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**Expositions of  
Holy Scripture:  
Deuteronomy -  
2 Kings**

**Alexander Maclaren**



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## Expositions of Holy Scripture: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth and First Book of Samuel, Second Samuel, First Kings, and Second Kings Chapters I to VII

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**Author(s):** Maclaren, Alexander (1826-1910)

**Publisher:** Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library

**Description:** Called the "prince of expositors," Alexander MacLaren was a renowned preacher of the 19th and 20th century. *Expositions of Holy Scripture* brings together many of the sermons over his fifty years in ministry. Although it discusses many different books and passages of the Bible, *Expositions of Holy Scripture* isn't a commentary in the fullest sense--for example, MacLaren doesn't comment on every verse. Rather, these volumes are MacLaren's powerful sermons, arranged by the text of the sermons. Broadly evangelical in nature, MacLaren's sermons are not historical--rarely referring to the current events of his day--allowing them to retain their interest and power since he first gave them. *Expositions of Holy Scriptures* is thus highly practical and lively. It makes a wonderful companion to more textually oriented commentaries. To read *Expositions of Holy Scripture* is to be in the presence of one of the greatest preachers of the last few centuries.

Tim Perrine  
CCEL Staff Writer

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**EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE**

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

**DEUTERONOMY, JOSHUA, JUDGES, RUTH, AND FIRST BOOK OF SAMUEL  
SECOND SAMUEL, FIRST KINGS, AND SECOND KINGS *CHAPTERS I to VII***

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**THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY**

## **GOD'S FAITHFULNESS**

'Know therefore that the Lord thy God, He is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love Him.'—**DEUT. vii. 9.**

'Faithful,' like most Hebrew words, has a picture in it. It means something that can be (1) leant on, or (2) builded on.

This leads to a double signification—(1) trustworthy, and that because (2) rigidly observant of obligations. So the word applies to a steward, a friend, or a witness. Its most wonderful and sublime application is to God. It presents to our adoring love—

I. God as coming under obligations to us.

A marvellous and blessed idea. He limits His action, regards Himself as bound to a certain line of conduct.

1. Obligations from His act of creation.

'A faithful Creator,' bound to take care of those whom He has made. To supply their necessities. To satisfy their desires. To give to each the possibility of discharging its ideal.

2. Obligations from His past self.

'God is faithful by whom ye were called,' therefore He will do all that is imposed on Him by His act of calling.

He cannot begin without completing. There are no abandoned mines. There are no half-hewn stones in His quarries, like the block at Baalbec. And this because the divine nature is inexhaustible in power and unchangeable in purpose.

3. Obligations from His own word.

A revelation is presupposed by the notion of faithfulness. It is not possible in heathenism. 'Dumb idols,' which have given their worshippers no promises, cannot be thought of as faithful. By its grand conception of Jehovah as entering into a covenant with Israel, the Old Testament presents Him to our trust as having bound Himself to a known line of action. Thereby He becomes, if we may so phrase it, a constitutional monarch.

That conception of a Covenant is the negation of caprice, of arbitrary sovereignty, of mystery. We know the principles of His government. His majestic 'I wills' cover the whole ground of human life and needs for the present and the future. We can go into no region of life but we find that God has defined His conduct to us there by some word spoken to our heart and binding Him.

4. Obligations from His new Covenant and highest word in Jesus Christ.

'He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.'

II. God as recognising and discharging these obligations.

That He will do so comes from His very nature. With Him there is no change of disposition, no emergence of unseen circumstances, no failure or exhaustion of power.

That He does so is matter of fact. Moses in the preceding context had pointed to facts of history, on which he built the 'know therefore' of the text. On the broad scale the whole

world's history is full of illustrations of God's faithfulness to His promises and His threats. The history of Judaism, the sorrows of nations, and the complications of national events, all illustrate this fact.

The personal history of each of us. The experience of all Christian souls. No man ever trusted in Him and was ashamed. He wills that we should put Him to the proof.

III. God as claiming our trust.

He is faithful, worthy to be trusted, as His deeds show.

Faith is our attitude corresponding to His faithfulness. Faith is the germ of all that He requires from us. How much we need it! How firm it might be! How blessed it would make us!

The thought of God as 'faithful' is, like a precious stone, turned in many directions in Scripture, and wherever turned it flashes light. Sometimes it is laid as the foundation for the confidence that even our weakness will be upheld to the end, as when Paul tells the Corinthians that they will be confirmed to the end, because 'God is faithful, through whom ye were called into the fellowship of His Son' (1 Cor. i. 9). Sometimes there is built on it the assurance of complete sanctification, as when he prays for the Thessalonians that their 'whole spirit and soul and body may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord' and finds it in his heart to pray thus because 'Faithful is He that calleth you, who will also do it' (1 Thess. v. 24). Sometimes it is presented as the steadfast stay grasping which faith can expect apparent impossibilities, as when Sara 'judged Him faithful who had promised' (Heb. xi. 11). Sometimes it is adduced as bringing strong consolation to souls conscious of their own feeble and fluctuating faith, as when Paul tells Timothy that 'If we are faithless, He abideth faithful; for He cannot deny Himself' (2 Tim. ii. 13). Sometimes it is presented as an anodyne to souls disturbed by experience of men's unreliableness, as when the apostle heartens the Thessalonians and himself to bear human untrustworthiness by the thought that though men are faithless, God 'is faithful, who shall establish you and keep you from evil' (2 Thess. iii. 2, 3). Sometimes it is put forward to breathe patience into tempted spirits, as when the Corinthians are comforted by the assurance that 'God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able' (1 Cor. x. 13). Sometimes it is laid as the firm foundation for our assurance of pardon, as when John tells us that 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins' (1 John i. 9). And sometimes that great attribute of the divine nature is proposed as holding forth a pattern for us to follow, and the faith in it as tending to make us in a measure steadfast like Himself, as when Paul indignantly rebuts his enemies' charge of levity of purpose and vacillation, and avers that 'as God is faithful, our word toward you is not yea and nay' (2 Cor. i. 18).

## THE LESSON OF MEMORY

‘Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these lofty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no.’—DEUT. viii. 2.

The strand of our lives usually slips away smoothly enough, but days such as this, the last Sunday in a year, are like the knots on a sailor’s log, which, as they pass through his fingers, tell him how fast it is being paid out from the reel, and how far it has run off.

They suggest a momentary consciousness of the swift passage of life, and naturally lead us to a glance backwards and forwards, both of which occupations ought to be very good for us. The dead flat upon which some of us live may be taken as an emblem of the low present in which most of us are content to pass our lives, affording nowhere a distant view, and never enabling us to see more than a street’s length ahead of us. It is a good thing to get up upon some little elevation and take a wider view, backwards and forwards.

And so now I venture to let the season preach to us, and to confine myself simply to suggesting for you one or two very plain and obvious thoughts which may help to make our retrospect wise and useful. And there are two main considerations which I wish to submit. The first is —what we ought to be chiefly occupied with as we look back; and secondly, what the issue of such a retrospect ought to be.

I. With what we should be mainly occupied as we look back. Memory, like all other faculties, may either help us or hinder us. As is the man, so will be his remembrance. The tastes which rule his present will determine the things that he likes best to think about in the past. There are many ways of going wrong in our retrospects. Some of us, for instance, prefer to think with pleasure about things that ought never to have been done, and to give a wicked immortality to thoughts that ought never to have had a being. Some men’s tastes and inclinations are so vitiated and corrupted that they find a joy in living their badnesses over again. Some of us, looking back on the days that are gone, select by instinctive preference for remembrance, the vanities and frivolities and trifles which were the main things in them whilst they lasted. Such a use of the great faculty of memory is like the folly of the Egyptians who embalmed cats and vermin. Do not let us be of those, who have in their memories nothing but rubbish, or something worse, who let down the drag-net into the depths of the past and bring it up full only of mud and foulnesses, and of ugly monsters that never ought to have been dragged into the daylight.

Then there are some of us who abuse memory just as much by picking out, with perverse ingenuity, every black bit that lies in the distance behind us, all the disappointments, all the losses, all the pains, all the sorrows. Some men look back and say, with Jacob in one of his moods, ‘Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life!’ Yes! and the same man, when he was in a better spirit, said, and a great deal more truly, ‘The God that fed me all my life long, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil.’ Do not paint like Rembrandt,



even if you do not paint like Turner. Do not dip your brush only in the blackness, even if you cannot always dip it in molten sunshine.

And there are some of us who, in like manner, spoil all the good that we could get out of a wise retrospect, by only looking back in such a fashion as to feed a sentimental melancholy, which is, perhaps, the most profitless of all the ways of looking backwards.

Now here are the two points, in this verse of my text, which would put all these blunders and all others right, telling us what we should chiefly think about when we look back, and from what point of view the retrospect of the past must be taken in order that it should be salutary. 'Thou shalt remember all the way by which the Lord thy God hath led thee.' Let memory work under the distinct recognition of divine guidance in every part of the past. That is the *first* condition of making the retrospect blessed. 'To humble thee and to prove thee, and to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no'; let us look back with a clear recognition of the fact that the use of life is to test, and reveal, and to make, character. This world, and all its outward engagements, duties, and occupations, is but a scaffolding, on which the builders may stand to rear the true temple, and when the building is reared you may do what you like with the scaffolding. So we have to look back on life from this point of view, that its joys and sorrows, its ups and downs, its work and repose, the vicissitudes and sometimes contrariety of its circumstances and conditions, are all for the purpose of making *us*, and of making plain to ourselves, what we are. 'To humble thee,' that is, to knock the self-confidence out of us, and to bring us to say: 'I am nothing and Thou art everything; I myself am a poor weak rag of a creature that needs Thy hand to stiffen me, or I shall not be able to resist or to do.' That is one main lesson that life is meant to teach us. Whoever has learnt to say by reason of the battering and shocks of time, by reason of sorrows and failures, by reason of joys, too, and fruition,—'Lord, I come to Thee as depending upon Thee for everything,' has wrung its supreme good out of life, and has fulfilled the purpose of the Father, who has led us all these years, to humble us into the wholesome diffidence that says: 'Not in myself, but in Thee are all my strength and my hope.'

I need not do more than remind you of the other cognate purposes which are suggested here. Life is meant, not only to bring us to humble self-distrust, as a step towards devout dependence on God, but also to reveal us to ourselves; for we only know what we are by reflecting on what we have done, and the only path by which self-knowledge can be attained is the path of observant recollection of our conduct in daily life.

Another purpose for which the whole panorama of life is made to pass before us, and for which all the gymnastic of life exercises us, is that we may be made submissive to the great Will, and may keep His commandments.

These thoughts should be with us in our retrospect, and then our retrospect will be blessed: First, we are to look back and see God's guidance everywhere, and second, we are

to judge of the things that we remember by their tendency to make character, to make us humble, to reveal us to ourselves, and to knit us in glad obedience to our Father God.

II. And now turn to the other consideration which may help to make remembrance a good, viz., the issues to which our retrospect must tend, if it is to be anything more than sentimental recollection.

First, let me say: Remember and be thankful. If what I have been saying as to the standard by which events are to be tried be true; if it be the case that the main fact about things is their power to mould persons and to make character, then there follows, very plainly and clearly, that all things that come within the sweep of our memory may equally contribute to our highest good.

Good does not mean pleasure. Bright-being may not always be well-being, and the highest good has a very much nobler meaning than comfort and satisfaction. And so, realising the fact that the best of things is that they shall make us like God, then we can turn to the past and judge it wisely, because then we shall see that all the diversity, and even the opposition, of circumstances and events, may co-operate towards the same end. Suppose two wheels in a great machine, one turns from right to left and the other from left to right, but they fit into one another, and they both produce one final result of motion. So the moments in my life which I call blessings and gladness, and the moments in my life which I call sorrows and tortures, may work into each other, and they will do so if I take hold of them rightly, and use them as they ought to be used. They will tend to the highest good whether they be light or dark; even as night with its darkness and its dew has its ministration and mission of mercy for the wearied eye no less than day with its brilliancy and sunshine; even as the summer and the winter are equally needful, and equally good for the crop. So in our lives it is good for us, sometimes, that we be brought into the dark places; it is good for us sometimes that the leaves be stripped from the trees, and the ground be bound with frost.

And so for both kinds of weather, dear brethren, we have to remember and be thankful. It is a hard lesson, I know, for some of us. There may be some listening to me whose memory goes back to this dying year as the year that has held the sorest sorrow of their lives; to whom it has brought some loss that has made earth dark. And it seems hard to tell quivering lips to be thankful, and to bid a man be grateful though his eyes fill with tears as he looks back on such a past. But yet it is true that it is good for us to be drawn, or to be driven, to Him; it is good for us to have to tread even a lonely path if it makes us lean more on the arm of our Beloved. It is good for us to have places made empty if, as in the year when Israel's King died, we shall thereby have our eyes purged to behold the Lord sitting on the Royal Seat.

‘Take it on trust a little while,  
Thou soon shalt read the mystery right,  
In the full sunshine of His smile.’

And for the present let us try to remember that He dwelleth in the darkness as in the light, and that we are to be thankful for the things that help us to be near Him, and not only for the things that make us outwardly glad. So I venture to say even to those of you who may be struggling with sad remembrances, remember and be thankful.

I have no doubt there are many of us who have to look back, if not upon a year desolated by some blow that never can be repaired, yet upon a year in which failing resources and declining business, or diminished health, or broken spirits, or a multitude of minute but most disturbing cares and sorrows, do make it hard to recognise the loving Hand in all that comes. Yet to such, too, I would say: ‘All things work together for good,’ therefore all things are to be embraced in the thankfulness of our retrospect.

The second and simple practical suggestion that I make is this: Remember, and let the memory lead to contrition. Perhaps I am speaking to some men or women for whom this dying year holds the memory of some great lapse from goodness; some young man who for the first time has been tempted to sensuous sin; some man who may have been led into slippery places in regard to business integrity. I draw a ‘bow at a venture’ when I speak of such things—perhaps some one is listening to me who would give a great deal if he or she could forget a certain past moment of this dying year, which makes their cheeks hot yet whilst they think of it. To such I say: Remember, go close into the presence of the black thing, and get the consciousness of it driven into your heart; for such remembrance is the first step to deliverance from the load, and to your passing, emancipated from the bitterness, into the year that lies before you.

But even if there are none of us to whom such remarks would specially apply, let us summon up to ourselves the memories of these bygone days. In all the three hundred and sixty-five of them, my friend, how many moments stand out distinct before you as moments of high communion with God? How many times can you remember of devout consecration to Him? How many, when—as visitors to the Riviera reckon the number of days in the season in which, far across the water, they have seen Corsica—you can remember this year to have beheld, faint and far away, ‘the mountains that are round about’ the ‘Jerusalem that is above’? How many moments do you remember of consecration and service, of devotion to your God and your fellows? Oh! what a miserable, low-lying stretch of God-forgetting monotony our lives look when we are looking back at them in the mass. One film of mist is scarcely perceptible, but when you get a mile of it you can tell what it is—oppressive darkness. One drop of muddy water does not show its pollution, but when you have a pitcherful of it you can see how thick it is. And so a day or an hour looked back upon may

not reveal the true godlessness of the average life, but if you will take the twelvemonth and think about it, and ask yourself a question or two about it, I think you will feel that the only attitude for any of us in looking back across a stretch of such brown barren moorland is that of penitent prayer for forgiveness and for cleansing.

But I dare say that some of you say: 'Oh! I look back and I do not feel anything of that kind of regret that you describe; I have done my duty, and nobody can blame me. I am quite comfortable in my retrospect. Of course there have been imperfections; we are all human, and these need not trouble a man.' Let me ask you, dear brother, one question: Do you believe that the law of a man's life is, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself? Do you believe that that is what you ought to do? Have you done it? If you have not, let me beseech you not to go out of this year, across the artificial and imaginary boundary that separates you from the next, with the old guilt upon your back, but go to Jesus Christ, and ask Him to forgive you, and then you may pass into the coming twelvemonth without the intolerable burden of unremembered, unconfessed, and therefore unforgiven, sin.

The next point that I would suggest is this: Let us remember in order that from the retrospect we may gain practical wisdom. It is astonishing what unteachable, untamable creatures men are. They learn wisdom about all the little matters of daily life by experience, but they do not seem to do so about the higher. Even a sparrow comes to understand a scarecrow after a time or two, and any rat in a hole will learn the trick of a trap. But you can trick men over and over again with the same inducement, and, even whilst the hook is sticking in their jaws, the same bait will tempt them once more. That is very largely the case because they do not observe and remember what has happened to them in bygone days.

There are two things that any man, who will bring his reason and common-sense to bear upon the honest estimate and retrospect of the facts of his life, may be fully convinced of. These are, first, his own weakness. One main use of a wise retrospect is to teach us where we are weakest. What an absurd thing it would be if the inhabitants of a Dutch village were to let the sea come in at the same gap in the same dyke a dozen times! What an absurd thing it would be if a city were captured over and over again by assaults at the same point, and did not strengthen its defences there! But that is exactly what you do; and all the while, if you would only think about your own past lives wisely and reasonably, and like men with brains in your heads, you might find out where it was that you were most open to attack; what it was in your character that most needed strengthening, what it was wherein the devil caught you most quickly, and might so build yourselves up in the most defenceless points.

Do not look back for sentimental melancholy; do not look back with unavailing regrets; do not look back to torment yourselves with useless self-accusation; but look back to see

how good God has been, and look back to see where you are weak, and pile the wall, higher there, and so learn practical wisdom from retrospect.

Another phase of the practical wisdom which memory should give is deliverance from the illusions of sense and time. Remember how little the world has ever done for you in bygone days. Why should you let it befool you once again? If it has proved itself a liar when it has tempted you with gilded offers that came to nothing, and with beauty that was no more solid than the 'Easter-eggs' that you buy in the shops—painted sugar with nothing inside—why should you believe it when it comes to you once more? Why not say: 'Ah! once burnt, twice shy! You have tried that trick on me before, and I have found it out!' Let the retrospect teach us how hollow life is without God, and so let it draw us near to Him.

The last thing that I would say is: 'Let us remember that we may hope. It is the prerogative of Christian remembrance, that it merges into Christian hope. The forward look and the backward look are really but the exercise of the same faculty in two different directions. Memory does not always imply hope, we remember sometimes because we do not hope, and try to gather round ourselves the vanished past because we know it never again can be a present or a future. But when we are occupied with an unchanging Friend, whose love is inexhaustible, and whose arm is unwearied, it is good logic to say: 'It has been, therefore it shall be.'

With regard to this fleeting life, it is a delusion to say 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant'; but with regard to the life of the soul that lives in God, that is true, and true for ever. The past is a specimen of the future. The future for the man who lives in Christ is but the prolongation, and the heightening into superlative excellence and beauty, of all that is good in the past and in the present. As the radiance of some rising sun may cast its bright beams into the opposite sky, even so the glowing past behind us flings its purples and its golds and its scarlets on to the else dim curtain of the future.

Remember that you may hope. A paradox, but a paradox that is a truth in the case of Christians whose memory is of a God that has loved and blessed them whose hope is in a God that changes never; whose memory is charged with 'every good and perfect gift that came down from the Father of Lights,' whose hope is in that same Father, 'with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.' So on every stone of remembrance, every Ebenezer on which is graven: 'Hitherto hath the Lord helped us,' we can mount a telescope—if I may so say—that will look into the furthest glories of the heavens, and be sure that the past will be magnified and perpetuated in the future. Our prayer may legitimately be; 'Thou hast been my help, leave me not, neither forsake me!' And His answer will be: 'I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.' Remember that you may hope, and hope because you remember.

## THE EATING OF THE PEACE-OFFERING

‘But thou must eat them before the Lord thy God in the place which the Lord thy God shall choose, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy manservant, and thy maidservant, and the Levite that is within thy gates: and thou shalt rejoice before the Lord thy God in all that thou puttest thine hands unto.’—[DEUT. xii. 18](#).

There were three bloody sacrifices, the sin-offering, the burnt-offering, and the peace-offering. In all three expiation was the first idea, but in the second of them the act of burning symbolised a further thought, namely, that of offering to God, while in the third, the peace-offering, there was added to both of these the still further thought of the offerer’s participation with God, as symbolised by the eating of the sacrifice. So we have great verities of the most spiritual religion adumbrated in this external rite. The rind is hard and forbidding, the kernel is juicy and sweet.

I. Communion with God based on atonement.

II. Feeding on Christ.

What was sacrifice becomes food. The same Person and facts, apprehended by faith, are, in regard to their bearing on the divine government, the ground of pardon, and in regard to their operation within us, the source of spiritual sustenance. Christ for us is our pardon; Christ in us is our life.

III. The restoration to the offerer of all which he lays on God’s altar.

The sacrifice was transformed and elevated into a sacrament. By being offered the sacrifice was ennobled. The offerer did not lose what he laid on the altar, but it came back to him, far more precious than before. It was no longer mere food for the body, and to eat it became not an ordinary meal, but a sacrament and means of union with God. It was a hundredfold more the offerer’s even in this life. All its savour was more savoury, all its nutritive qualities were more nutritious. It had suffered a fiery change, and was turned into something more rich and rare.

That is blessedly true as to all which we lay on God’s altar. It is far more ours than it ever was or could be, while we kept it for ourselves, and our enjoyment of, and nourishment from, our good things, when offered as sacrifices, are greater than when we eat our morsel alone. If we make earthly joys and possessions the materials of our sacrifice, they will not only become more joyful and richer, but they will become means of closer union with Him, instead of parting us from Him, as they do when used in selfish disregard of Him.

