climax of an

Eastern midday. No more sublime figure of the continuous progress in

goodness, brightness, and joy, which is the best reward of walking in

the paths of uprightness, can be imagined; and it is as true as it is

sublime. Blessed they who in the morning of their days begin to walk in

the way of wisdom; for, in most cases, years will strengthen their

uprightness, and to that progress there will be no termination, nor

will the midday sun have to decline westward to diminishing splendour

or dismal setting, but that noontide glory will be enhanced, and made

eternal in a new heaven. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow.

That blaze of growing glory, possible for us all, makes the tragic

gloom to which evil men condemn themselves the thicker and more

doleful, as some dungeon in an Eastern prison seems pitch dark to one

coming in from the blaze outside. How great is that darkness!' It is

the darkness of sin, of ignorance, of sorrow, and what adds deeper

gloom to it is that every soul that sits in that shadow of death might

have been shining, a sun, in the spacious heaven of God's love.

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MONOTONY AND CRISES

When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou

runnest, thou shalt not stumble.'--PROVERBS iv. 12.

The old metaphor likening life to a path has many felicities in it. It

suggests constant change, it suggests continuous progress in one

direction, and that all our days are linked together, and are not

isolated fragments; and it suggests an aim and an end. So we find it

perpetually in this Book of Proverbs. Here the way' has a specific

designation, the way of Wisdom'--that is to say, the way which Wisdom

teaches, and the way on which Wisdom accompanies us, and the way which

leads to Wisdom. Now, these two clauses of my text are not merely an

instance of the peculiar feature of Hebrew poetry called parallelism,

in which two clauses, substantially the same, occur, but with a little

pleasing difference. When thou goest'--that is, the monotonous tramp,

tramp, tramp of slow walking along the path of an uneventful daily

life, the humdrum one foot up and another foot down' which makes the

most of our days. When thou runnest'--that points to the crises, the

sudden spurts, the necessarily brief bursts of more than usual energy

and effort and difficulty. And about both of them, the humdrum and the

exciting, the monotonous and the startling, the promise comes that if

we walk in the path of Wisdom we shall not get disgusted with the one

and we shall not be overwhelmed by the other. When thou walkest, thy

steps shall not be straitened; when thou runnest, thou shalt not

stumble.'

But before I deal with these two clauses specifically, let me recall to

you the condition, and the sole condition, upon which either of them

can be fulfilled in our daily lives. The book from which my text is

taken is probably one of the very latest in the Old Testament, and you

catch in it a very significant and marvellous development of the Old

Testament thought. For there rises up, out of these early chapters of

the Book of Proverbs, that august and serene figure of the queenly

Wisdom, which is more than a personification and is less than a person

and a prophecy. It means more than the wise man that spoke it saw; it

means for us Christ, the Power of God and the Wisdom of God.' And so

instead of keeping ourselves merely to the word of the Book of

Proverbs, we must grasp the thing that shines through the word, and

realise that the writer's visions can only become realities when the

serene and august Wisdom that he saw shimmering through the darkness

took to itself a human Form, and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among

us.'

With that heightening of the meaning of the phrase, the path of Wisdom'

assumes a heightened meaning too, for it is the path of the personal

Wisdom, the Incarnate Wisdom, Christ Himself. And what does it then

come to be to obey this command to walk in the way of Wisdom? Put it

into three sentences. Let the Christ who is not only wise, but Wisdom,

choose your path, and be sure that by the submission of your will all

your paths are His, and not only yours. Make His path yours by

following in His steps, and do in your place what you think Christ

would have done if He had been there. Keep company with Him on the

road. If we will do these three things--if we will say to Him, Lord,

when Thou sayest go, I go; when Thou biddest me come, I come; I am Thy

slave, and I rejoice in the bondage more than in all licentious

liberty, and what Thou biddest me do, I do'--if you will further say,

As Thou art, so am I in the world'--and if you will further say, Leave

me not alone, and let me cling to Thee on the road, as a little child

holds on by her mother's skirt or her father's hand,' then, and only

then, will you walk in the path of Wisdom.

Now, then, these three things--submission of will, conformity of

conduct, closeness of companionship--these three things being

understood, let us look for a moment at the blessings that this text

promises, and first at the promise for long uneventful stretches of our

daily life. That, of course, is mainly the largest proportion of all

our lives. Perhaps nine-tenths at least of all our days and years fall

under the terms of this first promise, When thou walkest.' For many

miles there comes nothing particular, nothing at all exciting, nothing

new, nothing to break the plod, plod, plod along the road. Everything

is as it was yesterday, and the day before that, and as it will be

to-morrow, and the day after that, in all probability. The trivial

round, the common task' make up by far the largest percentage of our

lives. It is as in wine, the immense proportion of it is nothing but

water, and only a small proportion of alcohol is diffused through the

great mass of the tamer liquid.

Now, then, if Jesus Christ is not to help us in the monotony of our

daily lives, what, in the name of common sense, is His help good for?

If it is not true that He will be with us, not only in the moments of

crisis, but in the long commonplace hours, we may as well have no

Christ at all, for all that I can see. Unless the trivial is His field,

there is very little field for Him, in your life or mine. And so it

should come to all of us who have to take up this daily burden of

small, monotonous, constantly recurring, and therefore often wearisome,

duties, as even a more blessed promise than the other one, that when

thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened.'

I remember hearing of a man that got so disgusted with having to dress

and undress himself every day that he committed suicide to escape from

the necessity. That is a very extreme form of the feeling that comes

over us all sometimes, when we wake in a morning and look before us

along the stretch of dead level, which is a great deal more wearisome

when it lasts long than are the cheerful vicissitudes of up hill and

down dale. We all know the deadening influence of a habit. We all know

the sense of disgust that comes over us at times, and of utter

weariness, just because we have been doing the same things day after

day for so long. I know only one infallible way of preventing the

common from becoming commonplace, of preventing the small from becoming

trivial, of preventing the familiar from becoming contemptible, and it

is to link it all to Jesus Christ, and to say, For Thy sake, and unto

Thee, I do this'; then, not only will the rough places become plain,

and the crooked things straight, and not only will the mountains be

brought low, but the valleys of the commonplace will be exalted. Thy

steps shall not be straitened.' I will make his feet as hind's feet,'

says one of the old prophets. What a picture of light, buoyant,

graceful movement that is! And each of us may have that, instead of the

grind, grind, grind! tramp, tramp, tramp! along the level and

commonplace road of our daily lives, if we will. Walk in the path of

Christ, with Christ, towards Christ, and thy steps shall not be

straitened.'

Now, there is another aspect of this same promise--viz. if we thus are

in the path of Incarnate Wisdom, we shall not feel the restrictions of

the road to be restraints. Thy steps shall not be straitened'; although

there is a wall on either side, and the road is the narrow way that

leads to life, it is broad enough for the sober man, because he goes in

a straight line, and does not need half the road to roll about in. The

limits which love imposes, and the limits which love accepts, are not

narrowing. I will walk at liberty, for--I do as I like.' No! that is

slavery; but, I will walk at liberty, for I keep Thy precepts'; and I

do not want to go vagrantising at large, but limit myself thankfully to

the way which Thou dost mark out. Thy steps shall not be straitened.'

So much for the first of these promises.

Now what about the other one? When thou runnest, thou shalt not

stumble.'

As I have said, the former promise applies to the hours and the years

of life. The latter applies to but a few moments of each man's life.

Cast your thoughts back over your own days, and however changeful,

eventful, perhaps adventurous, and as we people call it, romantic, some

parts of our lives may have been, yet for all that you can put the

turning-points, the crises that have called for great efforts, and the

gathering of yourselves up, and the calling forth of all your powers to

do and to dare, you can put them all inside of a week, in most cases.

When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.' The greater the speed, the

greater the risk of stumbling over some obstacle in the way. We all

know how many men there are that do very well in the uneventful

commonplaces of life, but bring them face to face with some great

difficulty or some great trial, and there is a dismal failure. Jesus

Christ is ready to make us fit for anything in the way of difficulty,

in the way of trial, that can come storming upon us from out of the

dark. And He will make us so fit if we follow the injunctions to which

I have already been referring. Without His help it is almost certain

that when we have to run, our ankles will give, or there will be a

stone in the road that we never thought of, and the excitement will

sweep us away from principle, and we shall lose our hold on Him; and

then it is all up with us.

There is a wonderful saying in one of the prophets, which uses this

same metaphor of my text with a difference, where it speaks of the

divine guidance of Israel as being like that of a horse in the

wilderness. Fancy the poor, nervous, tremulous creature trying to keep

its footing upon the smooth granite slabs of Sinai. Travellers dare not

take their horses on mountain journeys, because they are highly nervous

and are not sure-footed enough. And, so says the old prophet, that

gracious Hand will be laid on the bridle, and hold the nervous

creature's head up as it goes sliding over the slippery rocks, and so

He will bring it down to rest in the valley. Now unto Him that is able

to keep us from stumbling,' as is the true rendering, and to present us

faultless . . . be glory.' Trust Him, keep near Him, let Him choose

your way, and try to be like Him in it; and whatever great occasions

may arise in your lives, either of sorrow or of duty, you will be equal

to them.

But remember the virtue that comes out victorious in the crisis must

have been nourished and cultivated in the humdrum moments. For it is no

time to make one's first acquaintance with Jesus Christ when the

eyeballs of some ravenous wild beast are staring into ours, and its

mouth is open to swallow us. Unless He has kept our feet from being

straitened in the quiet walk, He will not be able to keep us from

stumbling in the vehement run.

One word more. This same distinction is drawn by one of the prophets,

who adds another clause to it. Isaiah, or the author of the second

portion of the book which goes by his name, puts in wonderful

connection the two thoughts of my text with analogous thoughts in

regard to God, when he says, Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard,

that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the

earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?' and immediately goes on to say,

They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall run

and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' So it is from God,

the unfainting and the unwearied, that the strength comes which makes

our steps buoyant with energy amidst the commonplace, and steadfast and

established at the crises of our lives. But before these two great

promises is put another one: They shall mount up with wings as eagles,'

and therefore both the other become possible. That is to say,

fellowship with God in the heavens, which is made possible on earth by

communion with Christ, is the condition both of the unwearied running

and of unfainting walking. If we will keep in the path of Christ, He

will take care of the commonplace dreary tracts and of the brief

moments of strain and effort, and will bring us at last where He has

gone, if, looking unto Him, we run with patience the race,' and walk

with cheerfulness the road, that is set before us.'

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FROM DAWN TO NOON

The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and

more unto the perfect day.'--PROVERBS iv. 18.

Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their

father.'--MATT. xiii. 43.

The metaphor common to both these texts is not infrequent throughout

Scripture. In one of the oldest parts of the Old Testament, Deborah's

triumphal song, we find, Let all them that love Thee be as the sun when

he goeth forth in his might.' In one of the latest parts of the Old

Testament, Daniel's prophecy, we read, They that be wise shall shine as

the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to

righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.' Then in the New

Testament we have Christ's comparison of His servants to light, and the

great promise which I have read as my second text. The upshot of them

all is this--the most radiant thing on earth is the character of a good

man. The world calls men of genius and intellectual force its lights.

The divine estimate, which is the true one, confers the name on

righteousness.

But my first text follows out another analogy; not only brightness, but

progressive brightness, is the characteristic of the righteous man.

We are to think of the strong Eastern sun, whose blinding light

steadily increases till the noontide. The perfect day' is a somewhat

unfortunate translation. What is meant is the point of time at which

the day culminates, and for a moment, the sun seems to stand steady, up

in those southern lands, in the very zenith, raying down the arrows

that fly by noonday.' The text does not go any further, it does not

talk about the sad diminution of the afternoon. The parallel does not

hold; though, if we consult appearance and sense alone, it seems to

hold only too well. For, sadder than the setting of the suns, which

rise again to-morrow, is the sinking into darkness of death, from which

there seems to be no emerging. But my second text comes in to tell us

that death is but as the shadow of eclipse which passes, and with it

pass obscuring clouds and envious mists, and then shall the righteous

blaze forth like the sun in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.'

And so the two texts speak to us of the progressive brightness, and the

ultimate, which is also the progressive, radiance of the righteous.

I. In looking at them together, then, I would notice, first, what a

Christian life is meant to be.

I must not linger on the lovely thoughts that are suggested by that

attractive metaphor of life. It must be enough, for our present

purpose, to say that the light of the Christian life, like its type in

the heavens, may be analysed into three beams--purity, knowledge,

blessedness. And these three, blended together, make the pure whiteness

of a Christian soul.

But what I wish rather to dwell upon is the other thought, the

intention that every Christian life should be a life of increasing

lustre, uninterrupted, and the natural result of increasing communion

with, and conformity to, the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance.

Remember how emphatically, in all sorts of ways, progress is laid down

in Scripture as the mark of a religious life. There is the emblem of my

text. There is our Lord's beautiful one of vegetable growth: First the

blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.' There is the other

metaphor of the stages of human life, babes in Christ,' young men in

Him, old men and fathers. There is the metaphor of the growth of the

body. There is the metaphor of the gradual building up of a structure.

We are to edify ourselves together,' and to build ourselves up on our

most holy faith.' There is the other emblem of a race--continual

advance as the result of continual exertion, and the use of the powers

bestowed upon us.

And so in all these ways, and in many others that I need not now touch

upon, Scripture lays it down as a rule that life in the highest region,

like life in the lowest, is marked by continual growth. It is so in

regard to all other things. Continuity in any kind of practice gives

increasing power in the art. The artisan, the blacksmith with his

hammer, the skilled artificer at his trade, the student at his subject,

the good man in his course of life, and the bad man in his, do equally

show that use becomes second nature. And so, in passing, let me say

what incalculable importance there is in our getting habit, with all

its mystical power to mould life, on the side of righteousness, and of

becoming accustomed to do good, and so being unfamiliar with evil.

Let me remind you, too, how this intention of continuous growth is

marked by the gifts that are bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ. He gives

us--and it is by no means the least of the gifts that He bestows--an

absolutely unattainable aim as the object of our efforts. For He bids

us not only be perfect, as our Father in Heaven is perfect,' but He

bids us be entirely conformed to His own Self. The misery of men is

that they pursue aims so narrow and so shabby that they can be

attained, and are therefore left behind, to sink hull down on the

backward horizon. But to have before us an aim which is absolutely

unreachable, instead of being, as ignorant people say, an occasion of

despair and of idleness, is, on the contrary, the very salt of life. It

keeps us young, it makes hope immortal, it emancipates from lower

pursuits, it diminishes the weight of sorrows, it administers an

anaesthetic to every pain. If you want to keep life fresh, seek for

that which you can never fully find.

Christ gives us infinite powers to reach that unattainable aim, for He

gives us access to all His own fullness, and there is more in His

storehouses than we can ever take, not to say more than we can ever

hope to exhaust. And therefore, because of the aim that is set before

us, and because of the powers that are bestowed upon us to reach it,

there is stamped upon every Christian life unmistakably as God's

purpose and ideal concerning it, that it should for ever and for ever

be growing nearer and nearer, as some ascending spiral that ever

circles closer and closer, and yet never absolutely unites with the

great central Perfection which is Himself.

So, brethren, for every one of us, if we are Christian people at all,

this is the will of God, even your perfection.'

II. Consider the sad contrast of too many Christian lives.

I would not speak in terms that might seem to be reproach and scolding.

The matter is far too serious, the disease far too widespread, to need

or to warrant any exaggeration. But, dear brethren, there are many

so-called and, in a fashion, really Christian people to whom Christ and

His work are mainly, if not exclusively, the means of escaping the

consequences of sin--a kind of fire-escape.' And to very many it comes

as a new thought, in so far as their practical lives are concerned,

that these ought to be lives of steadily increasing deliverance from

the love and the power of sin, and steadily increasing appropriation

and manifestation of Christ's granted righteousness. There are, I

think, many of us from whom the very notion of progress has faded away.

I am sure there are some of us who were a great deal farther on on the

path of the Christian life years ago, when we first felt that Christ

was anything to us, than we are to-day. When for the time ye ought to

be teachers, ye have need that one teach you which be the first

principles of the oracles of God.'

There is an old saying of one of the prophets that a child would die a

hundred years old, which in a very sad sense is true about very many

folk within the pale of the Christian Church who are seventy-year-old

babes still, and will die so. Suns growing brighter and brighter until

the noonday!' Ah! there are many of us who are a great deal more like

those strange variable stars that sometimes burst out in the heavens

into a great blaze, that brings them up to the brightness of stars of

the first magnitude, for a day or two; and then they dwindle until they

become little specks of light that the telescope can hardly see.

And there are hosts of us who are instances, if not of arrested, at any

rate of unsymmetrical, development. The head, perhaps, is cultivated;

the intellectual apprehension of Christianity increases, while the

emotional, and the moral, and the practical part of it are all

neglected. Or the converse may be the case; and we may be full of gush

and of good emotion, and of fervour when we come to worship or to pray,

and our lives may not be a hair the better for it all. Or there may be

a disproportion because of an exclusive attention to conduct and the

practical side of Christianity, while the rational side of it, which

should be the basis of all, and the emotional side of it, which should

be the driving power of all, are comparatively neglected.

So, dear brethren! what with interruptions, what with growing by fits

and starts, and long, dreary winters like the Arctic winters, coming in

between the two or three days of rapid, and therefore brief and

unwholesome, development, we must all, I think, take to heart the

condemnation suggested by this text when we compare the reality of our

lives with the divine intention concerning them. Let us ask ourselves,

Have I more command over myself than I had twenty years ago? Do I live

nearer Jesus Christ today than I did yesterday? Have I more of His

Spirit in me? Am I growing? Would the people that know me best say that

I am growing in the grace and knowledge of my Lord and Saviour?'

Astronomers tell us that there are dark suns, that have burnt

themselves out, and are wandering unseen through the skies. I wonder if

there are any extinguished suns of that sort listening to me at this

moment.

III. How the divine purpose concerning us may be realised by us.

Now the Alpha and the Omega of this, the one means which includes all

other, is laid down by Jesus Christ Himself in another metaphor when He

said, Abide in Me, and I in you; so shall ye bring forth much fruit.'

Our path will brighten, not because of any radiance in ourselves, but

in proportion as we draw nearer and nearer to the Fountain of heavenly

radiance.

The planets that move round the sun, further away than we are on earth,

get less of its light and heat; and those that circle around it within

the limits of our orbit, get proportionately more. The nearer we are to

Him, the more we shall shine. The sun shines by its own light, drawn

indeed from the shrinkage of its mass, so that it gives away its very

life in warming and illuminating its subject-worlds. But we shine only

by reflected light, and therefore the nearer we keep to Him the more

shall we be radiant.

That keeping in touch with Jesus Christ is mainly to be secured by the

direction of thought, and love, and trust to Him. If we follow close

upon Him we shall not walk in darkness. It is to be secured and

maintained very largely by what I am afraid is much neglected by

Christian people of all sorts nowadays, and that is the devotional use

of their Bibles. That is the food by which we grow. It is to be secured

and maintained still more largely by that which I, again, am afraid is

but very imperfectly attained to by Christian people now, and that is,

the habit of prayer. It is to be secured and maintained, again, by the

honest conforming of our lives, day by day, to the present amount of

our knowledge of Him and of His will. Whosoever will make all his life

the manifestation of his belief, and turn all his creed into principles

of action, will grow both in the comprehensiveness, and in the depths

of his Christian character. Ye are the light in the Lord.' Keep in Him,

and you will become brighter and brighter. So shall we go from strength

to strength, till we appear before God in Zion.'

IV. Lastly, what brighter rising will follow the earthly setting?

My second text comes in here. Beauty, intellect, power, goodness; all

go down into the dark. The sun sets, and there is left a sad and fading

glow in the darkening pensive sky, which may recall the vanished light

for a little while to a few faithful hearts, but steadily passes into

the ashen grey of forgetfulness.

But then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun, in their

Heavenly Father's kingdom.' The momentary setting is but apparent. And

ere it is well accomplished, a new sun swims into the ampler ether, the

diviner air' of that future life, and with new spangled beams, flames

in the forehead of the morning sky.'

The reason for that inherent brightness suggested in our second text is

that the soul of the righteous man passes from earth into a region out

of which we gather all things that offend, and them that do iniquity.'

There are other reasons for it, but that is the one which our Lord

dwells on. Or, to put it into modern scientific language, environment

corresponds to character. So, when the clouds have rolled away, and no

more mists from the undrained swamps of selfishness and sin and animal

nature rise up to hide the radiance, there shall be a fuller flood of

light poured from the re-created sun.

That brightness thus promised has for its highest and most blessed

character that it is conformity to the Lord Himself. For, as you may

remember, the last use of this emblem that we find in Scripture refers

not to the servant but to the Master, whom His beloved disciple in

Apocalyptic vision saw, with His countenance as the sun shining in his

strength.' Thus we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.'

And therefore that radiance of the sainted dead is progressive, too.

For it has an infinite fulness to draw upon, and the soul that is

joined to Jesus Christ, and derives its lustre from Him, cannot die

until it has outgrown Jesus and emptied God. The sun will one day be a

dark, cold ball. We shall outlast it.

But, brethren, remember that it is only those who here on earth have

progressively appropriated the brightness that Christ bestows who have

a right to reckon on that better rising. It is contrary to all

probability to believe that the passage from life can change the

ingrained direction and set of a man's nature. We know nothing that

warrants us in affirming that death can revolutionise character. Do not

trust your future to such a dim peradventure. Here is a plain truth.

They who on earth are as the shining light that shineth more and more

unto the perfect day,' shall, beyond the shadow of eclipse, shine on as

the sun does, behind the opaque, intervening body, all unconscious of

what looks to mortal eyes on earth an eclipse, and shall blaze out like

the sun in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.' For all that we know and

are taught by experience, religious and moral distinctions are eternal.

He that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is

filthy, let him be filthy still.'

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KEEPING AND KEPT

Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of

life.'--PROVERBS iv. 23.

Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.'--1 PETER i. 5.

The former of these texts imposes a stringent duty, the latter promises

divine help to perform it. The relation between them is that between

the Law and the Gospel. The Law commands, the Gospel gives power to

obey. The Law pays no attention to man's weakness, and points no finger

to the source of strength. Its office is to set clearly forth what we

ought to be, not to aid us in becoming so. Here is your duty, do it'

is, doubtless, a needful message, but it is a chilly one, and it may

well be doubted if it ever rouses a soul to right action. Moralists

have hammered away at preaching self-restraint and a close watch over

the fountain of actions within from the beginning, but their

exhortations have little effect unless they can add to their icy

injunctions the warmth of the promise of our second text, and point to

a divine Keeper who will make duty possible. We must be kept by God, if

we are ever to succeed in keeping our wayward hearts.

I. Without our guarding our hearts, no noble life is possible.

The Old Testament psychology differs from our popular allocation of

certain faculties to bodily organs. We use head and heart, roughly

speaking, as being respectively the seats of thought and of emotion.

But the Old Testament locates in the heart the centre of personal

being. It is not merely the home of the affections, but the seat of

will, moral purpose. As this text says, the issues of life' flow from

it in all the multitudinous variety of their forms. The stream parts

into many heads, but it has one fountain. To the Hebrew thinkers the

heart was the indivisible, central unity which manifested itself in the

whole of the outward life. As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.'

The heart is the man. And that personal centre has a moral character

which comes to light in, and gives unity and character to, all his

deeds.

That solemn thought that every one of us has a definite moral

character, and that our deeds are not an accidental set of outward

actions but flow from an inner fountain, needs to be driven home to our

consciences, for most of the actions of most men are done so

mechanically, and reflected on so little by the doers, that the

conviction of their having any moral character at all, or of our

incurring any responsibility for them, is almost extinct in us, unless

when something startles conscience into protest.

It is this shrouded inner self to which supreme care is to be directed.

All noble ethical teaching concurs in this--that a man who seeks to be

right must keep, in the sense both of watching and of guarding, his

inner self. Conduct is more easily regulated than character--and less

worth regulating. It avails little to plant watchers on the stream half

way to the sea. Control must be exercised at the source, if it is to be

effectual. The counsel of our first text is a commonplace of all

wholesome moral teaching since the beginning of the world. The phrase

with all diligence' is literally above all guarding,' and energetically

expresses the supremacy of this keeping. It should be the foremost,

all-pervading aim of every wise man who would not let his life run to

waste. It may be turned into more modern language, meaning just what

this ancient sage meant, if we put it as, Guard thy character with more

carefulness than thou dost thy most precious possessions, for it needs

continual watchfulness, and, untended, will go to rack and ruin.' The

exhortation finds a response in every heart, and may seem too familiar

and trite to bear dwelling on, but we may be allowed to touch lightly

on one or two of the plain reasons which enforce it on every man who is

not what Proverbs very unpolitely calls a fool.'

That guarding is plainly imposed as necessary, by the very constitution

of our manhood. Our nature is evidently not a republic, but a monarchy.

It is full of blind impulses, and hungry desires, which take no heed of

any law but their own satisfaction. If the reins are thrown on the

necks of these untamed horses, they will drag the man to destruction.

They are only safe when they are curbed and bitted, and held well in.

Then there are tastes and inclinations which need guidance and are

plainly meant to be subordinate. The will is to govern all the lower

self, and conscience is to govern the will. Unmistakably there are

parts of every man's nature which are meant to serve, and parts which

are appointed to rule, and to let the servants usurp the place of the

rulers is to bring about as wild a confusion within as the Ecclesiast

lamented that he had seen in the anarchic times when he wrote--princes

walking and beggars on horseback. As George Herbert has it--

Give not thy humours way;

God gave them to thee under lock and key.'

Then, further, that guarding is plainly imperative, because there is an

outer world which appeals to our needs and desires, irrespective

altogether of right and wrong and of the moral consequences of

gratifying these. Put a loaf before a starving man and his impulse will

be to clutch and devour it, without regard to whether it is his or no.

Show any of our animal propensities its appropriate food, and it asks

no questions as to right or wrong, but is stirred to grasp its natural

food. And even the higher and nobler parts of our nature are but too

apt to seek their gratification without having the license of

conscience for doing so, and sometimes in defiance of its plain

prohibitions. It is never safe to trust the guidance of life to tastes,

inclinations, or to anything but clear reason, set in motion by calm

will, and acting under the approbation of the Lord Chief Justice,

Conscience.'

But again, seeing that the world has more evil than good in it, the

keeping of the heart will always consist rather in repelling

solicitations to yielding to evil. In short, the power and the habit of

sternly saying No' to the whole crowd of tempters is always the main

secret of a noble life. He that hath no rule over his own spirit is

like a city broken down and without walls.'

II. There is no effectual guarding unless God guards.

The counsel in Proverbs is not mere toothless moral commonplace, but is

associated, in the preceding chapter, with fatherly advice to let thine

heart keep my commandments' and to trust in the Lord with all thine

heart.' The heart that so trusts will be safely guarded, and only such

a heart will be. The inherent weakness of all attempts at self-keeping

is that keeper and kept being one and the same personality, the more we

need to be kept the less able we are to effect it. If in the very

garrison are traitors, how shall the fortress be defended? If, then, we

are to exercise an effectual guard over our characters and control over

our natures, we must have an outward standard of right and wrong which

shall not be deflected by variations in our temperature. We need a

fixed light to steer towards, which is stable on the stable shore, and

is not tossing up and down on our decks. We shall cleanse our way only

when we take heed thereto, according to Thy word.' For even God's

viceroy within, the sovereign conscience, can be warped, perverted,

silenced, and is not immune from the spreading infection of evil. When

it turns to God, as a mirror to the sun, it is irradiated and flashes

bright illumination into dark corners, but its power depends on its

being thus lit by radiations from the very Light of Life. And if we are

ever to have a coercive power over the rebellious powers within, we

must have God's power breathed into us, giving grip and energy to all

the good within, quickening every lofty desire, satisfying every

aspiration that feels after Him, cowing all our evil and being the very

self of ourselves.

We need an outward motive which will stimulate and stir to effort. Our

wills are lamed for good, and the world has strong charms that appeal

to us. And if we are not to yield to these, there must be somewhere a

stronger motive than any that the sorceress world has in its stores,

that shall constrainingly draw us to ways that, because they tend

upward, and yield no pabulum for the lower self, are difficult for

sluggish feet. To the writer of this Book of Proverbs the name of God

bore in it such a motive. To us the name of Jesus, which is Love, bears

a yet mightier appeal, and the motive which lies in His death for us is

strong enough, and it alone is strong enough, to fire our whole selves

with enthusiastic, grateful love, which will burn up our sloth, and

sweep our evil out of our hearts, and make us swift and glad to do all

that may please Him. If there must be fresh reinforcements thrown into

the town of Mansoul, as there must be if it is not to be captured,

there is one sure way of securing these. Our second text tells us

whence the relieving force must come. If we are to keep our hearts with

all diligence, we must be kept by the power of God,' and that power is

not merely to make diversion outside the beleaguered fortress which may

force the besiegers to retreat and give up their effort, but is to

enter in and possess the soul which it wills to defend. It is when the

enemy sees that new succours have, in some mysterious way, been

introduced, that he gives up his siege. It is God in us that is our

security.

III. There is no keeping by God without faith.

Peter was an expert in such matters, for he had had a bitter experience

to teach him how soon and surely self-confidence became self-despair.

Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I,' was said but a few

hours before he denied Jesus. His faith failed, and then the divine

guard that was keeping his soul passed thence, and, left alone, he

fell.

That divine Power is exerted for our keeping on condition of our

trusting ourselves to Him and trusting Him for ourselves. And that

condition is no arbitrary one, but is prescribed by the very nature of

divine help and of human faith. If God could keep our souls without our

trust in Him He would. He does so keep them as far as is possible, but

for all the choicer blessings of His giving, and especially for that of

keeping us free from the domination of our lower selves, there must be

in us faith if there is to be in God help. The hand that lays hold on

God in Christ must be stretched out and must grasp His warm, gentle,

and strong hand, if the tingling touch of it is to infuse strength. If

the relieving force is victoriously to enter our hearts, we must throw

open the gates and welcome it. Faith is but the open door for God's

entrance. It has no efficacy in itself any more than a door has, but

all its blessedness depends on what it admits into the hidden chambers

of the heart.

I reiterate what I have tried to show in these poor words. There is no

noble life without our guarding our hearts; there is no effectual

guarding unless God guards; there is no divine guarding unless through

our faith. It is vain to preach self-governing and self-keeping. Unless

we can tell the beleaguered heart, The Lord is thy Keeper; He will keep

thee from all evil; He will keep thy soul,' we only add one more

impossible command to a man's burden. And we do not apprehend nor

experience the divine keeping in its most blessed and fullest reality,

unless we find it in Jesus, who is able to keep us from falling, and to

present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding

joy.'

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THE CORDS OF SIN

His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be

holden with the cords of his sins.'--PROVERBS v. 22.

In Hosea's tender picture of the divine training of Israel which, alas!

failed of its effect, we read, I drew them with cords of a man,' which

is further explained as being with bands of love.' The metaphor in the

prophet's mind is probably that of a child being taught to go' and

upheld in its first tottering steps by leading-strings. God drew

Israel, though Israel did not yield to the drawing. But if these

gentle, attractive influences, which ever are raying out from Him, are

resisted, another set of cords, not now sustaining and attracting, but

hampering and fettering, twine themselves round the rebellious life,

and the man is like a wild creature snared in the hunter's toils,

enmeshed in a net, and with its once free limbs restrained. The choice

is open to us all, whether we will let God draw us to Himself with the

sweet manlike cords of His educative and forbearing love, or, flinging

off these, which only foolish self-will construes into limitations,

shall condemn ourselves to be prisoned within the narrow room of our

own sins. We may choose which condition shall be ours, but one or other

of them must be ours. We may either be drawn by the silken cord of

God's love or we may be holden by the cords' of our sins.

In both clauses of our text evil deeds done are regarded as having a

strange, solemn life apart from the doer of them, by which they become

influential factors in his subsequent life. Their issues on others may

be important, but their issues on him are the most important of all.

The recoil of the gun on the shoulder of him who fired it is certain,

whether the cartridge that flew from its muzzle wounded anything or

not. His own iniquities shall take the wicked'--they ring him round, a

grim company to whom he has given an independent being, and who have

now taken' him prisoner and laid violent hands on him. A long since

forgotten novel told of the fate of a modern Prometheus,' who made and

put life into a dreadful creature in man's shape, that became the curse

of its creator's life. That tragedy is repeated over and over again. We

have not done with our evil deeds when we have done them, but they, in

a very terrible sense, begin to be when they are done. We sow the seeds

broadcast, and the seed springs up dragon's teeth.

The view of human experience set forth, especially in the second clause

of this text, directs our gaze into dark places, into which it is not

pleasant to look, and many of you will accuse me of preaching gloomily

if I try to turn a reflective eye inwards upon them, but no one will be

able to accuse me of not preaching truly. It is impossible to enumerate

all the cords that make up the net in which our own evil doings hold us

meshed, but let me point out some of these.

I. Our evil deeds become evil habits.

We all know that anything once done becomes easier to do again. That is

true about both good and bad actions, but ill weeds grow apace,' and it

is infinitely easier to form a bad habit than a good one. The young

shoot is green and flexible at first, but it soon becomes woody and

grows high and strikes deep. We can all verify the statement of our

text by recalling the tremors of conscience, the self-disgust, the

dread of discovery which accompanied the first commission of some evil

deed, and the silence of undisturbed, almost unconscious facility, that

accompanied later repetitions of it. Sins of sense and animal passion

afford the most conspicuous instances of this, but it is by no means

confined to these. We have but to look steadily at our own lives to be

aware of the working of this solemn law in them, however clear we may

be of the grosser forms of evil deeds. For us all it is true that

custom presses on us with a weight, heavy as frost and deep almost as

life,' and that it is as hard for the Ethiopian to change his skin or

the leopard his spots as for those who are accustomed to do evil' to do

good.'

But experience teaches not only that evil deeds quickly consolidate

into evil habits, but that as the habit grips us faster, the poor

pleasure for the sake of which the acts are done diminishes. The zest

which partially concealed the bitter taste of the once eagerly

swallowed morsel is all but gone, but the morsel is still sought and

swallowed. Impulses wax as motives wane, the victim is like an ox

tempted on the road to the slaughter-house at first by succulent fodder

held before it, and at last driven into it by pricking goads and heavy

blows. Many a man is so completely wrapped in the net which his own

evil deeds have made for him, that he commits the sin once more, not

because he finds any pleasure in it, but for no better reason than that

he has already committed it often, and the habit is his master.

There are many forms of evil which compel us to repeat them for other

reasons than the force of habit. For instance, a fraudulent book-keeper

has to go on making false entries in his employer's books in order to

hide his peculations. Whoever steps on to the steeply sloping road to

which self-pleasing invites us, soon finds that he is on an inclined

plane well greased, and that compulsion is on him to go on, though he

may recoil from the descent, and be shudderingly aware of what the end

must be. Let no man say, I will do this doubtful thing once only, and

never again.' Sin is like an octopus, and if the loathly thing gets the

tip of one slender filament round a man, it will envelop him altogether

and drag him down to the cruel beak.

Let us then remember how swiftly deeds become habits, and how the

fetters, which were silken at first, rapidly are exchanged for iron

chains, and how the craving increases as fast as the pleasure from

gratifying it diminishes. Let us remember that there are many kinds of

evil which seem to force their own repetition, in order to escape their

consequences and to hide the sin. Let us remember that no man can

venture to say, This once only will I do this thing.' Let us remember

that acts become habits with dreadful swiftness, and let us beware that

we do not forge chains of darkness for ourselves out of our own godless

deeds.

II. Our evil deeds imprison us for good.

The tragedy of human life is that we weave for ourselves manacles that

fetter us from following and securing the one good for which we are

made. Our evil past holds us in a firm grip. The cords which confine

our limbs are of our own spinning. What but ourselves is the reason why

so many of us do not yield to God's merciful drawings of us to Himself?

We have riveted the chains and twined the net that holds us captive, by

our own acts. It is we ourselves who have paralysed our wills, so that

we see the light of God but as a faint gleam far away, and dare not

move to follow the gleam. It is we who have smothered or silenced our

conscience and perverted our tastes, and done violence to all in us

that thirsteth for God, even the living God.' Alas! how many of us have

let some strong evil habit gain such a grip of us that it has overborne

our higher impulses, and silenced the voice within us that cries out

for the living God! We are kept back from Him by our worse selves, and

whoever lets that which is lowest in him keep him from following after

God, who is his being's end and aim,' is caught and prisoned by the

cords woven and knitted out of his sins. Are there none of us who know,

when they are honest with themselves, that they would have been true

Christians long since, had it not been for one darling evil that they

cannot make up their minds to cast off? Wills disabled from strongly

willing the good, consciences silenced as when the tongue is taken out

of a bell-buoy on a shoal, tastes perverted and set seeking amid the

transitory treasures of earth for what God only can give them, these

are the cords' out of which are knotted the nets that hold so many of

us captive, and hinder our feet from following after God, even the

living God, in following and possessing whom is the only liberty of

soul, the one real joy of life.

III. Our evil deeds work their own punishment.

I do not venture to speak of the issues beyond the grave. It is not for

a man to press these on his brethren. But even from the standpoint of

this Book of Proverbs, it is certain that the righteous shall be

recompensed in the earth, much more the wicked and the sinner.'

Probably it was the earthly consequences of wrongdoing that were in the

mind of the proverb-maker. And we are not to let our Christian

enlightenment as to the future rob us of the certainty, written large

on human life here and now, that with whatever apparent exceptions in

regard to prosperous sin and tried righteousness, it is yet true that

every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of

reward.' Life is full of consequences of evil-doing. Even here and now

we reap as we have sown. Every sin is a mistake, even if we confine our

view to the consequences sought for in this life by it, and the

consequences actually encountered. A rogue is a roundabout fool.' True,

we believe that there is a future reaping so complete that it makes the

partial harvests gathered here seem of small account. But the framer of

this proverb, who had little knowledge of that future, had seen enough

in the meditative survey of this present to make him sure that the

consequences of evil-doing were certain, and in a very true sense,

penal. And leaving out of sight all that lies in the dark beyond,

surely if we sum up the lamed aspirations, the perverted tastes, the

ossifying of noble emotions, the destruction of the balance of the

nature, the blinding of the eye of the soul, the lowering and narrowing

of the whole nature, and many another wound to the best in man that

come as the sure issue of evil deeds, we do not need to doubt that

every sinful man is miserably holden with the cords of his sin.' Life

is the time for sowing, but it is a time for reaping too, and we do not

need to wait for death to experience the truth of the solemn warning

that he who soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.'

Let us, then, do no deeds without asking ourselves, What will the

harvest be? and if from any deeds that we have done we have to reap

sorrow or inward darkness, let us be thankful that by experience our

Father is teaching us how bitter as well as evil a thing it is to

forsake Him, and cast off His fear from our wayward spirits.

IV. The cords can be loosened.

Bitter experience teaches that the imprisoning net clings too tightly

to be stripped from our limbs by our own efforts. Nay rather, the net

and the captive are one, and he who tries to cast off the oppression

which hinders him from following that which is good is trying to cast

off himself. The desperate problem that fronts every effort at

self-emendation has two bristling impossibilities in it: one, how to

annihilate the past; one, how to extirpate the evil that is part of my

very self, and yet to keep the self entire. The very terms of the

problem show it to be insoluble, and the climax of all honest efforts

at making a clean thing of an unclean by means within reach of the

unclean thing itself, is the despairing cry, O wretched man that I am!

who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?' But to men

writhing in the grip of a sinful past, or paralysed beyond writhing,

and indifferent, because hopeless, or because they have come to like

their captivity, comes one whose name is the Breaker,' whose mission it

is to proclaim liberty to the captives, and whose hand laid on the

cords that bind a soul, causes them to drop harmless from the limbs and

sets the bondsman free. Many tongues praise Jesus for many great gifts,

but His proper work, and that peculiar to Himself alone, is His work on

the sin and the sins of the world. He deals with that which no man can

deal with for himself or by his own power. He can cancel our past, so

that it shall not govern our future. He can give new power to fight the

old habits. He can give a new life which owes nothing to the former

self, and is free from taint from it. He can break the entail of sin,

the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus' can make any of us, even

him who is most tied and bound by the chain of his sins, free from the

law of sin and death.' We cannot break the chains that fetter us, and

our own struggles, like the plungings of a wild beast caught in the

toils, but draw the bonds tighter. But the chains that cannot be broken

can be melted, and it may befall each of us as it befell the three

Hebrews in the furnace, when the king was astonished' and asked, Did

not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' and

wonderingly declared, Lo, I see four men loose walking in the midst of

the fire, and the aspect of the fourth is like a son of the gods.'

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WISDOM'S GIFT

That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance.'--PROVERBS

viii. 21.

The word here rendered substance' is peculiar. Indeed, it is used in a

unique construction in this passage. It means being' or existence,' and

seems to have been laid hold of by the Hebrew thinkers, from whom the

books commonly called the Wisdom Books' come, as one of their almost

technical expressions. Substance' may be used in our translation in its

philosophical meaning as the supposed reality underlying appearances,

but if we observe that in the parallel following clause we find

treasures,' it seems more likely that in the text, it is to be taken in

its secondary, and much debased meaning of wealth, material

possessions. But the prize held out here to the lovers of heavenly

wisdom is much more than worldly good. In deepest truth, the being

which is theirs is God Himself. They who love and seek the wisdom of

this book possess Him, and in possessing Him become possessed of their

own true being. They are owners and lords of themselves, and have in

their hearts a fountain of life, because they have God dwelling with

and in them.

I. The quest which always finds.

Those who love wisdom' might be a Hebrew translation of philosopher,'

and possibly the Jewish teachers of wisdom were influenced by Greece,

but their conception of wisdom has a deeper source than the Greek had,

and what they meant by loving it was a widely different attitude of

mind and heart from that of the Greek philosopher. It could never be

said of the disciples of a Plato that their quest was sure to end in

finding what they sought. Many a man then, and many a man since, and

many a man to-day, has followed knowledge, like a sinking star,' and

has only caught a glimmer of a far-off and dubious light. There is only

one search which is certain always to find what it seeks, and that is

the search which knows where the object of it is, and seeks not as for

something the locality of which is unknown, but as for that which the

place of which is certain. The manifold voices of human aims cry, Who

will show us any good?' The seeker who is sure to find is he who prays,

Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.' The heart

that truly and supremely affects God is never condemned to seek in

vain. The Wisdom of this book herself is presented as proclaiming, They

that seek me earnestly shall find me,' and humble souls in every age

since then have set to their seal that the word is true to their

experience. For there are two seekers in every such case, God and man.

The Father seeketh such to worship Him,' and His love goes through the

world, yearning and searching for hearts that will turn to Him. The

shepherd seeks for the lost sheep, and lays it on his shoulders to bear

it back to the fold. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the seeking

love of God. And the human seeker finds God, or rather is found by God,

for no aspiration after Him is vain, no longing unresponded to, no

effort to find Him unresponded to. We have as much of God as we wish,

as much as our desires have fitted us to receive. The all-penetrating

atmosphere enters every chink open to it, and no seeking soul has ever

had to say, I sought Him but found Him not.'

Is there any other quest of which the same can be said? Are not all

paths of human effort strewed with the skeletons of men who have

fretted and toiled away their lives in vain attempts to grasp aims that

have eluded their grip? Do we not all know the sickness of disappointed

effort, or the sadder sickness of successful effort, which has secured

the apparent good and found it not so good after all? The Christian

life is, amid all the failures of human effort, the only life in which

the seeking after good is but a little less blessed than the finding of

it is, and in which it is always true that he that seeketh findeth.'

Nor does such finding deaden the spirit of seeking, for in every

finding there is a fresh discovery of new depths in God, and a

consequent quickening of desire to press further into the abyss of His

Being, so that aspiration and fruition ever beget each other, and the

upward, Godward progress of the soul is eternal.

II. The finding that is always blessed.

We have seen that being is the gift promised to the lovers of wisdom,

and that the promise may either be referred to the possession of God,

who is the fountain of all being, or to the true possession of

ourselves, which is a consequence of our possession of Him. In either

aspect, that possession is blessedness. If we have God, we have real

life. We truly own ourselves when we have God. We really live when God

lives in us, the life of our lives. We are ourselves, when we have

ceased to be ourselves, and have taken God to be the Self of ourselves.

Such a life, God-possessing, brings the one good which corresponds to

our whole nature. All other good is fragmentary, and being fragmentary

is inadequate, as men's restless search after various forms of good but

too sadly proves. Why does the merchantman wander over sea and land

seeking for many goodly pearls? Because he has not found one of great

price, but tries to make up by their number for the insufficiency of

each. But the soul is made, not to find its wealth in the manifold but

in the one, and no aggregation of incompletenesses will make up

completeness, nor any number of partial satisfactions of this and the

other appetite or desire make a man feel that he has enough and more

than enough. We must have all good in one Person, if we are ever to

know the rest of full satisfaction. It will be fatal to our blessedness

if we have to resort to a hundred different sources for different

supplies. The true blessedness is simple and yet infinitely complex,

for it comes from possessing the one Person in whom dwell for us all

forms of good, whether good be understood as intellectual or moral or

emotional. That which cannot be everything to the soul that seeks is

scarcely worth the seeking, and certainly is not wisely proposed as the

object of a life's search, for such a life will be a failure if it

fails to find its object, and scarcely less tragically, though perhaps

less conspicuously, a failure if it finds it. All other good is but

apparent; God is the one real object that meets all man's desires and

needs, and makes him blessed with real blessedness, and fills the cup

of life with the draught that slakes thirst and satisfies the

thirstiest.