Nor must we forget the wonderful thought, also mirrored in this piece of ancient ritual, that God delights in men’s sacrifices and surrenders and services. ‘If I were hungry, I would not tell thee,’ said the Psalmist in God’s name in regard to outward sacrifices; ‘Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?’ But he does ‘eat’ the better sacrifices that loving hearts or obedient wills lay on His altar. He seeks for these, and delights when they are offered to Him. ‘He hungered, and seeing a fig tree by the wayside, He came to it.’ He still

hungers for the fruit that we can yield to Him, and if we will, He will enter in and sup with us, not disdainingly to sit at the poor table which we can spread for Him, nor to partake of the humble fare which we can lay upon it, but mending the banquet by what He brings for *our* nourishment, and hallowing the hour by His presence.

### **PROPHETS AND THE PROPHET**

‘When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. 10. There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, 11. Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. 12. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee. 13. Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God. 14. For these nations, which thou shalt possess, hearkened unto observers of times, and unto diviners: but as for thee, the Lord thy God hath not suffered thee so to do. 15. The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto Him ye shall hearken; 16. According to all that thou desiredst of the Lord thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. 17. And the Lord said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. 18. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put My words in His mouth; and He shall speak unto them all that I shall command Him. 19. And it shall come to pass that whosoever will not hearken unto My words which He shall speak in My name, I will require it of him. 20. But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. 21. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? 22. When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.’—*DEUT. xviii. 9-22.*

It is evident from the connection in which the promise of ‘a prophet like unto Moses’ is here introduced that it does not refer to Jesus only; for it is presented as Israel’s continuous defence against the temptation of seeking knowledge of the divine will by the illegitimate methods of divination, soothsaying, necromancy, and the like, which were rampant among the inhabitants of the land. A distant hope of a prophet in the far-off future could afford no motive to shun these superstitions. We cannot understand this passage unless we recognise that the direct reference is to the institution of the prophetic order as the standing means of imparting the reliable knowledge of God’s will, possessing which, Israel had no need to turn to them ‘that peep and mutter’ and bring false oracles from imagined gods. But that primary reference of the words does not exclude, but rather demands, their ultimate reference to Him in whom the divine word is perfectly enshrined, and who is the bright, consummate flower of the prophetic order, which ‘spake of Him,’ not only in its individual predictions, but by its very existence.



A glance must be given to the exhaustive list of pretenders to knowledge of the future or to power of shaping it magically, which occurs in [verses 10, 11](#), and suggests a terrible picture of the burdens of superstition which weighed on men in these days of ignorance, as the like burdens do still, wherever Jesus is not known as the one Revealer of God, and the sole Lord of all things. Of the eight terms employed, the first three refer to different means of reading the future, the next two to different means of influencing events, and the last three to different ways of consulting the dead. The first of these eight properly refers to drawing lots, but includes other methods; the second is an obscure word, which is supposed by some to mean a ‘murmurer,’ and may refer rather to the low mutterings of the soothsayer than to the method of his working; the third is probably a general expression for an interpreter of omens, especially of those given by the play of liquid in a ‘cup,’ such as Joseph ‘divined’ by.

Two names for magicians follow, of which the former seems to mean one who worked with charms such as African or American Indian ‘medicine men’ use, and the latter, one who binds by incantations, or one who ties magic knots, which are supposed to have the power of hindering the designs of the person against whom they are directed. The word employed means ‘binding,’ and maybe used either literally or metaphorically. The malicious tying of knots in order to work harm is not dead yet in some backward corners of Britain. Then follow three names for traffickers with spirits,—those who raise ghosts as did the witch of Endor, those who have a ‘familiar spirit,’ and those who in any way consult the dead. It is a grim catalogue, bearing witness to the deep-rooted longing in men to peer into the darkness ahead, and to get some knowledge of the purposes of the awful unseen Power who rules there. The longing is here recognised as legitimate, while the methods are branded as bad, and Israel is warned from them, by being pointed to the merciful divine institution which meets the longing.

It is clear, from this glance at the context, that the ‘prophet’ promised to Israel must mean the order, not the individual; and it is interesting to note, first, the relation in which that order is presented as standing towards all that rabble of diviners and sorcerers, with their rubbish of charms and muttered spells. It sweeps them off the field, because it is truly what they pretend to be. God knows men’s longings, and God will meet them so far as meeting them is for men’s good. But the characteristics of the prophet are set in strong contrast to those of the diviners and magicians, and lift the order high above all the filth and folly of these others. First, the prophet is ‘raised up’ by God; the individual holder of the office has his ‘call’ and does not ‘prophesy out of his own heart.’ The man who takes this office on himself without such a call is *ipso facto* branded as a false prophet. Then he is ‘from the midst of thee, of thy brethren,’—springing from the people, not an alien, like so many of these wandering soothsayers, but with the national life throbbing in his veins, and himself participant of the thoughts and emotions of his brethren. Then he is to be ‘like unto’

Moses,—not in all points, but in his receiving direct communications from God, and in his authority as God's messenger. The crowning characteristic, 'I will put My words into his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him,' invests his words with divine authority, calls for obedience to them as the words of God Himself, widens out his sphere far beyond that of merely foretelling, brings in the moral and religious element which had no place in the oracles of the soothsayer, and opens up the prospect of a continuous progressive revelation throughout the ages ('all that I *shall* command him'). We mutilate the grand idea of the prophet in Israel if we think of his work as mainly prediction, and we mutilate it no less if we exclude prediction from it. We mutilate it still more fatally if we try to account for it on naturalistic principles, and fail to see in the prophet a man directly conscious of a divine call, or to hear in his words the solemn accents of the voice of God.

The loftiness and the limitations of 'the goodly fellowship of the prophets' alike point onwards to Jesus Christ. In Him, and in Him alone, the idea of the prophet is fully realised. The imperfect embodiments of it in the past were prophecies as well as prophets. The fact that God has 'spoken unto the fathers by the prophets,' leads us to expect that He will speak 'to us in a Son,' and that not by fragments of His mighty voice, but in one full, eternal, all-embracing and all-sufficient Word. Every divine idea, which has been imperfectly manifested in fragmentary and sinful men and in the material creation, is completely incarnated in Him. He is the King to whom the sins and the saintlinesses of Israel's kings alike pointed. He is the Priest, whom Aaron and his sons foreshadowed, who perfectly exercises the sympathy which they could only feel partially, because they were compassed with infirmity and self-regard, and who offers the true sacrifice of efficacy higher than 'the blood of bulls and goats.' He is the Prophet, who makes all other means of knowing the divine will unnecessary, hearing whom we hear the very voice of God speaking in His gentle words of love, in His authoritative words of command, in His illuminating words of wisdom, and speaking yet more loudly and heart-touchingly in the eloquence of deeds no less than divine; who is 'not ashamed to call us brethren,' and is 'bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh'; who is like, but greater than, the great lawgiver of Israel, being the Son and Lord of the 'house' in which Moses was but a servant. 'To Him give all the prophets witness,' and the greatest of them was honoured when, with Moses, Elijah stood on the Mount of Transfiguration, subordinate and attesting, and then faded away when the voice proclaimed, 'This is My beloved Son, hear Him,'—and they 'saw no one save Jesus only.'

## A CHOICE OF MASTERS

‘Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things; 48. Therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies . . . in want of all things: and He shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until He have destroyed thee.’—DEUT. xxviii. 47, 48.

The history of Israel is a picture on the large scale of what befalls every man.

A service—we are all born to obedience, to depend on and follow some person or thing. There is only a choice of services; and he who boasts himself free is but a more abject slave, as the choice for a nation is either the rule of settled order and the sanctities of an established law, or the usurpation of a mob and the intolerable tyranny of unbridled and irresponsible force.

I. The service of God or the service of our enemies.

Israel was the servant in turn of Egypt, Philistia, Edom, Assyria, Babylon, Syria, and Rome. It was every invader’s prey. God’s invisible arm was its only guard from these, and an all-sufficient guard as long as it leaned on Him. When it turned from Him it fell under their yoke. Its lawful Lord loved it; its tyrants hated it.

So with us. We have to serve God or enemies. Our lusts, our passions, the world, evil habits—in a word, our sins ring us round. God is the only defence against them.

The contrast between the one and the many—a king or an ochlocracy. The contrast of the loving Lord and the hostile sins.

II. A service which is honour or a service which is degradation.

God alone is worthy of our absolute submission and service. How low a man sinks when he is ruled by any lesser authority! Such obedience is a crime against the dignity of human nature, and the soul is not without a galling sense of this now and then, when its chains rattle.

III. A service which is freedom because it is rendered by love, or a service which is hard slavery.

‘With joy for the abundance of all things.’ How sin palls upon us, and yet we commit it. The will is overborne, conscience is stifled.

IV. A service which feeds the spirit or a service which starves it.

The soul can only in God get what it wants. Prison fare is what it receives in the other service. The unsatisfying character of all sin; it cloy, and yet leaves one hungry. It is ‘that which satisfieth not.’ ‘Broken cisterns which hold no water.’

V. A service which is life or a service which is death.

The dark forebodings of the text grow darker as it goes on. The grim slavery which it threatens as the only alternative to joyful service of God is declared to be lifelong ‘penal servitude,’ and not only is there no deliverance from it, but it directly tends to wear away the life of the hopeless slaves. For the words that follow our text are ‘and he shall put a yoke

of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee.' That is dismally true in regard to any and every life that has shaken off the service of God which is perfect freedom, and has persisted in the service of sin. Such service is suicidal; it rivets an iron yoke on our necks, and there is no locksmith who can undo the shackles and lift it off, so long as we refuse to take service with God. Stubbornly rebellious wills forge their own fetters. Like many a slave-owner, our tyrants have a cruel delight in killing their slaves, and our sins not only lead to death, but are themselves death.

But there is a bright possibility before the most down-trodden vassal of sin. 'The bond-servant abideth not in the house for ever.' He is not a son of the house, but has been brought into it, stolen from his home. He may be carried back to his Father's house, and there 'have bread enough and to spare,' if a deliverer can be found. And He has been found. Christ the Son makes us free, and if we trust Him for our emancipation we 'shall be free indeed,' 'that we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, should serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.'

### THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

‘For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. 12. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? 13. Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? 14. But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it. 15. See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; 16. In that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply; and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it. 17. But if thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; 18. I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, and that ye shall not prolong your days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to go to possess it. 19. I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: 20. That thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey His voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto Him: for He is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the Lord sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.’—[DEUT. xxx. 11-20](#).

This paragraph closes the legislation of this book, the succeeding chapters being in the nature of an epilogue or appendix. It sums up the whole law, makes plain its inmost essence and its tremendous alternatives. As in the closing strains of some great symphony, the themes which have run through the preceding movements are woven together in the final burst of music. Let us try to discover the component threads of the web.

The first point to note is the lofty conception of the true essence of the whole law, which is enshrined here. ‘This commandment which I command thee this day’ is twice defined in the section ([vs. 16, 20](#)), and in both instances ‘to love Jehovah thy God’ is presented as the all-important precept. Love is recognised as the great commandment. Leviticus may deal with minute regulations for worship, but these are subordinate, and the sovereign commandment is love. Nor is the motive which should sway to love omitted; for what a tender drawing by the memories of what He had done for Israel is put forth in the name of ‘Jehovah, *thy* God!’ The Old Testament system is a spiritual system, and it too places the very heart of religion in love to God, drawn out by the contemplation of his self-revelation in his loving dealings with us. We have here clearly recognised that the obedience which pleases God is obedience born of love, and that the love which really sets towards God will, like a powerful stream, turn all the wheels of life in conformity to His will. When Paul proclaimed that ‘love is the fulfilling of the law,’ he was only repeating the teaching of this passage, when it puts

‘to walk in His ways,’ or ‘to obey His voice,’ after ‘to love Jehovah thy God.’ Obedience is the result and test of love; love is the only parent of real obedience.

The second point strongly insisted on here is the blessedness of possessing such a knowledge as the law gives. [Verses 11-14](#) present that thought in three ways. The revelation is not that of duties far beyond our capacity: ‘It is not too hard for thee.’ No doubt, complete conformity with it is beyond our powers, and entire, whole-hearted, and whole-souled love of God is not attained even by those who love Him most. Paul’s position that the law gives the knowledge of sin, just because it presents an impossible elevation in its ideal, is not opposed to the point of view of this context; for he is thinking of complete conformity as impossible, while it is thinking of real, though imperfect, obedience as within the reach of all men. No man can love as he ought; every man can love. It is blessed to have our obligations all gathered into such a commandment.

Again, the possession of the law is a blessing, because its authoritative voice ends the weary quest after some reliable guide to conduct, and we need neither try to climb to heaven, nor to traverse the wide world and cross the ocean, to find certitude and enlightenment enough for our need. They err who think of God’s commandments as grievous burdens; they are merciful guide-posts. They do not so much lay weights on our backs as give light to our eyes.

Still further, the law has its echo ‘in thy heart.’ It is ‘graven on the fleshly tables of the heart,’ and we all respond to it when it gathers up all duty into ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God,’ and our consciences say to it, ‘Thou speakest well.’ The worst man knows it better than the best man keeps it. Blurred and illegible often, like the half-defaced inscriptions disinterred from the rubbish mounds that once were Nineveh or Babylon, that law remains written on the hearts of all men.

A further point to be well laid to heart is the merciful plainness and emphasis with which the issues that are suspended on obedience or disobedience are declared. The solemn alternatives are before every man that hears. Life or death, blessing or cursing, are held out to him, and it is for him to elect which shall be realised in his case. Of course, it may be said that the words ‘life’ and ‘death’ are here used in their merely physical sense, and that the context shows ([vs. 17, 18](#)) that life here means only ‘length of days, that thou mayest dwell in the land.’ No doubt that is so, though we can scarcely refuse to see some glimmer of a deeper conception gleaming through the words, ‘He is thy life,’ though it is but a glimmer. We have no space here to enter upon the question of how far it is now true that obedience brings material blessings. It was true for Israel, as many a sad experience that it was a bitter as well as an evil thing to forsake Jehovah was to show in the future. But though the connection between well-doing and material gain is not so clear now, it is by no means abrogated, either for nations or for individuals. Moral and religious law has social and economic consequences, and though the perplexed distribution of earthly good and ill often bewilders

faith and emboldens scepticism, there still is visible in human affairs a drift towards recompensing in the world the righteous and the wicked.

But to us, with our Christian consciousness, 'life' means more than living, and 'He is our life' in a deeper and more blessed sense than that our physical existence is sustained by His continual energy. The love of God and consequent union with Him give us the only true life. Jesus is 'our life,' and He enters the spirit which opens to Him by faith, and communicates to it a spark of His own immortal life. He that is joined to Jesus lives; he that is separated from Him 'is dead while he liveth.'

The last point here is the solemn responsibility for choosing one's part, which the revelation of the law brings with it. 'I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse, therefore choose life.' We each determine for ourselves whether the knowledge of what we ought to be will lead to life or to death, and by choosing obedience we choose life. Every ray of light from God is capable of producing a double effect. It either gladdens or pains, it either gives vision or blindness. The gospel, which is the perfect revelation of God in Christ, brings every one of us face to face with the great alternative, and urgently demands from each his personal act of choice whether he will accept it or neglect or reject it. Not to choose to accept *is* to choose to reject. To do nothing is to choose death. The knowledge of the law was not enough, and neither is an intellectual reception of the gospel. The one bred Pharisees, who were 'whited sepulchres'; the other breeds orthodox professors, who have 'a name to live and are dead.' The clearer our light, the heavier our responsibility. If we are to live, we have to 'choose life'; and if we do not, by the vigorous exercise of our will, turn away from earth and self, and take Jesus for our Saviour and Lord, loving and obeying whom we love and obey God, we have effectually chosen a worse death than that of the body, and flung away a better life than that of earth.

### **GOD'S TRUE TREASURE IN MAN**

'The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.'—**DEUT. xxxii. 9.**

'Jesus Christ (Who) gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people.'—**TITUS ii. 14.**

I choose these two texts because they together present us with the other side of the thought to that which I have elsewhere considered, that man's true treasure is in God. That great axiom of the religious consciousness, which pervades the whole of Scripture, is rapturously expressed in many a psalm, and never more assuredly than in that one which struggles up from the miry clay in which the Psalmist's 'steps had well-nigh slipped' and soars and sings thus: 'The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup; Thou maintainest my lot,' 'The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.'

You observe the correspondence between these words and those of my first text: 'The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.' The correspondence in the original is not quite so marked as it is in our Authorised Version, but still the idea in the two passages is the same. Now it is plain that persons can possess persons only by love, sympathy, and communion. From that it follows that the possession must be mutual; or, in other words, that only he can say 'Thou art mine' who can say 'I am Thine.' And so to possess God, and to be possessed by God, are but two ways of putting the same fact. 'The Lord is the portion of His people, and the Lord's portion is His people,' are only two ways of stating the same truth.

Then my second text clearly quotes the well-known utterance that lies at the foundation of the national life of Israel: 'Ye shall be unto Me a peculiar treasure above all people,' and claims that privilege, like all Israel's privileges, for the Christian Church. In like manner Peter (**1 Pet. ii. 9**) quotes the same words, 'a peculiar people,' as properly applying to Christians. I need scarcely remind you that 'peculiar' here is used in its proper original sense of belonging to, or, as the Revised Version gives it, 'a people for God's own possession' and has no trace of the modern signification of 'singular.' Similarly we find Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians giving both sides of the idea of the inheritance in intentional juxtaposition, when he speaks (**i. 14**) of the 'earnest of our inheritance . . . unto the redemption of God's own possession.' In the words before us we have the same idea; and this text besides tells us how Christ, the Revealer of God, wins men for Himself, and what manner of men they must be whom He counts as His.

Therefore there are, as I take it, three things to be spoken about now. First, God has a special ownership in some people. Second, God owns these people because He has given Himself to them. Third, God possesses, and is possessed by, His inheritance, that He may give and receive services of love. Or, in briefer words, I have to speak about this wonderful thought of a special divine ownership, what it rests upon, and what it involves.

I. God has special ownership in some people.



'The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.' Put side by side with those other words of the Old Testament: 'All souls are Mine,' or the utterance of the 100th Psalm rightly translated: 'It is He that hath made us, and to Him we belong.' There is a right of absolute and utter ownership and possession inherent in the very relation of Creator and creature; so that the being made is wholly and altogether at the disposal, and is the property, of Him that makes him.

But is that enough for God's heart? Is that worth calling ownership at all? An arbitrary tyrant in an unconstitutional kingdom, or a slave-owner, may have the most absolute right of property over his subject or his slave; may have the right of entire disposal of all his industry, of the profit of all his labour; may be able to do anything he likes with him, may have the power of life and death; but such ownership is only of the husk and case of a man: the man himself may be free, and may smile at the claim of possession. 'They may *'own'* the body, and after that have no more than they can do.' That kind of authority and ownership, absolute and utter, to the point of death, may satisfy a tyrant or a slave-driver, it does not satisfy the loving heart of God. It is not real possession at all. In what sense did Nero own Paul when he shut him up in prison, and cut his head off? Does the slave-owner own the man whom he whips within an inch of his life, and who dare not do anything without his permission? Does God, in any sense that corresponds with the longing of infinite love, own the men that reluctantly obey Him, and are simply, as it were, tools in His hands? He covets and longs for a deeper relationship and tenderer ties, and though all creatures are His, and all men are His servants and His possession, yet, like certain regiments in our own British army, there are some who have the right to bear in a special manner on their uniform and on their banners the emblazonment, 'The King's Own.' 'The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.'

Well, then, the next thought is that the special relationship of possession is constituted by mutual love. I said at the beginning of these remarks that as concerns men's relations, the only real possession is through love, sympathy, and communion, and that that must necessarily be mutual. We have a perfect right to apply the human analogy here; in fact, we are bound to do it if we would rightly understand such words as those of my text; and it just leads us to this, that the one thing whereby God reckons that He possesses a man at all is when His love falls upon that man's heart and soaks into it, and when there springs up in the heart a corresponding emotion and affection. The men who welcome the divine love that goes through the whole world, seeking such to worship it, and to trust it, and to become its own; and who therefore lovingly yield to the loving divine will, and take it for their law—these are the men whom He regards as His 'portion' and 'the lot of His inheritance.' So that God is mine, and that 'I am God's,' are two ends of one truth; 'I possess Him,' and 'I am possessed by Him,' are but the statement of one fact expressed from two points of view. In the one case you look upon it from above, in the other case you look upon it from

beneath. All the sweet commerce of mutual surrender and possession which makes the joy of our hearts, in friendship and in domestic life, we have the right to lift up into this loftier region, and find in it the last teaching of what makes the special bond of mutual possession between God and man.

And deep words of Scripture point in that direction. Those parables of our Lord's: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, in their infinite beauty, whilst they contain a great deal besides this, do contain this in their several ways; the money, the animal, the man belong to the woman of the house, to the shepherd, to the father. Each is 'lost' in a different fashion, but the most clear revelation is given in the last parable of the three, which explains the other two. The son was 'lost' when he did not love the father; and he was 'found' by the father when he returned the yearning of the father's heart.

And so, dear brethren, it ever is; the one thing that knits men to God is that the silken cord of love let down from Heaven should by our own hand be wrapped round our own hearts, and then we are united to Him. We are His and He is ours by the double action of His love manifested by Him, and His love received by us.

Now there is nothing in all that of favouritism. The declaration that there are people who have a special relationship to the divine heart may be so stated as to have a very ugly look, and it often has been so stated as to be nothing more than self-complacent Pharisaism, which values a privilege principally because its possession is an insult to somebody else that has it not.

There has been plenty of Christianity of that sort in the world, but there is nothing of it in the thoughts of these texts rightly looked at. There is only this: it cannot but be that men who yield to God and love Him, and try to live near Him and to do righteousness, are His in a manner that those who steel themselves against Him and turn away from Him are not. Whilst all creatures have a place in His heart, and are flooded with His benefits, and get as much of Him as they can hold, the men who recognise the source of their blessing, and turn to it with grateful hearts, are nearer Him than those that do not do so. Let us take care, lest for the sake of seeming to preserve the impartiality of His love, we have destroyed all in Him that makes His love worth having. If to Him the good and the bad, the men who fear Him and the men who fear Him not, are equally satisfactory, and, in the same manner, the objects of an equal love, then He is not a God that has pleasure in righteousness; and if He is not a God that 'has pleasure in righteousness,' He is not a God for us to trust to. We are not giving countenance to the notion that God has any step-children, any petted members of His family, when we cleave to this—they that have welcomed His love into their hearts are nearer to Him than those that have closed the door against it.

And there is one more point here about this matter of ownership on which I dwell for a moment, namely, that this conception of certain men being in a special sense God's possession and inheritance means also that He has a special delight in, and lofty appreciation

of, them. All this material creation exists for the sake of growing good men and women. That is the use of the things that are seen and temporal; they are like greenhouses built for the great Gardener's use in striking and furthering the growth of His plants; and when He has got the plants He has got what He wanted, and you may pull the greenhouse down if you like. And so God estimates, and teaches us to estimate, the relative value and greatness of the material and the spiritual in this fashion, that He says to us in effect: 'All these magnificences and magnitudes round you are small and vulgar as compared with this—a heart in which wisdom and divine truth and the love and likeness of God have attained to some tolerable measure of maturity and of strength.' These are His 'jewels,' as the Roman matron said about her two boys. The great Father looks upon the men that love Him as His jewels, and, having got the jewels, the rock in which they were embedded and preserved may be crushed when you like. 'They shall be Mine,' saith the Lord, 'My treasures in that day of judgment which I make.'

And so, my brother, all the insignificance of man, as compared with the magnitude and duration of the universe, need not stagger our faith that the divinest thing in the universe is a heart that has learnt to love God and aspires after Him, and should but increase our wonder and our gratitude that He has been mindful of man and has visited him, in order that He might give Himself to men, and so might win men for Himself.

II. That brings me, and very briefly, to the other points that I desire to deal with now. The second one, which is suggested to us from my second text in the Epistle to Titus, is that this possession, by God, of man, like man's possession of God, comes because God has given Himself to man.

The Apostle puts it very strongly in the Epistle to Titus: 'The glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us that He might purify unto Himself *a people for a possession*.' Israel, according to one metaphor, was God's 'son,' begotten by that great redeeming act of deliverance from the captivity of Egypt ([Deut. xxxii. 6-19](#)). According to another metaphor, Israel was God's bride, wooed and won for His own by that same act. Both of these figures point to the thought that in order to get man for His own He has to give Himself to man.

And the very height and sublimity of that truth is found in the Christian fact which the Apostle points to here. We need not depart from human analogies here either. Christ gave Himself to us that He might acquire us for Himself. Absolute possession of others is only possible at the price of absolute surrender to them. No human heart ever gave itself away unless it was convinced that the heart to which it gave itself had given itself to it.

And on the lower levels of gratitude and obligation, the only thing that binds a man to another in utter submission is the conviction that that other has given himself in absolute sacrifice for him. A doctor goes into the wards of an hospital with his life in his hands, and because he does, he wins the full confidence and affection of those whom he treats. You

cannot buy a heart with anything less than a heart. In the barter of the world it is not 'skin for skin,' but it is 'self for self'; and if you want to own me, you must give yourself altogether to me. And the measure in which teachers and guides and preachers and philanthropists of all sorts make conquests of men is the measure in which they make themselves sacrifices for men.

Now all that is true, and is lifted to its superlative truth, in the great central fact of the Christian faith. But there is more than human analogy here. Christ is not only self-sacrifice in the sense of surrender, but He is sacrifice in the sense of giving Himself for our redemption and forgiveness. He has not only given Himself to us, He has given Himself for us. And there, and on that, is builded, and on that alone has He a right to build, or have we a right to yield to it, His claim to absolute authority and utter command over each of us.

He has died for us, therefore the springs of our life are at His disposal; and the strongest motives which can sway our lives are set in motion by His touch. His death, says this text, redeems us from iniquity and purifies us. That points to its power in delivering us from the service and practice of sin. He buys us from the despot whose slaves we were, and makes us His own in the hatred of evil and the doing of righteousness. Moved by His death, we become capable of heroisms and martyrdoms of devotion to Him. Brethren, it is only as that self-sacrificing love touches us, which died for our sins upon the Cross, that the diabolical chain of selfishness will be broken from our affections and our wills, and we shall be led into the large place of glad surrender of ourselves to the sweetness and the gentle authority of His omnipotent love.

III. The last thought that I suggest is the issues to which this mutual possession points. God owns men, and is owned by them, in order that there may be a giving and receiving of mutual services of love.

'The Lord's portion is His people.' That in the Old Testament is always laid as the foundation of certain obligations under which He has come, and which He will abundantly discharge. What is a great landlord expected to do to his estate? 'What ought I to have done to my vineyard?' the divine Proprietor asks through the mouth of His servant the prophet. He ought to till it, He ought not to starve it, He ought to fence it, He ought to cast a wall about it, He ought to reap the fruits. And He does all that for His inheritance. God's honour is concerned in His portion not being waste. It is not to be a 'garden of the sluggard,' by which people who pass can see the thorns growing there. So He will till it, He will plough it, He will pick out the weeds, and all the disciplines of life will come to us, and the plough-share will be driven deep into the heart, that 'the peaceable fruit of righteousness' may spring up. He will fence His vineyard. Round about His inheritance His hand will be cast, within His people His Spirit will dwell. No harm shall come near thee if thy love is given to Him; safe and untouched by evil thou shalt walk if thou walk with God. 'He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of Mine eye.' The soul that trusts Him He takes in charge, and before

any evil can fall to it 'the pillared firmament must be rottenness, and earth be built on stubble.' 'He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.' 'The Lord's portion is His people,' and 'none shall pluck them out of His hand.'

And on the other side, we belong to God in Christ. What do we owe Him? What does the vineyard owe the husbandman? Fruit. We are His, therefore we are bound to absolute submission. 'Ye are not your own.' Life, circumstances, occupations, all—we hold them at His will. We have no more right of property in anything than a slave in the bad old days had in his cabin and patch of ground. They belonged to the master to whom he belonged. Let us recognise our stewardship, and be glad to know ourselves His, and all events and things which we sometimes think ours, His also.

We are His, therefore we owe absolute trust. The slave has at least this blessing in his lot, that he need have no anxieties; nor need we. We belong to God, and He will take care of us. A rich man's horses and dogs are well cared for, and our Owner will not leave us unheeded. Our well-being involves His good name. Leave anxious thought to masterless hearts which have to front the world with nobody at their backs. If you are God's you will be looked after.

We are His, therefore we are bound to live to His praise. That is the conclusion which one Old Testament passage draws. 'This people have I formed for Myself; they shall show forth My praise' ([Isaiah xliiii. 21](#)). The Apostle Peter quotes these words immediately after those from Exodus, which describe Israel as 'a people for God's own possession,' when he says 'that ye should show forth the praise of Him who hath called you.' Let us, then, live to His glory, and remember that the servants of the King are bound to stand to their colours amid rebels, and that they who know the sweetness of possessing God, and the blessedness of yielding to His supreme control, should acknowledge what they have found of His goodness, and 'tell forth the honour of His name, and make His praise glorious.' Let not all the magnificent and wonderful expenditure of divine longing and love be in vain, nor run off your hearts like water poured upon a rock. Surely the sun's flames leaping leagues high, they tell us, in tongues of burning gas, must melt everything that is near them. Shall we keep our hearts sullen and cold before such a fire of love? Surely that superb and wonderful manifestation of the love of God in the Cross of Christ should melt into running rivers of gratitude all the ice of our hearts.

'He gave Himself for me!' Let us turn to Him and say: 'Lo! I give myself to Thee. Thou art mine. Make me Thine by the constraint of Thy love, so utterly, and so saturate my spirit with Thyself, that it shall not only be Thine, but in a very deep sense it shall be Thee, and that it may be "no more I that live, but Christ that liveth in me."' "

### THE EAGLE AND ITS BROOD

‘As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings.’—[DEUT. xxxii. 11](#).

This is an incomplete sentence in the Authorised Version, but really it should be rendered as a complete one; the description of the eagle’s action including only the two first clauses, and (the figure being still retained) the person spoken of in the last clauses being God Himself. That is to say, it should read thus, ‘As an eagle stirreth up his nest, fluttereth over his young, *He* spreads abroad His wings, takes them, bears them on His pinions.’ That is far grander, as well as more compact, than the somewhat dragging comparison which, according to the Authorised Version, is spread over the whole verse and tardily explained, in the following, by a clause introduced by an unwarranted ‘So’—‘the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him.’

Now, of course, we all know that the original reference of these words is to the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, and their training in the desert. In the solemn address by Jehovah at the giving of the law ([Exodus xix. 4](#)), the same metaphor is employed, and, no doubt, that passage was the source of the extended imagery here. There we read, ‘Ye know what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto Myself.’ The meaning of the glowing metaphor, with its vivid details, is just that Jehovah brought Israel out of its fixed abode in Goshen, and trained it for mature national life by its varied desert experiences. As one of the prophets puts the same idea, ‘I taught Ephraim to go,’ where the figure of the parent bird training its callow fledglings for flight is exchanged for that of the nurse teaching a child to walk. While, then, the text primarily refers to the experience of the infant nation in the forty years’ wanderings, it carries large truths about us all; and sets forth the true meaning and importance of life. There seem to me to be three thoughts here, which I desire to touch on briefly: first, a great thought about God; then an illuminating thought about the true meaning and aspect of life; and lastly a calming thought about the variety of the methods by which God carries out our training.

I. Here is a great thought about God.

Now, it may come as something of a shock if I say that the bird that is selected for the comparison is not really the eagle, but one which, in our estimation, is of a very much lower order—viz. the carnivorous vulture. But a poetical emblem is not the less fitting, though, besides the points of resemblance, the thing which is so used has others less noble. Our modern repugnance to the vulture as feeding on carcasses was probably not felt by the singer of this song. What he brings into view are the characteristics common to the eagle and the vulture; superb strength in beak and claw, keenness of vision almost incredible, magnificent sweep of pinion and power of rapid, unwearied flight. And these characteristics, we may say, have their analogues in the divine nature, and the emblem not unfitly shadows forth one aspect of the God of Israel, who is ‘fearful in praises,’ who is strong to destroy as

well as to save, whose all-seeing eye marks every foul thing, and who often pounces on it swiftly to rend it to pieces, though the sky seemed empty a moment before.

But the action described in the text is not destructive, terrible, or fierce. The monarch of the sky busies itself with tender cares for its brood. Then, there is gentleness along with the terribleness. The strong beak and claw, the gaze that can see so far, and the mighty spread of wings that can lift it till it is an invisible speck in the blue vault, go along with the instinct of paternity: and the fledglings in the nest look up at the fierce beak and bright eyes, and know no terror. The impression of this blending of power and gentleness is greatly deepened, as it seems to me, if we notice that it is the male bird that is spoken about in the text, which should be rendered: 'As the eagle stirreth up *his* nest and fluttereth over *his* young.'

So we just come to the thought that we must keep the true balance between these two aspects of that great divine nature—the majesty, the terror, the awfulness, the soaring elevation, the all-penetrating vision, the power of the mighty pinion, one stroke of which could crush a universe into nothing; and, on the other side, the yearning instinct of Fatherhood, the love and gentleness, and all the tender ministries for us, His children, to which these lead. Brethren, unless we keep hold of both of these in due equipoise and inseparably intertwining, we damage the one which we retain almost as much as the one which we dismiss. For there is no love like the love that is strong, and can be fierce, and there is no condescension like the condescension of Him who is the Highest, in order that He may be, and because He is ready to be, the lowest. Modern tendencies, legitimately recoiling from the one-sidedness of a past generation, are now turning away far too much from the Old Testament conceptions of Jehovah, which are concentrated in that metaphor of the vulture in the sky. And thereby we destroy the love, in the name of which we scout the wrath.

'Infinite mercy, but, I wis,  
As infinite a justice too.'

'As the vulture stirreth up his nest,'—that is the Old Testament revelation of the terribleness and gentleness of Jehovah. 'How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wing?'—that is the New Testament modification of the image. But you never could have had the New unless you first had had the Old. And you are a foolish man if, in the name of the sanctity of the New, you cast away the teaching of the Old. Keep both the metaphors, and they will explain and confirm each other.

II. Here we have an illuminating thought of the meaning of life.

What is it all for? To teach us to fly, to exercise our half-fledged wings in short flights, that may prepare us for, and make it possible to take, longer ones. Every event that befalls us has a meaning beyond itself; and every task that we have to do reacts upon us, the doers, and either fits or hinders us for larger work. Life as a whole, and in its minutest detail, is

worthy of God to give, and worthy of us to possess, only if we recognise the teaching that is put into picturesque form in this text—that the meaning of all which God does to us is to train us for something greater yonder. Life as a whole is ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,’ unless it is an apprenticeship training. What are we here for? To make character. That is the aim and end of all—to make character; to get experience; to learn the use of our tools. I declare it seems to me that the world had better be wiped out altogether, incontinently, unless there is a world beyond, where a man shall use the force which here he made his own. ‘Thou hast been faithful in a few things; behold I will make thee ruler over many things.’ No man gets to the heart of the mystery of life or has in his hand the key which will enable him to unlock all the doors and difficulties of human experience, unless he gets to this—that it is all meant as training.

If we could only carry that clear conviction with us day by day into the little things of life, what different things these, which we call the monotonous trifles of our daily duties, would become! The things may be small and unimportant, but the way in which we do them is not unimportant. The same fidelity may be exercised, and must be brought to bear, in order to do the veriest trifle of our daily lives rightly, as needs to be invoked, in order to get us safely through the crises and great times of life. There are no great principles for great duties, and little ones for little duties. We have to regulate all our conduct by the same laws. Life is built up of trifles, as mica-flakes, if there be enough of them, make the Alpine summits towering thousands of feet into the blue. Character may be manifested in the great moments, but it is made in the small ones. So, life is meant for discipline, and unless we use it for that, however much enjoyment we get out of it, we misuse it.

III. Lastly, there is here a calming thought as to the variety of God’s methods with us.

‘As the eagle stirreth up his nest.’ No doubt the callow brood are much warmer and more comfortable in the nest than when they are turned out of it. The Israelites were by no means enamoured with the prospect of leaving the flesh-pots and the onions and the farm-houses that they had got for themselves in Goshen, to tramp with their cattle through the wilderness. They went after Moses with considerable disinclination.

Here we have, then, as the first thing needed, God’s loving compulsion to effort. To ‘stir up the nest’ means to make a man uncomfortable where he is;—sometimes by the prickings of his conscience, which are often the voices of God’s Spirit; sometimes by changes of circumstances, either for the better or for the worse; and oftentimes by sorrows. The straw is pulled out of the nest, and it is not so comfortable to lie in; or a bit of it develops a sharp point that runs into the half-feathered skin, and makes the fledgling glad to come forth into the air. We all shrink from change. What should we do if we had it not? We should stiffen into habits that would dwarf and weaken us. We all recoil from storms. What should we do if we had them not? Sea and air would stagnate, and become heavy and putrid and pestilential, if it were not for the wild west wind and the hurtling storms. So all our changes, instead of



being whimpered over, and all our sorrows, instead of being taken reluctantly, should be recognised as being what they are, loving summonses to effort. Then their pressure would be modified, and their blessing would be secured when their purpose was served.

But the training of the father-eagle is not confined to stirring up the nest. What is to become of the young ones when they get out of it, and have never been accustomed to bear themselves up in the invisible ether about them? So 'he fluttereth over his young.' It is a very beautiful word that is employed here, which 'flutter' scarcely gives us. It is the same word that is used in the first chapter of Genesis, about the Spirit of God '*brooding* on the face of the waters'; and it suggests how near, how all-protecting with expanded wings, the divine Father comes to the child whose restfulness He has disturbed.

And is not that true? Had you ever trouble that you took as from Him, which did not bring that hovering presence nearer you, until you could almost feel the motion of the wing, and be brushed by it as it passed protectingly above your head? Ah, yes! 'Stirring the nest' is meant to be the precursor of closer approach of the Father to us; and if we take our changes and our sorrows as loving summonses from Him to effort, be sure that we shall realise Him as near to us, in a fashion that we never did before.

That is not all. There is sustaining power. 'He spreadeth abroad his wings; he taketh them; beareth them on his wings.' On those broad pinions we are lifted, and by them we are guarded. It matters little whether the belief that the parent bird thus carries the young, when wearied with their short flights, is correct or not. The truth which underlies the representation is what concerns us. The beautiful metaphor is a picturesque way of saying, 'In all their afflictions He was afflicted; and the Angel of His presence saved them.' It is a picturesque way of saying, 'Thou canst do all things through Christ which strengtheneth thee.' And we may be very sure that if we let Him 'stir up our nests' and obey His loving summons to effort, He will come very near to strengthen us for our attempts, and to bear us up when our own weak wings fail. The Psalmist sang that angels' hands should bear up God's servant. That is little compared with this promise of being carried heavenwards on Jehovah's own pinions. A vile piece of Greek mythology tells how Jove once, in the guise of an eagle, bore away a boy between his great wings. It is foul where it stands, but it is blessedly true about Christian experience. If only we lay ourselves on God's wings—and that not in idleness, but having ourselves tried our poor little flight—He will see that no harm comes to us.

During life this training will go on; and after life, what then? Then, in the deepest sense, the old word will be true, 'Ye know how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you *to Myself*'; and the great promise shall be fulfilled, when the half-fledged young brood are matured and full grown, 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.'

## THEIR ROCK AND OUR ROCK

‘Their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves being Judges.’—DEUT. xxxii. 31.

Moses is about to leave the people whom he had led so long, and his last words are words of solemn warning. He exhorts them to cleave to God. The words of the text simply mean that the history of the nation had sufficiently proved that God, their God, was ‘above all gods.’ The Canaanites and all the enemies whom Israel had fought had been beaten, and in their awe of this warrior people acknowledged that their idols had found their lord. The great suit of ‘Jehovah *versus* Idols’ has long since been decided. Every one acknowledges that Christianity is the only religion possible for twentieth century men. But the words of the text lend themselves to a wider application, and clothe in a picturesque garb the universal truth that the experience of godless men proves the futility of their objects of trust, when compared with that of him whose refuge is in God.

I. God is a Rock to them that trust Him.

We note the singular frequency of that designation in this song, in which it occurs six times. It is also found often in the Psalms. If Moses were the singer, we might see in this often-repeated metaphor a trace of influence of the scenery of the Sinaitic peninsula, which would be doubly striking to eyes accustomed to the alluvial plains of Egypt. What are the aspects of the divine nature set forth by this name?

(1) Firm foundation: the solid eternity of the rock on which we can build.

Petra: faithfulness to promises, unchanging.

(2) Refuge: ‘refuge from the storm’; ‘my rock and my fortress and my high tower.’

(3) Refreshment: rock from which water gushed out; and (4) Repose: ‘shadow of a great rock’; ‘shadow from the heat.’

Trace the image through Scripture, from this song till Christ’s parable of the man who ‘built his house on a rock.’

II. Every man’s experience shows him that there is no such refuge anywhere else.

We do not assert that every man consciously comes to that conclusion. All we say is that he would do so if he rightly pondered the facts. The history of every life is a history of disappointment. Take these particulars just stated and ask yourselves: What does experience say as to the possibility of our possessing such blessings apart from God? There is no need for us to exaggerate, for the naked reality is sad enough. If God is not our best Good, we have no solid good. Every other ‘rock’ crumbles into sand. Else why this restless change, why this disquiet, why the constant repetition, generation after generation, of the old, old wail, ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’? Why does every heart say Amen to the poet and the dramatist singing of ‘the fever and the fret,’ the tragic fare of man’s life?

Our appeal is not to men in the flush of excitement, but to them in their hours of solitary sane reflection. It is from ‘Philip drunk to Philip sober.’ We each have material for judging

in our own case, and in the cases of some others. The experiment of living with other 'rocks' than God has been tried for millenniums now. What has been the issue? You know what Christianity claims that it can do to make a life stable and safe. Do you know anything else that can? You know what Christian men will calmly say that they have found. Can you say as much? Let us hear some dying testimonies. Hearken to Jacob: 'The God which hath fed me all my life long unto this day, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil.' Hearken to Moses: 'The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are judgment, a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is He.' Hearken to Joshua: 'Not one good thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake.' Hearken to David: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.' Hearken to Paul: 'The Lord stood by me and strengthened me, and I was delivered . . . the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and will save me unto His heavenly kingdom.' What man who has chosen to take refuge or build on men and creatures can look backward and forward in such fashion?