III. The blessedness that always lasts.

He who finds God, as every one of us may find Him, in Christ, has found

a Good that cannot change, pass, or grow stale. His blessedness will

always last, as long as he keeps fast hold of that which he has, and

lets no man take his crown.

For the Christian's good is the only one that does not intend to grow

old and pall. We can never exhaust God. We need never grow weary of

Him. Possession robs other wealth of its glamour, and other pleasures

of their poignant sweetness. We grow weary of most good things, and

those which we have long had, we generally find get somewhat faded and

stale. Habit is a fatal enemy to enjoyment. But it only adds to the joy

which springs from the possession of God in Christ. Swedenborg said

that the oldest angels look the youngest, and they who have longest

experience of the joy of fellowship with God are they who enjoy each

instance of it most. We can never drink the chalice of His love to the

dregs, and it will be fresh and sparkling as long as we have lips that

can absorb it. He keeps the good wine till the last.

The Christian's good is the only good which cannot be taken away. Loss

and change beggars the millionaire sometimes, and the possibility of

loss shadows all earthly good with pale foreboding. Everything that is

outside the substance of the soul can be withdrawn, but the possession

of God in Christ is so intimate and inward, so interwoven with the very

deepest roots of the Christian's personal being, that it cannot be

taken out from these by any shocks of time or change. There is but one

hand that can end that possession and that is his own. He can withdraw

himself from God, by giving himself over to sin and the world. He can

empty the shrine and compel the indwelling deity to say, as the legend

told was heard in the Temple the night before Roman soldiers desecrated

the Holy of Holies: Let us depart. But besides himself, neither things

present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other

creature' has power to take away that faithful God to whom a poor soul

clings, and in whom whoso thus clings finds its unchangeable good.

The Christian's good is the only one from which we cannot be taken. A

grim psalm paints for us the life and end of men who trust in the

multitude of their possessions,' and whose inward thought is that they

have founded families that will last.' It tells how this their way is

folly,' and yet is approved with acclamations by the crowd. It lets us

see the founder of a family, the possessor of broad acres, going down

to the grave, carrying nothing away, stripped of his glory and with

Death for his shepherd, who has driven his flock from pleasant pastures

here into the dreariness of Sheol. But that shepherd has a double

office. Some he separates from all their possessions, hopes, and joys.

Some he, stern though his aspect and harsh though his guidance, leads

up to the green pastures of God, and as the last messenger of the love

of God in Christ, unites the souls that found God amid the distractions

of earth with the God whom they will know better and possess more fully

and blessedly, amid the unending felicities and progressive

blessednesses of Heaven.

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WISDOM AND CHRIST

Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his

delight, rejoicing always before him; 31. Rejoicing in the habitable

part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of

men.'--PROVERBS viii. 30, 31.

There is a singular difference between the two portions of this Book of

Proverbs. The bulk of it, beginning with chapter x., contains a

collection of isolated maxims which may be described as the product of

sanctified common sense. They are shrewd and homely, but not remarkably

spiritual or elevated. To these is prefixed this introductory portion,

continuous, lofty in style, and in its personification of divine

wisdom, rising to great sublimity both of thought and of expression. It

seems as if the main body of the book had been fitted with an

introduction by another hand than that of the compilers of the various

sets of proverbial sayings. It is apparently due to an intellectual

movement, perhaps not uninfluenced by Greek thought, and

chronologically the latest of the elements composing the Old Testament

scriptures. In place of the lyric fervour of prophets, and the devout

intuition of psalmists, we have the praise of Wisdom. But that noble

portrait is no copy of the Greek conception, but contains features

peculiar to itself. She stands opposed to blatant, meretricious Folly,

and seeks to draw men to herself by lofty motives and offering pure

delights. She is not a person, but she is a personification of an

aspect of the divine nature, and seeing that she is held forth as

willing to bestow herself on men, that queenly figure shadows the great

truth of God's self-communication as being the end and climax of all

His revelation.

We are on the wrong tack when we look for more or less complete

resemblances between the Wisdom' of Proverbs and the Sophia' of Greek

thinkers. It is much rather an anticipation, imperfect but real, of

Jesus than a pale reflection of Greek thought. The way for the perfect

revelation of God in the incarnation was prepared by prophet and

psalmist. Was it not also prepared by this vision of a Wisdom which was

always with God, and yet had its delights with the sons of men, and

whilst rejoicing always before Him,' yet rejoiced in the habitable

parts of the earth?

Let us then look, however imperfect our gaze may be, at the

self-revelation in Proverbs of the personified divine Wisdom, and

compare it with the revelation of the incarnate divine Word.

I. The Self-revelation of Wisdom.

The words translated in Authorised Version, As one brought up with

him,' are rendered in Revised Version, as a master workman,' and seem

intended to represent Wisdom--that is, of course, the divine Wisdom--as

having been God's agent in the creative act. In the preceding context,

she triumphantly proclaims her existence before His works of old,' and

that she was with God, or ever the earth was.' Before the everlasting

mountains she was, before fountains flashed in the light and refreshed

the earth, her waters flowed. But that presence is not all, Wisdom was

the divine agent in creation. That thought goes beyond the ancient one:

He spake and it was done.' Genesis regards the divine command as the

cause of creatural being. God said, Let there be--and there was': the

forthputting of His will was the impulse to which creatures sprang into

existence at response. That is a great thought, but the meditative

thinker in our text has pondered over the facts of creation, and

notwithstanding all their apparent incompletenesses and errors, has

risen to the conclusion that they can all be vindicated as very good.'

To him, this wonderful universe is not only the product of a sovereign

will, but of one guided in its operations by all-seeing Wisdom.

Then the relation of this divine Wisdom to God is represented as being

a continual delight and a childlike rejoicing in Him, or as the word

literally means, a sporting' in Him. Whatever energy of creative action

is suggested by the preceding figure of a master workman,' that energy

had no effort. To the divine Wisdom creation was an easy task. She was

not so occupied with it as to interrupt her delight in contemplating

God, and her task gave her infinite satisfaction, for she rejoiced

always' before Him, and she rejoiced in His habitable earth. The writer

does not shrink from ascribing to the agent of creation something like

the glow of satisfaction that we feel over a piece of well-done work,

the poet's or the painter's rapture as he sees his thoughts bodied

forth in melody or glowing on canvas.

But there is a greater thought than these here, for the writer adds,

and my delight was with the sons of men.' It is noteworthy that the

same word is used in the preceding verse. The delight of the heavenly

Wisdom in God' is not unlike that directed to man. The sons of men' are

the last, noblest work of Creation, and on them, as the shining apex,

her delight settles. The words describe not only what was true when man

came into being, as the utmost possible climax of creatural excellence,

but are the revelation of what still remains true.

One cannot but feel how in all this most striking disclosure of the

depths of God, a deeper mystery is on the verge of revelation. There is

here, as we have said, a personification, but there seems to be a

Person shining through, or dimly discerned moving behind, the curtain.

Wisdom is the agent of creation. She creates with ease, and in creating

delights in God as well as in her work, which calls for no effort in

doing, and done, is all very good. She delights most of all in the sons

of men, and that delight is permanent. Does not this unknown Jewish

thinker, too, belong, as well as prophet and psalmist, to those who

went before crying, Hosanna to Him that cometh in the name of the Lord?

Let us turn to the New Testament and find an answer to the question.

II. The higher revelation of the divine Word.

There can be no doubt that the New Testament is committed to the

teaching that the Eternal Word of God, who was incarnate in Jesus, was

the agent of creation. John, in his profound prologue to the Gospel,

utters the deepest truths in brief sentences of monosyllables, and

utters them without a trace of feeling that they needed proof. To him

they are axiomatic and self evident. All things were made by Him.' The

words are the words of a child; the thought takes a flight beyond the

furthest reach of the mind of men. Paul, too, adds his Amen when he

proclaims that All things have been created through Him and unto Him,

and He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.' The

writer of Hebrews declares a Son through whom also He made the worlds,

and who upholds all things by the word of His power' and does not

scruple at transferring to Jesus the grand poetry of the Psalmist who

hymned Thou, Lord, in the beginning, hast laid the foundation of the

earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands.' We speak of things

too deep for us when we speak of persons in the Godhead, but yet we

know that the Eternal Word, which was from the beginning, was made

flesh and dwelt among us. The personified Wisdom of Proverbs is the

personal Word of John's prologue. John almost quotes the former when he

says the same was in the beginning with God.' for his word recalls the

grand declaration, The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way

. . . I was set up in the beginning or ever the earth was.' Then there

are two beginnings, one lost in the depths of timeless being, one, the

commencement of creative activity, and that Word was with God in the

remotest, as in the nearer, beginning.

But the ancient vision of the Jewish thinker anticipated the perfect

revelation of the New Testament still further, in its thought of an

unbroken communion between the personified Wisdom and God. That dim

thought of perfect communion and interchange of delights flashes into

wondrous clearness when we think of Him who spake of the glory which I

had with Thee before the foundation of the world,' and calmly declared:

Thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.' Into that depth of

mutual love we cannot look, and our eyes are too dim-sighted to bear

the blaze of that flashing interchange of glory, but we shall rob the

earthly life of Jesus of its pathos and saving power, if we do not

recognise that in Him the personification of Proverbs has become a

person, and that when He became flesh, He not only took on Him the

garment of mortality, but laid aside the visible robes of His imperial

majesty,' and that His being found in fashion as a man was humbling

Himself beyond all humiliation that afterwards was His.

But still further, the Gospel reality fills out and completes the

personification of Proverbs in that it shows us a divine person who so

turned to the sons of men' that He took on Him their nature and Himself

bore their sicknesses. The Jewish writer had great thoughts of the

divine condescension, and was sure that God's love still rested on men,

sinful as they were, but not even he could foresee the miracle of

long-suffering love in the Incarnate Jesus, and he had no power of

insight into the depths of the heart of God, that enabled him to

foresee the sufferings and death of Jesus. Till that supreme

self-sacrifice was a fact, it was inconceivable. Alas, now that it is a

fact, to how many hearts that need it most is it still incredible. But

passing all anticipation as it is, it is the root of all joy, the

ground of all hope, and to millions of sinful souls it is their only

refuge, and their sovereign example and pattern of life.

The Jewish thinker had a glimpse of a divine wisdom which delighted in

man, but he did not dream of the divine stooping to share in man's

sorrows, or of its so loving humanity as to take on itself its

limitations, not only to pity these as God's images, but to take part

of the same and to die. That man should minister to the divine delight

is wonderful, but that God should participate in man's grief passes

wonder. Thereby a new tenderness is given to the ancient

personification, and the august form of the divine Wisdom softens and

melts into the yet more august and tender likeness of the divine Love.

Nor is there only an adumbration of the redeeming love of Jesus as He

dwells among us here, but we have to remember that Jesus delights in

the sons of men when they love Him back again. All the sweet mysteries

of our loving communion with Him, and of His joy in our faith, love,

and obedience, all the secret treasures of His self-impartation to, and

abiding in, souls that open themselves to His entrance, are suggested

in that thought. We can minister to the joy of Jesus, and when He is

welcomed into any heart, and any man's love answers His, He sees of the

travail of His soul and is satisfied.

III. The call of the personal Word to each of us.

The Wisdom of Proverbs is portrayed in her queenly dignity, as calling

men to herself, and promising them the satisfaction of all their needs.

She describes herself that the description may draw men to her. The

self-revelation of God is His mightiest means of attracting men to Him.

We but need to know Him as He really is, in order to love Him and cling

to Him. A fairer form than hers has drawn near to us, and calls us with

tenderer invitations and better promises. The divine Wisdom has become

Man with sweet human hands and lips and eyes.' Such was His delight in

the sons of men that He emptied Himself of His glory, and finished a

greater work than that over which he presided when the mountains were

settled and the hills brought forth. Now He calls us, and His summons

is tenderer, and gives promise of loftier blessings than the call of

Wisdom was and did. She called to the simple, Come eat ye of my bread,

and drink of the wine which I have mingled.' He invites us: If any man

thirst, let him come unto Me and drink,' and He furnishes a table for

us, and calls us to eat of the bread which is His body broken for us,

and to drink of the wine which is His blood shed for many for the

remission of sins. She promises riches and honour, yea, durable riches

and righteousness.' His voice vibrates with sympathy, and calls the

weary and heavy laden, of whom she scarcely thinks, and offers to them

a gift, which may seem humble enough beside her more dazzling offers of

fruit, better than gold and revenues, better than choice silver, but

which come closer to universal wants, the gift of rest, which is really

what all men long for, and none but they who take His yoke upon them

possess. See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh,' for if they escaped

not when they refused her that spake through the Jewish thinker's lips

of old, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that

beseecheth us from heaven.' Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of

God, and it is in Him crucified that our weakness and our folly are

made strong and wise, and Wisdom's ancient promise is fulfilled: Whoso

findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord.'

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THE TWO-FOLD ASPECT OF THE DIVINE WORKING

The way of the Lord is strength to the upright: but destruction shall

be to the workers of iniquity.'--PROVERBS x. 29.

You observe that the words shall be,' in the last clause, are a

supplement. They are quite unnecessary, and in fact they rather hinder

the sense. They destroy the completeness of the antithesis between the

two halves of the verse. If you leave them out, and suppose that the

way of the Lord' is what is spoken of in both clauses, you get a far

deeper and fuller meaning. The way of the Lord is strength to the

upright; but destruction to the workers of iniquity.' It is the same

way which is strength to one man and ruin to another, and the moral

nature of the man determines which it shall be to him. That is a

penetrating word, which goes deep down. The unknown thinkers, to whose

keen insight into the facts of human life we are indebted for this Book

of Proverbs, had pondered for many an hour over the perplexed and

complicated fates of men, and they crystallised their reflections at

last in this thought. They have in it struck upon a principle which

explains a great many things, and teaches us a great many solemn

lessons. Let us try to get a hold of what is meant, and then to look at

some applications and illustrations of the principle.

I. First, then, let me just try to put clearly the meaning and bearing

of these words. The way of the Lord' means, sometimes in the Old

Testament and sometimes in the New, religion, considered as the way in

which God desires a man to walk. So we read in the New Testament of the

way' as the designation of the profession and practice of Christianity;

and the way of the Lord' is often used in the Psalms for the path which

He traces for man by His sovereign will.

But that, of course, is not the meaning here. Here it means, not the

road in which God prescribes that we should walk, but that road in

which He Himself walks; or, in other words, the sum of the divine

action, the solemn footsteps of God through creation, providence, and

history. His goings forth are from everlasting.' His way is in the

sea.' His way is in the sanctuary.' Modern language has a whole set of

phrases which mean the same thing as the Jew meant by the way of the

Lord,' only that God is left out. They talk about the current of

events,' the general tendency of things,' the laws of human affairs,'

and so on. I, for my part, prefer the old-fashioned Hebraism.' To many

modern thinkers the whole drift and tendency of human affairs affords

no sign of a person directing these. They hear the clashing and

grinding of opposing forces, the thunder as of falling avalanches, and

the moaning as of a homeless wind, but they hear the sounds of no

footfalls echoing down the ages. This ancient teacher had keener ears.

Well for us if we share his faith, and see in all the else distracting

mysteries of life and history, the way of the Lord!'

But not only does the expression point to the operation of a personal

divine Will in human affairs, but it conceives of that operation as

one, a uniform and consistent whole. However complicated, and sometimes

apparently contradictory, the individual events were, there was a unity

in them, and they all converged on one result. The writer does not

speak of ways,' but of the way,' as a grand unity. It is all one

continuous, connected, consistent mode of operation from beginning to

end.

The author of this proverb believed something more about the way of the

Lord. He believed that although it is higher than our way, still, a man

can know something about it; and that whatever may be enigmatical, and

sometimes almost heart-breaking, in it, one thing is sure--that as we

have been taught of late years in another dialect, it makes for

righteousness.' Clouds and darkness are round about Him,' but the Old

Testament writers never falter in the conviction, which was the soul of

all their heroism and the life blood of their religion, that in the

hearts of the clouds and darkness, Justice and judgment are the

foundations of His throne.' The way of the Lord, says this old thinker,

is hard to understand, very complicated, full of all manner of

perplexities and difficulties, and yet on the whole the clear drift and

tendency of the whole thing is discernible, and it is this: it is all

on the side of good. Everything that is good, and everything that does

good, is an ally of God' s, and may be sure of the divine favour and of

the divine blessing resting upon it.

And just because that is so clear, the other side is as true; the same

way, the same set of facts, the same continuous stream of tendency,

which is all with and for every form of good, is all against every form

of evil. Or, as one of the Psalmists puts the same idea, The eyes of

the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry.

The face of the Lord is against them that do evil.' The same eye that

beams in lambent love on the righteous' burns terribly to the evil

doer. The face of the Lord' means the side of the divine nature which

is turned to us, and is manifested by His self-revealing activity, so

that the expression comes near in meaning to the way of the Lord,' and

the thought in both cases is the same, that by the eternal law of His

being, God's actions must all be for the good and against the evil.

They do not change, but a man's character determines which aspect of

them he sees and has to experience. God's way has a bright side and a

dark. You may take which you like. You can lay hold of the thing by

whichever handle you choose. On the one side it is convex, on the other

concave. You can approach it from either side, as you please. The way

of the Lord' must touch your way.' Your cannot alter that necessity.

Your path must either run parallel in the same direction with His, and

then all His power will be an impulse to bear you onward; or it must

run in the opposite direction, and then all His power will be for your

ruin, and the collision with it will crush you as a ship is crushed

like an egg-shell, when it strikes an iceberg. You can choose which of

these shall befall you.

And there is a still more striking beauty about the saying, if we give

the full literal meaning to the word strength.' It is used by our

translators, I suppose, in a somewhat archaic and peculiar

signification, namely, that of a stronghold. At all events the Hebrew

means a fortress, a place where men may live safe and secure; and if we

take that meaning, the passage gains greatly in force and beauty. This

way of the Lord' is like a castle for the shelter of the shelterless

good man, and behind those strong bulwarks he dwells impregnable and

safe. Just as a fortress is a security to the garrison, and a frowning

menace to the besiegers or enemies, so the name of the Lord is a strong

tower,' and the way of the Lord' is a fortress. If you choose to take

shelter within it, its massive walls are your security and your joy. If

you do not, they frown down grimly upon you, a menace and a terror. How

differently, eight hundred years ago, Normans and Saxons looked at the

square towers that were built all over England to bridle the

inhabitants! To the one they were the sign of the security of their

dominion; to the other they were the sign of their slavery and

submission. Torture and prison-houses they might become; frowning

portents they necessarily were. The way of the Lord' is a castle

fortress to the man that does good, and to the man that does evil it is

a threatening prison, which may become a hell of torture. It is ruin to

the workers of iniquity.' I pray you, settle for yourself which of

these it is to be to you.

II. And now let me say a word or two by way of application, or

illustration, of these principles that are here.

First, let me remind you how the order of the universe is such that

righteousness is life and sin is death. This universe and the fortunes

of men are complicated and strange. It is hard to trace any laws,

except purely physical ones, at work. Still, on the whole, things do

work so that goodness is blessedness, and badness is ruin. That is, of

course, not always true in regard of outward things, but even about

them it is more often and obviously true than we sometimes recognise.

Hence all nations have their proverbs, embodying the generalised

experience of centuries, and asserting that, on the whole, honesty is

the best policy,' and that it is always a blunder to do wrong. What

modern phraseology calls laws of nature,' the Bible calls the way of

the Lord'; and the manner in which these help a man who conforms to

them, and hurt or kill him if he does not, is an illustration on a

lower level of the principle of our text. This tremendous congeries of

powers in the midst of which we live does not care whether we go with

it or against it, only if we do the one we shall prosper, and if we do

the other we shall very likely be made an end of. Try to stop a train,

and it will run over you and murder you; get into it, and it will carry

you smoothly along. Our lives are surrounded with powers, which will

carry our messages and be our slaves if we know how to command nature

by obeying it, or will impassively strike us dead if we do not.

Again, in our physical life, as a rule, virtue makes strength, sin

brings punishment. Riotous living' makes diseased bodies. Sins in the

flesh are avenged in the flesh, and there is no need for a miracle to

bring it about that he who sows to the flesh shall of the flesh reap

corruption.' God entrusts the punishment of the breach of the laws of

temperance and morality in the body to the natural' operation of such

breach. The inevitable connection between sins against the body and

disease in the body, is an instance of the way of the Lord--the same

set of principles and facts--being strength to one man and destruction

to another. Hundreds of young men in Manchester--some of whom are

listening to me now, no doubt--are killing themselves, or at least are

ruining their health, by flying in the face of the plain laws of purity

and self-control. They think that they must have their fling,' and obey

their instincts,' and so on. Well, if they must, then another must'

will insist upon coming into play--and they must reap as they have

sown, and drink as they have brewed, and the grim saying of this book

about profligate young men will be fulfilled in many of them. His bones

are full of the iniquity of his youth, which shall lie down with him in

the grave.' Be not deceived, God is not mocked, and His way avenges

bodily transgressions by bodily sufferings.

And then, in higher regions, on the whole, goodness makes blessedness,

and evil brings ruin. All the powers of God's universe, and all the

tenderness of God's heart are on the side of the man that does right.