III. Every man's own nature tells him that God is his true Rock.

Again I say that here I do not appeal to the surface of our consciousness, nor to men who have sophisticated themselves, nor to people who have sinned themselves, into hardness, but to the voice of the inner man which speaks in the depths of each man's being.

There is the cry of Want: the manifest want of the soul for God.

There is the voice of Reason.

There is the voice of Conscience.

IV. Yet many of us will not take God for our Rock.

Surely it is a most extraordinary thing that men should be 'judges,' being convinced in their deepest consciousness that God is the only Foundation and Refuge, and yet that the conviction should have absolutely no influence on their conduct. The same stark, staring inconsequence is visible in many other departments of life, but in this region it works its most tragic results. The message which many of my hearers need most is—follow out your deepest convictions, and be true to the inward voice which condenses all your experience into the one counsel to take God for the 'strength of your hearts and your portion for ever,' for only in Him will you find what you need for life and strength and riches. If He is 'our Rock,' then we shall have a firm foundation, a safe refuge, inexhaustible refreshment and untroubled rest. Lives founded on aught beside are built on sand and will be full of tremors and unsettlements, and at last the despairing builder and his ruined house will be washed away with the dissolving 'sandbank and shoal of time' on which he built.

## GOD AND HIS SAINTS

‘He loved the people; all His saints are in Thy hand: and they sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words.’—DEUT. xxxiii. 3.

The great ode of which these words are a part is called ‘the blessing wherewith Moses blessed the children of Israel before his death.’ It is mainly an invocation of blessing from Heaven on the various tribes, but it begins, as the national existence of Israel began, with the revelation of God on Sinai, and it lays that as the foundation of everything. It does not matter, for my purposes, in the smallest degree, who was the author of this great song. Whoever he was, he has, by dint of divine inspiration and of his own sympathy with the inmost spirit of the Old Covenant, anticipated the deepest things of Christian truth; and these are here in the words of our text.

I. The first thing that I would point out is the Divine Love which is the foundation of all.

‘He loved the people.’ That is the beginning of everything. The word that this singer uses is one that only appears in this place, and if we regard its etymology, there lies in it a very tender and beautiful expression of the warmth of the divine love, for it is probably connected with words in an allied language which mean the *bosom* and a *tender embrace*, and so the picture that we have is of that great divine Lover folding ‘the people’ to His heart, as a mother might her child, and cherishing them in His bosom.

Still further, the word is in a form in the Hebrew which implies that the act spoken about is neither past, present, nor future only, but continuous and perpetual. Thus it suggests to us the thought of timeless, eternal love, which has no beginning, and therefore has no end, which does not grow, and therefore will never decline nor decay, but which runs on upon one lofty level, with neither ups nor downs, and with no variation of the impulse which sends it forth; always the same, and always holding its objects in the fervent embrace of which the text speaks.

Further, mark the place in this great song where this thought comes in. As I said, it is laid as the beginning of everything. ‘We love Him because He first loved us’ was the height to which the last of the Apostles attained in the last of his writings. But this old singer, with the mists of antiquity around him, who knew nothing about the Cross, nothing about the historical Christ, who had only that which modern thinkers tell us is a revelation of a wrathful God, somehow or other rose to the height of the evangelical conception of God’s love as the foundation of the very existence of a people who are His. Like an orchid growing on a block of dry wood and putting forth a gorgeous bloom, this singer, with so much less to feed his faith than we have, has yet borne this fair flower of deep and devout insight into the secret of things and the heart of God. ‘He loved the people’— therefore He formed them for Himself; therefore He brought them out of bondage; therefore He came down in flashing

fire on Sinai and made known His will, which to know and do is life. All begins from the tender, timeless love of God.

And if the question is asked, Why does God thus love? the only answer is, Because he is God. 'Not for your sakes, O house of Israel . . . but for Mine own name's sake.' The love of God is self-originated. In it, as in all His acts, He is His own motive, as His name, 'I am that I am,' proclaims. It is inseparable from His being, and flows forth before, and independent of, anything in the creature which could draw it out. Men's love is attracted by their perception or their imagination of something loveable in its objects. It is like a well, where there has to be much work of the pump-handle before the gush comes. God's love is like an artesian well, or a fountain springing up from unknown depths in obedience to its own impulse. All that we can say is, 'Thou art God. It is Thy nature and property to be merciful.'

'God loved the people.' The bed-rock is the spontaneous, unalterable, inexhaustible, ever-active, fervent love of God, like that with which a mother clasps her child to her maternal breast. The fair flower of this great thought was a product of Judaism. Let no man say that the God of Love is unknown to the Old Testament.

II. Notice how, with this for a basis, we have next the guardian care extended to all those that answer love by love.

The singer goes on to say, mixing up his pronouns, in the fashion of Hebrew poetry, somewhat arbitrarily, 'all *His* saints are in *Thy* hand.' Now, what is a 'saint'? A man who answers God's love by his love. The notion of a saint has been marred and mutilated by the Church and the world. It has been taken as a special designation of certain selected individuals, mostly of the ascetic and monastic type, whereas it belongs to every one of God's people. It has been taken by the world to mean sanctimoniousness and not sanctity, and is a term of contempt rather than of admiration on their lips. And even those of us, who have got beyond thinking that it is a title of honour belonging only to the aristocracy of Christ's Kingdom, are too apt to mistake what it really does mean. It may be useful to say a word about the Scriptural use and true meaning of that much-abused term. The root idea of sanctity or holiness is not moral character, goodness of disposition and of action, but it is separation from the world and consecration to God. As surely as a magnet applied to a heap of miscellaneous filings will pick out every little bit of iron there, so surely will that love which He bears to the people, when it is responded to, draw to itself, and therefore draw out of the heap, the men that feel its impulse and its preciousness. And so 'saint' means, secondly, righteous and pure, but it means, first, knit to God, separated from evil, and separated by the power of His received love.

Now, brethren, here is a question for each of us: Do I yield to that timeless, tender clasp of the divine Father and Mother in one? Do I answer it by my love? If I do, then I am a 'saint,' because I belong to Him, and He belongs to me, and in that commerce I have broken with the world. If we are true to ourselves, and true to our Lord, and true to the relation

between us, the purity of character, which is popularly supposed to be the meaning of *holiness*, will come. Not without effort, not without set-backs, not without slow advance, but it will come; for he that is consecrated to the Lord is 'separated' from iniquity. Such is the meaning of 'saint.'

'All His saints are in Thy hand.' The first metaphor of our text spoke of God's bosom, to which He drew the people and folded them there. This one speaks of His 'hand.' They lie in it. That means two things. It means absolute security, for will He not close His fingers over His palm to keep the soul that has laid itself there? And 'none shall pluck them out of My Father's hand.' No one but yourself can do that. And you can do it, if you cease to respond to His love, and so cease to be a saint. Then you will fall out of His hand, and how far you will fall God only knows.

Being in God's hand means also submission. Loyola said to his black army, 'Be like a stick in a man's hand.' That meant utter submission and abnegation of self, the willingness to be put anywhere, and used anyhow, and done anything with. And if I by my reception of, and response to, that timeless love, am a saint belonging to God, then not only shall I be secure, but I must be submissive. 'All His saints are in Thy hand.' Do not try to get out of it; be content to let it guide you as the steersman's hand turns the spokes of the wheel and directs the ship.

Now, there is a last thought here. I have spoken of the foundation of all as being divine love, of the security and guardian care of the saints, and there follows one thought more:—

III. The docile obedience of those that are thus guarded.

As the words stand in our Bible, they are as follow:—"They sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words." These two clauses make up one picture, and one easily understands what it is. It represents a group of docile scholars, sitting at the Master's feet. He is teaching them, and they listen open-mouthed and open-eared to what he says, and will take his words into their lives, like Mary sitting at Christ's feet, whilst Martha was bustling about His meal. But, beautiful as that picture is, there has been suggested a little variation in the words which gives another one that strikes me as being even more beautiful. There are some difficulties of language with which I need not trouble you. But the general result is this, that perhaps instead of 'sitting down at Thy feet' we should read 'followed at Thy feet.' That suggests the familiar metaphor of a guide and those led by him who, without him, know not their road. As a dog follows his master, as the sheep their shepherd, so, this singer felt, will saints follow the God whom they love. Religion is imitation of God. That was a deep thought for such a stage of revelation, and it in part anticipates Christ's tender words: 'He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice.' They follow at His feet. That is the blessedness and the power of Christian morality, that it is keeping close at Christ's heels, and that instead of its being said to us, 'Go,' He says, 'Come,' and instead of our being bid to hew out for ourselves a path of duty, He says to us, 'He that

followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.' They follow at His feet, as the dog at his master's, as the sheep at their shepherd's.

They 'receive His words.' Yes, if you will keep close to Him, He will turn round and speak to you. If you are near enough to Him to catch His whisper He will not leave you without guidance. That is one side of the thought, that following we receive what He says, whereas the people that are away far behind Him scarcely know what His will is, and never can catch the low whisper which will come to us by providences, by movements in our own spirits, through the exercise of our own faculties of judgment and common-sense, if only we will keep near to Him. 'Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding, whose mouths must be held in with bit and with bridle, else they will not come near to thee,' but walk close behind Him, and then the promise will be fulfilled: 'I will guide thee with Mine eye.' A glance tells two people who are in sympathy what each wishes, and Jesus Christ will speak to us, if we keep close at His heels.

They that follow Him will 'receive His words' in another sense. They will take them in, and His words will not be wasted. And they will receive them in yet another sense. They will carry them out and do them, and His words will not be in vain.

So, dear brethren, the peace, the strength, the blessedness, the goodness, of our lives flow from these three stages, which this singer so long ago had found to be the essence of everything, recognition of the timeless tenderness of God, the yielding to and answering that love, so that it separates us for Himself, the calm security and happy submission which follow thereon, the imitation of Him in daily life, and the walking in His steps, which is rewarded and made more perfect by hearing more distinctly the whisper of His loving, commanding voice.

## ISRAEL THE BELOVED

‘The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him; and the Lord shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between His shoulders.’—DEUT. xxxiii. 12.

Benjamin was his father’s favourite child, and the imagery of this promise is throughout drawn from the relations between such a child and its father. So far as the future history of the tribes is shadowed in these ‘blessings’ of this great ode, the reference of the text may be to the tribe of Benjamin, as specially distinguished by Saul having been a member of it, and by the Temple having been built on its soil. But we find that each of the promises of the text is repeated elsewhere, with distinct reference to the whole nation. For example, the first one, of safe dwelling, reappears in [verse 28](#) in reference to Israel; the second one, of God’s protecting covering, is extended to the nation in many places; and the third, of dwelling between His shoulders, is in substance found again in [chap. i. 31](#), ‘the Lord thy God bare thee, as a man doth bear his son.’ So that we may give the text a wider extension, and take it as setting forth under a lovely metaphor, and with a restricted reference, what is true of all God’s children everywhere and always.

### I. Who are the ‘beloved of the Lord’?

The first answer to that question must be—all men. But these great blessings, so beautifully shadowed in this text, do not belong to all men; nor does the designation, ‘the beloved of the Lord,’ belong to all men, but to those who have entered into a special relation to Him. In these words of the Hebrew singer there sound the first faint tones of a music that was to swell into clear notes, when Jesus said: ‘If a man love Me, he will keep My Word, and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him.’ They who are knit by faith and love to God’s only-begotten and beloved Son, by that union receive ‘power to become the sons of God,’ and share in the love which is ever pouring out from the Father’s heart on ‘the Son of His love.’

### II. What are their blessed privileges?

The three clauses of the text express substantially the same idea, but with a striking variety of metaphors.

#### 1. They have a sure dwelling-place.

There is a very slight change of rendering of the first clause, which greatly increases its ‘force, and preserves the figure that is obscured by the usual translation. We should read ‘shall dwell safely *on*,’ rather than ‘*by*, Him.’ And the effect of that small change in the preposition is to bring out the thought that God is regarded as the foundation on which His beloved build their house of life, and dwell in security and calm. If we are sons through the Son, we shall build our houses or pitch our tents on that firm ground, and, being founded on the Rock of ages, they will not fall when all created foundations reel to the overthrow of whatever is built on *them*. It is not companionship only, blessed as that is, that is promised



here. We have a larger privilege than dwelling *by* Him, for if we love His Son, we build *on* God, and ‘God dwelleth in us and we in Him.’

What spiritual reality underlies the metaphor of dwelling or building on God? The fact of habitual communion.

Note the blessed results of such grounding of our lives on God through such habitual communion. We shall ‘dwell safely.’ We may think of that as being objective safety—that is, freedom from peril, or as being subjective—that is, freedom from care or fear, or as meaning ‘trustfully,’ confidently, as the expression is rendered in [Psalm xvi. 9](#) (margin), which is for us the ground of both these. He who dwells in God trustfully dwells both safely and securely, and none else is free either from danger or from dread.

2. They have a sure shelter.

God is for His beloved not only the foundation on which they dwell in safety, but their perpetual covering. They dwell safely because He is so. There are many tender shapes in which this great promise is presented to our faith. Sometimes God is thought of as covering the weak fugitive, as the arching sides of His cave sheltered David from Saul. Sometimes He is represented as covering His beloved, who cower under His wings, ‘as the hen gathereth her chickens’ when hawks are in the sky. Sometimes He appears as covering them from tempest, ‘when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall,’ and ‘the shadow of a great rock’ shields from its fury. Sometimes He is pictured as stretching out protection over His beloved’s heads, as the Pillar of cloud lay, long-drawn-out, over the Tabernacle when at rest, and ‘on all the Glory was a defence.’ But under whatever emblem the general idea of a covering shelter was conceived, there was always a correlative duty on our side. For the root-meaning of one of the Old Testament words for ‘faith’ is ‘fleeing to a refuge,’ and we shall not be safe in God unless by faith we flee for refuge to Him in Christ.

3. They have a Father who bears them on His shoulders.

The image is the same as in [chap. i.](#) already referred to. It recurs also in [Isaiah \(xlv. 3, 4\)](#), ‘Even to hoar hairs will I carry you, and I have made and I will bear, yea, I will carry, and will deliver’; and in [Hosea \(xi. 3\)](#), ‘I taught Ephraim to go; I took them on My arms.’

The image beautifully suggests the thought of the favourite child riding high and happy on the strong shoulder, which lifts it above rough places and miry ways. The prose reality is: ‘My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’

The Cross carries those who carry it. They who carry God in their hearts are carried by God through all the long pilgrimage of life. Because they are thus upheld by a strength not their own, ‘they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint,’ and though marches be long and limbs strained, they shall ‘go from strength to strength till every one of them appears before God in Zion.’

### **'AT THE BUSH'**

'.. The goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.'—DEUT. xxxiii. 16.

I think this is the only reference in the Old Testament to that great vision which underlay Moses' call and Israel's deliverance. It occurs in what is called 'the blessing wherewith Moses, the man of God, blessed the children of Israel before his death,' although modern opinion tends to decide that this hymn is indeed much more recent than the days of Moses. There seems a peculiar appropriateness in this reference being put into the mouth of the ancient Lawgiver, for to him even Sinai, with all its glories, cannot have been so impressive and so formative of his character as was the vision granted to him when solitary in the wilderness. It is to be noticed that the characteristic by which God is designated here never occurs elsewhere than in this one place. It is intended to intensify the conception of the greatness, and preciousness, and all-sufficiency of that 'goodwill.' If it is that 'of Him that dwelt in the bush,' it is sure to be all that a man can need. I need not remind you that the words occur in the blessing pronounced on 'Joseph'—that is, the two tribes which represented Joseph—in which all the greatest material gifts that could be desired by a pastoral people are first called down upon them, and then the ground of all these is laid in 'the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.' 'The blessing—let it come on the head of Joseph.'

So then here, first, is a great thought as to what for us all is the blessing of blessings—God's 'goodwill.' 'Goodwill'—the word, perhaps, might bear a little stronger rendering. 'Goodwill' is somewhat tepid. A man may have a good enough will, and yet no very strong emotion of favour or delight, and may do nothing to carry his goodwill into action. But the word that is employed here, and is a common enough one in Scripture, always carries with it a certain intensity and warmth of feeling. It is more than 'goodwill'; it is more than 'favour'; perhaps 'delight' would be nearer the meaning. It implies, too, not only the inward sentiment of complacency, but also the active purpose of action in conformity with it, on God's part. Now it needs few words to show that these two things, which are inseparable, do make the blessing of blessings for every one of us—the delight, the complacency, of God in us, and the active purpose of good in God for us. These are the things that will make a man happy wherever he is.

If I might dwell for a moment upon other scriptural passages, I would just recall to you, as bringing up very strongly and beautifully the all-sufficiency and the blessed effects of having this delight and loving purpose directed towards us like a sunbeam, the various great things that a chorus of psalmists say that it will do for a man. Here is one of their triumphant utterances: 'Thou wilt bless the righteous; with favour wilt Thou compass him as with a shield.' That crystal battlement, if I may so vary the figure, is round a man, keeping far away from him all manner of real evil, and filling his quiet heart as he stands erect behind the rampart, with the sense of absolute security. That is one of the blessings that God's favour or goodwill will secure for us. Again, we read: 'By Thy favour Thou hast made my mountain

to stand strong.' He that knows himself to be the object of the divine delight, and who by faith knows himself to be the object of the divine activity in protection, stands firm, and his purposes will be carried through, because they will be purposes in accordance with the divine mind, and nothing has power to shake him. So he that grasps the hand of God can say, not because of his grasp, but because of the Hand that he holds, 'The Lord is at my right hand; I shall not be greatly moved. By Thy favour Thou hast made our mountain to stand strong.' And again, in another analogous but yet diversified representation, we read: 'In Thee shall we rejoice all the day, and in Thy favour shall our horn be exalted.' That is the emblem, not only of victory, but of joyful confidence, and so he who knows himself to have God for his friend and his helper, can go through the world keeping a sunny face, whatever the clouds may be, erect and secure, light of heart and buoyant, holding up his chin above the stormiest waters, and breasting all difficulties and dangers with a confidence far away from presumption, because it is the consequence of the realisation of God's presence. So the goodwill of God is the chiefest good.

Now, if we turn to the remarkable designation of the divine nature which is here, consider what rivers of strength and of blessedness flow out of the thought that for each of us 'the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush' may be our possession.

What does that pregnant designation of God say? That was a strange shrine for God, that poor, ragged, dry desert bush, with apparently no sap in its gray stem, prickly with thorns, with 'no beauty that we should desire it,' fragile and insignificant, yet it was 'God's house.' Not in the cedars of Lebanon, not in the great monarchs of the forest, but in the forlorn child of the desert did He abide. 'The goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush' may dwell in you and me. Never mind how small, never mind how sapless, never mind how lightly esteemed among men, never mind though we make a very poor show by the side of the 'oaks of Bashan' or the 'cedars of Lebanon.' It is all right; the Fire does not dwell in them. 'Unto this man will I look, and with him will I dwell, who is of a humble and a contrite heart, and who trembleth at My word.' Let no sense of poverty, weakness, unworthiness, ever draw the faintest film of fear across our confidence, for even with us He will sojourn. For it is 'the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush' that we evoke for ours.

Again, what more does that name say? He 'that dwelt in the bush' filled it with fire, and it 'burned and was not consumed.' Now there is good ground to object to the ordinary interpretation, as if the burning of the bush which yet remains unconsumed was meant to symbolise Israel, or, in the New Testament application, the Church which, notwithstanding all persecution, still remains undestroyed. Our brethren of the Presbyterian churches have taken the Latin form of the words in the context for their motto—*Nec Tamen Consumeatur*. But I venture to think that that is a mistake; and that what is meant by the symbol is just what is expressed by the verbal revelation which accompanied it, and that was this: 'I AM THAT I AM.' The fire that did not burn out is the emblem of the divine nature which does

not tend to death because it lives, nor to exhaustion because it energises, nor to emptiness because it bestows, but after all times is the same; lives by its own energy and is independent. 'I am that I have become,'—that is what men have to say. 'I am that I once was not, and again once shall not be,' is what men have to say. 'I am that I am' is God's name. And this eternal, ever-living, self-sufficing, absolute, independent, unwearied, inexhaustible God is the God whose favour is as inexhaustible as Himself, and eternal as His own being. 'Therefore the sons of men shall put their trust beneath the shadow of Thy wings,' and, if they have 'the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush,' will be able to say, 'Because Thou livest we shall live also.'

What more does the name say? He 'that dwelt in the bush' dwelt there in order to deliver; and, dwelling there, declared 'I have seen the affliction of My people, and am come down to deliver them.' So, then, if the goodwill of that eternal, delivering God is with us, we, too, may feel that our trivial troubles and our heavy burdens, all the needs of our prisoned wills and captive souls, are known to Him, and that we shall have deliverance from them by Him. Brethren, in that name, with its historical associations, with its deep revelations of the divine nature, with its large promises of the divine sympathy and help, there lie surely abundant strengths and consolations for us all. The goodwill, the delight, of God, and the active help of God, may be ours, and if these be ours we shall be blessed and strong.

Do not let us forget the place in this blessing on the head of Joseph which my text holds. It is preceded by an invoking of the precious things of Heaven, and 'the precious fruits brought forth by the sun. . . of the chief things of the ancient mountains, and the precious things of the lasting hills, and the precious things of the earth and the fulness thereof.' They are all heaped together in one great mass for the beloved Joseph. And then, like the golden spire that tops some of those campaniles in Italian cities, and completes their beauty, above them all there is set, as the shining apex of all, 'the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.' That is more precious than all other precious things; set last because it is to be sought first; set last as in building some great structure the top stone is put on last of all; set last because it gathers all others into itself, secures that all others shall be ours in the measure in which we need them, and arms us against all possibilities of evil. So the blessing of blessings is the 'goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.'

In my text this is an invocation only; but we can go further than that. You and I can make sure that we have it, if we will. How to secure it? One of the texts which I have already quoted helps us a little way along the road in answer to that question, for it says, 'Thou, Lord, wilt bless the righteous. With favour wilt thou compass him as with a shield.' But it is of little use to tell me that if I am 'righteous' God will 'bless me,' and 'compass me with favour.' If you will tell me how to become righteous, you will do me more good. And we have been told how to be righteous—'If a man keep My commandments My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him.' If we knit ourselves to

Jesus Christ, and we can all do that if we like, by faith that trusts Him, and by love, the child of faith, that obeys Him, and grows daily more like Him—then, without a doubt, that delight of God in us, and that active purpose of good in God's mind towards us, will assuredly be ours; and on no other terms.

So, dear brethren, the upshot of my homily is just this—Men may strive and scheme, and wear their finger-nails down to the quick, to get some lesser good, and fail after all. The greatest good is certainly ours by that easy road which, however hard it may be otherwise, is made easy because it is so certain to bring us to what we want. Holiness is the condition of God's delight in us, and a genuine faith in Christ, and the love which faith evokes, are the conditions. So it is a very simple matter You never can be sure of getting the lower good You can be quite sure of getting the highest. You never can be certain that the precious things of the earth and the fulness thereof will be yours, or that if they were, they would be so very precious; but you can be quite sure that the 'goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush' may lie like light upon your hearts, and be strength to your limbs.

And so I commend to you the words of the Apostle, 'Wherefore we labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him.' To minister to God's delight is the highest glory of man. To have the favour of Him that dwelt in the bush resting upon us is the highest blessing for man. He will say 'Well done! good and faithful servant.' 'The Lord taketh pleasure'—wonderful as it sounds—'in them that fear Him, in them that hope in His mercy,' and that, hoping in His mercy, live as He would have them live.

### SHOD FOR THE ROAD

‘Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be.’—[DEUT. xxxiii. 25.](#)

There is a general correspondence between those blessings wherewith Moses blessed the tribes of Israel before his death, and the circumstances and territory of each tribe in the promised land. The portion of Asher, in whose blessing the words of our text occurs, was partly the rocky northern coast and partly the fertile lands stretching to the base of the Lebanon. In the inland part of their territory they cultivated large olive groves, the produce of which was trodden out in great rock-hewn cisterns. So the clause before my text is a benediction upon that industry—‘let him dip his foot in oil.’ And then the metaphor naturally suggested by the mention of the foot is carried on into the next words, ‘Thy shoes shall be iron and brass,’ the tribe being located upon rocky sea-coast, having rough roads to travel, and so needing to be well shod. The substance, then, of that promise seems to be—strength adequate to, and unworn by, exercise; while the second clause, though not altogether plain, seems to put a somewhat similar idea in unmetaphorical shape. ‘As thy days, so shall thy strength be,’ probably means the promise of power that grows with growing years.

So, then, we have first that thought that God gives us an equipment of strength proportioned to our work,—shoes fit for our road. God does not turn people out to scramble over rough mountains with thin-soled boots on; that is the plain English of the words. When an Alpine climber is preparing to go away into Switzerland for rock work, the first thing he does is to get a pair of strong shoes, with plenty of iron nails in the soles of them. So Asher had to be shod for his rough roads, and so each of us may be sure that if God sends us on stony paths He will provide us with strong shoes, and will not send us out on any journey for which He does not equip us well.

There are no difficulties to be found in any path of duty, for which he that is called to tread it is not prepared by Him that sent him. Whatsoever may be the road, our equipment is calculated for it, and is given to us from Him that has appointed it.

Is there not a suggestion here, too, as to the sort of travelling we may expect to have? An old saying tells us that we do not go to heaven in silver slippers, and the reason is because the road is rough. The ‘primrose way’ leads somewhere else, and it may be walked on ‘delicately.’ But if we need shoes of iron and brass, we may pretty well guess the kind of road we have before us. If a man is equipped with such coverings on his feet, depend upon it that there will be use for them before he gets to the end of his day’s journey. The thickest sole will make the easiest travelling over rocky roads. So be quite sure of this, that if God gives to us certain endowments and equipments which are only calculated for very toilsome paths, the roughness of the road will match the stoutness of the shoes.

And see what He does give. See the provision which is made for patience and strength, for endurance and courage, in all the messages of His mercy, in all the words of His love,

in all the powers of His Gospel, and then say whether that looks as if we should have an easy life of it on our way home. Those two ships that went away a while ago upon the brave, and, as some people thought, desperate task of finding the North Pole—any one that looked upon them as they lay in Portsmouth Roads, might know that it was no holiday cruise they were meant for. The thickness of the sides, the strength of the cordage, the massiveness of the equipment, did not look like pleasure-sailing.

And so, dear brethren, if we think of all that is given to us in God's Gospel in the way of stimulus and encouragement, and exhortation, and actual communication of powers, we may calculate, from the abundance of the resources, how great will be the strain upon us before we come to the end, and our 'feet stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem.' Go into some of the great fortresses in continental countries, and you will find the store-rooms full of ammunition and provisions; bread enough and biscuits enough, as it seems, for half the country, laid up there, and a deep well somewhere or other in the courtyard. What does that mean? It means fighting, that is what it means. So if we are brought into this strong pavilion, so well provisioned, so massively fortified and defended, that means that we shall need all the strength that is to be found in those thick walls, and all the sustenance that is to be found in those gorged magazines, and all the refreshment that is to be drawn from that free, and full, and inexhaustible fountain, before the battle is over and the victory won. Depend upon it, the promise 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass.' means, 'Thy road shall be rocky and flinty'; and so it is.

And yet, thank God! whilst it is true that it is very hard and very difficult for many of us, and hard and difficult—even if without the 'very'—for us all, it is also true that we have the adequate provision sufficient for all our necessities—and far more than sufficient! It is a poor compliment to the strength that He gives to us to say that it is enough to carry us through. God does not deal out His gifts to people with such an economical correspondence to necessities as that. There is always a wide margin. More than we can ask, more than we can think, more than we can need is given us.

If He were to deal with us as men often deal with one another, asking us, 'Well, how much do you want? cannot you do with a little less? there is the exact quantity that you need for your support'—if you got your bread by weight and your water by measure, it would be a very poor affair. See how He actually does—He says, 'Child, there is Mine own strength for you'; and we think that we honour Him when we say, 'God has given us enough for our necessities!' Rather the old word is always true: 'So they did eat and were filled; and they took up of the fragments that remained seven baskets-full,' and after they were satisfied and replete with the provision, there was more at the end than when they began.

That suggests another possible thought to be drawn from this promise, namely, that it assures not only of strength adequate to the difficulties and perils of the journey, but also of a strength which is not worn out by use.

The 'portion' of Asher was the rocky sea-coast. The sharp, jagged rocks would cut to pieces anything made of leather long before the day's march was over; but the travellers have their feet shod with metal, and the rocks which they have to stumble over will only strike fire from their shoes. They need not step timidly for fear of wearing them out; but, wherever they have to march, may go with full confidence that their shoeing will not fail them. A wise general looks after that part of his soldiers' outfit with special care, knowing that if *it* gives out, all the rest is of no use. So our Captain provides us with an inexhaustible strength, to which we may fully trust. We shall not exhaust it by any demands that we can make upon it. We shall only brighten it up, like the nails in a well-used shoe, the heads of which are polished by stumbling and scrambling over rocky roads.

So we may be bold in the march, and draw upon our stock of strength to the utmost. There is no fear that it will fail us. We may put all our force into our work, we shall not weaken the power which 'by reason of use is exercised,' not exhausted. For the grace which Christ gives us to serve Him, being divine, is subject to no weariness, and neither faints nor fails. The bush that burned unconsumed is a type of that Infinite Being who works unexhausted, and lives undying, after all expenditure is rich, after all pouring forth is full. And of His strength we partake.

Whensoever a man puts forth an effort of any kind whatever—when I speak, when I lift my hand, when I run, when I think—there is waste of muscular tissue. Some of my strength goes in the act, and thus every effort means expenditure and diminution of force. Hence weariness that needs sleep, waste that needs food, languor that needs rest. We belong to an order of being in which work is death, in regard to our physical nature; but our spirits may lay hold of God, and enter into an order of things in which work is not death, nor effort exhaustion, nor is there loss of power in the expenditure of power.

That sounds strange, and yet it is not strange. Think of that electric light which is made by directing a strong stream upon two small pieces of carbon. As the electricity strikes upon these and turns their blackness into a fiery blaze, it eats away their substance while it changes them into light. But there is an arrangement in the lamp by which a fresh surface is continually being brought into the path of the beam, and so the light continues without wavering and blazes on. The carbon is our human nature, black and dull in itself; the electric beam is the swift energy of God, which makes us 'light in the Lord.' For the one, decay is the end of effort; for the other, there is none. 'Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.' Though we belong to the perishing order of nature by our bodily frame, we belong to the undecaying realm of grace by the spirit that lays hold upon God. And if our work weary us, as it must do so long as we continue here, yet in the deepest sanctuary of our being, our strength is greated by exercise. 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass.' 'Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years.' 'Stand, therefore, having your feet shod with the preparedness of the Gospel of peace.'



But this is not all. There is an advance even upon these great promises in the closing words. That second clause of our text says more than the first one. 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass,' that promises us powers and provision adapted to, and unexhausted by, the weary pilgrimage and rough road of life. But 'as thy days, so shall thy strength be,' says even more than that. The meaning of the word rendered 'strength' in our version is very doubtful, and most modern translators are inclined to render it 'rest.' But if we adhere to the translation of our version, we get a forcible and relevant promise, which fits on well to the previous clause, understood as it has been in my previous remarks. The usual understanding of the words is 'strength proportioned to thy day,' an idea which we have found already suggested by the previous clause. But that explanation rests on, or at any rate derives support from, the common misquotation of the words. They are not, as we generally hear them quoted, 'As thy day, so shall thy strength be,'—but 'day' is in the plural, and that makes a great difference. 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be,' that is to say: the two sums—of 'thy days' and of 'thy strength'—keep growing side by side, the one as fast as the other and no faster. The days increase. Well, what then? The strength increases too. As I said, we are allied to two worlds. According to the law of one of them, the outer world of physical life, we soon reach the summit of human strength. For a little while it is true, even in the life of nature, that our power grows with our days. But we soon reach the watershed, and then the opposite comes to be true. Down, steadily down, we go. With diminishing power, with diminishing vitality, with a dimmer eye, with an obtuser ear, with a slower-beating heart, with a feebler frame, we march on and on to our grave. 'As thy days, so shall thy weakness be,' is the law for all of us mature men and women in regard to our outward life.

But, dear brethren, we may be emancipated from that dreary law in regard to the true life of our spirits, and instead of growing weaker as we grow older, we may and we should grow stronger. We may be and we should be moving on a course that has no limit to its advance. We may be travelling on a shining path through the heavens, that has no noon-tide height from which it must slowly and sadly decline, but tends steadily and for ever upwards, nearer and nearer to the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance. 'The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more till the noon-tide of the day.' But the reality surpasses even that grand thought, for it discloses to us an endless approximation to an infinite beauty, and an ever-growing possession of never exhausted fulness, as the law for the progress of all Christ's servants. The life of each of us may and should be continual accession and increase of power through all the days here, through all the ages beyond. Why? Because 'the life which I live, I live by the faith of the Son of God.' Christ liveth in me. It is not my strength that grows, so much as God's strength in me which is given more abundantly as the days roll. It is so given on one condition. If my faith has laid hold of the infinite, the exhaustless, the immortal energy of God, unless there is something fearfully

wrong about me, I shall be becoming purer, nobler, wiser, more observant of His will, gentler, liker Christ, every way fitter for His service, and for larger service, as the days increase.

Those of us who have reached middle life, or perhaps gone a little over the watershed, ought to have this experience as our own in a very distinct degree. The years that are past ought to have drawn us somewhat away from our hot pursuing after earthly and perishable things. They should have added something to the clearness and completeness of our perception of the deep simplicity of God's gospel. They should have tightened our hold and increased our possession of Christ, and unfolded more and more of His all-sufficiency. They should have enriched us with memories of God's loving care, and lighted all the sky behind with a glow which is reflected on the path before us, and kindles calm confidence in His unfailing goodness. They should have given us power and skill for the conflicts that yet remain, as the Red Indians believe that the strength of every defeated and scalped enemy passes into his conqueror's arm. They should have given force to our better nature, and weakening, progressive weakening, to our worse. They should have rooted us more firmly and abidingly in Him from whom all our power comes, and so have given us more and fuller supplies of His exhaustless and ever-flowing might.

So it may be with us if we abide in Him, without whom we are nothing, but partaking of whose strength 'the weakest shall be as David, and David as an angel of God.'

If for us, drawing nearer to the end is drawing nearer to the light, our faces will be brightened more and more with that light which we approach, and our path will be 'as the shining light which shines more and more unto the noon-tide of the day,' because we are closer to the very fountain of heavenly radiance, and growingly bathed and flooded with the outgoings of His glory. 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be.'

The promise ought to be true for us all. It is true for all who use the things that are freely given to them of God. And whilst thus it is the law for the devout life here, its most glorious fulfilment remains for the life beyond. There each new moment shall bring new strength, and growing millenniums but add fresh vigour to our immortal life. Here the unresting beat of the waves of the sea of time gnaws away the bank and shoal whereon we stand, but there each roll of the great ocean of eternity shall but spread new treasures at our feet and add new acres to our immortal heritage. 'The oldest angels,' says Swedenborg, 'look the youngest.' When life is immortal, the longer it lasts the stronger it becomes, and so the spirits that have stood for countless days before His throne, when they appear to human eyes, appear as—'young men clothed in long white garments,'—full of unaging youth and energy that cannot wane. So, whilst in the flesh we must obey the law of decay, the spirit may be subject to this better law of life, and 'while the outward man perisheth, the inward man be renewed day by day.' 'Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.'

### A DEATH IN THE DESERT

‘So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. 6. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, . . . but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day.’—DEUT. xxxiv. 5, 6.

A fitting end to such a life! The great law-giver and leader had been all his days a lonely man; and now, surrounded by a new generation, and all the old familiar faces vanished, he is more solitary than ever. He had lived alone with God, and it was fitting that alone with God he should die.

How the silent congregation must have watched, as, alone, with ‘natural strength unabated,’ he breasted the mountain, and went up to be seen no more! With dignified reticence our chapter tells us no details. He ‘died there,’ in that dreary solitude, and in some cleft he was buried, and no man knows where. The lessons of that solitary death and unknown tomb may best be learned by contrast with another death and another grave—those of the Leader of the New Covenant, the Law-giver and Deliverer from a worse bondage, and Guide into a better Canaan, the Son who was faithful over His own house, as Moses was ‘faithful in all his house, as a servant.’ That lonely and forgotten grave among the savage cliffs was in keeping with the whole character and work of him who lay there.

‘Here,—here’s his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,  
Lightnings are loosened,  
Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,  
Peace let the dew send!  
Lofty designs must close in like effects;  
Loftily lying,  
Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,  
Living and dying.’

Contrast that grave with the sepulchre in the garden where Jesus lay, close by a city wall, guarded by foes, haunted by troops of weeping friends, visited by a great light of angel faces. The one was hidden and solitary, as teaching the loneliness and mystery of death; the other revealed light in the darkness, and companionship in the loneliness. The one faded from men’s memory because it was nothing to any man; no impulses, nor hopes, nor gifts, could come from it. The other forever draws hearts and memories, because in it was wrought out the victory in which all our hopes are rooted. An endured cross, an empty grave, an occupied throne, are as the threefold cord on which all our hopes hang. Moses was solitary as God’s servant in life and death, and oblivion covered his mountain grave. Christ’s ‘delights were with the sons of men.’ He lived among them, and all men ‘know his sepulchre to this day.’

I. Note, then, first, as a lesson gathered from this lonely death, the penalty of transgression.

One of the great truths which the old law and ordinances given by Moses were intended to burn in on the conscience of the Jew, and through him on the conscience of the world, was that indissoluble connection between evil done and evil suffered, which reaches its highest exemplification in the death which is the 'wages of sin.' And just as some men that have invented instruments for capital punishment have themselves had to prove the sharpness of their own axe, so the lawgiver, whose message it had been to declare, 'the soul that sinneth it shall die,' had himself to go up alone to the mountain-top to receive in his own person the exemplification of the law that had been spoken by his own lips. He sinned when, in a moment of passion (with many palliations and excuses), he smote the rock that he was bidden to address, and forgot therein, and in his angry words to the rebels, that he was only an instrument in the divine hand. It was a momentary wavering in a hundred and twenty years of obedience. It was one failure in a life of self-abnegation and suppression. The stern sentence came.

People say, 'A heavy penalty for a small offence.' Yes; but an offence of Moses could not be a small offence.' *Noblesse oblige!* The higher a man rises in communion with God, and the more glorious the message and office which are put into his hands, the more intolerable in him is the slightest deflection from the loftiest level. A splash of mud, that would never be seen on a navvy's clothes, stains the white satin of a bride or the embroidered garment of a noble. And so a little sin done by a loftily endowed and inspired man ceases to be small.

Nor are we to regard that momentary lapse only from the outside and the surface. One little mark under the armpit of a plague-sufferer tells the physician that the fatal disease is there. A tiny leaf above ground may tell that, deep below, lurks the root of a poison plant. That little deflection, coming as it did at the beginning of the resumption of his functions by the Lawgiver after seven-and-thirty years of comparative abeyance, and on his first encounter with the new generation that he had to lead, was a very significant indication that his character had begun to yield and suffer from the strain that had been put upon it; and that, in fact, he was scarcely fit for the responsibilities that the new circumstances brought. So the penalty was not so disproportionate to the fault as it may seem.

And was the penalty such a very great one? Do you think that a man who had been toiling for eighty years at a very thankless task would consider it a very severe punishment to be told, 'Go home and take your wages'? It did not mean the withdrawal of the divine favour. 'Moses and Aaron among his priests. . . . Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.' The penalty of a forgiven sin is never hard to bear, and the penalty of a forgiven sin is very often punctually and mercifully exacted.

But still we are not to ignore the fact that this lonely death, with which we are now concerned, is of the nature of a penal infliction. And so it stands forth in consonance with

the whole tone of the Mosaic teaching. I admit, of course, that the mere physical fact of the separation between body and spirit is simply the result of natural law. But that is not the death that you and I know. Death as we know it, the ugly thing that flings its long shadows across all life, and that comes armed with terrors for conscience and spirit, is 'the wages of sin,' and is only experienced by men who have transgressed the law of God. So far Moses in his life and in his death carries us—that no transgression escapes the appropriate punishment; that the smallest sin has in it the seeds of mortal consequences; that the loftiest saint does not escape the law of retribution.

And no further does Moses with his Law and his death carry us. But we turn to the other death. And there we find the confirmation, in an eminent degree, of that Law, and yet the repeal of it. It is confirmed and exhausted in Jesus Christ. His death was 'the wages of sin.' Whose? Not His. Mine, yours, every man's. And because He died, surrounded by men, outside the old city wall, pure and sinless in Himself, He therein both said 'Amen' to the Law of Moses, and swept it away. For all the sins of the world were laid upon His head, He bore the curse for us all, and has emptied the bitter cup which men's transgressions have mingled. Therefore the solitary death in the desert proclaims 'the wages of sin'; that death outside the city wall proclaims 'the gift of God,' which is 'eternal life.'

II. Another of the lessons of our incident is the withdrawal, by a hard fate, of the worker on the very eve of the completion of his work.

For all these forty years there had gleamed before the fixed and steadfast spirit of the sorely tried leader one hope that he never abandoned, and that was that he might look upon and enter into the blessed land which God had promised. And now he stands on the heights of Moab. Half a dozen miles onwards, as the crow flies, and his feet would tread its soil. He lifts his eyes, and away up yonder, in the far north, he sees the rolling uplands of Gilead, and across the deep gash where the Jordan runs, he catches a glimpse of the blue hills of Naphtali or of Galilee, and the central mountain masses of Ephraim and Manasseh, where Ebal and Gerizim lift their heads; and then, further south, the stony summits of the Judaeen hills, where Jerusalem and Bethlehem lie, and, through some gap in the mountains, a gleam as of sunshine upon armour tells where the ocean is. And then his eye falls upon the waterless plateau of the South, and at his feet the fertile valley of Jordan, with Jericho glittering amongst its palm trees like a diamond set in emeralds, and on some spur of the lower hill bounding the plain, the little Zoar. This was the land which the Lord had promised to the fathers, for which he had been yearning, and to which all his work had been directed all these years; and now he is to die, as my text puts it, with such pathetic emphasis, 'there in Moab,' and to have no part in the fair inheritance.