The stars in their courses fight against the man that fights against

Him; and on the other side, in yielding thyself to the will of God and

following the dictates of His commandments, Thou shalt make a league

with the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field shall be at

peace with thee.' All things serve the soul that serves God, and all

war against him who wars against his Maker. The way of the Lord cannot

but further and help all who love and serve Him. For them all things

must work together for good. By the very laws of God's own being, which

necessarily shape all His actions, the whole stream of tendency without

us makes for righteousness.' In the one course of life we go with the

stream of divine activity which pours from the throne of God. In the

other we are like men trying to row a boat up Niagara. All the rush of

the mighty torrent will batter us back. Our work will be doomed to

destruction, and ourselves to shame. For ever and ever to be good is to

be well. An eternal truth lies in the facts that the same word good'

means pleasant and right, and that sin and sorrow are both called

evil.' All sin is self-inflicted sorrow, and every rogue is a

roundabout fool.' So ask yourselves the question: Is my life in harmony

with, or opposed to, these omnipotent laws which rule the whole field

of life?' Still further, this same fact of the two-fold aspect and

operation of the one way of the Lord will be made yet more evident in

the future. It becomes us to speak very reverently and reticently about

the matter, but I can conceive it possible that the one manifestation

of God in a future life may be in substance the same, and yet that it

may produce opposite effects upon oppositely disposed souls. According

to the old mystical illustration, the same heat that melts wax hardens

clay, and the same apocalypse of the divine nature in another world may

to one man be life and joy, and to another man may be terror and

despair. I do not dwell upon that; it is far too awful a thing for us

to speak about to one another, but it is worth your taking to heart

when you are indulging in easy anticipations that of course God is

merciful and will bless and save everybody after he dies. Perhaps--I do

not go any further than a perhaps--perhaps God cannot, and perhaps if a

man has got himself into such a condition as it is possible for a man

to get into, perhaps, like light upon a diseased eye, the purest beam

may be the most exquisite pain, and the natural instinct may be to call

upon the rocks and the hills to fall upon them' and cover them up in a

more genial darkness from that Face, to see which should be life and

blessedness.

People speak of future rewards and punishments as if they were given

and inflicted by simple and divine volition, and did not stand in any

necessary connection with holiness on the one hand or with sin on the

other. I do not deny that some portion of both bliss and sorrow may be

of such a character. But there is a very important and wide region in

which our actions here must automatically bring consequences hereafter

of joy or sorrow, without any special retributive action of God' s.

We have only to keep in view one or two things about the future which

we know to be true, and we shall see this. Suppose a man with his

memory of all his past life perfect, and his conscience stimulated to

greater sensitiveness and clearer judgment, and all opportunities ended

of gratifying tastes and appetites, whose food is in this world, while

yet the soul has become dependent on them for ease and comfort, What

more is needed to make a hell? And the supposition is but the statement

of a fact. We seem to forget much; but when the waters are drained off

all the lost things will be found at the bottom. Conscience gets dulled

and sophisticated here. But the icy cold of death will wake it up, and

the new position will give new insight into the true character of our

actions. You see how often a man at the end of life has his eyes

cleared to see his faults. But how much more will that be the case

hereafter! When the rush of passion is past, and you are far enough

from your life to view it as a whole, holding it at arm's length, you

will see better what it looks like. There is nothing improbable in

supposing that inclinations and tastes which have been nourished for a

lifetime may survive the possibility of indulging them in another life,

as they often do in this; and what can be worse than such a thirst for

one drop of water, which never can be tasted more? These things are

certain, and no more is needed to make sin produce, by necessary

consequence, misery, and ruin; while similarly, goodness brings joy,

peace, and blessing.

But again, the self-revelation of God has this same double aspect.

The way of the Lord' may mean His process by which He reveals His

character. Every truth concerning Him may be either a joy or a terror

to men. All His attributes' are builded into a strong tower, into which

the righteous runneth, and is safe,' or else they are builded into a

prison and torture-house. So the thought of God may either be a happy

and strengthening one, or an unwelcome one. I remembered God, and was

troubled' says one Psalmist. What an awful confession--that the thought

of God disturbed him! The thought of God to some of us is a very

unwelcome one, as unwelcome as the thought of a detective to a company

of thieves. Is not that dreadful? Music is a torture to some ears: and

there are people who have so alienated their hearts and wills from God

that the Name which should be their dearest faith' is not only their

ghastliest doubt,' but their greatest pain. O brethren, the thought of

God and all that wonderful complex of mighty attributes and beauties

which make His Name should be our delight, the key to all treasures,

the end of all sorrows, our light in darkness, our life in death, our

all in all. It is either that to us, or it is something that we would

fain forget. Which is it to you?

Especially the Gospel has this double aspect. Our text speaks of the

distinction between the righteous and evil doers; but how to pass from

the one class to the other, it does not tell us. The Gospel is the

answer to that question. It tells us that though we are all workers of

iniquity,' and must, therefore, if such a text as this were the last

word to be spoken on the matter, share in the ruin which smites the

opponent of the divine will, we may pass from that class; and by simple

faith in Him who died on the Cross for all workers of iniquity, may

become of those righteous on whose side God works in all His way, who

have all His attributes drawn up like an embattled army in their

defence, and have His mighty name for their refuge.

As the very crown of the ways of God, the work of Christ and the record

of it in the Gospel have most eminently this double aspect. God meant

nothing but the salvation of the whole world when He sent us this

Gospel. His way' therein was pure, unmingled, universal love. We can

make that great message untroubled blessing by simply accepting it.

Nothing more is needed but to take God at His word, and to close with

His sincere and earnest invitation. Then Christ's work becomes the

fortress in which we are guarded from sin and guilt, from the arrows of

conscience, and the fiery darts of temptation. But if not accepted,

then it is not passive, it is not nothing. If rejected, it does more

harm to a man than anything else can, just because, if accepted, it

would have done him more good. The brighter the light, the darker the

shadow. The pillar which symbolised the presence of God sent down

influences on either side; to the trembling crowd of the Israelites on

the one hand, to the pursuing ranks of the Egyptians on the other; and

though the pillar was one, opposite effects streamed from it, and it

was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these.'

Everything depends on which side of the pillar you choose to see. The

ark of God, which brought dismay and death among false gods and their

worshippers, brought blessing into the humble house of Obed Edom, the

man of Gath, with whom it rested for three months before it was set in

its place in the city of David. That which is meant to be the savour of

life unto life must either be that or the savour of death unto death.

Jesus Christ is something to each of us. For you who have heard His

name ever since you were children, your relation to Him settles your

condition and your prospects, and moulds your character. Either He is

for you the tried corner-stone, the sure foundation, on which whosoever

builds will not be confounded, or He is the stone of stumbling, against

which whosoever stumbles will be broken, and which will crush to powder

whomsoever it falls upon, This Child is set for the rise' or for the

fall of all who hear His name. He leaves no man at the level at which

He found him, but either lifts him up nearer to God, and purity and

joy, or sinks him into an ever-descending pit of darkening separation

from all these. Which is He to you? Something He must be--your strength

or your ruin. If you commit your souls to Him in humble faith, He will

be your peace, your life, your Heaven. If you turn from His offered

grace, He will be your pain, your death, your torture. What maketh

Heaven, that maketh hell.' Which do you choose Him to be?

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THE MANY-SIDED CONTRAST OF WISDOM AND FOLLY

Whoso loveth instruction loveth knowledge: but he that hateth reproof

is brutish. 2. A good man obtaineth favour of the Lord: but a man of

wicked devices will he condemn. 3. A man shall not be established by

wickedness; but the root of the righteous shall not be moved. 4. A

virtuous woman is a crown to her husband: but she that maketh ashamed

is as rottenness in his bones. 5. The thoughts of the righteous are

right: but the counsels of the wicked are deceit. 6. The words of the

wicked are to lie in wait for blood: but the mouth of the upright shall

deliver them. 7. The wicked are overthrown, and are not: but the house

of the righteous shall stand. 8. A man shall be commended according to

his wisdom: but he that is of a perverse heart shall be despised. 9. He

that is despised, and hath a servant, is better than he that honoureth

himself, and lacketh bread. 10. A righteous man regardeth the life of

his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel. 11. He that

tilleth his land shall be satisfied with bread: but he that followeth

vain persons is void of understanding. 12. The wicked desireth the net

of evil men: but the root of the righteous yieldeth fruit. 13. The

wicked is snared by the transgression of his lips: but the just shall

come out of trouble. 14. A man shall be satisfied with good by the

fruit of his mouth; and the recompence of a man's hands shall be

rendered unto him. 15. The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but

he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.'--PROVERBS xii. 1-15.

The verses of the present passage are a specimen of the main body of

the Book of Proverbs. They are not a building, but a heap. The stones

seldom have any mortar between them, and connection or progress is for

the most part sought in vain. But one great antithesis runs through the

whole--the contrast of wisdom or righteousness with folly or

wickedness. The compiler or author is never weary of setting out that

opposition in all possible lights. It is, in his view, the one

difference worth noting between men, and it determines their whole

character and fortunes. The book traverses with keen observation all

the realm of life, and everywhere finds confirmation of its great

principle that goodness is wisdom and sin folly.

There is something extremely impressive in this continual reiteration

of that contrast. As we read, we feel as if, after all, there were

nothing in the world but it and its results. That profound sense of the

existence and far-reaching scope of the division of men into two

classes is not the least of the benefits which a thoughtful study of

Proverbs brings to us. In this lesson it is useless to attempt to

classify the verses. Slight traces of grouping appear here and there;

but, on the whole, we have a set of miscellaneous aphorisms turning on

the great contrast, and setting in various lights the characters and

fates of the righteous and the wicked.

The first mark of difference is the opposite feeling about discipline.

If a man is wise, he will love knowledge'; and if he loves knowledge,

he will love the means to it, and therefore will not kick against

correction. That is another view of trials from the one which

inculcates devout submission to a Father. It regards only the benefits

to ourselves. If we want to be taught anything, we shall not flinch

from the rod. There must be pains undergone in order to win knowledge

of any sort, and the man who rebels against these shows that he had

rather be comfortable and ignorant than wise. A pupil who will not

stand having his exercises corrected will not learn his faults. On the

other hand, hating reproof is brutish' in the most literal sense; for

it is the characteristic of animals that they do not understand the

purpose of pain, and never advance because they do not. Men can grow

because they can submit to discipline; beasts cannot improve because,

except partially and in a few cases, they cannot accept correction.

The first proverb deals with wisdom or goodness in its inner source;

namely, a docile disposition. The two next deal with its consequences.

It secures God's favour, while its opposite is condemned; and then, as

a consequence of this, the good man is established and the wicked swept

away. The manifestations of God's favour and its opposite are not to be

thrown forward to a future life. Continuously the sunshine of divine

love falls on the one man, and already the other is condemned. It needs

some strength of faith to look through the shows of prosperity often

attending plain wickedness, and believe that it is always a blunder to

do wrong.

But a moderate experience of life will supply many instances of

prosperous villainy in trade and politics which melted away like mist.

The shore is strewn with wrecks, dashed to pieces because righteousness

did not steer. Every exchange gives examples in plenty. How many

seemingly solid structures built on wrong every man has seen in his

lifetime crumble like the cloud masses which the wind piles in the sky

and then dissipates! The root of the righteous is in God, and therefore

he is firm. The contrast is like that of Psalm i.--between the tree

with strong roots and waving greenery, and the chaff, rootless, and

therefore whirled out of the threshing-floor.

The universal contrast is next applied to women; and in accordance with

the subordinate position they held in old days, the bearing of her

goodness is principally regarded as affecting her husband. That does

not cover the whole ground, of course. But wherever there is a true

marriage, the wife will not think that woman's rights are infringed

because one chief issue of her beauty of virtue is the honour and joy

it reflects upon him who has her heart. A virtuous woman' is not only

one who possesses the one virtue to which the phrase has been so

miserably confined, but who is a woman of strength'--no doll or

plaything, but

A perfect woman, nobly planned

To warn, to comfort, and command.'

The gnawing misery of being fastened like two dogs in a leash to one

who causes shame' is vividly portrayed by that strong figure, that she

is like rottenness in his bones,' eating away strength, and inflicting

disfigurement and torture.

Then come a pair of verses describing the inward and outward work of

the two kinds of men as these affect others. The former verses dealt

with their effects on the actors; the present, with their bearing on

others. Inwardly, the good man has thoughts which scrupulously keep the

balance true and are just to his fellows, while the wicked plans to

deceive for his own profit. When thoughts are translated into speech,

deceit bears fruit in words which are like ambushes of murderers,

laying traps to destroy, while the righteous man's words are like

angels of deliverance to the unsuspecting who are ready to fall into

the snare. Selfishness, which is the root of wickedness, will be

cruelty and injustice when necessary for its ends. The man who is wise

because God is his centre and aim will be merciful and helpful. The

basis of philanthropy is religion. The solemn importance attached to

speech is observable. Words can slay as truly as swords. Now that the

press has multiplied the power of speech, and the world is buzzing with

the clatter of tongues, we all need to lay to heart the

responsibilities and magic power of spoken and printed words, and to

set a watch on the door of our lips.'

Then follow a couple of verses dealing with the consequences to men

themselves of their contrasted characters. The first of these (verse 7)

recurs to the thought of verse 3, but with a difference. Not only the

righteous himself, but his house, shall be established. The solidarity

of the family and the entail of goodness are strongly insisted on in

the Old Testament, though limitations are fully recognised. If a good

man's son continues his father's character, he will prolong his

father's blessings; and in normal conditions, a parent's wisdom passes

on to his children. Something is wrong when, as is so often the case,

it does not; and it is not always the children's fault.

The overthrow of the wicked is set in striking contrast with their

plots to overthrow others. Their mischief comes back, like an

Australian boomerang, to the hand that flings it; and contrariwise,

delivering others is a sure way of establishing one's self. Exceptions

there are, for the world-scheme is too complicated to be condensed into

a formula; but all proverbs speak of the average usual results of

virtue and vice, and those of this book do the same. Verse 8 asserts

that, on the whole, honour attends goodness, and contempt wickedness.

Of course, companions in dissipation extol each other's vices, and

launch the old threadbare sneers at goodness. But if wisdom were not

set uppermost in men's secret judgment, there would be no hypocrites,

and their existence proves the truth of the proverb.

Verse 9 seems suggested by despised' in verse 8. There are two kinds of

contempt--one which brands sin deservedly, one which vulgarly despises

everybody who is not rich. A man need not mind, though his modest

household is treated with contempt, if quiet righteousness reigns in

it. It is better to be contented with little, and humble in a lowly

place, than to be proud and hungry, as many were in the writer's time

and since. A foolish world set on wealth may despise, but its contempt

breaks no bones. Self-conceit is poor diet.

This seems to be the first of a little cluster of proverbs bearing on

domestic life. It prefers modest mediocrity of station, such as Agur

desired. Its successor shows how the contrasted qualities come out in

the two men's relation to their domestic animals. Goodness sweeps a

wide circle touching the throne of God and the stall of the cattle. It

was not Coleridge who found out that He prayeth best who loveth best'

but this old proverb-maker; and he could speak the thought without the

poet's exaggeration, which robs his expression of it of half its value.

The original says knoweth the soul' which may indeed mean, regardeth

the life' but rather seems to suggest sympathetic interest in leading

to an understanding of the dumb creature, which must precede all wise

care for its well-being. It is a part of religion to try to enter into

the mysterious feelings of our humble dependants in farmyard and

stable. On the other hand, for want of such sympathetic interest, even

when the wicked' means to be kind, he does harm; or the word rendered

tender mercies' may here mean the feelings (literally, bowels') which,

in their intense selfishness, are cruel even to animals.

Verse 11 has no connection with the preceding, unless the link is

common reference to home life and business. It contrasts the sure

results of honest industry with the folly of speculation. The Revised

Version margin vain things' is better than the text vain persons,'

which would give no antithesis to the patient tilling of the first

clause. That verse would make an admirable motto to be stretched across

the Stock Exchange, and like places on both sides of the Atlantic. How

many ruined homes and heart-broken wives witness in America and England

to its truth! The vulgar English proverb, What comes over the Devil's

back goes under his belly,' says the same thing. The only way to get

honest wealth is to work for it. Gambling in all its forms is rank

folly.

So the next proverb (verse 12) continues the same thought, and puts it

in a somewhat difficult phrase. It goes a little deeper than the

former, showing that the covetousness which follows after vain things,

is really wicked lusting for unrighteous gain. The net of evildoer's is

better taken as in the margin (Rev. Ver.) prey' or spoil,' and the

meaning seems to be as just stated. Such hankering for riches, no

matter how obtained, or such envying of the booty which admittedly has

been won by roguery, is a mark of the wicked. How many professing

church members have known that feeling in thinking of the millions of

some railway king! Would they like the proverb to be applied to them?

The contrast to this is the root of the righteous yields fruit,' or

shoots forth,' We have heard (verse 3) that it shall never be moved,

being fixed in God; now we are told that it will produce all that is

needful. A life rooted in God will unfold into all necessary good,

which will be better than the spoil of the wicked. There are two ways

of getting on--to struggle and fight and trample down rivals; one, to

keep near God and wait for him. Ye fight and war; ye have not, because

ye ask not.'

The next two proverbs have in common a reference to the effect of

speech upon the speaker. In the transgression of the lips is an evil

snare'; that is, sinful words ensnare their utterer, and whoever else

he harms, he himself is harmed most. The reflex influence on character

of our utterances is not present to us, as it should be. They leave

stains on lips and heart. Thoughts expressed are more definite and

permanent thereby. A vicious thought clothed in speech has new power

over the speaker. If we would escape from that danger, we must be

righteous, and speak righteousness; and then the same cause will deepen

our convictions of whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.'

Verse 14 insists on this opposite side of the truth. Good words will

bring forth fruit, which will satisfy the speaker, because, whatever

effects his words may have on others, they will leave strengthened

goodness and love of it in himself. If the house be worthy, your peace

shall rest upon it; if not, it shall return to you again.' That

reaction of words on oneself is but one case of the universal law of

consequences coming back on us. We are the architects of our own

destinies. Every deed has an immortal life, and returns, either like a

raven or a dove, to the man who sent it out on its flight. It comes

back either croaking with blood on its beak, or cooing with an olive

branch in its mouth. All life is at once sowing and reaping. A harvest

comes in which retribution will be even more entire and accurate.

The last proverb of the passage gives a familiar antithesis, and

partially returns to the thought of verse 1. The fool has no standard

of conduct but his own notions, and is absurdly complacent as to all

his doings. The wise seeks better guidance than his own, and is docile,

because he is not so ridiculously sure of his infallibility. No type of

weak wickedness is more abominable to the proverbialist than that of

pert self-conceit, which knows so little that it thinks it knows

everything, and is as untameable as a fly.' But in the wisest sense, it

is true that a mark of folly is self-opinionativeness; that a man who

has himself for teacher has a fool for scholar; that the test of wisdom

is willingness to be taught; and, especially, that to bring a docile,

humble spirit to the Source of all wisdom, and to ask counsel of God,

is the beginning of true insight, and that the self-sufficiency which

is the essence of sin, is never more fatal than when it is ignorant of

guilt, and therefore spurns a Saviour.

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THE POOR RICH AND THE RICH POOR

There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing; there is that

maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches.'--PROVERBS xiii. 7.

Two singularly-contrasted characters are set in opposition here. One,

that of a man who lives like a millionaire and is a pauper; another,

that of a man who lives like a pauper and is rich. The latter

character, that of a man who hides and hoards his wealth, was, perhaps,

more common in the days when this collection of Proverbs was put

together, because in all ill-governed countries, to show wealth is a

short way to get rid of it. But they have their modern representatives.

We who live in a commercial community have seen many a blown-out bubble

soaring and glittering, and then collapsing into a drop of soapsuds,

and on the other hand, we are always hearing of notes and bank-books

being found stowed away in some wretched hovel where a miser has died.

Now, I do not suppose that the author of this proverb attached any kind

of moral to it in his own mind. It is simply a jotting of an

observation drawn from a wide experience; and if he meant to teach any

lesson by it, I suppose it was nothing more than that in regard to

money, as to other things, we should avoid extremes, and should try to

show what we are, and to be what we seem. But whilst thus I do not take

it that there is any kind of moral or religious lesson in the writer's

mind, I may venture, perhaps, to take this saying as being a

picturesque illustration, putting in vivid fashion certain great truths

which apply in all regions of life, and which find their highest

application in regard to Christianity, and our relation to Jesus

Christ. There, too, there is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath

nothing; and there is that maketh himself poor, and yet'--or one might,

perhaps, say therefore--hath great riches.' It is from that point of

view that I wish to look at the words at this time. I must begin with

recalling to your mind, I. Our universal poverty.

Whatever a man may think about himself, however he may estimate himself

and conceit himself, there stand out two salient facts, the fact of

universal dependence, and the fact of universal sinfulness, which ought

to bear into every heart the consciousness of this poverty. A word or

two about each of these two facts.

First, the fact of universal dependence. Now, wise men and deep

thinkers have found a very hard problem in the question of how it is

possible that there should be an infinite God and a finite universe

standing, as it were, over against Him. I am not going to trouble you

with the all-but-just-succeeding answers to that great problem which

the various systems of thinking have given. These lie apart from my

present purpose. But what I would point out is that, whatever else may

be dark and difficult about the co-existence of these two, the infinite

God and the finite universe, this at least is sun-clear, that the

creature depends absolutely for everything on that infinite Creator.

People talk sometimes, and we are all too apt to think, as if God had

made the world and left it. And we are all too apt to think that,

however we may owe the origination of our own personal existence to a

divine act, the act was done when we began to be, and the life was

given as a gift that could be separated from the Bestower. But that is

not the state of the case at all. The real fact is that life is only

continued because of the continued operation on every living thing,

just as being is only continued by reason of the continued operation on

every existing thing, of the Divine Power. In Him we live,' and the

life is the result of the perpetual impartation from Himself in whom

all things consist,' according to the profound word of the Apostle.

Their being depends on their union with Him. If it were possible to cut

a sunbeam in two, so that the further half of it should be separated

from its vital union with the great central fire from which it rushed

long, long ago, that further half would pale into darkness. And if you

cut the connection between God and the creature, the creature shrivels

into nothing. By Him the spring buds around us unfold themselves; by

Him all things are. So, at the very foundation of our being there lies

absolute dependence.

In like manner, all that we call faculties, capacities, and the like,

are, in a far deeper sense than the conventional use of the word gift'

implies, bestowments from Him. The Old Testament goes to the root of

the matter when, speaking of the artistic and aesthetic skill of the

workers in the fine arts in the Tabernacle, it says, the Spirit of the

Lord' taught Bezaleel; and when, even in regard to the brute strength

of Samson--surely the strangest hero of faith that ever existed--it

says that when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him,' into his giant

hands there was infused the strength by which he tore the lion's jaws

asunder. In like manner, all the faculties that men possess they have

simply because He has given them. What hast thou that thou hast not

received? If thou hast received, why dost thou boast thyself?' So there

is a great psalm that gathers everything that makes up human life, and

traces it all to God, when it says, They shall be abundantly satisfied

with the fatness of Thy house,' for from God comes all that sustains

us; Thou shalt make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures,' for from

God comes all that gladdens us; with Thee is the fountain of life,' for

from Him flow all the tiny streams that make the life of all that live;

in Thy light shall we see light,' for every power of perceiving, and

all grace and lustre of purity, owe their source to Him. As well, then,

might the pitcher boast itself of the sparkling water that it only

holds, as well might the earthen jar plume itself on the treasure that

has been deposited in it, as we make ourselves rich because of the

riches that we have received. Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,

neither let the mighty man glory in his strength. Let not the rich man

glory in his riches; but he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.'