It is the lot of all epoch-making men, of all great constructive and reforming geniuses, whether in the Church or in the world, that they should toil at a task, the full issues of which will not be known until their heads are laid low in the dust. But if, on the one hand, that

seems hard, on the other hand there is the compensation of 'the vision of the future and all the wonder that shall be,' which is granted many a time to the faithful worker ere he closes his eyes. But that is not the fate of epoch-making and great men only; it is the law for our little lives. If these are worth anything, they are constructed on a scale too large to bring out all their results here and now. It is easy for a man to secure immediate consequences of an earthly kind; easy enough for him to make certain that he shall have the fruit of his toil. But quick returns mean small profits; and an unfinished life that succeeds in nothing may be far better than a completed one, that has realised all its shabby purposes and accomplished all its petty desires. Do you, my brother, live for the far-off; and seek not for the immediate issues and fruits that the world can give, but be contented to be of those whose toil waits for eternity to disclose its significance. Better a half-finished temple than a finished pigstye or huckster's shop. Better a life, the beginning of much and the completion of nothing, than a life directed to and hitting an earthly aim. 'He that soweth to the spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting,' and his harvest and garner are beyond the grave.

III. Again, notice here the lesson of the solitude and mystery of death.

Moses dies alone, with no hand to clasp his, none to close his eyes; but God's finger does it. The outward form of his death is but putting into symbol and visibility the awful characteristics of that last moment for us all. However closely we have been twined with others, each of us has to unclasp dear hands, and make that journey through the narrow, dark tunnel by himself. We live alone in a very real sense, but we each have to die as if there were not another human being in the whole universe but only ourselves. But the solitude may be a solitude with God. Up there, alone with the stars and the sky and the everlasting rocks and menacing death, Moses had for companion the supporting God. That awful path is not too desolate and lonely to be trodden if we tread it with Him.

Moses' lonely death leads to a society yonder. If you refer to the thirty-second chapter you will find that, when he was summoned to the mountain, God said to him, 'Die in the mount whither thou goest up, and be gathered to thy people.' He was to be buried there, up amongst the rocks of Moab, and no man was ever to visit his sepulchre to drop a tear over it. How, then, was he 'gathered to his people'? Surely only thus, that, dying in the desert alone, he opened his eyes in 'the City,' surrounded by 'solemn troops and sweet societies' of those to whom he was kindred. So the solitude of a moment leads on to blessed and eternal companionship.

So far the death of Moses carries us. What does the other death say? Moses had none but God with him when he died. There is a drearier desolation than that, and Jesus Christ proved it when He cried, 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' That was solitude indeed, and in that hour of mysterious, and to us unfathomable, desertion and misery, the lonely Christ sounded a depth, of which the lawgiver in His death but skimmed the surface. Christ was parted from God in His death, because He bore on Him the sins that separate

us from our Father, and in order that none of us may ever need to tread that dark passage alone, but may be able to say, 'I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me'—Thou, who hast trodden every step in its rough and dreary path, uncheered by the presence which cheers us and millions more. Christ died that we might live. He died alone that, when we come to die, we may hold His hand and the solitude may vanish.

Then, again, our incident teaches us the mystery that wrapped death to that ancient world, of which we may regard that unknown and forgotten sepulchre as the visible symbol. Deep darkness lies over the Old Testament in reference to what is beyond the grave, broken by gleams of light, when the religious consciousness asserted its indestructibility, in spite of all appearance to the contrary; but never growing to the brightness of serene and continuous assurance of immortal life and resurrection. We may conceive that mysteriousness as set forth for us by that grave that was hidden away in the defiles of Moab, unvisited and uncared for by any.

We turn to the other grave, and there, as the stone is rolled away, and the rising sunshine of the Easter morning pours into it, we have a visible symbol of the life and immortality which Jesus Christ then brought to light by His Gospel. The buried grave speaks of the inscrutable mystery that wrapped the future: the open sepulchre proclaims the risen Lord of life, and the sunlight certainty of future blessedness which we owe to Him. Death is solitary no more, though it be lonely as far as human companionship is concerned; and a mystery no more, though what is beyond is hidden from our view, and none but Christ has ever returned to tell the tale, and He has told us little but the fact that we shall live with Him.

We rejoice that we have not to turn to a grave hid amongst the hills where our dead Leader lies, but to an open sepulchre by the city wall in the sunshine, from whence has come forth the ever-living 'Captain of our salvation.'

IV. The last lesson is the uselessness of a dead leader to a generation with new conflicts.

Commentators have spent a great deal of ingenuity in trying to assign reasons why God concealed the grave of Moses. The text does not say that God concealed it at all. The ignorance of the place of his sepulchre does not seem to have been part of the divine design, but simply a consequence of the circumstances of his death, and of the fact that he lay in an enemy's land, and that they had had something else to do than go to look for the grave of a dead commander. They had to conquer the land, and a living Joshua was what they wanted, not a dead Moses.

So we may learn from this how easily the gaps fill. 'Thirty days' mourning,' and says my text, with almost a bitter touch,' so the days of mourning for Moses were ended.' A month of it, that was all; and then everybody turned to the new man that was appointed for the new work. God has many tools in His tool-chest, and He needs them all before the work is done. Joshua could no more have wielded Moses' rod than Moses could have wielded Joshua's sword. The one did his work, and was laid aside. New circumstances required a new type

of character—the smaller man better fitted for the rougher work. And so it always is. Each generation, each period, has its own men that do some little part of the work which has to be done, and then drop it and hand over the task to others. The division of labour is the multiplication of joy at the end, and ‘he that soweth and he that reapeth rejoice together.’ But whilst the one grave tells us, ‘This man served his generation by the will of God, and was laid asleep and saw corruption,’ the other grave proclaims One whom all generations need, whose work is comprehensive and complete, who dies never. ‘He liveth and was dead, and is alive for evermore.’ Christ, and Christ alone, can never be antiquated. This day requires Him, and has in Him as complete an answer to all its necessities as if no other generation had ever possessed Him. He liveth for ever, and for ever is the Shepherd of men.

So Aaron dies and is buried on Hor, and Moses dies and is buried on Pisgah, and Joshua steps into his place, and, in turn, he disappears. The one eternal Word of God worked through them all, and came at last Himself in human flesh to be the Everlasting Deliverer, Redeemer, Founder of the Covenant, Lawgiver, Guide through the wilderness, Captain of the warfare, and all that the world or a single soul can need until the last generation has crossed the flood, and the wandering pilgrims are gathered in the land of their inheritance. The dead Moses pre-supposes and points to the living Christ. Let us take Him for our all-sufficing and eternal Guide.



## **THE BOOK OF JOSHUA**

### THE NEW LEADER'S COMMISSION

'Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord it came to pass, that the Lord spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, saying, 2. Moses My servant is dead: now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel. 3. Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses. 4. From the wilderness and this Lebanon even unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea, toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast. 5. There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. 6. Be strong and of a good courage; for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land which I swear unto their fathers to give them. 7. Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses My servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. 8. This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. 9. Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest. 10. Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, saying, 11. Pass through the host, and command the people, saying, Prepare you victuals; for within three days ye shall pass over this Jordan, to go in to possess the land, which the Lord your God giveth you to possess it.'—**JOSHUA i. 1-11.**

The closest connection exists between Deuteronomy and Joshua. The narrative may be read as running on without a break. It turns away from the lonely grave up on the mountain to the bustling camp and the new leader. No man is indispensable. God's work goes on uninterrupted. The instruments are changed, but the Master-hand is the same, and lays one tool aside and takes another out of the tool-chest as He will. Moses is dead,—what then? Does his death paralyse the march of the tribes? No; it is but the ground for the ringing command, 'Therefore arise, go over this Jordan.' The immediate installation of his successor, and the uninterrupted continuance of the advance, do not mean that Moses is not honoured or is forgotten, for the narrative lovingly links his honorific title, 'the servant of the Lord,' with the mention of his death; and God Himself does the same, for he is thrice referred to in the divine command to Joshua, as the recipient of the promise of the conquest, as the example of the highest experience of God's all-sufficing companionship, and as the medium by which Israel received the law. Joshua steps into the empty place, receives the same great promise, is assured of the same Presence, and is to obey the same law. The change of leaders is great, but nothing else is changed; and even it is not so great as faint hearts in their sorrow

are apt to think, for the real Leader lives, and Moses and Joshua alike are but the transmitters of His orders and His aids to Israel.

The first command given to Joshua was a trial of his faith, for 'Jordan was in flood' (Joshua iii. 15),—and how was that crowd to get across, when fords were impassable and ferry-boats were wanting, to say nothing of the watchful eyes that were upon them from the other bank? To cross a stream in the face of the enemy is a ticklish operation, even for modern armies; what must it have been, then, for Joshua and his horde? Not a hint is given him as to the means by which the crossing is to be made possible. He has Jehovah's command to do it, and Jehovah's promise to be with him, and that is to be enough. We too have sometimes to face undertakings which we cannot see how to carry through; but if we do see that the path is one appointed by God, and will boldly tread it, we may be quite sure that, when we come to what at present seems like a mountain wall across it, we shall find that the glen opens as we advance, and that there is a way,—narrow, perhaps, and dangerous, but practicable. 'One step enough for me' should be our motto. We may trust God not to command impossibilities, nor to lead us into a *cul de sac*.

The promise to Moses (Deut. ii. 24) is repeated almost verbally in verse 4. The boundaries of the land are summarily given as from 'the wilderness' in the south to 'this Lebanon' in the north, and from the Euphrates in the east to the Mediterranean in the west. 'The land of the Hittites' is not found in the original passage in Deuteronomy, and it seems to be a designation of the territory between Lebanon and the Euphrates, which we now know to have been the seat of the northern Hittites, while the southern branch was planted round Hebron and the surrounding district. But these wide boundaries were not attained till late in the history, and were not long retained. Did the promise, then, fail? No, for it, like all the promises, was contingent on conditions, and Israel's unfaithfulness cut short its extent of territory. We, too, fail to possess all the land destined for us. Our charter is much wider than our actual wealth. God gives more than we take, and we are content to occupy but a corner of the broad land which He has given us. In like manner Joshua did not realise to the full the following promise of uniform victory, but was defeated at Ai and elsewhere. The reason was the same,—the faithlessness of the people. Unbelief and sin turn a Samson into a weakling, and make Israel flee before the ranks of the Philistines.

The great encouragement given to Joshua in entering on his hard and perilous enterprise is twice repeated here: 'As I was with Moses, so will I be with thee.' Did Joshua remember how, nearly forty years since, he had fronted the mob of cowards with the very same assurance, and how the answer had been a shower of stones? The cowards are all dead,—will their sons believe the assurance now? If we do believe that God is with us, we shall be ready to cross Jordan in flood, and to meet the enemies that are waiting on the other bank. If we do not, we shall not dare greatly, nor succeed in what we attempt. The small successes of material wealth and gratified ambition may be ours, but for all the higher duties and nobler

conflicts that become a man, the condition of achievement and victory is steadfast faith in God's presence and help.

That assurance—which we may all have if we cling to Jesus, in whom God comes to be with every believing soul—is the only basis on which the command to Joshua, thrice repeated, can wisely or securely be rested. It is mockery to say to a man conscious of weakness, and knowing that there are evils which must surely come, and evils which may possibly come, against which he is powerless, 'Don't be afraid' unless you can show him good reason why he need not be. And there is only one reason which can still reasonable dread in a human heart that has to front 'all the ills that flesh is heir to,' and sees behind them all the grim form of death. He ought to be afraid, unless—unless what? Unless he has heard and taken into his inmost soul the Voice that said to Joshua, 'I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee: be strong and of a good courage,' or, still more sweet and peace-bringing, the Voice that said to the frightened crew of the fishing-boat in the storm and the darkness, 'It is I; be not afraid.' If we know that Christ is with us, it is wise to be strong and courageous; if we are meeting the tempest alone, the best thing we can do is to fear, for the fear may drive us to seek for His help, and He ever stretches out His hand to him who is afraid, as he ought to be, when he feels the cold water rising above his knees, and by his very fear is driven to faith, and cries, 'Lord, save; I perish!'

Courage that does not rest on Christ's presence is audacity rather than courage, and is sure to collapse, like a pricked bladder, when the sharp point of a real peril comes in contact with it. If we sit down and reckon the forces that we have to oppose to the foes that we are sure to meet, we shall find ourselves unequal to the fight, and, if we are wise, shall 'send the ambassage' of a humble desire to the great King, who will come to our help with His all-conquering powers. Then, and only then, shall we be safe in saying, 'I will not fear what man can do unto me, or devils either,' when we have said, 'In God have I put my trust,' and have heard Him answering, 'I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.'

## THE CHARGE TO THE SOLDIER OF THE LORD

‘Only be then strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded thee. . . that thou mayest prosper wheresoever thou goest. 8. This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.’—[JOSHUA i. 7, 8](#).

This is the central portion of the charge given to the successor of Moses. Joshua was a very small man in comparison with his predecessor. He was no prophet nor constructive genius; he was not capable of the heights of communion and revelation which the lofty spirit of Moses was able to mount. He was only a plain, fiery soldier, with energy, swift decision, promptitude, self-command, and all the military virtues in the highest degree. The one thing that he needed was to be ‘strong and courageous’; and over and over again in this chapter you will find that injunction pealed into his ears. He is the type of the militant servant of the Lord, and the charge to him embodies the duties of all such.

I. We have here the duty of courageous strength.

Christianity has altered the perspective of human virtues, has thrown the gentler ones into prominence altogether unknown before, and has dimmed the brilliancy of the old heroic type of character; but it has not struck those virtues out of its list. Whilst the perspective is altered, there is as much need in the lowliest Christian life for the loftiest heroism as ever there was. For in no mere metaphor, but in grim earnest, all Christian progress is conflict, and we have to fight, not only with the evils that are within, but, if we would be true to the obligations of our profession and loyal to the commands of our Master, we have to take our part in the great campaign which He has inaugurated and is ever carrying on against every abuse and oppression, iniquity and sin, that grinds down the world and makes our brethren miserable and servile. So, then, in these words we have directions in regard to a side of the Christian character, indispensable to-day as ever, and the lack of which cannot be made up for by any amount of sweet and contemplative graces.

Jesus Christ is the type of both. The Conqueror of Canaan and the Redeemer of the world bear the same name. The Jesus whom we trust was a Joshua. And let us learn the lesson that neither the conqueror of the typical and material land of promise nor the Redeemer who has won the everlasting heaven for our portion could do their work without the heroic side of human excellence being manifestly developed. Do you remember ‘He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem’? Do you remember that the Apostle whom a hasty misconception has thought of as the gentlest of the Twelve, because he had most to say about love, is the Apostle that more emphatically than any other rings into our ears over and over again the thought of the Christ, militant and victorious, the Hero as well as the patient Sufferer, the ‘Captain of our salvation’? And so let us recognise how both the gentler and the stronger

graces, the pacific and the warlike side of human excellence, have their highest development in Jesus Christ, and learn that the firmest strength must be accompanied with the tenderest love and swathed in meekest gentleness. As another Apostle has it in his pregnant, brief injunctions, ringing and laconic like a general's word of command, 'Quit you like men I be strong! let all your deeds be done in love!' Braid the two things together, for the mightiest strength is the love that conquers hate, and the only love that is worthy of a man is the love that is strong to contend and to overcome.

'Be strong.' Then strength is a duty; then weakness is a sin. Then the amount of strength that we possess and wield is regulated by ourselves. We have our hands on the sluice. We may open it to let the whole full tide run in, or we may close it till a mere dribble reaches us. For the strength which is strength, and not merely weakness in a fever, is a strength derived, and ours because derived. The Apostle gives the complete version of the exhortation when he says: 'Finally, my brethren,' that Omega of command which is the Alpha of performance, 'be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.' Let Christ's strength in. Open the heart wide that it may come. Keep yourself in continual touch with God, the fountain of all power. Trust is strength, because trust touches the Rock of Ages.

For this reason the commandment to be strong and of good courage is in the text based upon this: 'As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee. I will not fail thee nor forsake thee.' Our strength depends on ourselves, because our strength is the fruit of our faith. And if we live with Him, grasping His hand and, in the realising consciousness of our own weakness, looking beyond ourselves, then power will come to us above our desire and equal to our need. The old victories of faith will be reproduced in us when we say with the ancient king, 'Lord! We know not what to do, but our eyes are up unto Thee.' Then He will come to us, to make us 'strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.' 'Wait on the Lord and He will strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord.'

But courage is duty, too, as well as strength. Power and the consciousness of power do not always go together. In regard to the strength of nature, courage and might are quite separable. There may be a strong coward and a weak hero. But in the spiritual region, strength and courage do go together. The consciousness of the divine power with us, and that alone, will make us bold with a boldness that has no taint of levity and presumption mingled with it, and never will overestimate its own strength. The charge to Joshua, then, not only insists upon the duty of strength, but on the duty of conscious strength, and on the duty of measuring the strength that is at my back with the weakness that is against me, and of being bold because I know that more and 'greater is He that is with me than are they that be with them.'

II. So much, then, for the first of the exhortations here. Now look next at the duty of implicit obedience to the word of command.

That is another soldierly virtue, the exercise of which sheds a nobility over the repulsive horrors of the battlefield. Joshua had to be fitted to command by learning to obey, and, like

that other soldier whose rough trade had led him to some inkling of Christ's authority by its familiarising him with the idea of the strange power of the word of command, had to realise that he himself was 'under authority' before he could issue his orders.

Courage and strength come first, and on them follows the command to do all according to the law, to keep it without deflection to right or left, and to meditate on it day and night. These two virtues make the perfect soldier—courage and obedience. Daring and discipline must go together, and to know how to follow orders is as essential as to know how to despise dangers.

But the connection between these two, as set forth in this charge, is not merely that they must co-exist, but that courage and strength are needed for, and are to find their noblest field of exercise in, absolute acceptance of, and unhesitating, swift, complete, unmurmuring obedience to, everything that is discerned to be God's will and our duty.

For the Christian soldier, then, God's law is his marching orders. The written word, and especially the Incarnate Word, are our law of conduct. The whole science of our warfare and plan of campaign are there. We have not to take our orders from men's lips, but we must often disregard them, that we may listen to the 'Captain of our salvation.' The soldier stands where his officer has posted him, and does what he was bid, no matter what may happen. Only one voice can relieve him. Though a thousand should bid him flee, and his heart should echo their advices, he is recreant if he deserts his post at the command of any but him who set him there. Obedience to others is mutiny. Nor does the Christian need another law to supplement that which Christ has given him in His pattern and teaching. Men have appended huge comments to it, and have softened some of its plain precepts which bear hard on popular sins. But the Lawgiver's law is one thing, and the lawyers' explanations which explain it away or darken what was clear enough, however unwelcome, are quite another. Christ has given us Himself, and therein has given a sufficient directory for conduct and conflict which fits close to all our needs, and will prove definite and practical enough if we honestly try to apply it.

The application of Christ's law to daily life takes some courage, and is the proper field for the exercise of Christian strength. 'Be very courageous that thou mayest observe.' If you are not a bold Christian you will very soon get frightened out of obedience to your Master's commandments. Courage, springing from the realisation of God's helping strength, is indispensable to make any man, in any age, live out thoroughly and consistently the principles of the law of Jesus Christ. No man in *this* generation will work out a punctual obedience to what he knows to be the will of God, without finding out that all the 'Canaanites' are not dead yet; but that there are enough of them left to make a very thorny life for the persistent follower of Jesus Christ.

And not only is there courage needed for the application of the principles of conduct which God has given us, but you will never have them handy for swift application unless,

in many a quiet hour of silent, solitary, patient meditation you have become familiar with them. The recruit that has to learn on the battle-field how to use his rifle has a good chance of being dead before he has mastered the mysteries of firing. And Christian people that have their Christian principles to dig out of the Bible when the necessity comes, will likely find that the necessity is past before they have completed the excavation. The actual battle-field is no place to learn drill. If a soldier does not know how his sword hangs, and cannot get at it in a moment, he will probably draw it too late.

I am afraid that the practice of such meditation as is meant here has come to be, like the art of making ecclesiastical stained glass, almost extinct in modern times. You have all so many newspapers and magazines to read that the Bible has a chance of being shoved out of sight, except on Sundays and in chapels. The ‘meditating’ that is enjoined in my text is no mere intellectual study of Scripture, either from an antiquarian or a literary or a theological point of view, but it is the mastering of the principles of conduct as laid down there, and the appropriating of all the power for guidance and for sustaining which that word of the Lord gives. Meditation, the familiarising ourselves with the ethics of Scripture, and with the hopes and powers that are treasured in Jesus Christ, so that our minds are made up upon a great many thorny questions as to what we ought to do, and that when crises or dangers come, as they have a knack of coming, very suddenly, and are sprung upon us unexpectedly, we shall be able, without much difficulty, or much time spent in perplexed searching, to fall back upon the principles that decide our conduct—that is essential to all successful and victorious Christian life.

And it is the secret of all blessed Christian life. For there is a lovely echo of these vigorous words of command to Joshua in a very much more peaceful form in the 1st Psalm: ‘Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, . . . but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law doth he meditate day and night’—the very words that are employed in the text to describe the duty of the soldier—therefore ‘all that he doeth shall prosper.’