Then, turn for a moment to the second of the facts on which this

universal poverty depends, and that is the fact of universal

sinfulness. Ah! there is one thing that is our own--

If any power we have, it is to will.'

We have that strange faculty, which nobody has ever thoroughly

explained yet, but which we all know to exist, of wrenching ourselves

so far away from God, in whom we live and move and have our being,'

that we can make our thoughts and ways, not merely lower than, but

contradictory of, and antagonistic to, His thoughts, and His ways.

Conscience tells us, and we all know it, that we are the causes of our

own actions, though from Him come the powers by which we do them. The

electricity comes from the central powerstation, but it depends on us

what sort of wheels we make it drive, and what kind of work we set it

to do. Make all allowances you like for circumstances--what they call

nowadays environment,' by which formidable word some people seem to

think that they have explained away a great many difficulties--make all

allowances you like for inheritance--what they now call heredity,' by

which other magic word people seem to think that they may largely

obliterate the sense of responsibility and sin--allow as much as you

like, in reason, for these, and there remains the indestructible

consciousness in every man, I did it, and it was my fault that I did

it; and the moral guilt remains.'

So, then, there are these two things, universal dependence and

universal sinfulness, and on them is built the declaration of universal

poverty. Duty is debt. Everybody knows that the two words come from the

same root. What we ought is what we owe. We all owe an obedience which

none of us has rendered. Ten thousand talents is the debt and--they had

nothing to pay.' We are like bankrupts that begin business with a

borrowed capital, by reason of our absolute dependence; and so manage

their concerns as to find themselves inextricably entangled in a

labyrinth of obligations which they cannot discharge. We are all

paupers. And so I come to the second point, and that is--

II. The poor rich man.

There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.' That

describes accurately the type of man of whom there are thousands; of

whom there are dozens listening to me at this moment; who ignores

dependence and is not conscious of sin, and so struts about in

self-complacent satisfaction with himself, and knows nothing of his

true condition. There is nothing more tragic--and so it would be seen

to be if it were not so common--than that a man, laden, as we each of

us are, with a burden of evil that we cannot get rid of, should yet

conceit himself to possess merits, virtues, graces, that ought to

secure for him the admiration of his fellows, or, at least, to exempt

him from their censure, and which he thinks, when he thinks about it at

all, may perhaps secure for him the approbation of God. The

deceitfulness of sin' is one of its mightiest powers. There is nothing

that so blinds a man to the real moral character of actions as that

obstinate self-complacency which approves of a thing because it is

mine. You condemn in other people the very things you do yourself. You

see all their ugliness in them; you do not recognise it when it is your

deed. Many of you have never ventured upon a careful examination and

appraisement of your own moral and religious character. You durst not,

for you are afraid that it would turn out badly. So, like some

insolvent who has not the courage to face the facts, you take refuge in

defective bookkeeping, and think that that is as good as being solvent.

Then you have far too low a standard, and one of the main reasons why

you have so low a standard is just because the sins that you do have

dulled your consciences, and like the Styrian peasants that eat

arsenic, the poison does not poison you, and you do not feel yourself

any the worse for it. Dear brethren! these are very rude things for me

to say to you. I am saying them to myself as much as to you, and I

would to God that you would listen to them, not because I say them, but

because they are true. The great bulk of us know our own moral

characters just as little as we know the sound of our own voices. I

suppose if you could hear yourself speak you would say, I never knew

that my voice sounded like that.' And I am quite sure that many of you,

if the curtain could be drawn aside which is largely woven out of the

black yarn of your own evil thoughts, and you could see yourselves as

in a mirror, you would say, I had no notion that I looked like that.'

There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.'

Ay! and more than that. The making of yourself rich is the sure way to

prevent yourself from ever being so. We see that in all other regions

of life. If a student says to himself, Oh! I know all that subject,'

the chances are that he will not get it up any more; and the further

chance is that he will be ploughed' when the examination-day comes. If

the artist stands before the picture, and says to himself, Well done,

that is the realisation of my ideal!' he will paint no more anything

worth looking at. And in any department, when a man says Lo! I have

attained,' then he ceases to advance.

Now, bring all that to bear upon religion, upon Christ and His

salvation, upon our own spiritual and religious and moral condition.

The sense of imperfection is the salt of approximation to perfection.

And the man that says I am rich' is condemning himself to poverty and

pauperism. If you do not know your need, you will not go to look for

the supply of it. If you fancy yourselves to be quite well, though a

mortal disease has gripped you, you will take no medicine, nor have

recourse to any physician. If you think that you have enough good to

show for man's judgment and for God' s, and have not been convinced of

your dependence and your sinfulness, then Jesus Christ will be very

little to you, and His great work as the Redeemer and Saviour of His

people from their sins will be nothing to you. And so you will condemn

yourselves to have nothing unto the very end.

I believe that this generation needs few things more than it needs a

deepened consciousness of the reality of sin and of the depth and

damnable nature of it. It is because people feel so little of the

burden of their transgression that they care so little for that gentle

Hand that lifts away their burden. It is because from much of popular

religion--and, alas! that I should have to say it, from much of popular

preaching--there has vanished the deep wholesome sense of poverty,

that, from so much of popular religion, and preaching too, there has

faded away the central light of the Gospel, the proclamation of the

Cross by which is taken away the sin of the whole world.

So, lastly, my text brings before us--

III. The rich poor man.

There is that maketh himself poor and yet'--or, as varied, the

expression is, therefore hath great riches.' Jesus Christ has lifted

the thoughts in my text into the very region into which I am trying to

bring them, when in the first of all the Beatitudes, as they are

called, He opened His mouth and said, Blessed are the poor in spirit,

for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.' Poor, and therefore an owner of a

kingdom! Now I need not, at this stage of my sermon, insist upon the

fact that that consciousness of poverty is the only fitting attitude

for any of us to take up in view of the two facts with which I started,

the fact of our dependence and the fact of our sinfulness. What

absurdity it seems for a man about whom these two things are true,

that, as I said, he began with a borrowed capital, and has only

incurred greater debts in his transactions, there should be any

foothold left in his own estimation on which he can stand and claim to

be anything but the pauper that he is. Oh! brethren, of all the

hallucinations that we put upon ourselves in trying to believe that

things are as we wish, there is none more subtle, more obstinate, more

deeply dangerous than this, that a man full of evil should be so

ignorant of his evil as to say, like that Pharisee in our Lord's

parable, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are. I give tithes

. . . I pray . . . I am this, that, and the other thing; not like that

wretched publican over there.' Yes, this is the fit attitude for

us,--He would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven.'

Then let me remind you that this wholesome recognition of facts about

ourselves as they are is the sure way to possess the wealth. Of course,

it is possible for a man by some mighty influence or other brought to

bear upon him, to see himself as God sees him, and then, if there is

nothing more than that, he is tortured with the sorrow that worketh

death.' Judas went out and hanged himself'; Peter went out and wept

bitterly.' The one was sent to his own place,' wherever that was; the

other was sent foremost of the Twelve. If you see your poverty, let

self-distrust be the nadir, the lowest point, and let faith be the

complementary high point, the zenith. The rebound from self-distrust to

trust in Christ is that which makes the consciousness of poverty the

condition of receiving wealth.

And what wealth it is!--the wealth of a peaceful conscience, of a quiet

heart, of lofty aims, of a pure mind, of strength according to our

need, of an immortal hope, of a treasure in the heavens that faileth

not, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt; where thieves do not

break through nor steal.' Blessed be God! the more we have the riches

of glory in Christ Jesus, the more shall we feel that we have nothing,

and that all is His, and none of it ours. And so, as the rivers run in

the valleys, and the high mountain-tops are dry and barren, the grace

which makes us rich will run in the low ground of our conscious

humiliation and nothingness.

Dear brother! do you estimate yourself as you are? Have you taken stock

of yourself? Have you got away from the hallucination of possessing

wealth? Has your sense of need led you to cease from trust in yourself,

and to put all your trust in Jesus Christ? Have you taken the wealth

which He freely gives to all who sue in forma pauperis? He does not ask

you to bring anything but debts and sins, emptiness and weakness, and

penitent faith. He will strengthen the weakness, fill the emptiness,

forgive the sins, cancel the debts, and make you rich toward God.' I

beseech you to listen to Him, speaking from heaven, and taking up the

strain of this text: Because thou sayest I am rich, and increased with

goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art

wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, I counsel thee

to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich.' And

then you will be of those blessed poor ones who are rich through faith,

and heirs of the Kingdom.'

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THE TILLAGE OF THE POOR

Much food is in the tillage of the poor.'--PROVERBS xiii. 23.

Palestine was a land of small peasant proprietors, and the institution

of the Jubilee was intended to prevent the acquisition of large estates

by any Israelite. The consequence, as intended, was a level of modest

prosperity. It was the tillage of the poor,' the careful, diligent

husbandry of the man who had only a little patch of land to look after,

that filled the storehouses of the Holy Land. Hence the proverb of our

text arose. It preserves the picture of the economical conditions in

which it originated, and it is capable of, and is intended to have, an

application to all forms and fields of work. In all it is true that the

bulk of the harvested results are due, not to the large labours of the

few, but to the minute, unnoticed toils of the many. Small service is

true service, and the aggregate of such produces large crops. Spade

husbandry gets most out of the ground. The labourer's allotment of half

an acre is generally more prolific than the average of the squire's

estate. Much may be made of slender gifts, small resources, and limited

opportunities if carefully cultivated, as they should be, and as their

very slenderness should stimulate their being.

One of the psalms accuses the children of Ephraim' because, being armed

and carrying bows, they turned back in the day of battle.' That saying

deduces obligation from equipment, and preaches a stringent code of

duty to those who are in any direction largely gifted. Power to its

last particle is duty, and not small is the crime of those who, with

great capacities, have small desire to use them, and leave the brunt of

the battle to half-trained soldiers, badly armed.

But the imagery of the fight is not sufficient to include all aspects

of Christian effort. The peaceful toil of the husbandman that labours'

stands, in one of Paul's letters, side by side with the heroism of the

man that warreth.' Our text gives us the former image, and so

supplements that other.

It completes the lesson of the psalm in another respect, as insisting

on the importance, not of the well endowed, but of the slenderly

furnished, who are immensely in the majority. This text is a message to

ordinary, mediocre people, without much ability or influence.

I. It teaches, first, the responsibility of small gifts.

It is no mere accident that in our Lord's great parable He represents

the man with the one talent as the hider of his gift. There is a

certain pleasure in doing what we can do, or fancy we can do, well.

There is a certain pleasure in the exercise of any kind of gift, be it

of body or mind; but when we know that we are but very slightly gifted

by Him, there is a temptation to say, Oh! it does not matter much

whether I contribute my share to this, that, or the other work or no. I

am but a poor man. My half-crown will make but a small difference in

the total. I am possessed of very little leisure. The few minutes that

I can spare for individual cultivation, or for benevolent work, will

not matter at all. I am only an insignificant unit; nobody pays any

attention to my opinion. It does not in the least signify whether I

make my influence felt in regard of social, religious, or political

questions, and the like. I can leave all that to the more influential

men. My littleness at least has the prerogative of immunity. My little

finger would produce such a slight impact on the scale that it is

indifferent whether I apply it or not. It is a good deal easier for me

to wrap up my talent--which, after all, is only a threepenny bit, and

not a talent--and put it away and do nothing.'

Yes, but then you forget, dear friend! that responsibility does not

diminish with the size of the gifts, but that there is as great

responsibility for the use of the smallest as for the use of the

largest, and that although it does not matter very much to anybody but

yourself what you do, it matters all the world to you.

But then, besides that, my text tells us that it does matter whether

the poor man sets himself to make the most of his little patch of

ground or not. There is much food in the tillage of the poor.' The

slenderly endowed are the immense majority. There is a genius or two

here and there, dotted along the line of the world's and the Church's

history. The great men and wise men and mighty men and wealthy men may

be counted by units, but the men that are not very much of anything are

to be counted by millions. And unless we can find some stringent law of

responsibility that applies to them, the bulk of the human race will be

under no obligation to do anything either for God or for their fellows,

or for themselves. If I am absolved from the task of bringing my weight

to bear on the side of right because my weight is infinitesimal, and I

am only one in a million, suppose all the million were to plead the

same excuse; what then? Then there would not be any weight on the side

of the right at all. The barns in Palestine were not filled by farming

on a great scale like that pursued away out on the western prairies,

where one man will own, and his servants will plough a furrow for miles

long, but they were filled by the small industries of the owners of

tiny patches.

The tillage of the poor,' meaning thereby not the mendicant, but the

peasant owner of a little plot, yielded the bulk of the food.' The

wholesome old proverb, many littles make a mickle,' is as true about

the influence brought to bear in the world to arrest evil and to

sweeten corruption as it is about anything besides. Christ has a great

deal more need of the cultivation of the small patches that He gives to

the most of us than He has even of the cultivation of the large estates

that He bestows on a few. Responsibility is not to be measured by

amount of gift, but is equally stringent, entire, and absolute

whatsoever be the magnitude of the endowments from which it arises.

Let me remind you, too, how the same virtues and excellences can be

practised in the administering of the smallest as in that of the

greatest gifts. Men say--I dare say some of you have said--Oh! if I

were eloquent like So-and-so; rich like somebody else; a man of weight

and importance like some other, how I would consecrate my powers to the

Master! But I am slow of speech, or nobody minds me, or I have but very

little that I can give.' Yes! He that is faithful in that which is

least is faithful also in much.' If you do not utilise the capacity

possessed, to increase the estate would only be to increase the crop of

weeds from its uncultivated clods. We never palm off a greater

deception on ourselves than when we try to hoodwink conscience by

pleading bounded gifts as an excuse for boundless indolence, and to

persuade ourselves that if we could do more we should be less inclined

to do nothing. The most largely endowed has no more obligation and no

fairer field than the most slenderly gifted lies under and possesses.

All service coming from the same motive and tending to the same end is

the same with God. Not the magnitude of the act, but the motive

thereof, determines the whole character of the life of which it is a

part. The same graces of obedience, consecration, quick sympathy,

self-denying effort may be cultivated and manifested in the spending of

a halfpenny as in the administration of millions. The smallest rainbow

in the tiniest drop that hangs from some sooty eave and catches the

sunlight has precisely the same lines, in the same order, as the great

arch that strides across half the sky. If you go to the Giant's

Causeway, or to the other end of it amongst the Scotch Hebrides, you

will find the hexagonal basaltic pillars all of identically the same

pattern and shape, whether their height be measured by feet or by

tenths of an inch. Big or little, they obey exactly the same law. There

is much food in the tillage of the poor.'

II. But now, note, again, how there must be a diligent cultivation of

the small gifts.

The inventor of this proverb had looked carefully and sympathetically

at the way in which the little peasant proprietors worked; and he saw

in that a pattern for all life. It is not always the case, of course,

that a little holding means good husbandry, but it is generally so; and

you will find few waste corners and few unweeded patches on the ground

of a man whose whole ground is measured by rods instead of by miles.

There will usually be little waste time, and few neglected

opportunities of working in the case of the peasant whose subsistence,

with that of his family, depends on the diligent and wise cropping of

the little patch that does belong to him.

And so, dear brethren! if you and I have to take our place in the ranks

of the one-talented men, the commonplace run of ordinary people, the

more reason for us to enlarge our gifts by a sedulous diligence, by an

unwearied perseverance, by a keen look-out for all opportunities of

service, and above all by a prayerful dependence upon Him from whom

alone comes the power to toil, and who alone gives the increase. The

less we are conscious of large gifts the more we should be bowed in

dependence on Him from whom cometh every good and perfect gift'; and

who gives according to His wisdom; and the more earnestly should we use

that slender possession which God may have given us. Industry applied

to small natural capacity will do far more than larger power rusted

away by sloth. You all know that it is so in regard of daily life, and

common business, and the acquisition of mundane sciences and arts. It

is just as true in regard to the Christian race, and to the Christian

Church's work of witness.

Who are they who have done the most in this world for God and for men?

The largely endowed men? Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble

are called.' The coral insect is microscopic, but it will build up from

the profoundest depth of the ocean a reef against which the whole

Pacific may dash in vain. It is the small gifts that, after all, are

the important ones. So let us cultivate them the more earnestly the

more humbly we think of our own capacity. Play well thy part; there all

the honour lies.' God, who has builded up some of the towering Alps out

of mica-flakes, builds up His Church out of infinitesimally small

particles--slenderly endowed men touched by the consecration of His

love.

III. Lastly, let me remind you of the harvest reaped from these slender

gifts when sedulously tilled.

Two great results of such conscientious cultivation and use of small

resources and opportunities may be suggested as included in that

abundant food' of which the text speaks.

The faithfully used faculty increases. To him that hath shall be

given.' Oh! if I had a wider sphere how I would flame in it, and fill

it!' Then twinkle your best in your little sphere, and that will bring

a wider one some time or other. For, as a rule, and in the general,

though with exceptions, opportunities come to the man that can use

them; and roughly, but yet substantially, men are set in this world

where they can shine to the most advantage to God. Fill your place; and

if you, like Paul, have borne witness for the Master in little

Jerusalem, He will not keep you there, but carry you to bear witness

for Him in imperial Rome itself.

The old fable of the man who told his children to dig all over the

field and they would find treasure, has its true application in regard

to Christian effort and faithful stewardship of the gifts bestowed upon

us. The sons found no gold, but they improved the field, and secured

its bearing golden harvests, and they strengthened their own muscles,

which was better than gold. So if we want larger endowments let us

honestly use what we possess, and use will make growth.

The other issue, about which I need not say more than a word, is that

the final reward of all faithful service--Enter thou into the joy of

thy Lord' is said, not to the brilliant, but to the faithful' servant.

In that great parable, which is the very text-book of this whole

subject of gifts and responsibilities and recompense, the men who were

entrusted with unequal sums used these unequal sums with equal

diligence, as is manifest by the fact that they realised an equal rate

of increase. He that got two talents made two more out of them, and he

that had five did no more; for he, too, but doubled his capital. So,

because the poorer servant with his two, and the richer with his ten,

had equally cultivated their diversely-measured estates, they were

identical in reward; and to each of them the same thing is said: Enter

thou into the joy of thy Lord.' It matters little whether we copy some

great picture upon a canvas as big as the side of a house, or upon a

thumbnail; the main thing is that we copy it. If we truly employ

whatsoever gifts God has given to us, then we shall be accepted

according to that we have, and not according to that we have not.

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SIN THE MOCKER

Fools make a mock at sin; but among the righteous there is

favour.'--PROVERBS xiv. 9.

The wisdom of this Book of Proverbs is not simply intellectual, but it

has its roots in reverence and obedience to God, and for its

accompaniment, righteousness. The wise man is the good man, and the

good man is the godly man. And as is wisdom, so its opposite, folly, is

not only intellectual feebleness--the bad man is a fool, and the

godless is a bad man. The greatest amount of brain-power cultivated to

the highest degree does not make a man wise, and about many a student

and thinker God pronounces the sentence Thou fool!'

That does not mean that all sin is ignorance, as we sometimes hear it

said with a great show of tolerant profundity. There is some ignorance

in all sin, but the essence of sin is the aversion of the will from a

law and from a Person, not the defect of the understanding. So far from

all sin being but ignorance, and therefore blameless, there is no sin

without knowledge, and the measure of ignorance is the measure of

blamelessness; unless the ignorance be itself, as it often is,

criminal. Ignorance is one thing, folly is another.

One more remark by way of introduction must be made on the language of

our text. The margin of the Revised Version correctly turns it

completely round, and for the foolish make a mock at guilt,' would

read, guilt mocketh at the foolish.' In the original the verb in our

text is in the singular, and the only singular noun to go with it is

guilt.' The thought then here is, that sin tempts men into its

clutches, and then gibes and taunts them. It is a solemn and painful

subject, but perhaps this text rightly pondered may help to save some

of us from hearing the mocking laugh which echoes through the empty

chambers of many an empty soul.

I. Sin mocks us by its broken promises.

The object immediately sought by any wrong act may be attained. In sins

of sense, the appetite is gratified; in other sins, the desire that

urged to them attains its end. But what then? The temptation lay in the

imagination that, the wrong thing being done, an inward good would

result, and it does not; for even if the immediate object be secured,

other results, all unforeseen, force themselves on us which spoil the

hoped for good. The sickle cuts down tares as well as wheat, and the

reaper's hands are filled with poisonous growths as well as with corn.

There is a revulsion of feeling from the thing that before the sin was

done attracted. The hideous story of the sin of David's son, Amnon,

puts in ugliest shape the universal experience of men who are tempted

to sin and are victims of the revulsion that follows--He hated her

exceedingly, so that the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than

the love wherewith he had loved her.' Conscience, which was overpowered

and unheard amid the loud cries of desire, speaks. We find out the

narrow limits of satisfaction. The satisfied appetite has no further

driving power, but lies down to sleep off its debauch, and ceases to be

a factor for the time. Inward discord, the schism between duty and

inclination, sets up strife in the very sanctuary of the soul. We are

dimly conscious of the evil done as robbing us of power to do right. We

cannot pray, and would be glad to forget God. And a self thus racked,

impoverished, and weakened, is what a man gains by the sin that

promised him so much and hid so much from him.

Or if these consequences are in any measure silenced and stifled, a

still more melancholy mockery betrays him, in the continuance of the

illusion that he is happy and all is well, when all the while he is

driving headlong to destruction. Many a man orders his life so that it

is like a ship that sails with huzzas and bedizened with flags while a

favouring breeze fills its sails, but comes back to port battered and

all but waterlogged, with its canvas lean, rent, and beggared by the

strumpet wind.' It is always a mistake to try to buy happiness by doing

wrong. The price is rigorously demanded, but the quid pro quo is not

given, or if it seems to be so, there is something else given too,

which takes all the savour out of the composite whole. The Folly' of

the earlier half of this book woos men by her sweet invitations, and

promises the sweetness of stolen waters and the pleasantness of bread

eaten in secret, but she hides the fact, which the listener to her

seducing voice has to find out for himself after he has drunk of the

stolen waters and tasted the maddening pleasantness of her bread eaten

in secret, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.' The temptations

that seek to win us to do wrong and dazzle us by fair visions are but

juggling fiends that keep the word of promise to the ear, and break it

to the hope.'

II. Sin mocks fools by making them its slaves.

There is not only a revulsion of feeling from the evil thing done that

was so tempting before, but there is a dreadful change in the voice of

the temptress. Before her victim had done the sin, she whispered hints

of how little a thing it was. Don't make such a mountain of a molehill.

It is a very small matter. You can easily give it up when you like.'

But when the deed is done, then her mocking laugh rings out, I have got

you now and you cannot get away.' The prey is seduced into the trap by

a carefully prepared bait, and as soon as its hesitating foot steps on

to the slippery floor, down falls the door and escape is impossible, We

are tempted to sin by the delusion that we are shaking off restraints

that fetter our manhood, and that it is spirited to do as we like, and

as soon as we have sinned we discover that we were pleasing not

ourselves but a taskmaster, and that while the voice said, Show

yourself a man, beyond these petty, old-fashioned maxims'; the meaning

of it was, Become my slave.'

Sin grows in accordance with an awful necessity, so that it is never in

a sinner's power to promise himself It is only this one time that I

will do the wrong thing. Let me have one lapse and I will abjure the

evil for ever after.' We have to reckon with the tremendous power of

habit, and to bethink ourselves that a man may never commit a given

sin, but that if he has committed it once, it is all but impossible

that he will stop there. The incline is too slippery and the ice too

smooth to risk a foot on it. Habit dominates, outward circumstances

press, there springs up a need for repeating the draught, and for its

being more highly spiced. Sin begets sin as fast as the green flies

which infest rose-bushes. One has heard of slavers on the African coast

speaking negroes fair, and tempting them on board by wonderful

promises, but once the poor creatures are in the ship, then on with the

hatches and, if need be, the chains.

III. Sin mocks fools by unforeseen consequences.

These are carefully concealed or madly disregarded, while we are in the

stage of merely being tempted, but when we have done the evil, they are

unmasked, like a battery against a detachment that has been trapped.

The previous denial that anything will come of the sin, and the

subsequent proclamation that this ugly issue has come of it, are both

parts of sin's mockery, and one knows not which is the more fiendish,

the laugh with which she promises impunity or that with which she tells

of the certainty of retribution. We may be mocked, but God is not

mocked. Whatever a man soweth, that'--and not some other growth--shall

he also reap.' We dwell in an all-related order of things, in which no

act but has its appropriate consequences, and in which it is only fools

who say to themselves, I did not think it would matter much.' Each act

of ours is at once sowing and reaping; a sowing, inasmuch as it sets in

motion a train the issues of which may not be realised by us till the

act has long been forgotten; a reaping, inasmuch as what we are and do

to-day is the product of what we were and did in a forgotten past. We

are what we are, because we were long ago what we were. As in these

composite photographs, which are produced by laying one individual

likeness on another, our present selves have our past selves preserved

in them. We do not need to bring in a divine Judge into human life in

order to be sure that, by the play of the natural laws of cause and

effect, every transgression and disobedience receives its just

recompense of reward.' Given the world as it is, and the continuous

identity of a man, and you have all that is needed for an Iliad of woes

flowing from every life that makes terms with sin. If we gather into

one dismal pile the weakening of power for good, the strengthening of

impulses to evil, the inward poverty, the unrest, the gnawings of

conscience or its silence, the slavery under evil often loathed even

while it is being obeyed, the dreary sense of inability to mend

oneself, and often the wreck of outward life which dog our sins like

sleuth-hounds, surely we shall not need to imagine a future tribunal in

order to be sure that sin is a murderess, or to hear her laugh as she

mocks her helpless victims.

But as surely as there are in this present world experiences which must

be regarded as consequences of sin, so surely do they all assume a more

dreadful character and take on the office of prophets of a future. If

man lives beyond the grave, there is nothing to suggest that he will

there put off character as he puts off the bodily life. He will be

there what he has made himself here. Only he will be so more intensely,

more completely. The judgments of earth foretell and foreshadow a

judgment beyond earth.

There is but one more word that I would say, and it is this. Jesus has

come to set the captives of sin free from its mockery, its tyranny, its

worst consequences. He breaks the power of past evil to domineer over

us. He gives us a new life within, which has no heritage of evil to

pervert it, no memories of evil to discourage it, no bias towards evil

to lead it astray. As for the sins that we have done, He is ready to

forgive, to seal to us God's forgiveness, and to take from our own

self-condemnation all its bitterness and much of its hopelessness. For

the past, His blood has taken away its guilt and power. For the future

it sets us free from the mockery of our sin, and assures us of a future

which will not be weakened or pained by remembrances of a sinful past.

Sin mocks at fools, but they who have Christ for their Redeemer, their

Righteousness, and their Life can smile at her impotent rage, and mock

at her and her impotent attempts to terrify them and assert her lost

power with vain threats.

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HOLLOW LAUGHTER, SOLID JOY

Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is

heaviness.'--PROVERBS xiv. 13.

These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy may be in you, and

that your joy may be fulfilled.'--JOHN xv. 11 (R.V.).

A poet, who used to be more fashionable than he is now, pronounces

happiness' to be our being's end and aim. That is not true, except

under great limitations and with many explanations. It may be regarded

as God's end, but it is ruinous to make it man's aim. It is by no means

the highest conception of the Gospel to say that it makes men happy,

however true it may be. The highest is that it makes them good. I put

these two texts together, not only because they bring out the contrast

between the laughter which is hollow and fleeting and the joy which is

perfect and perpetual, but also because they suggest to us the

difference in kind and object between earthly and heavenly joys; which

difference underlies the other between the boisterous laughter in which

is no mirth and no continuance and the joy which is deep and abiding.

In the comparison which I desire to make between these two texts we

must begin with that which is deepest, and consider--

I. The respective objects of earthly and heavenly joy.

Our Lord's wonderful words suggest that they who accept His sayings,

that they who have His word abiding in them, have in a very deep sense

His joy implanted in their hearts, to brighten and elevate their joys

as the sunshine flashes into silver the ripples of the lake. What then

were the sources of the calm joys of the Man of Sorrows'? Surely His

was the perfect instance of rejoicing in the Lord always'--an unbroken

communion with the Father. The consciousness that the divine pleasure

ever rested on Him, and that all His thoughts, emotions, purposes, and

acts were in perfect harmony with the perfect will of the perfect God,

filled His humanity up to the very brim with gladness which the world

could not take away, and which remains for us for ever as a type to

which all our gladness must be conformed if it is to be worthy of Him

and of us. As one of the Psalmists says, God is to be the gladness of

our joy.' It is in Him, gazed upon by the faith and love of an obedient

spirit, sought after by aspiration and possessed inwardly in peaceful

communion, confirmed by union with Him in the acts of daily obedience,

that the true joy of every human life is to be realised. They who have

drunk of this deep fountain of gladness will not express their joy in

boisterous laughter, which is the hollower the louder it is, and the

less lasting the more noisy, but will manifest itself in the depth and

not the tumult of the soul.'

Nor must we forget that My joy' co-existed with a profound experience

of sorrow to which no human sorrow was ever like. Let us not forget

that, while His joy filled His soul to the brim, He was acquainted with

grief'; and let us not wonder if the strange surface contradiction is

repeated in ourselves. It is more Christlike to have inexpressibly deep

joy with surface sorrow, than to have a shallow laughter masking a

hurtful sorrow.

We have to set the sources of earthly gladness side by side with those

of Christ's joy to be aware of a contrast. His sprang from within, the

world's is drawn from without. His came from union with the Father, the

world's largely depends on ignoring God. His needed no supplies from

the gratifications ministered by sense, and so independent of the

presence or absence of such; the world's need the constant

contributions of outward good, and when these are cut off they droop

and die. He who depends on outward circumstances for his joy is the

slave of externals and the sport of time and chance.

II. The Christian's joy is full, the world's partial.

All human joys touch but part of our nature, the divine fills and

satisfies all. In the former there is always some portion of us

unsatisfied, like the deep pits on the moon's surface into which no

light shines, and which show black on the silver face. No human joys

wait to still conscience, which sits at the banquet like the skeleton

that Egyptian feasters set at their tables. The old story told of a

magician's palace blazing with lighted windows, but there was always

one dark;--what shrouded figure sat behind it? Is there not always a

surly elder brother' who will not come in however the musicians may

pipe and the servants dance? Appetite may be satisfied, but what of

conscience, and reason, and the higher aspirations of the soul? The

laughter that echoes through the soul is the hollower the louder it is,

and reverberates most through empty spaces.

But when Christ's joy remains in us our joy will be full. Its flowing

tide will rush into and placidly occupy all the else oozy shallows of

our hearts, even into the narrowest crannies its penetrating waters

will pass, and everywhere will bring a flashing surface that will

reflect in our hearts the calm blue above. We need nothing else if we

have Christ and His joy within us. If we have everything else, we need

His joy within us, else ours will never be full.

III. The heavenly joys are perpetual, the earthly joys transient.

Many of our earthly joys die in the very act of being enjoyed. Those

which depend on the gratification of some appetite expire in fruition,

and at each recurrence are less and less complete. The influence of

habit works in two ways to rob all such joys of their power to minister

to us--it increases the appetite and decreases the power of the object

to satisfy. Some are followed by swift revulsion and remorse; all soon

become stale; some are followed by quick remorse; some are necessarily

left behind as we go on in life. To the old man the pleasures of youth

are but like children's toys long since outgrown and left behind. All

are at the mercy of externals. Those which we have not left we have to

leave. The saddest lives are those of pleasure-seekers, and the saddest

deaths are those of the men who sought for joy where it was not to be

found, and sought for their gratification in a world which leaves them,

and which they have to leave.

There is a realm where abide fullness of joy and pleasures for ever

more.' Surely they order their lives most wisely who look for their

joys to nothing that earth holds, and have taken for their own the

ancient vow: 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.' If My joy' abides in us in its calm and

changeless depth, our joy will be full' whatever our circumstances may

be; and we shall hear at last the welcome: Enter thou into the joy of

thy Lord.'

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SATISFIED FROM SELF

. . . A good man shall be satisfied from himself.'--PROVERBS xiv. 14.

At first sight this saying strikes one as somewhat unlike the ordinary

Scripture tone, and savouring rather of a Stoical self-complacency; but

we recall parallel sayings, such as Christ's words, The water that I

shall give him shall be in him a well of water'; and the Apostle' s,

Then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone.' We further note that

the text has an antithetic parallel in the preceding clause, where the

picture is drawn of a backslider in heart,' as filled with his own

ways'; so that both clauses set forth the familiar but solemn thought

that a man's deeds react upon the doer, and apart from all thoughts of

divine judgment, themselves bring certain retribution. To grasp the

inwardness of this saying we must note that--

I. Goodness comes from godliness.

There is no more striking proof that most men are bad than the notion

which they have of what is good. The word has been degraded to mean in

common speech little more than amiability, and is applied with little

discrimination to characters of which little more can be said than that

they are facile and indulgent of evil. A good fellow' may be a very bad

man. At the highest the epithet connotes merely more or less admirable

motives and more or less admirable deeds as their results, whilst often

its use is no more than a piece of unmeaning politeness. That was what

the young ruler meant by addressing Christ as Good Master'; and

Christ's answer to him set him, and should set us, on asking ourselves

why we call very ordinary men and very ordinary actions good.' The

scriptural notion is immensely deeper, and the scriptural employment of

the word is immensely more restricted. It is more inward: it means that

motives should be right before it calls any action good; it means that

our central and all-influencing motive should be love to God and regard

to His will. That is the Old Testament point of view as well as the

New. Or to put it in other words, the good man' of the Bible is a man

in whom outward righteousness flows from inward devotion and love to

God. These two elements make up the character: godliness is an

inseparable part of goodness, is the inseparable foundation of

goodness, and the sole condition on which it is possible. But from this

conception follows, that a man may be truly called good, although not

perfect. He may be so and yet have many failures. The direction of his

aspirations, not the degree to which these are fulfilled, determines

his character, and his right to be reckoned a good man. Why was David

called a man after God's own heart,' notwithstanding his frightful

fall? Was it not because that sin was contrary to the main direction of

his life, and because he had struggled to his feet again, and with

tears and self-abasement, yet with unconquerable desire and hope,

pressed toward the mark for the prize of his high calling'? David in

the Old Testament and Peter in the New bid us be of good cheer, and

warn us against the too common error of thinking that goodness means

perfection. The new moon with a ragged edge' is even in its

imperfections beautiful, and in its thinnest circlet prophesies the

perfect round.

Remembering this inseparable connection between godliness and goodness

we further note that--

II. Godliness brings satisfaction.

There is a grim contrast between the two halves of this verse. The

former shows us the backslider in heart as filled with his own ways.'

He gets weary with satiety; with his doings he will be sick of them';

and the things which at first delighted will finally disgust and be

done without zest. There is nothing sadder than the gloomy faces often

seen in the world's festivals. But, on the other hand, the godly man

will be satisfied from within. This is no Stoical proclamation of

self-sufficingness. Self by itself satisfies no man, but self, become

the abiding-place of God, does satisfy. A man alone is like the chaff

which the wind driveth away'; but, rooted in God, he is like a tree

planted by the rivers of water, whose leaf does not wither.' He has

found all that he needs. God is no longer without him but within; and

he who can say, I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' has within

him the secret of peace and the source of satisfaction which can never

say I thirst.' Such an inward self, in which God dwells and through

which His sweet presence manifests itself in the renewed nature, sets

man free from all dependence for blessedness on externals. We hang on

them and are in despair if we lose them, because we have not the life

of God within us. He who has such an indwelling, and he only, can truly

say, All my possessions I carry with me.' Take him and strip from him,

film after film, possessions, reputation, friends; hack him limb from

limb, and as long as there is body enough left to keep life in him, he

can say, I have all and abound.' Ye took joyfully the spoiling of your

possessions, knowing that ye have your own selves for a better

possession.'

III. Godly goodness brings inward satisfaction.

No man is satisfied with himself until he has subjugated himself. What

makes men restless and discontented is their tossing, anarchical

desires. To live by impulse, or passion, or by anything but love to

God, is to make ourselves our own tormentors. It is always true that he

who loveth his life shall lose it,' and loses it by the very act of

loving it. Most men's lives are like the troubled sea, which cannot

rest,' and whose tossing surges, alas! cast up mire and dirt,' for

their restless lives bring to the surface much that was meant to lie

undisturbed in the depths.

But he who has subdued himself is like some still lake which heareth

not the loud winds when they call,' and mirrors the silent heavens on

its calm surface. But further, goodness brings satisfaction, because,

as the Psalmist says, in keeping Thy commandments there is great

reward.' There is a glow accompanying even partial obedience which

diffuses itself with grateful warmth through the whole being of a man.

And such goodness tends to the preservation of health of soul as

natural, simple living to the health of the body. And that general

sense of well-being brings with it a satisfaction compared with which

all the feverish bliss of the voluptuary is poor indeed.

But we must not forget that satisfaction from one's self is not

satisfaction with one's self. There will always be the imperfection

which will always prevent self-righteousness. The good man after the

Bible pattern most deeply knows his faults, and in that very

consciousness is there a deep joy. To be ever aspiring onwards, and to

know that our aspiration is no vain dream, this is joy. Still to press

toward the mark,' still to have the yet untroubled world which gleams

before us as we move,' and to know that we shall attain if we follow

on, this is the highest bliss. Not the accomplishment of our ideal, but

the cherishing of it, is the true delight of life.

Such self-satisfying goodness comes only through Christ. He makes it

possible for us to love God and to trust Him. Only when we know the

love wherewith He has loved us,' shall we love with a love which will

be the motive power of our lives. He makes it possible to live outward

lives of obedience, which, imperfect as it is, has great reward.' He

makes it possible for us to attain the yet unattained, and to be sure

that we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' He has said,

The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water

springing up unto everlasting life.' Only when we can say, I live, yet

not I, but Christ liveth in me,' will it be true of us in its fullest

sense, A good man shall be satisfied from himself.'

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WHAT I THINK OF MYSELF AND WHAT GOD THINKS OF ME

All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the Lord weigheth

the spirits.'--PROVERBS xvi. 2.

All the ways of a man'--then there is no such thing as being conscious

of having gone wrong, and having got into miry and foul ways? Of course

there is; and equally of course a broad statement such as this of my

text is not to be pressed into literal accuracy, but is a simple,

general assertion of what we all know to be true, that we have a

strange power of blinding ourselves as to what is wrong in ourselves

and in our actions. Part of the cure for that lies in the thought in

the second clause of the text--But the Lord weigheth the spirits.' He

weighs them in a balance, or as a man might take up something and poise

it on his palm, moving his hand up and down till his muscles by their

resistance gave him some inkling of its weight. But what is it that God

weighs? The spirits.' We too often content ourselves with looking at

our ways; God looks at ourselves. He takes the inner man into account,

estimates actions by motives, and so very often differs from our

judgment of ourselves and of one another.

Now so far the verse of my text carries me, and as a rule we have to

keep ourselves within the limits of each verse in reading this Book of

Proverbs, for two adjoining verses have very seldom anything to do with

each other. But in the present case they have, for here is what

follows: Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts' (about

thyself and everything else) shall be established.' That is to say,

since we make such terrible blunders about the moral character of our

own works, and since side by side with these erroneous estimates there

is God's absolutely correct and all-penetrating one, common sense says:

Put yourself into His hands, and then it will be all right.' So we

consider now these very well-worn and familiar thoughts as to our

strange blunders about ourselves, as to the contemporaneous divine

estimate, which is absolutely correct, and as to the practical issues

that come from two facts.

I. Our strange power of blinding ourselves.

It is difficult to make so threadbare a commonplace at all impressive.

But yet if we would only take this thought, All the ways of a

man'--that is me--are right in his own eyes'--that is, my eyes--and

apply it directly to our own personal experience and thoughts of

ourselves, we should find that, like every other commonplace of

morality and religion, the apparently toothless generality has sharp

enough teeth, and that the trite truth flashes up into strange beauty,

and has power to purify and guide our lives. Some one says that

recognised truths lie bedridden in the dormitory of the soul, side by

side with exploded errors.' And I am afraid that that is true of this

thought, that we cannot truly estimate ourselves.

All the ways of a man are right in his own eyes.' For to begin with, we

all know that there is nothing that we so habitually neglect as the

bringing of conscience to bear right through all our lives. Sometimes

it is because there is a temptation that appeals very strongly, perhaps

to sense, perhaps to some strong inclination which has been

strengthened by indulgence. And when the craving arises, that is no

time to begin asking, Is it right, or is it wrong to yield?' That

question stands small chance of being wisely considered at a moment

when, under the goading of roused desire, a man is like a mad bull when

it charges. It drops its head and shuts its eyes, and goes right

forward, and no matter whether it smashes its horns against an iron

gate, and damages them and itself, or not, on it will go. So when great

temptations rise--and we all know such times in our lives--we are in no

condition to discuss that question with ourselves. Sometimes the

craving is so vehement that if we could not get this thing that we want

without putting our hands through the sulphurous smoke of the

bottomless pit, we should thrust them out to grasp it. But in regard to

the smaller commonplace matters of daily life, too, we all know that

there are whole regions of our lives which seem to us to be so small

that it is hardly worth while summoning the august thought of right or

wrong?' to decide them. Yes, and a thousand smugglers that go across a

frontier, each with a little package of contraband goods that does not

pay any duty, make a large aggregate at the year's end. It is the

trifles of life that shape life, and it is to them that we so

frequently fail in applying, honestly and rigidly, the test, Is this

right or wrong?' He that is faithful in that which is least,' and

conscientious down to the smallest things, is faithful also in much.'

The legal maxim has it, The law does not care about the very smallest

matters.' What that precisely means, as a legal maxim, I do not profess

to know, but it is rank heresy in regard to conduct and morality. Look

after the pennies, and the pounds will look after themselves. Get the

habit of bringing conscience to bear on little things, or you will

never be able to bring it to bear when great temptations come and the

crises emerge in your lives. Thus, by reason of that deficiency in the

habitual application of conscience to bur lives, we slide through, and

take for granted that all our ways are right in our eyes.

Then there is another thing: we not only neglect the rigid application

of conscience to all our lives, but we have a double standard, and the

notion of right and wrong which we apply to our neighbours is very

different from that which we apply to ourselves. No wonder that the

criminal is acquitted, and goes away from the tribunal without a stain

on his character,' when he is his own judge and jury. All the ways of a

man are right in his own eyes,' but the very same way's that you allow

to pass muster and condone in yourselves, you visit with sharp and

unfailing censure in others. That strange self-complacency which we

have, which is perfectly undisturbed by the most general confessions of

sinfulness, and only shies when it is brought up to particular details

of faults, we all know is very deep in ourselves.

Then there is another thing to be remembered, and that is--the enormous

and the tragical influence of habit in dulling the mirror of our souls,

on which our deeds are reflected in their true image. There are places

in Europe where the peasantry have become so accustomed to minute and

constantly repeated doses of arsenic that it is actually a minister of

health to them, and what would poison you is food for them. We all know

that we may sit in a hall like this, packed full and steaming, while

the condensed breath is running down the windows, and never be aware of

the foulness of the odours and the air. But when we go out and feel the

sweet, pure breath of the unpolluted atmosphere, then we know how habit

has dulled the lungs. And so habit dulls the conscience. According to

the old saying, the man that began by carrying a calf can carry an ox

at the end, and feel no burden. What we are accustomed to do we

scarcely ever recognise to be wrong, and it is these things which pass

because they are habitual that do more to wreck lives than occasional

outbursts of far worse evils, according to the world's estimate of

them. Habit dulls the eye.

Yes; and more than that, the conscience needs educating just as much as

any other faculty. A man says, My conscience acquits me'; then the

question is, And what sort of a conscience have you got, if it acquits

you?' All that your conscience says is, It is right to do what is

right, it is wrong to do what is wrong.' But for the explanation of

what is wrong and what is right you have to go somewhere else than to

your consciences. You have to go to your reason, and your judgment, and

your common sense, and a hundred other sources. And then, when you have

found out what is right and what is wrong, you will hear the voice

saying, Do that, and do not do this.' Every one of us has faults that

we know nothing about, and that we bring up to the tribunal of our

consciences, and wipe our mouths and say, We have done no harm.' I

thought within myself that I verily ought to do many things contrary to

the name of Jesus of Nazareth.' They think that they do God service.'

Many things that seem to us virtues are vices.

And as for the individual so for the community. The perception of what

is right and what is wrong needs long educating. When I was a boy the

whole Christian Church of America, with one voice, declared that

slavery was a patriarchal institution appointed by God.' The Christian

Church of to-day has not awakened either to the sin of war or of drink.

And I have not the smallest doubt that there are hosts of things which

public opinion, and Christian public opinion, regards to-day as

perfectly allowable and innocent, and, perhaps, even praiseworthy, and

over which it will ask God's blessing, at which, in a hundred years our

descendants will hold up their hands in wonder, and say, How did good

people--and good people they no doubt were--tolerate such a condition

of things for a moment?' All a man's ways are right in his own eyes,'

and he needs a great deal of teaching before he comes to understand

what, according to God's will, really, is right and what is wrong.