III. That leads to the last thought here—the sure victory of such bold obedience.

‘Thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest’; ‘Thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then shalt thou have good success,’ or, as the last word might be rendered, ‘then shalt thou *act wisely*’ You may not get victory from an earthly point of view, for many a man that lives strong and courageous and joyfully obeying God’s law, as far as he knows it and because he loves the Lawgiver, goes through life, and finds that, as far as the world’s estimate is concerned, there is nothing but failure as his portion. Ah I but the world’s way is not the true way of estimating victory. ‘Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world,’ said Jesus Christ when within arm’s-length of the Cross. And His way is the way in which we must conquer the world, if we conquer it at all. The success which my text means is the carrying out of conscientious convictions of God’s will into practice. That is the only success that is worth talking about or looking for. The man that succeeds in obeying and translating God’s



will into conduct is the victor, whatever be the outward fruits of his life. He may go out of the field beaten, according to the estimate of men that can see no higher than their own height, and little further than their own finger tips can reach; he may himself feel that the world has gone past him, and that he has not made much of it; he may have to lie down at last unknown, poor, with all his bright hopes that danced before him in childhood gone, and sore beaten by the enemies; but if he is able to say in the strength that Christ gives, 'I have finished my course; I have kept the faith,' his 'way has prospered,' and he has had 'good success.' 'We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.'

## THE UNTRODDEN PATH AND THE GUIDING ARK

‘Come not near unto the ark, that ye may know the way by which ye must go; for ye have not passed this way heretofore.’—[JOSHUA iii. 4](#).

It was eminently true of Israel that they had ‘not passed this way heretofore,’ inasmuch as the path which was opening before them, through the oozy bed of the river, had never been seen by human eye, nor trodden by man’s foot. Their old leader was dead. There were only two of the whole host that had ever been out of the desert in their lives. They had a hard task before them. Jericho lay there, gleaming across the plain, among the palm-trees, backed by the savage cliffs, up the passes in which they would have to fight their way. So that we need not wonder that, over and over again, in these early chapters of this book, the advice is reiterated, ‘Be of good courage. Be strong and fear not!’ They needed special guidance, and they received very special guidance, and my text tells us what they had to do, in order to realise the full blessing and guidance that was given them. ‘Let there be a space of 2000 cubits by measure between you and the ark’—three-quarters of a mile or thereabouts—‘do not press close upon the heels of the bearers, for you will not be able to see where they are going if you crowd on them. Be patient. Let the course of the ark disclose itself before you try to follow it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go, for ye have not passed this way heretofore.’

I. Note the untrodden path.

I suppose that most of us have to travel a very well-worn road, and that our course, in the cases of all except those in early life, is liker that of a millhorse than an untrodden path. Most of us are continually treading again in the prints of our own footsteps. A long, weary stretch of monotonous duties, and the repetition of the same things to-day that we did yesterday is the destiny of most of us.

Some of us, perhaps, may be standing upon the verge of some new scenes in our lives. Some of you young people may have come up to a great city for the first time to carve out a position for yourselves, and are for the first time encompassed by the temptations of being unknown in a crowd. Some of you may be in new domestic circumstances, some with new sorrows, or tasks, or difficulties pressing upon you, calling for wisdom and patience. It is quite likely that there may be some who, in the most prosaic and literal sense of the words, are entering on a path altogether new and untrodden. But they will be in the minority, and for the most of us the days that were full of new possibilities are at an end, and we have to expect little more than the monotonous repetition of the habitual, humdrum duties of mature life. We have climbed the winding paths up the hill, and most of us are upon the long plateau that stretches unvaried, until it begins to dip at the further edge. And some of us are going down that other side of the hill.

But whatever may be the variety in regard to the mere externals of our lives, how true it is about us all that even the most familiar duties of to-day are not quite like the same duties

when they had to be done yesterday; and that the path for each of us—though, as we go along, we find in it nothing new—is yet an untrodden path! For we are not quite the same as we were yesterday, though our work may be the same, and the difference in us makes it in some measure different.

But what mainly makes even the most well-beaten paths new at the thousandth time of traversing them is our ignorance of what may be waiting round the next turn of the road. The veil that hangs before and hides the future is a blessing, though we sometimes grumble at it, and sometimes petulantly try to make pinholes through it, and peep in to see a little of what is behind it. It brings freshness into our lives, and a possibility of anticipation, and even of wonder and expectation, that prevents us from stagnating. Even in the most habitual repetition of the same tasks ‘ye have not passed this way heretofore.’ And life for every one of us is still full of possibilities so great and so terrible that we may well feel that the mist that covers the future is a blessing and a source of strength for us all.

Our march through time is like that of men in a mist, in which things loom in strangely distorted shapes, unlike their real selves, until we get close up to them, and only then do we discover them.

So for us all the path is new and unknown by reason of the sudden surprises that may be sprung upon us, by reason of the sudden temptations that may start up at any moment in our course, by reason of the earthquakes that may shatter the most solid-seeming lives, by reason of the sudden calamities that may fall upon us. The sorrows that we anticipate seldom come, and those that do come are seldom anticipated. The most fatal bolts are generally from the blue. One flash, all unlooked for, is enough to blast the tree in all its leafy pride. Many of us, I have no doubt, can look back to times in our lives when, without anticipation on our parts, or warning from anything outside of us, a smiting hand fell upon some of our blessings. The morning dawned upon the gourd in full vigour of growth, and in the evening it was stretched yellow and wilted upon the turf. Dear brethren, anything may come out of that dark cloud through which our life’s course has to pass, and there are some things concerning which all that we know is that they must come.

These are very old threadbare thoughts; I dare say you think it was not worth your while to come to hear them, nor mine to speak them; but if we would lay them to heart, and realise how true it is about every step of our earthly course that ‘ye have not passed this way heretofore,’ we should complain less than we do of the weariness and prosaic character of our commonplace lives, and feel that all was mystical and great and awful; and yet most blessed in its possibilities and its uncertainties.

II. Note, again, the guiding ark.

It was a new thing that the ark should become the guide of the people. All through the wilderness, according to the history, it had been carried in the centre of the march, and had had no share in the direction of the course. That had been done by the pillar of cloud. But,

just as the manna ceased when the tribes got across the Jordan and could eat the bread of the land, the miracle ending and they being left to trust to ordinary means of supply at the earliest possible moment, so there ensued an approximation to ordinary guidance, which is none the less real because it is granted without miracle. The pillar of cloud ceased to move before the people in the crossing of the Jordan, and its place was taken by the material symbol of the presence of God, which contained the tables of the law as the basis of the covenant. And that ark moved at the commandment of the leader Joshua, for he was the mouthpiece of the divine will in the matter. And so when the ark moved at the bidding of the leader, and became the guide of the people, there was a kind of a drop down from the pure supernatural of the guiding pillar.

For us a similar thing is true. Jesus Christ is the true Ark of God. For what was the ark? the symbol of the divine Presence; and Christ is the reality of the divine Presence with men. The whole content of that ark was the 'law of the Lord,' and Jesus Christ is the embodied law of the present God. The ark was the sign that God had entered into this covenant with these people, and that they had a right to say to Him, 'Thou art our God, and we are Thy people,' and the same double assurance of reciprocal possession and mutual delight in possession is granted to us in and through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So He becomes the guiding Ark, the Shepherd of Israel. His presence and will are our directors. The law, which is contained and incorporated in Him, is that by which we are to walk. The covenant which He has established in His own blood between God and man contains in itself not only the direction for conduct, but also the motives which will impel us to walk where and as He enjoins.

And so, every way we may say, by His providences which He appoints, by His example which He sets us, by His gracious word in which He sums up all human duties in the one sweet obligation, 'Follow Me,' and even more by His Spirit that dwells in us, and whispers in our ears, 'This is the way; walk ye in it,' and enlightens every perplexity, and strengthens all feebleness, and directs our footsteps into the way of peace; that living and personal Ark of the covenant of the Lord of the whole earth is still the guide of waiting and docile hearts. Jesus Christ's one word to us is, 'If any man serve Me, let him follow Me. And where I am'—of course, seeing he is a follower—'there shall also My servant be.'

The one Pattern for us, the one Example that we need to follow, the one Strength in our perplexities, the true Director of our feet, is that dear Lord, if we will only listen to Him. And that direction will be given to us in regard to the trifles, as in regard to the great things of our lives.

III. And so the last thought that is here is the watchful following.

'Come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye ought to go.' In a shipwreck, the chances are that the boats will be swamped by the people scrambling into them in too great a hurry. In the Christian life most of the mistakes that people make arise from

their not letting the ark go far enough ahead of them before they gather up their belongings and follow it. An impatience of the half-declared divine will, a running before we are sent, an acting before we are quite sure that God wills us to do so-and-so, are at the root of most of the failures of Christian effort, and of a large number of the miseries of Christian men. If we would only have patience! Three-quarters of a mile the ark went ahead before a man lifted a foot to follow it, and there was no mistake possible then.

Now do not be in a hurry to act. 'Raw haste' is 'half-sister to delay.' We are all impatient of uncertainty, either in opinion or in conduct; but if you are not quite sure what God wants you to do, you may be quite sure that He does not at present want you to do anything. Wait till you see what He does wish you to do. Better, better far, to spend hours in silent—although people that know nothing about what we are doing may call it indolent—waiting for the clear declaration of God's will, than to hurry on paths which, after we have gone on them far enough to make it a mortification and a weariness to turn back, we shall find out to have been not His at all, but only our own mistakes as to where the ark would have us go.

And that there may be this patience the one thing needful-as, indeed, it is the one thing needful for all strength of all kinds in the Christian life—is the rigid suppression of our own wills. That is the secret of goodness, and its opposite is the secret of evil. To live by my own will is to die. Nothing but blunders, nothing but miseries, nothing but failures, nothing but remorse, will be the fruit of such a life. And a great many of us who call ourselves Christians are not Christians in the sense of having Christ's will for our absolute law, and keeping our own will entirely in subordination thereto. As is the will, so is the man, and whoever does not bow himself absolutely, and hush all the babble of his own inclinations and tastes and decisions, in order that that great Voice may speak, has small chance of ever walking in the paths of righteousness, or finding that his ways please the Lord.

Suppress your own wills, dwell near God, that you may hear His lightest whisper. 'I will guide thee with Mine eye.' What is the use of the glance of an eye if the man for whom it is meant is half a mile off, and staring about him at everything except the eye that would guide? And that is what some of us that call ourselves Christian people are. God might look guidance at us for a week, and we should never know that He was doing it; we have so many other things to look after. And we are so far away from Him that it would need a telescope for us to see His face. 'I will guide thee with Mine eye.' Keep near Him, and you will not lack direction.

And so, dear brethren, if we stay ourselves on, and wait patiently for, Him, and are content to do what He wishes, and never to run without a clear commission, nor to act without a full conviction of duty, then the old story of my text will repeat itself in our daily life, as well as in the noblest form in the last act of life, which is death. The Lord will move before us and open a safe, dry path for us between the heaped waters; and where the feet of our great High Priest, bearing the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, stood, amidst the slime

and the mud, we may plant our firm feet on the stones that He has left there. And so the stream of life, like the river of death, will be parted for Christ's followers, and they will pass over on dry ground, 'until all the people are passed clean over Jordan.'

**'THE WATERS SAW THEE; THEY WERE AFRAID'**

'And Joshua said unto the people, Sanctify yourselves: for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you. 6. And Joshua spake unto the priests, saying, Take up the ark of the covenant, and pass over before the people. And they took up the ark of the covenant, and went before the people. 7. And the Lord said unto Joshua, This day will I begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee. 8 And thou shalt command the priests that bear the ark of the covenant, saying, When ye are come to the brink of the water of Jordan, ye shall stand still in Jordan. 8. And Joshua said unto the children of Israel, Come hither, and hear the words of the Lord your God. 10. And Joshua said, Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you, and that He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Hivites, and the Perizzites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Jebusites. 11. Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth Over before you into Jordan. 12. Now therefore take you twelve men out of the tribes of Israel, out of every tribe a man. 13. And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests that bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of Jordan, that the waters of Jordan shall be out off from the waters that come down from above; and they shall stand upon an heap. 14. And it came to pass, when the people removed from their tents, to pass over Jordan, and the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people; 15. And as they that bare the ark were come unto Jordan, and the feet of the priests that bare the ark were dipped in the brim of the water, (for Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest,) 16. That the waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon an heap very far from the city Adam, that is beside Zaretan: and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, even the salt sea failed, and were cut off: and the people passed over right against Jericho. 17. And the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of Jordan, and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground, until all the people were passed clean over Jordan.'—[JOSHUA iii. 5-17](#).

The arrangement of the narrative of the passage of Jordan, which occupies [chapters iii.](#) and [iv.](#), is remarkable, and has led to suggestions of interpolation and blending of two accounts, which are quite unnecessary. It is divided into four sections,—the preparations ([Joshua iii. 1-6](#)), the passage ([Joshua iii. 7-17](#)), the lifting of the memorial stones from the river's bed and the fixing of one set of them in it ([Joshua iv. 1-14](#)), the return of the waters, and the erection of the second set of memorial stones at Gilgal ([Joshua iv. 15-24](#)).

Each section closes with a summary of the whole transaction, after the common manner of Old Testament history, which gives to a hasty reader the impression of confusion and repetition; but a little attention shows a very symmetrical arrangement, negating the possibility of interpolation. The last three sections are all built on the same lines. In each there is a triple division,—God's command to Joshua, Joshua's communication of it to the people,

and the actual fact, fulfilling these. So each stage passes thrice before the view, and the impressiveness of the history is heightened by our seeing it first in the mirror of the divine Word, and then in the orders of the commander, before we see it as a thing actually happening.

Verses 5 and 6 of the chapter belong to the section which deals with the preparation. General instructions had been already issued that the host was to follow the ark, leaving two thousand cubits between them and it; but nothing had been said as to how Jordan was to be crossed. No doubt many a question and doubt had been muttered by the watch-fires, as the people looked at the muddy, turbid stream, swirling in flood. The spies probably managed to swim it, but that was a feat worthy to be named in the epitaph of heroes (1 Chron. xii. 15), and impossible for the crowd of all ages and both sexes which followed Joshua. There was the rushing stream, swollen as it always is in harvest. How were they to get over? And if the people of Jericho, right over against them, chose to fall upon them as they were struggling across, what could hinder utter defeat? No doubt, all that was canvassed, in all sorts of tones; but no inkling of the miracle seems to have been given.

God often opens His hand by one finger at a time, and leaves us face to face with some plain but difficult duty, without letting us see the helps to its performance, till we need to use them. If we go right on the road which He has traced out, it will never lead us into a blind alley. The mountains will part before us as we come near what looked their impassable wall; and some narrow gorge or other, wide enough to run a track through, but not wide enough to be noticed before we are close on it, will be sure to open. The attitude of expectation of God's help, while its nature is unrevealed, is kept up in Joshua's last instruction. The people are bidden to 'sanctify themselves, because to-morrow the Lord will do wonders' among them. That sanctifying was not external, but included the hallowing of spirit by docile waiting for His intervention, and by obedience while the manner of it was hidden. The secret of to-morrow is partly made known, and the faith of the people is nourished by the mystery remaining, as well as by the light given. The best security for to-morrow's wonders is to-day's sanctifying.

The command to the priests discloses to them a little more, in bidding them pass over before the people, but the additional disclosure would only be an additional trial of faith; for the silence as to how so impossible a command was to be made possible is absolute. The swollen river had obliterated all fords; and how were priests, staggering under the weight of the ark on their shoulders, to 'pass over'? The question is not answered till the ark is on their shoulders. To-day often sees to-morrow's duty without seeing how it is to be done. But the bearers of the ark need never fear but that the God to whom it belongs will take care of it and of them. The last sentence of verse 6 is the anticipatory summary which closes each section.



In [verses 7-17](#) we have the narrative of the actual crossing, in its three divisions of God's command ([vs. 7-8](#)), Joshua's repetition of it ([vs. 9-13](#)), and the historical fact ([vs. 14-17](#)). The final instructions were only given on the morning of the day of crossing. The report of God's commands given in [verses 7 and 8](#) is condensed, as is evident from the fuller statement of them in Joshua's address to the people, which immediately follows. In it Joshua is fully aware of the manner of the miracle and of the details of the crossing, but we have no record of his having received them. The summary of that eventful morning's instructions to him emphasises first the bearing of the miracle on his reputation. The passage of the Red Sea had authenticated the mission of Moses to the past generation, who, in consequence of it, 'believed God and His servant Moses.' The new generation are to have a parallel authentication of Joshua's commission. It is noteworthy that this is not the purpose of the miracle which the leader announces to the people in [verse 10](#). It was a message from God to himself, a kind of gracious whisper meant for his own encouragement. What a thought to fill a man's heart with humble devotion, that God would work such a wonder in order to demonstrate that He was with him! And what a glimpse of more to follow lay in that promise, 'This day will I *begin* to magnify thee I.'

The command to the priests in [verse 8](#) is also obviously condensed; for Joshua's version of it, which follows, is much more detailed, and contains particular instructions, which must have been derived from the divine word to him on that morning.

We may pass on, then, to the second division of the narrative; namely, Joshua's communication of God's commands to the people. Observe the form which the purpose of the miracle assumes there. It is the confirmation of the divine Presence, not with the leader, but with the people and their consequent victory. Joshua grasped the inmost meaning of God's Word to himself, and showed noble self-suppression, when he thus turned the direction of the miracle. The true servant of God knows that God is with him, not for his personal glorification, but for the welfare of God's people, and cares little for the estimation in which men hold him, if they will only believe that the conquering God is with them. We too often make great leaders and teachers in the church opaque barriers to hide God from us, instead of transparent windows through which He shines upon His people. We are a great deal more ready to say, 'God is with him,' than to add, 'and therefore God is with us, in our Joshuas, and without them.'

Observe the grand emphasis of that name, 'the living God,' tacitly contrasted with the dead idols of the enemies, and sealing the assurance of His swift and all-conquering might. Observe, too, the triumphant contempt in the enumeration of the many tribes of the foe with their barbarous names. Five of them had been enough, when named by the spies' trembling lips, to terrify the congregation, but here the list of the whole seven but strengthens confidence. Faith delights to look steadily at its enemies, knowing that the one Helper is more than they all. This catalogue breathes the same spirit as Paul's rapturous list of the

foes impotent to separate from the love of God. Mark, too, the long-drawn-out designation of the ark, with its accumulation of nouns, which grammatical purists have found difficult,—‘the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth’; where it leads they need not fear to follow. It was the pledge of His presence, it contained the Ten Words on which His covenant was concluded. That covenant enlisted on their side Him who was Lord of the swollen river as of all the fierce clans beyond; and with His ark in front, their victory was sure. If ever the contemplation of His power and covenant relation was in place, it was on that morning, as Israel stood ranked for the march that was to lead them through Jordan, and to plant their feet on the soil of Canaan. Nor must we omit the peculiar appropriateness of this solemn designation, on the occasion of the ark’s first becoming the leader of the march. Hitherto it had been carried in the centre; now it was moved to the van, and took the place of the pillar, which blazed no more. But the guidance was no less divine. The simple coffer which Bezaleel had made was as august and reliable a symbol of God’s presence as the pillar; and the tables of the law, shut in it, were henceforth to be the best directors of the nation.

Then follows the command to elect twelve representatives of the tribes, for a purpose not yet explained; and then, at the last moment, the manner of crossing is disclosed, to the silencing of wise doubters and the confirmation of ignorant faith. The brief anticipatory announcement of the miracle puts stress on the arrest of the waters at the instant when the priests’ feet touched them, and tells what is to befall the arrested torrent above the point where the ark stood, saying nothing about the lower stretch of the river, and just hinting by one word ‘heap’ the parallel between this miracle and that of the passing of the Red Sea: ‘The floods stood upright as an heap’ (*Exod. xv. 8*).

*Verses 14-17* narrate the actual crossing. One long sentence, like the roll of an Atlantic wave, or a long-drawn shout of triumph, masses together the stages of the march; the breaking up of the encampment; the solemn advance of the ark, watched by the motionless crowd; its approach to the foaming stream, running bank-full, as is its wont in the early harvest months; the decisive moment when the naked feet of the priests were dipped in the water. What a hush of almost painful expectation would fall on the gazers! Then, with a rush of triumph, the long sentence pours on, like a river escaping from some rocky gorge, and tells the details of the transcendent fact. Looking up stream, the water ‘stood’; and, as the flow above went on, it was dammed up, and, as would appear, swept back to a point not now known, but apparently some miles up. Looking down the course, the water flowed naturally to the Dead Sea; and, in effect, the whole bed southwards was quickly left bare, giving room for the advance of the people with wide-extended front, while the priests, with the ark on their shoulders, stood silent in the midst of the bed, between the heaped waters and the hasting host. *Verse 17* gives the usual summary sentence, which partly anticipates what is still to follow, but here comes in with special force, as gathering up the whole wonderful scene, and recounting once more, and not without a ring of astonished triumph, how

the priests stood firm on dry ground in that strange place, 'until all the nation were passed clean over Jordan.'