Now let me turn for a moment to the contrasted picture, with which I

can only deal in a sentence or two.

II. The divine estimate.

I have already pointed out the two emphatic thoughts that lie in that

clause, God weigheth,' and weigheth the spirits.' I need not repeat

what I said, in the introduction to these remarks, upon this subject.

Just let us take with us these two thoughts, that the same actions

which we sometimes test, in our very defective and loaded balances,

have also to go into the infallible scales, and that the actions go

with their interpretation in their motive. God weighs the spirits.' He

reads what we do by His knowledge of what we are. We reveal to one

another what we are by what we do, and, as is a commonplace, none of us

can penetrate, except very superficially and often inaccurately, to the

motives that actuate. But the motive is three-fourths of the action.

God does not go from without, as it were, inwards; from our actions to

estimate our characters; but He starts with the character and the

motive--the habitual character and the occasional motive--and by these

He reads the deed. He weighs, ponders, penetrates to the heart of the

thing, and He weighs the spirits.

So on the one hand, I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in

unbelief,' and many a deed which the world would condemn, and in which

we onlookers would see evil, God does not wholly condemn, because He,

being the Inlooker as well as the Onlooker, sees the albeit mistaken

yet pure motives that underlay it. So it is conceivable that the

inquisitor, and the heretic that he sent to the stake, may stand side

by side in God's estimate; the one if he were actuated by pure zeal for

the truth, the other because he was actuated by self-sacrifice in

loyalty to his Lord. And, on the other hand, many a deed that goes

flaunting through the world in purple and fine linen' will be stripped

of its gauds, and stand naked and ugly before the eyes of Him with whom

we have to do.' He weighs the spirits.'

Lastly, a word about--

III. The practical issues of these thoughts.

Commit thy works unto the Lord'--that is to say, do not be too sure

that you are right because you do not think you are wrong. We should be

very distrustful of our own judgments of ourselves, especially when

that judgment permits us to do certain things. I know nothing against

myself,' said the Apostle, yet am I not hereby justified.' And again,

still more emphatically, he lays down the principle that I would have

liked to have enlarged upon if I had had time. Happy is he that

condemneth not himself in the things which he alloweth.' You may have

made the glove too easy by stretching. It is possible that you may

think that something is permissible and right which a wiser and more

rigid and Christlike judgment of yourself would have taught you was

wrong. Look under the stones for the reptiles, and remember the prayer,

Cleanse thou me from secret faults,' and distrust a permitting and easy

conscience.

Then, again, let us seek the divine strengthening and illumination. We

have to seek that in some very plain ways. Seek it by prayer. There is

nothing so powerful in stripping off from our besetting sins their

disguises and masks as to go to God with the honest petition: Search me

. . . and try me . . . and see if there be any wicked way in me, and

lead me in the way everlasting.' Brethren! if we will do that, we shall

get answers that will startle us, that will humble us, but that will be

blessed beyond all other blessedness, and will bring to light the

hidden things of darkness.' Then, after they are brought to light and

cast out, then shall every man have praise of God.'

We ought to keep ourselves in very close union with Jesus Christ,

because if we cling to Him in simple faith, He will come into our

hearts, and we shall be saved from walking in darkness, and have the

light of life shining down upon our deeds. Christ is the conscience of

the Christian man's conscience, who, by His voice in the hearts that

wait upon Him, says, Do this,' and they do it. It is when He is in our

spirits that our estimate of ourselves is set right, and that we hear

the voice saying, This is the way, walk ye in it'; and not merely do we

hear the voice, but we get help to our feet in running in the way of

His commandments, with enlarged and confirmed hearts. Brethren! for the

discovery of our faults, which we ought all to long for, and for the

conquest of these discovered faults, which, if we are Christians, we do

long for, our confidence is in Him. And if you trust Him, the blood of

Christ will cleanse'--because it comes into our life's blood--from all

sin.'

And the last thing that I would say is this. We must punctiliously obey

every dictate that speaks in our own consciences, especially when it

urges us to unwelcome duties or restrains us from too welcome sins. To

him that hath shall be given'--and the sure way to condemn ourselves to

utter blindness as to our true selves is to pay no attention to the

glimmers of light that we have, whilst, on the other hand, the sure way

to be led into fuller illumination is to follow faithfully whatsoever

sparkles of light may shine upon our hearts. Do the duty that lies

nearest thee.' Put thy trust in Jesus Christ. Distrust thine own

approbation or condonation of thine actions, and ever turn to Him and

say, Show me what to do, and make me willing and fit to do it.' Then

there will be little contrariety between your estimate of your ways and

God's judgments of your spirits.

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A BUNDLE OF PROVERBS

Understanding is a wellspring of life unto him that hath it: but the

instruction of fools is folly. 23. The heart of the wise teacheth his

mouth, and addeth learning to his lips. 24. Pleasant words are as an

honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones. 25. There is a

way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of

death. 26. He that laboureth laboureth for himself; for his mouth

craveth it of him. 27. An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips

there is as a burning fire. 28. A froward man soweth strife: and a

whisperer separateth chief friends. 29. A violent man enticeth his

neighbour, and leadeth him into the way that is not good. 30. He

shutteth his eyes to devise froward things: moving his lips he bringeth

evil to pass. 31. The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in

the way of righteousness. 32. He that is slow to anger is better than

the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.

33. The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of

the Lord.'--PROVERBS xvi. 22-33.

A slight thread of connection may be traced in some of the proverbs in

this passage. Verse 22, with its praise of Wisdom,' introduces one

instance of Wisdom's excellence in verse 23, and that again, with its

reference to speech, leads on to verse 24 and its commendation of

pleasant words.' Similarly, verses 27-30 give four pictures of vice,

three of them beginning with a man.' We may note, too, that, starting

with verse 26, every verse till verse 30 refers to some work of the

mouth' or lips.'

The passage begins with one phase of the contrast between Wisdom and

Folly, which this book is never weary of emphasising and underscoring.

We shall miss the force of its most characteristic teaching unless we

keep well in mind that the two opposites of Wisdom and Folly do not

refer only or chiefly to intellectual distinctions. The very basis of

Wisdom,' as this book conceives it, is the fear of the Lord,' without

which the man of biggest, clearest brain, and most richly stored mind,

is, in its judgment, a fool.' Such understanding,' which apprehends and

rightly deals with the deepest fact of life, our relation to God and to

His law, is a well-spring of life.' The figure speaks still more

eloquently to Easterns than to us. In those hot lands the cool spring,

bursting through the baked rocks or burning sand, makes the difference

between barrenness and fertility, the death of all green things and

life. So where true Wisdom is deep in a heart, it will come flashing up

into sunshine, and will quicken the seeds of all good as it flows

through the deeds. Everything liveth whithersoever the river cometh.'

Productiveness, refreshment, the beauty of the sparkling wavelets, the

music of their ripples against the stones, and all the other blessings

and delights of a perpetual fountain, have better things corresponding

to them in the life of the man who is wise with the true Wisdom which

begins with the fear of God. Just as it is active in the life, so is

Folly. But its activity is not blessing and gladdening, but punitive.

For all sin automatically works its own chastisement, and the curse of

Folly is that, while it corrects, it prevents the fool' from profiting

by the correction. Since it punishes itself, one might expect that it

would cure itself, but experience shows that, while it wields a rod,

its subjects receive no correction.' That insensibility is the paradox

and the Nemesis of Folly.'

The Old Testament ethics are remarkable for their solemn sense of the

importance of words, and Proverbs shares in that sense to the full. In

some aspects, speech is a more perfect self-revelation than act. So the

outflow of the fountain in words comes next. Wise heart makes wise

speech. That may be looked at in two ways. It may point to the

utterance by word as the most precious, and incumbent on its possessor,

of all the ways of manifesting Wisdom; or it may point to the only

source of real learning,'--namely, a wise heart. In the former view, it

teaches us our solemn obligation not to hide our light under a bushel,

but to speak boldly and lovingly all the truth which God has taught us.

A dumb Christian is a monstrosity. We are bound to give voice to our

Wisdom.' In the other aspect, it reminds us that there is a better way

of getting Wisdom than by many books,--namely, by filling our hearts,

through communion with God, with His own will. Then, whether we have

worldly learning' or no, we shall be able to instruct many, and lead

them to the light which has shone on us.

There are many kinds of pleasant words, some of which are not like

honey,' but like poison hid in jam. Insincere compliments, flatteries

when rebukes would be fitting, and all the brood of civil

conventionalities, are not the words meant here. Truly pleasant ones

are those which come from true Wisdom, and may often have a surface of

bitterness like the prophet's roll, but have a core of sweetness. It is

a great thing to be able to speak necessary and unwelcome truths with

lips into which grace is poured. A spoonful of honey catches more flies

than a hogshead of vinegar.

Verse 25 has no connection with its context. It teaches two solemn

truths, according to the possible double meaning of right.' If that

word means ethically right, then the saying sets forth the terrible

possibility of conscience being wrongly instructed, and sanctioning

gross sin. If it means only straight, or level--that is, successful and

easy--the saying enforces the not less solemn truth that sin deceives

as to its results, and that the path of wrong-doing, which is flowery

and smooth at first, grows rapidly thorny, and goes fast downhill, and

ends at last in a cul-de-sac, of which death is the only outlet. We are

not to trust our own consciences, except as enlightened by God's Word.

We are not to listen to sin's lies, but to fix it well in our minds

that there is only one way which leads to life and peace, the narrow

way of faith and obedience.

The Revised Version's rendering of verse 26 gives the right idea. The

appetite,' or hunger, of the labourer labours for him' (that is, the

need of food is the mainspring of work), and it lightens the work to

which it impels. So hunger is a blessing. That is true in regard to the

body. The manifold material industries of men are, at bottom, prompted

by the need to earn something to eat. The craving which drives to such

results is a thing to be thankful for. It is better to live where toil

is needful to sustain life than in lazy lands where an hour's work will

provide food for a week. But the saying reaches to spiritual desires,

and anticipates the beatitude on those who hunger and thirst after

righteousness.' Happy they who feel that craving, and are driven by it

to the labour for the bread which comes down from heaven! This is the

work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.'

The next three proverbs (vs. 27-29) give three pictures of different

types of bad men. First, we have the worthless man' (Rev. Ver.),

literally a man of Belial,' which last word probably means

worthlessness. His work is digging evil'; his words are like scorching

fire. To dig evil seems to have a wider sense than has digging a pit

for others (Ps. vii. 15), which is usually taken as a parallel. The man

is not merely malicious toward others, but his whole activity goes to

further evil. It is the material in which he delights to work. What

mistaken spade husbandry it is to spend labour on such a soil! What can

it grow but thistles and poisonous plants? His words are as bad as his

deeds. No honey drops from his lips, but scorching fire, which burns up

not only reputations but tries to consume all that is good. As James

says, such a tongue is set on fire of hell.' The picture is that of a

man bad through and through. But there may be indefinitely close

approximations to it, and no man can say, Thus far will I go in evil

ways, and no further.'

The second picture is of a more specific kind. The froward man' here

seems to be the same as the slanderer in the next clause. He utters

perverse things, and so soweth strife and parts friends. There are

people whose mouths are as full of malicious whispers as a sower's

basket is of seed, and who have a base delight in flinging them

broadcast. Sometimes they do not think of what the harvest will be, but

often they chuckle to see it springing in the mistrust and alienation

of former friends. A loose tongue often does as much harm as a bitter

one, and delight in dwelling on people's faults is not innocent because

the tattler did not think of the mischief he was setting agoing.

In verse 29 another type of evil-doer is outlined--the opposite, in

some respects, of the preceding. The slanderer works secretly; this

mischief-maker goes the plain way to work. He uses physical force or

violence.' But how does that fit in with enticeth'? It may be that the

enticement of his victim into a place suitable for robbing or murder is

meant, but more probably there is here the same combination of force

and craft as in chapter i. 10-14. Criminals have a wicked delight in

tempting innocent people to join their gangs. A lawless desperado is a

hotbed of infection.

Verse 30 draws a portrait of a bad man. It is a bit of homely

physiognomical observation. A man with a trick of closing his eyes has

something working in his head; and, if he is one of these types of men,

one may be sure that he is brewing mischief. Compressed lips mean

concentrated effort, or fixed resolve, or suppressed feeling, and in

any of these cases are as a danger signal, warning that the man is at

work on some evil deed.

Two sayings follow, which contrast goodness with the evils just

described. The if' in verse 31 weakens the strong assertion of the

proverb. The hoary head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of

righteousness.' That is but putting into picturesque form the Old

Testament promise of long life to the righteous--a promise which is not

repeated in the new dispensation, but which is still often realised.

Whom the gods love, die young,' is a heathen proverb; but there is a

natural tendency in the manner of life which Christianity produces to

prolong a man's days. A heart at peace, because stayed on God, passions

held well in hand, an avoidance of excesses which eat away strength, do

tend to length of life, and the opposites of these do tend to shorten

it. How many young men go home from our great cities every year, with

their bones full of the iniquities of their youth,' to die!

If we are to tread the way of righteousness, and so come to reverence

and the silver hair,' we must govern ourselves. So the next proverb

extols the ruler of his own spirit as more than conquerors,' whose

triumphs are won in such vulgar fields as battles and sieges, Our

sorest fights and our noblest victories are within.

Unless above himself he can

Erect himself, how poor a thing is man!'

Verse 31 takes the casting of the lot as one instance of the limitation

of all human effort, in all which we can but use the appropriate means,

while the whole issue must be left in God's hands. The Jewish law did

not enjoin the lot, but its use seems to have been frequent. The

proverb presents in the sharpest relief a principle which is true of

all our activity. The old proverb-maker knew nothing of chance. To him

there were but two real moving forces in the world--man and God. To the

one belonged sowing the seed, doing his part, whether casting the lot

or toiling at his task. His force was real, but derived and limited.

Efforts and attempts are ours; results are God' s. We sow; He gives it

a body as it pleases Him.' Nothing happens by accident. Man's little

province is bounded on all sides by God' s, and the two touch. There is

no neutral territory between, where godless chance rules.

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TWO FORTRESSES

The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it,

and is safe. 11. The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as an

high wall in his own conceit'--PROVERBS xviii. 10, 11.

The mere reading of these two verses shows that, contrary to the usual

rule in the Book of Proverbs, they have a bearing on each other. They

are intended to suggest a very strong contrast, and that contrast is

even more emphatic in the original than in our translation; because, as

the margin of your Bibles will tell you, the last word of the former

verse might be more correctly rendered, the righteous runneth into it,

and is set on high.' It is the same word which is employed in the next

verse--a high wall.'

So we have the strong tower' and the strong city'; the man lifted up

above danger on the battlements of the one, and the man fancying

himself to be high above it (and only fancying himself) in the

imaginary safety of the other.

I. Consider then, first, the two fortresses.

One need only name them side by side to feel the full force of the

intended contrast. On the one hand, the name of the Lord with all its

depths and glories, with its blaze of lustrous purity, and infinitudes

of inexhaustible power; and on the other, the rich man's wealth.' What

contempt is expressed in putting the two side by side! It is as if the

author had said, Look on this picture and on that!' Two fortresses!

Yes! The one is like Gibraltar, inexpugnable on its rock, and the other

is like a painted castle on the stage; flimsy canvas that you could put

your foot through--solidity by the side of nothingness. For even the

poor appearance of solidity is an illusion, as our text says with

bitter emphasis--a high wall in his own conceit.'

The name of the Lord,' of course, is the Biblical expression for the

whole character of God, as He has made it known to us, or in other

words, for God Himself, as He has been pleased to reveal Himself to

mankind. The syllables of that name are all the deeds by which He has

taught us what He is; every act of power, of wisdom, of tenderness, of

grace that has manifested these qualities and led us to believe that

they are all infinite. In the name, in its narrower sense, the name of

Jehovah, there is much of the name' in its wider sense. For that name

Jehovah,' both by its signification and by the circumstances under

which it was originally employed, tells us a great deal about God. It

tells us, for instance, by virtue of its signification, that He is

self-existent, depending upon no other creature. I AM THAT I AM!' No

other being can say that. All the rest of us have to say, I am that

which God made me.' Circumstances and a hundred other things have made

me; God finds the law of His being and the fountain of His being within

Himself.

He sits on no precarious throne,

Nor borrows leave to be.'

His name proclaims Him to be self-existent, and as self-existent,

eternal; and as eternal, changeless; and as self-existent, eternal,

changeless, infinite in all the qualities by which He makes Himself

known. This boundless Being, all full of wisdom, power, and tenderness,

with whom we can enter into relations of amity and concord, surely He

is a strong tower into which we may run and be safe.'

But far beyond even the sweep of that great name, Jehovah, is the

knowledge of God's deepest heart and character which we learn in Him

who said, I have declared Thy name unto My brethren, and will declare

it.' Christ in His life and death, in His meekness, sweetness,

gentleness, calm wisdom, infinite patience, attractiveness; yearning

over sinful hearts, weeping over rebels, in the graciousness of His

life, in the sacredness and the power of His Cross, is the Revealer to

our hearts of the heart of God. If I may so say, He has builded the

strong tower' broader, has expanded its area and widened its gate, and

lifted its summit yet nearer the heavens, and made the name of God a

wider name and a mightier name, and a name of surer defence and

blessing than ever it was before.

And so, dear brethren! it all comes to this, the name that is the

strong tower' is the name My Father!' a Father of infinite tenderness

and wisdom and power. Oh! where can the child rest more quietly than on

the mother's breast, where can the child be safer than in the circle of

the father's arms? The name of the Lord is a strong tower.'

Now turn to the other for a moment: The rich man's wealth is' (with

great emphasis on the next little word) his strong city, and as a high

wall in his own conceit.' Of course we have not to deal here only with

wealth in the shape of money, but all external and material goods, the

whole mass of the things seen and temporal,' are gathered together here

in this phrase.

Men use their imaginations in very strange fashion, and make, or fancy

they make, for themselves out of the things of the present life a

defence and a strength. Like some poor lunatic, out upon a moor, that

fancies himself ensconced in a castle; like some barbarous tribes

behind their stockades or crowding at the back of a little turf wall,

or in some old tumble-down fort that the first shot will bring rattling

down about their ears, fancying themselves perfectly secure and

defended--so do men deal with these outward things that are given them

for another purpose altogether: they make of them defences and

fortresses.

It is difficult for a man to have them and not to trust them. So Jesus

said to His disciples once: How hardly shall they that have riches

enter into the Kingdom'; and when they were astonished at His words, He

repeated them with the significant variation, How hard is it for them

that trust in riches to enter into the Kingdom of God.' So He would

teach that the misuse and not the possession of wealth is the barrier,

but so, too, He would warn us that, nine times out of ten, the

possession of them in more than a very modest measure, tempts a man

into confidence in them.

The illusion is one that besets us all. We are all tempted to make a

defence of the things that we can see and handle. Is it not strange,

and is it not sad, that most of us just turn the truth round about and

suppose that the real defence is the imaginary, and that the imaginary

one is the real? How many men are there in this chapel who, if they

spoke out of their deepest convictions, would say: Oh yes! the promises

of God are all very well, but I would rather have the cash down. I

suppose that I may trust that He will provide bread and water, and all

the things that I need, but I would rather have a good solid balance at

the banker' s.' How many of you would rather honestly, and at the

bottom of your hearts, have that than God's word for your defence? How

many of you think that to trust in a living God is but grasping at a

very airy and unsubstantial kind of support; and that the real solid

defence is the defence made of the things that you can see?

My brother! it is exactly the opposite way. Turn it clean round, and

you get the truth. The unsubstantial shadows are the material things

that you can see and handle; illusory as a dream, and as little able to

ward off the blows of fate as a soap bubble. The real is the unseen

beyond--the things that are,' and He who alone really is, and in His

boundless and absolute Being is our only defence.

In one aspect or another, that false imagination with which my last

text deals is the besetting sin of Manchester. Not the rich man only,

but the poor man just as much, is in danger of it. The poor man who

thinks that everything would be right if only he were rich, and the

rich man who thinks that everything is right because he is rich, are

exactly the same man. The circumstances differ, but the one man is but

the other turned inside out. And all round about us we see the fierce

fight to get more and more of these things, the tight grip of them when

we have got them, the overestimate of the value of them, the contempt

for the people who have less of them than ourselves. Our aristocracy is

an aristocracy of wealth; in some respects, one by no means to be

despised, because there often go a great many good qualities to the

making and the stewardship of wealth; but still it is an evil that men

should be so largely estimated by their money as they are here. It is

not a sound state of opinion which has made what is he worth?' mean how

much of it has he?' We are taught here to look upon the prizes of life

as being mainly wealth. To win that is success'--prosperity'--and it is

very hard for us all not to be influenced by the prevailing tone.

I would urge you, young men, especially to lay this to heart--that of

all delusions that can beset you in your course, none will work more

disastrously than the notion that the summum bonum, the shield and stay

of a man, is the abundance of the things that he possesses.' I fancy I

see more listless, discontented, unhappy faces looking out of carriages

than I see upon the pavement. And I am sure of this, at any rate, that

all which is noble and sweet and good in life can be wrought out and

possessed upon as much bread and water as will keep body and soul

together, and as much furniture as will enable a man to sit at his meal

and lie down at night. And as for the rest, it has many advantages and

blessings, but oh! it is all illusory as a defence against the evils

that will come, sooner or later, to every life.

II. Consider next how to get into the true Refuge.

The righteous runneth into it and is safe,' says my text. You may get

into the illusory one very easily. Imagination will take you there.

There is no difficulty at all about that. And yet the way by which a

man makes this world his defence may teach you a lesson as to how you

can make God your defence. How does a man make this world his defence?

By trusting to it. He that says to the fine gold, Thou art my

confidence,' has made it his fortress--and that is how you will make

God your fortress--by trusting to Him. The very same emotion, the very

same act of mind, heart, and will, may be turned either upwards or

downwards, as you can turn the beam from a lantern which way you

please. Direct it earthwards, and you trust in the uncertainty of

riches.' Flash it heavenwards, and you trust in the living God.'

And that same lesson is taught by the words of our text, The righteous

runneth into it.' I do not dwell upon the word righteous.' That is the

Old Testament point of view, which could not conceive it possible that

any man could have deep and close communion with God, except on

condition of a pure character. I will not speak of that at present, but

point to the picturesque metaphor, which will tell us a great deal more

about what faith is than many a philosophical dissertation. Many a man

who would be perplexed by a theologian's talk will understand this: The

righteous runneth into the name of the Lord.'

The metaphor brings out the idea of eager haste in betaking oneself to

the shelter, as when an invading army comes into a country, and the

unarmed peasants take their portable belongings and their cattle, and

catch up their children in their arms, and set their wives upon their

mules, and make all haste to some fortified place; or as when the

manslayer in Israel fled to the city of refuge, or as when Lot hurried

for his life out of Sodom. There would be no dawdling then; but with

every muscle strained, men would run into the stronghold, counting

every minute a year till they were inside its walls, and heard the

heavy door close between them and the pursuer. No matter how rough the

road, or how overpowering the heat--no time to stop to gather flowers,

or even diamonds on the road, when a moment's delay might mean the

enemy's sword in your heart!

Now that metaphor is frequently used to express the resolved and swift

act by which, recognising in Jesus Christ, who declares the name of the

Lord, our hiding-place, we shelter ourselves in Him, and rest secure.

One of the picturesque words by which the Old Testament expresses

trust' means literally to flee to a refuge.' The Old Testament trust is

the New Testament faith, even as the Old Testament Name of the Lord'

answers to the New Testament Name of Jesus.' And so we run into this

sure hiding-place and strong fortress of the name of the Lord, when we

betake ourselves to Jesus and put our trust in Him as our defence.

Such a faith--the trust of mind, heart, and will--laying hold of the

name of the Lord, makes us righteous,' and so capable of dwelling with

the devouring fire' of God's perfect purity. The Old Testament point of

view was righteousness, in order to abiding in God. The New Testament

begins, as it were, at an earlier stage in the religious life, and

tells us how to get the righteousness, without which, it holds as

strongly as the Old Testament, no man shall see the Lord.' It shows us

that our faith, by which we run into that fortress, fits us to enter

the fortress, because it makes us partakers of Christ's purity.

So my earnest question to you all is--Have you fled for refuge to lay

hold' on that Saviour in whom God has set His name? Like Lot out of

Sodom, like the manslayer to the city of refuge, like the unwarlike

peasants to the baron's tower, before the border thieves, have you gone

thither for shelter from all the sorrows and guilt and dangers that are

marching terrible against you? Can you take up as yours the old grand

words of exuberant trust in which the Psalmist heaps together the names

of the Lord, as if walking about the city of his defence, and telling

the towers thereof, The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my

deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and

the horn of my salvation, and my high tower'? If you have, then because

you have made the Lord your refuge, there shall no evil befall you.'

III. So we have, lastly, what comes of sheltering in these two refuges.

As to the former of them, I said at the beginning of these remarks that

the words is safe' were more accurately as well as picturesquely

rendered by is set aloft.' They remind us of the psalm which has many

points of resemblance with this text, and which gives the very same

thought when it says, I will set him on high, because he hath known My

name.' The fugitive is taken within the safe walls of the strong tower,

and is set up high on the battlements, looking down upon the baffled

pursuers, and far beyond the reach of their arrows. To stand upon that

tower lifts a man above the region where temptations fly, above the

region where sorrow strikes; lifts him above sin and guilt and

condemnation and fear, and calumny and slander, and sickness, and

separation and loneliness and death; and all the ills that flesh is

heir to.'

Or, as one of the old Puritan commentators has it: The tower is so deep

that no pioneer can undermine it, so thick that no cannon can breach

it, so high that no ladder can scale it.' The righteous runneth into

it,' and is perched up there; and can look down like Lear from his

cliff, and all the troubles that afflict the lower levels shall show

scarce so gross as beetles' from the height where he stands, safe and

high, hidden in the name of the Lord.

I say little about the other side. Brethren! the world in any of its

forms, the good things of this life in any shape, whether that of money

or any other, can do a great deal for us. They can keep a great many

inconveniences from us, they can keep a great many cares and pains and

sorrows from us. I was going to say, to carry out the metaphor, they

can keep the rifle-bullets from us. But, ah! when the big siege-guns

get into position and begin to play; when the great trials that every

life must have, sooner or later, come to open fire at us, then the

defence that anything in this outer world can give comes rattling about

our ears very quickly. It is like the pasteboard helmet which looked as

good as if it had been steel, and did admirably as long as no sword

struck it.

There is only one thing that will keep us peaceful and unharmed, and

that is to trust our poor shelterless lives and sinful souls to the

Saviour who has died for us. In Him we find the hiding-place, in which

secure, as beneath the shadow of a great rock, dreaded evils will pass

us by, as impotent to hurt as savages before a castle fortified by

modern skill. All the bitterness of outward calamities will be taken

from them before they reach us. Their arrows will still wound, but He

will have wiped the poison off before He lets them be shot at us. The

force of temptation will be weakened, for if we live near Him we shall

have other tastes and desires. The bony fingers of the skeleton Death,

who drags men from all other homes, will not dislodge us from our

fortress-dwelling. Hid in Him we shall neither fear going down to the

grave, nor coming up from it, nor judgment, nor eternity. Then, I

beseech you, make no delay. Escape! flee for your life! A growing host

of evil marches swift against you. Take Christ for your defence and cry

to Him,

Lo! from sin and grief and shame,

Hide me, Jesus! in Thy name.'

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A STRING OF PEARLS

Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived

thereby is not wise. 2. The fear of a king is as the roaring of a lion:

whoso provoketh him to anger sinneth against his own soul. 3. It is an

honour for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling.

4. The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold; therefore shall

he beg in harvest, and have nothing. 5. Counsel in the heart of man is

like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out. 6. Most

men will proclaim every one his own goodness: but a faithful man who

can find? 7. The just man walketh in his integrity: his children are

blessed after him.'--PROVERBS xx. 1-7.

The connection between the verses of this passage is only in their

common purpose to set forth some details of a righteous life, and to

brand the opposite vices. A slight affinity may be doubtfully traced in

one or two adjacent proverbs, but that is all.

First comes temperance, enforced by the picture of a drunkard. Wine and

strong drink are, as it were, personified, and their effects on men are

painted as their own characters. And an ugly picture it is, which

should hang in the gallery of every young man and woman. Wine is a

mocker.' Intemperance delights in scoffing at all pure, lofty, sacred

things. It is the ally of wild profanity, which sends up its tipsy and

clumsy ridicule against Heaven itself. If a man wants to lose his sense

of reverence, his susceptibility for what is noble, let him take to

drink, and the thing is done. If he would fain keep these fresh and

quick, let him eschew what is sure to deaden them. Of course there are

other roads to the same end, but there is no other end to this road.

Nobody ever knew a drunkard who did not scoff at things that should be

reverenced, and that because he knew that he was acting in defiance of

them.

A brawler,' or, as Delitzsch renders it, boisterous'--look into a

liquor-store if you want to verify that, or listen to a drunken party

coming back from an excursion and making night hideous with their

bellowings, or go to any police court on a Monday morning. We in

England are familiar with the combination on police charge-sheets,

drunk and disorderly.' So does the old proverb-maker seem to have been.

Drink takes off the brake, and every impulse has its own way, and makes

as much noise as it can.

The word rendered in Authorised Version is deceived,' and in Revised

Version erreth,' is literally staggers' or reels,' and it is more

graphic to keep that meaning. There is a world of quiet irony in the

unexpectedly gentle close of the sentence, is not wise.' How much

stronger the assertion might have been! Look at the drunkard as he

staggers along, scoffing at everything purer and higher than himself,

and ready to fight with his own shadow, and incapable of self-control.

He has made himself the ugly spectacle you see. Will anybody call him

wise?

The next proverb applies directly to a state of things which most

nations have outgrown. Kings who can give full scope to their anger,

and who inspire mainly terror, are anomalies in civilised countries

now. The proverb warns that it is no trifle to rouse the lion from his

lair, and that when he begins to growl there is danger. The man who

stirs him forfeits his own life,' or, at all events, imperils it.

The word rendered sins' has for its original meaning misses,' and seems

to be so used here, as also in Proverbs viii. 36. Against' is a

supplement. The maxim inculcates the wisdom of avoiding conduct which

might rouse an anger so sure to destroy its object. And that is a good

maxim for ordinary times in all lands, monarchies or republics. For

there is in constitutional kingdoms and in republics an uncrowned

monarch, to the full as irresponsible, as easily provoked, and as

relentless in hunting its opponents to destruction, as any old-world

tyrant. Its name is Public Opinion. It is not well to provoke it. If a

man does, let him well understand that he takes his life, or what is

sometimes dearer than life, in his hand. Not only self-preservation,

which the proverb and Scripture recognise as a legitimate motive, but

higher considerations, dictate compliance with the ruling forces of our

times, as far as may be. Conscience only has the right to limit this

precept, and to say, Let the brute roar, and never mind if you do

forfeit your life. It is your duty to say "No," though all the world

should be saying "Yes."'

A slight thread of connection may be established between the second and

third proverbs. The latter, like the former, commends peacefulness and

condemns pugnacity. Men talk of glory' as the warrior's meed, and the

so-called Christian world has not got beyond the semi-barbarous stage

which regards honour' as mainly secured by fighting. But this ancient

proverb-maker had learned a better conception of what honour' or glory'

was, and where it grew.

Peace hath her victories

No less renowned than war,'

said Milton. But our proverb goes farther than no less,' and gives

greater glory to the man who never takes up arms, or who lays them

down. The saying is true, not only about warfare, but in all regions of

life. Fighting is generally wasted time. Controversialists of all

sorts, porcupine-like people, who go through the world all sharp quills

sticking out to pierce, are less to be admired than peace-loving souls.

Any fool can show his teeth,' as the word for quarrelling' means. But

it takes a wise man, and a man whose spirit has been made meek by

dwelling near God in Christ, to withhold the angry word, the quick

retort. It is generally best to let the glove flung down lie where it

is. There are better things to do than to squabble.

Verse 4 is a parable as well as a proverb. If a man sits by the

fireside because the north wind is blowing, when he ought to be out in

the field holding the plough with frost-nipped fingers, he will beg

(or, perhaps, seek for a crop) in harvest, and will find nothing, when

others are rejoicing in the slow result of winter showers and of their

toilsome hours. So, in all life, if the fitting moments for preparation

are neglected, late repentance avails nothing. The student who dawdles

when he should be working, will be sure to fail when the examination

comes on. It is useless to begin ploughing when your neighbours are

driving their reaping machines into the fields. There is a time to sow,

and a time to reap.' The law is inexorable for this life, and not less

certainly so for the life to come. The virgins who cried in vain, Lord,

Lord, open to us!' and were answered, Too late, too late, ye cannot

enter now!' are sisters of the man who was hindered from ploughing

because it was cold, and asked in vain for bread when harvest time had

come. To-day, if ye will to hear His voice, harden not your hearts.'

The next proverb is a piece of shrewd common sense. It sets before us

two men, one reticent, and the other skilful in worming out designs

which he wishes to penetrate. The former is like a deep draw-well; the

latter is like a man who lets down a bucket into it, and winds it up

full. Still waters are deep.' The faculty of reading men may be abused

to bad ends, but is worth cultivating, and may be allied to high aims,

and serve to help in accomplishing these. It may aid good men in

detecting evil, in knowing how to present God's truth to hearts that

need it, in pouring comfort into closely shut spirits. Not only astute

business men or politicians need it, but all who would help their

fellows to love God and serve Him--preachers, teachers, and the like.

And there would be more happy homes if parents and children tried to

understand one another. We seldom dislike a man when we come to know

him thoroughly. We cannot help him till we do.

The proverb in verse 6 is susceptible of different renderings in the

first clause. Delitzsch and others would translate, Almost every man

meets a man who is gracious to him.' The contrast will then be between

partial grace' or kindness, and thoroughgoing reliableness or

trustworthiness. The rendering of the Authorised and Revised Versions,

on the other hand, makes the contrast between talk and reality,

professions of goodwill and acts which come up to these. In either

case, the saying is the bitter fruit of experience. Even charity, which

believeth all things,' cannot but admit that soft words are more

abundant than deeds which verify them. It is no breach of the law of

love to open one's eyes to facts, and so to save oneself from taking

paper money for gold, except at a heavy discount. Perhaps the

reticence, noted in the previous proverb, led to the thought of a

loose-tongued profession of kindliness as a contrast. Neither the one

nor the other is admirable. The practical conclusion from the facts in

this proverb is double--do not take much heed of men's eulogiums on

their own benevolence; do not trumpet your own praises. Caution and

modesty are parts of Christian perfection.

The last saying points to the hereditary goodness which sometimes, for

our comfort, we do see, as well as to the halo from a saintly parent

which often surrounds his children. Note that there may be more than

mere succession in time conveyed by the expression after him.' It may

mean following in his footsteps. Such children are blessed, both in

men's benedictions and in their own peaceful hearts. Weighty

responsibilities lie upon the children of parents who have transmitted

to them a revered name. A Christian's children are doubly bound to

continue the parental tradition, and are doubly criminal if they depart

from it. There is no sadder sight than that of a godly father wailing

over an ungodly son, unless it be that of the ungodly son who makes him

wail. Absalom hanging by his curls in the oak-tree, and David groaning,

My son, my son!' touch all hearts. Alas that the tragedy should be so

often repeated in our homes to-day!

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THE SLUGGARD IN HARVEST

The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he

beg in harvest, and have nothing.'--PROVERBS xx. 4.

Like all the sayings of this book, this is simply a piece of plain,

practical common sense, intended to inculcate the lesson that men

should diligently seize the opportunity whilst it is theirs. The

sluggard is one of the pet aversions of the Book of Proverbs, which,

unlike most other manuals of Eastern wisdom, has a profound reverence

for honest work.

He is a great drone, for he prefers the chimney-corner to the field,

even although it cannot have been very cold if the weather was open

enough to admit of ploughing. And he is a great fool, too, for he buys

his comfort at a very dear price, as do all men who live for to-day,

and let to-morrow look out for itself.

But like most of the other sayings of this book, my text contains

principles which are true in the highest regions of human life, for the

laws which rule up there are not different from those which regulate

the motions of its lower phases. Religion recognises the same practical

common-sense principles that daily business does. I venture to take

this as my text now, in addressing young people, because they have

special need of, and special facilities for, the wisdom which it

enjoins; and because the words only want to be turned with their faces

heavenwards in order to enforce the great appeal, the only one which it

is worth my while to make, and worth your while to come here to listen

to; the appeal to each of you, I beseech you, by the mercies of God,

that ye yield yourselves to God' now.

My object, then, will be perhaps best accomplished if I simply ask you

to look, first, at the principles involved in this quaint proverb; and,

secondly, to apply them in one or two directions.

I. First, then, let us try to bring out the principles which are

crystallised in this picturesque saying.

The first thought evidently is: present conduct determines future

conditions. Life is a series of epochs, each of which has its destined

work, and that being done, all is well; and that being left undone, all

is ill.

Now, of course, in regard to many of the accidents of a man's

condition, his conduct is only one, and by no means the most powerful,

of the factors which settle them. The position which a man fills, the

tasks which he has to perform, and the whole host of things which make

up the externals of his life, depend upon far other conditions than any

that he brings to them. But yet on the whole it is true that what a man

does, and is, settles how he fares. And this is the mystical importance

and awful solemnity of the most undistinguished moments and most

trivial acts of this awful life of ours, that each of them has an

influence on all that comes after, and may deflect our whole course

into altogether different paths. It is not only the moments that we

vulgarly and blindly call great which settle our condition, but it is

the accumulation of the tiny ones; the small deeds, the unnoticed acts,

which make up so large a portion of every man's life. It is these,

after all, that are the most powerful in settling what we shall be.

There come to each of us supreme moments in our lives. Yes! and if in

all the subordinate and insignificant moments we have not been getting

ready for them, but have been nurturing dispositions and acquiring

habits, and cultivating ways of acting and thinking which condemn us to

fail beneath the requirements of the supreme moment, then it passes us

by, and we gain nothing from it. Tiny mica flakes have built up the

Matterhorn, and the minute acts of life after all, by their

multiplicity, make up life to be what it is. Sand is heavy,' says this

wise book of Proverbs. The aggregation of the minutest grains, singly

so light that they would not affect the most delicate balance, weighs

upon us with a weight heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.' The

mystic significance of the trivialities of life is that in them we

largely make destiny, and that in them we wholly make character.

And now, whilst this is true about all life, it is especially true

about youth. You have facilities for moulding your being which some of

us older men would give a great deal to have again for a moment, with

our present knowledge and bitter experience. The lava that has

solidified into hard rock with us is yet molten and plastic with you.

You can, I was going to say, be anything you make up your minds to;

and, within reasonable limits, the bold saying is true. Ask what thou

wilt and it shall be given to thee' is what nature and Providence,

almost as really as grace and Christ, say to every young man and woman,

because you are the arbiters, not wholly, indeed, of your destiny, and

are the architects, altogether, of your character, which is more.

And so I desire to lay upon your hearts this threadbare old truth,

because you are living in the ploughing time, and the harvest is months

ahead. Whilst it is true that every day is the child of all the

yesterdays, and the parent of all the to-morrows, it is also true that

life has its predominant colouring, varying at different epochs, and

that for you, though you are largely inheriting, even now, the results

of your past, brief as it is, still more largely is the future, the

plastic future, in your hands, to be shaped into such forms as you

will. The child is father of the man,' and the youth has the blessed

prerogative of standing before the mouldable to-morrow, and possessing

a nature still capable of being cast into an almost infinite variety of

form.

But then, not only do you stand with special advantages for making

yourselves what you will, but you specially need to be reminded of the

terrible importance and significance of each moment. For this is the

very irony of human life, that we seldom awake to the sense of its

importance till it is nearly ended, and that the period when reflection

would avail the most is precisely the period when it is the least

strong and habitual. What is the use of an old man like me thinking

about what he could make of life if he had it to do over again, as

compared with the advantage of your doing it? Yet I dare say that for

once that you think thus, my contemporaries do it fifty times. So, not

to abate one jot of your buoyancy, not to cast any shadow over joys and

hopes, but to lift you to a sense of the blessed possibilities of your

position, I want to lay this principle of my text upon your

consciences, and to beseech you to try to keep it operatively in

mind--you are making yourselves, and settling your destiny, by every

day of your plastic youth.

There is another principle as clear in my text--viz., the easy road is

generally the wrong one. The sluggard was warmer at the fireside than

he would be in the field with his plough in the north wind, and so he

stopped there. There are always obstacles in the way of noble life. It

is always easier, as flesh judges, to live ignobly than to live as

Jesus Christ would have us live. Endure hardness' is the commandment to

all who would be soldiers of any great cause, and would not fling away

their lives in low self-indulgence. If a man is going to be anything

worth being, or to do anything worth doing, he must start with, and

adhere to this, to scorn delights and live laborious days.' And only

then has he a chance of rising above the fat dull weed that rots in

Lethe's stream, and of living anything like the life that it becomes

him to live.

Be sure of this, dear young friends, that self-denial and rigid

self-control, in its two forms, of stopping your ears to the

attractions of lower pleasures, and of cheerily encountering

difficulties, is an indispensable condition of any life which shall at

the last yield a harvest worth the gathering, and not destined to be

Cast as rubbish to the void,

When God hath made the pile complete.'

Never allow yourselves to be turned away from the plain path of duty by

any difficulties. Never allow yourselves to be guided in your choice of

a road by the consideration that the turf is smooth, and the flowers by

the side of it sweet. Remember, the sluggard would have been warmer,

with a wholesome warmth, at the ploughtail than cowering in the chimney

corner. And the things that seem to be difficulties and hardships only

need to be fronted to yield, like the east wind in its season, good

results in bracing and hardening. Fix it in your minds that nothing

worth doing is done but at the cost of difficulty and toil.

That is a lesson that this generation wants, even more than some that

have lived. I suppose it is one of the temptations of older men to look

askance upon the amusements of younger ones, but I cannot help lifting

up here one word of earnest appeal to the young men and women of this

congregation, and beseeching them, as they value the nobleness of their

own lives, and their power of doing any real good, to beware of what

seems to me the altogether extravagant and excessive love, and

following after, of mere amusement which characterises this day to so

large an extent. Better toil than such devotion to mere relaxation.

The last principle here is that the season let slip is gone for ever.

Whether my text, in its second picture, intends us to think of the

sluggard when the harvest came as begging' from his neighbours; or

whether, as is possibly the construction of the Hebrew, it simply means

to describe him as going out into his field, and looking at it, and

asking for the harvest and seeing nothing there but weeds, the lesson

it conveys is the same--the old, old lesson, so threadbare that I

should be almost ashamed of taking up your time with it unless I

believed that you did not lay it to heart as you should. Opportunity is

bald behind, and must be grasped by the forelock. Life is full of

tragic might-have-beens. No regret, no remorse, no self-accusation, no

clear recognition that I was a fool will avail one jot. The time for

ploughing is past; you cannot stick the share into the ground when you

should be wielding the sickle. Too late' is the saddest of human words.

And, my brother, as the stages of our lives roll on, unless each is

filled as it passes with the discharge of the duties, and the

appropriation of the benefits which it brings, then, to all eternity,

that moment will never return, and the sluggard may beg in harvest,

that he may have the chance to plough once more, and have none. The

student that has spent the term in indolence, perhaps dissipation, has

no time to get up his subject when he is in the examination-room, with

the paper before him. And life, and nature, and God's law, which is the

Christian expression for the heathen one of nature, are stern

taskmasters, and demand that the duty shall be done in its season or

left undone for ever.

II. In the second place, let me, just in a few words, carry the lamp of

these principles of my text and flash its rays upon one or two

subjects.

Let me say a word, first, about the lowest sphere to which my text

applies. I referred at the beginning of this discourse to this proverb

as simply an inculcation of the duty of honest work, and of the

necessity of being wide awake to opportunities in our daily work. Now,

the most of you young men, and many of you young women, are destined

for ordinary trades, professions, walks in commerce; and I do not

suppose it to be beneath the dignity of the pulpit to say this: Do not

trust to any way of getting on by dodges or speculation, or favour, or

anything but downright hard work. Don't shirk difficulties, don't try

to put the weight of the work upon some colleague or other, that you

may have an easier life of it. Set your backs to your tasks, and

remember that in all labour there is profit'; and whether the profit

comes to you in the shape of advancement, position, promotion in your

offices, partnerships perhaps, wealth, and the like, or no, the profit

lies in the work. Honest toil is the key to pleasure.

Then, let me apply the text in a somewhat higher direction. Carry these

principles with you in the cultivation of that important part of

yourself--your intellects. What would some of us old students give if

we had the flexibility, the power of assimilating new truth, the

retentive memories, that you young people have? Some of you, perhaps,

are students by profession; I should like all of you to make a

conscience of making the best of your brains, as God has given them to

you, a trust. The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold.' The

dawdler will read no books that tax his intellect, therefore shall he

beg in harvest and have nothing. Amidst all the flood of feeble,

foolish, flaccid literature with which we are afflicted at this day, I

wonder how many of you young men and women ever set