From [verses 7 and 10](#) we learn the purpose of this miracle as being twofold. It was intended to stamp the seal of God's approbation on Joshua, and to hearten the people by the assurance of God's fighting for them. The leader was thereby put on the level of Moses, the people, on that of the generation before whom the Red Sea had been divided. The parallel with that event is obvious and significant. The miracle which led Israel into the wilderness is repeated as they pass from it. The first stage of their deliverance and the second are begun with analogous displays of divine power. The same arm which cleft the sea is stretched out, after all sins, for the new generation, and 'is not shortened that it cannot save.' God does not disdain to duplicate His wonders, even for very unworthy servants. The unchanging, long-suffering patience, and the unwearied strength to which all generations in succession can turn with confidence, are wonderfully set forth by these two miracles. And though we have passed into the higher stage, where miracles have ceased, the principle which dictated the parallelism still holds good, and we too can look back to all these ancient wonders, and be sure that they are done over and over again according to our needs. 'As we have heard, so have we seen,' might have been Israel's song that day, as it may be ours every day.

The beautiful application made of the parted waters of Jordan in Christian literature, which sees in them the prophecy of conquered death, is perhaps scarcely in accordance with truth, for the divided Jordan was the introduction, not to peace, but to warfare. But it is too deeply impressed on the heart to be lightly put aside, and we may well allow faith and hope to discern in the stream, whose swollen waters shrink backwards as soon as the ark is borne into their turbid and swift current, an emblem of that dark flood that rolled between the host of God and their home, and was dried up as soon as the pierced foot of the Christ touched its cold waters.

'What ailest thee, thou sea, that thou fleest; thou Jordan, that thou turnest back?' Christ has gone up before us. He has shaken His hand over the river, and caused men to go over dry shod.

## STONES CRYING OUT

‘For the priests which bare the ark stood in the midst of Jordan, until every thing was finished that the Lord commanded Joshua to speak unto the people, according to all that Moses commanded Joshua: and the people hasted and passed over. 11. And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over, that the ark of the Lord passed over, and the priests, in the presence of the people. 12. And the children of Reuben, and the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh, passed over armed before the children of Israel, as Moses spake unto them: 13. About forty thousand prepared for war passed over before the Lord unto battle, to the plains of Jericho. 14. On that day the Lord magnified Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they feared Moses, all the days of his life. 15. And the Lord spake unto Joshua, saying, 16. Command the priests that bare the ark of the testimony, that they come up out of Jordan. 17. Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, Come ye up out of Jordan. 18. And it came to pass, when the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord were come up out of the midst of Jordan, and the soles of the priests’ feet were lifted up unto the dry land, that the waters of Jordan returned unto their place, and flowed over all his banks, as they did before. 19. And the people came up out of Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and encamped in Gilgal, in the east border of Jericho. 20. And those twelve stones, which they took out of Jordan, did Joshua pitch in Gilgal. 21. And he spake unto the children of Israel, saying, When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean these stones? 22. Then ye shall let your children know, saying, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land. 23. For the Lord your God dried up the waters of Jordan from before you, until ye were passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red sea, which He dried up from before us, until we were gone over: 24. That all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty: that ye might fear the Lord your God for ever.’—**JOSHUA iv. 10-24.**

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first (from [verses 1 to 14](#)) has as its main subject the bringing up of the twelve memorial stones from the bed of Jordan; the second ([verse 15 to the end](#)) gives the conclusion of the whole incident. The plan of arrangement, already pointed out in a former chapter, is very plain in this. Each section has God’s commands to Joshua, Joshua’s to the people, and the execution of these. To each is appended a summary, which anticipates the more detailed particulars that follow. Our text begins in the middle of the first section, but we must glance at the preceding verses. These tell how, when the people were all across, Joshua, who had apparently remained on the eastern bank with the twelve representatives of the tribes, received God’s command to tell these the purpose for which they had been chosen, and to set them to execute it. This additional instruction is the explanation of the apparent discrepancy between [Joshua iii. 12](#) and [iv. 2](#). [Verses 4-8](#) tell Joshua’s communication of the instructions to the men; [verse 8](#) narrates the execution of them by each man’s wrenching up from the river’s bed a great stone, with which he toiled

through the muddy ooze to the western shore, and thence over the hot plain to Gilgal, where the host camped; [verse 9](#) tells that twelve other stones were set up where the priests had stood, and were visible at some time after date, when it was written; but when that was, or whether the verse is part of the original or a later note, we cannot say. At any rate, there were two memorials, one on the bank, one in the stream—‘a grand jury of great stones,’ as Thomas Fuller calls them. There is no difficulty in supposing that the monument in the river was firm enough to resist its current, and high enough to be visible either above the surface or beneath the ordinarily shallow water.

I. The first picture here brought before us is that of the motionless ark in the midst of what had been Jordan. There is an obvious intention to contrast the stillness of the priests, bearing it on their shoulders, and standing rooted in that strange place all these long hours, with the hurry around. ‘The priests stood . . . and the people hasted.’ However broad the front and swift the march, the crossing must have taken many hours. The haste was not from fear, but eagerness. It was ‘an industrious speed and mannerly quickness, as not willing to make God wait upon them, in continuing a miracle longer than necessity did require.’ When all were over, then came the twelve and Joshua, who would spend some time in gathering the stones and rearing the memorial in the river-bed. Through all the stir the ark was still. Over all the march it watched. So long as one Israelite was in the channel it remained, a silent presence, to ensure his safety. It let their rate of speed determine the length of its standing there. It waited for the slowest foot and the weariest laggard. God makes His ‘very present help’ of the same length as our necessities, and lets us beat the time to which He conforms. Not till the last loiterer has struggled to the farther shore does He cease by His presence to keep His people safe on the strange road which by His presence He has opened for them.

The silent presence of the ark is enough to dam up the stream. There is vehement action around, but the cause of it all is in absolute repose. God moves all things, Himself unmoved. He ‘worketh hitherto,’ and no intensity of energy breaks the depth of His perfect rest. His activity implies no effort, and is followed by no exhaustion. The ark is still, while it holds back a swollen river for hours. The centre of the swiftest revolution is a point of rest.

The form of the miracle was a condescension to weak faith, to which help was ministered by giving sense something to grasp. It was easier to believe that the torrent would not rush down on them when they could look at the priests standing there motionless, with the visible symbol of God’s presence on their shoulders. The ark was no more the cause of the miracle than were its carriers; but, just as Jesus helped one blind man by laying moistened earth on his eyes, and another by sending him to Siloam to wash, so God did here. Children learn best when they have something to look at. Sight is sometimes the servant of faith.

We need not dwell on the summary, beginning with [verse 11](#), which anticipates the subject of the next section, and adds that the fighting men of the tribes who had already re-

ceived their inheritance on the east bank of Jordan, loyally kept their promise, and marched with their brethren to the campaign.

II. [Verses 15-18](#) finish the story with the return of the waters to their bed. The triple division appears again. First God commands Joshua, who then transmits the command to the people, who, in turn, then obey. And thus at each stage the divine causality, Joshua's delegated but absolute authority, and the people's prompt obedience, are signalised; and the whole incident, in all its parts, is set forth as on the one hand a conspicuous instance of God's interposition, and, on the other, of Israel's willing service.

We can fancy how the people who had reached the western shore lined the bank, gazing on the group in the channel, who still stood waiting God's command to relieve them at their post. The word comes at last, and is immediately obeyed. May we not learn the lesson to stand fixed and patient wherever God sets us, as long as He does not call us thence? God's priests should be like the legionary on guard in Pompeii, who stuck to his post while the ashes were falling thick, and was smothered by them, rather than leave his charge without his commander's orders. One graphic word pictures the priests lifting, or, as it might be translated, 'plucking,' the soles of their feet from the slimy bottom into which they had settled down by reason of long standing still. They reach the bank, marching as steadily with their sacred burden as might be over so rough and slippery a road. The first to enter were the last to leave the river's bed. God's ark 'goes before us,' and 'is our rearward.' He besets us behind and before, and all dangerous service is safe if begun and ended in Him. The one point made prominent is the instantaneous rush back of the impatient torrent as soon as the curb was taken off. Like some horse rejoicing to be free, the tawny flood pours down, and soon everything looks 'as aforetime,' except for the new rock, piled by human hands, round which the waters chafed. The dullest would understand what had wrought the miracle when they saw the immediate consequence of the ark's leaving its place. Cause and effect seldom come thus close together in God's dealings; but sometimes He lets us see them as near each other as the lightning and the thunder, that we may learn to trace them in faith, when centuries part them. How the people would gaze as the hurrying stream covered up their path, and would look across to the further shore, almost doubting if they had really stood there that morning! They were indeed 'Hebrews'—men from the other side—now, and would set themselves to the dangerous task before them with courage. 'Well begun is half done'; and God would not divide the river for them to thrust them into a tiger's den, where they would be torn to pieces. Retreat was impossible now. A new page in their history was turned. The desert was as unreachable as Egypt, The passage of the Jordan rounded off the epoch which the passage of the Bed Sea introduced, and began a new era.

That parallelism of the two crossings is suggested by the notice of date in [verse 19](#). 'The tenth day of the first month' was just forty years to a day since the first Paschal lamb had been chosen, and four days short of the Passover, which was solemnised at Gilgal ([Joshua](#)

v. 10) where they encamped that night. It was a short march from the point of crossing, and a still shorter from Jericho. It would have been easy to fall upon the invaders as they straggled across the river, but no attempt was made to dispute the passage, though, no doubt, many a keen pair of eyes watched it from the neighbouring hills. In the beginning of the next chapter we are told why there was this singular supineness. 'Their heart melted, neither was there spirit in them any more,' or, in more modern language, panic laid hold of the enemy, and they could not pluck up courage to oppose the advance of Israel. If we add this result to those mentioned in chapter in., we find sufficient motive for the miracle to take it out of the class of purposeless, legendary wonders. Given the importance of Israel as the depositaries of revelation, there is nothing unreasonable in a miracle which so powerfully contributed to their conquest of Canaan, and we have yet to learn that there is anything unreasonable in the belief that they were the depositaries of revelation. The fundamental postulate of the Old Testament is a supernatural revelation, and that opens the door for any miracle needful for its accomplishment. It is folly to seek to conciliate by minimising the miraculous element. However much may be thrown out to the wolves, they will not cease to pursue and show their teeth. We should be very slow to pronounce on what is worthy of God; but any man who believes in a divine revelation, given to the world through Israel, may well believe in such a miracle as this at such a moment of their history.

III. The memorial stones ([verses 20-24](#)). Gilgal, the first encampment, lay defenceless in the open plain, and the first thing to be done would be to throw up some earthwork round the camp. It seems to have been the resting-place of the ark and probably of the non-combatants, during the conquest, and to have derived thence a sacredness which long clung to it, and finally led, singularly enough, to its becoming a centre of idolatrous worship. The rude circle of unhewn stones without inscription was, no doubt, exactly like the many pre-historic monuments found all over the world, which forgotten races have raised to keep in everlasting remembrance forgotten fights and heroes. It was a comparatively small thing; for each stone was but a load for one man, and it would seem mean enough by the side of Stonehenge or Carnac, just as Israel's history is on a small scale, as compared with the world-embracing empires of old. Size is not greatness; and Joshua's little circle told a more wonderful story than its taller kindred, or Egyptian obelisks or colossi.

These grey stones preached at once the duty of remembering, and the danger of forgetting, the past mercies of God. When they were reared, they would seem needless; but the deepest impressions get filled up by degrees, as the river of time deposits its sands on them. We do not forget pain so quickly as joy, and most men have a longer and keener remembrance of their injurers than of their benefactors, human or divine. The stones were set up because Israel remembered, but also lest Israel should forget. We often think of the Jews as monsters of ingratitude; but we should more truly learn the lesson of their history, if we regarded them as fair, average men, and asked ourselves whether our recollection of God's



goodness to us is much more vivid than theirs. Unless we make distinct and frequent efforts to recall, we shall certainly forget 'all His benefits.' The cultivation of thankful remembrance is a very large part of practical religion; and it is not by accident that the Psalmist puts it in the middle, between hope and obedience, when he says 'that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments' ([Psalm lxxviii. 7](#)).

The memorial stones further proclaimed the duty of parental instruction in God's mercies. They speak of a time when tradition was the vehicle of history; when books were rare, and monuments were relied upon to awaken curiosity which a father's words would satisfy. Notwithstanding all differences in means of obtaining knowledge, the old law remains in full force, that the parent is the natural and most powerful instructor in the ways of God. The Jewish father was not to send his child to some Levite or other to get his question answered, but was to answer it himself. I am afraid that a good many English parents, who call themselves Christians, are too apt to say, 'Ask your Sunday-school teacher,' when such questions are put to them. The decay of parental religious teaching is working enormous mischief in Christian households; and the happiest results would follow if Joshua's homely advice were attended to, 'Ye shall let your children know.'

The same principle which led to the erection of this simple monument reaches its highest and sacred instance in the institution of the Lord's Supper, in which Jesus, with wonderful lowliness, condescends to avail Himself of material symbols in order to secure a firmer place in treacherous memories. He might well have expected that such stupendous love could never be forgotten; but He 'knoweth our frame,' and trusts some share in keeping His death vividly in the hearts of His people to the humble ministry of bread and wine, Strange that we should need to be reminded of the death which it is life to remember! Blessed that, needing it, we have the need so tenderly met, and that He does not disdain to accept loving memories which slumber till stirred by such poor reminders of His unspeakable love!



## THE CAPTAIN OF THE LORD'S HOST

‘And he said, Nay, but as captain of the host of the Lord am I now come.’—[JOSHUA v. 14](#).

The army of Israel was just beginning a hard conflict under an untried leader. Behind them the Jordan barred their retreat, in front of them Jericho forbade their advance. Most of them had never seen a fortified city, and had no experience nor engines for a siege. So we may well suppose that many doubts and fears shook the courage of the host, as it drew around the doomed city. Their chief had his own heavy burden. He seems to have gone apart to meditate on what his next step was to be. Absorbed in thought, he lifts up his eyes mechanically, as brooding men will, not expecting to see anything, and is startled by the silent figure of ‘a man with a sword drawn’ in his hand, close beside him. There is nothing supernatural in his appearance; and the immediate thought of the leader is, ‘Is this one of the enemy that has stolen upon my solitude?’ So, promptly and boldly, he strides up to him with the quick challenge: ‘Whose side are you on? Are you one of us, or from the enemy’s camp?’ And then the silent lips open. ‘Upon neither the one nor the other. I am not on your side, you are on mine, for as Captain of the Lord’s host, am I come up.’ And then Joshua falls on his face, recognises his Commander-in-Chief, owns himself a subordinate, and asks for orders. ‘What saith my Lord unto his servant?’

Now let us try to gather the meaning and the lessons of this striking incident.

I. I see in it a transient revelation of an eternal truth.

I believe, as the vast majority of careful students of the course of Old Testament revelation and its relation to the New Testament completion believe, that we have here not a record of the appearance of a created superhuman person, but that of a preliminary manifestation of the Eternal Word of God, who, in the fulness of time, ‘became flesh and dwelt among us.’

You will observe that there run throughout the whole of the Old Testament notices of the occasional manifestation of a mysterious person who is named ‘*the Angel*,’ ‘the Angel of the Lord.’ For instance, in the great scene in the wilderness, where the bush burned and was not consumed, he who appeared is named ‘the Angel of the Lord’; and his lips declare ‘I am that I am.’ In like manner, soon after, the divine voice speaks to Moses of ‘the Angel in whom is My name.’

When Balaam had his path blocked amongst the vineyards, it was a *replica* of the figure of my text that stayed his way, a man with a drawn sword in his hand, who spoke in autocratic and divine fashion. When the parents of Samson were apprised of the coming birth of the hero, it was ‘the Angel of the Lord’ that appeared to them, accepted their sacrifice, declared the divine will, and disappeared in a flame of fire from the altar. A psalm speaks of ‘the Angel of the Lord’ as encamping round about them that fear him, and delivering them. Isaiah tells us of the ‘Angel of his face,’ who was ‘afflicted in all Israel’s afflictions, and saved them.’ And the last prophetic utterance of the Old Testament is most distinct and

remarkable in its strange identification and separation of Jehovah and the Angel, when it says, 'the Lord shall suddenly come to His Temple, even the Angel of the Covenant.' Now, if we put all these passages—and they are but select instances—if we put all these passages together, I think we cannot help seeing that there runs, as I said, throughout the whole of the Old Testament a singular strain of revelation in regard to a Person who, in a remarkable manner, is distinguished from the created hosts of angel beings, and also is distinguished from, and yet in name, attributes, and worship all but identified with, the Lord Himself.

If we turn to the narrative before us, we find there similar phenomena marked out. For this mysterious 'man with the sword drawn' in his hand, quotes the very words which were spoken at the bush, when he says, 'Loose thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy.' And by fair implication, He would have us to identify the persons in these two great theophanies. He ascribes to Himself, in the further conversation in the next chapter, directly divine attributes, and is named by the sacred name; 'The Lord said unto Joshua, see, I have given into thy hand Jericho and its king.'

If we turn to the New Testament, we find that there under another image the same strain of thought is presented. The Word of God, who from everlasting 'was with God, and was God,' is represented as being the Agent of Creation, the Source of all human illumination, the Director of Providence, the Lord of the Universe. 'By him were all things, and in him all things consists.' So, surely, these two halves make a whole; and the Angel of the Lord, separate and yet so strangely identified with Jehovah, who at the crises of the nation's history, and stages of the development of the process of Revelation, is manifested, and the Eternal Word of God, whom the New Testament reveals to us, are one and the same.

This truth was transiently manifested in our text. The vision passed, the ground that was hallowed by His foot is undistinguished now in the sweltering plain round the mound that once was Jericho. But the fact remains, the humanity, that was only in appearance, and for a few minutes, assumed then, has now been taken up into everlasting union with the divine nature, and a Man reigns on the Throne, and is Commander of all who battle for the truth and the right. The eternal order of the universe is before us here.

It only remains to say a word in reference to the sweep of the command which our vision assigns to the Angel of the Lord. 'Captain of the Lord's host' means a great deal more than the true General of Israel's little army. It does mean that, or the words and the vision would cease to have relevance and bearing on the moment's circumstances and need. But it includes also, as the usage of Scripture would sufficiently show, if it were needful to adduce instances of it, all the ordered ranks of loftier intelligent beings, and all the powers and forces of the universe. These are conceived of as an embattled host, comparable to an army in the strictness of their discipline and their obedience to a single will. It is the modern thought that the universe is a Cosmos and not a Chaos, an ordered unit, with the addition of the truth beyond the reach and range of science, that its unity is the expression of a personal will. It is the

same thought which the centurion had, to Christ's wonder, when he compared his own power as an officer in a legion, where his will was implicitly obeyed, to the power of Christ over diseases and sorrows and miseries and death, and recognised that all these were His servants, to whom, if His autocratic lips chose to say 'Go,' they went, and if He said, 'Do this,' they did it.

So the Lord of the universe and its ordered ranks is Jesus Christ. That is the truth which was flashed from the unknown, like a vanishing meteor in the midnight, before the face of Joshua, and which stands like the noonday sun, unsetting and irradiating for us who live under the Gospel.

II. I see here the Leader of all the warfare against the world's evil.

'The Captain of the Lord's host.' He Himself takes part in the fight. He is not like a general who, on some safe knoll behind the army, sends his soldiers to death, and keeps his own skin whole. But He *has* fought, and He *is* fighting. Do you remember that wonderful picture in two halves, at the end of one of the Gospels, 'the Lord went up into Heaven and sat at the right hand of God, . . . they went forth everywhere preaching the Word'? Strange contrast between the repose of the seated Christ and the toils of His peripatetic servants! Yes, strange contrast; but the next words harmonise the two halves of it; 'the Lord also working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.' The Leader does not so rest as that He does not fight; and the servants do not need so to fight, as that they cannot rest. Thus the old legends of many a land and tongue have a glorious truth in them to the eye of faith, and at the head of all the armies that are charging against any form of the world's misery and sin, there moves the form of the Son of Man, whose aid we have to invoke, even from His crowned repose at the right hand of God. 'Gird thy sword upon Thy thigh, O Most Mighty, and in Thy majesty ride forth prosperously, and Thy right hand shall teach Thee terrible things.'

If this, then, be for us, as truly as for Joshua and his host, a revelation of who is our true leader, surely all of us in our various degrees, and especially any of us who have any 'Quixotic crusade' for the world's good on our consciences and on our hands, may take the lessons and the encouragements that are here. Own your Leader; that is one plain duty. And recognise this fact, that by no other power than by His, and with no other weapons than those which He puts into our hands, in His Cross and meekness, can a world's evils be overcome, and the victory be won for the right and the truth. I have no faith in crusades which are not under the Captain of our salvation. And I would that the earnest men, and there are many of them, the laborious and the self-sacrificing men in many departments of philanthropy and benevolence and social reformation—who labour unaware of who is their Leader, and not dependent upon His help, nor trusting in His strength—would take to heart this vision of my text, and see beside them the 'man with the drawn sword in his hand,' the Christ with the

'sharp two-edged sword going out of his mouth,' by whom, and by whom alone, the world's evil can be overcome and slain.

Own your General; submit to His authority; pick the weapons that He can bless; trust absolutely in His help. *We may* have, *we shall* have, in all enterprises for God and man that are worth doing, 'need of patience,' just as the army of Israel had to parade for six weary days round Jericho blowing their useless trumpets, whilst the impregnable walls stood firm, and the defenders flouted and jeered their aimless procession. But the seventh day will come, and at the trumpet blast down will go the loftiest ramparts of the cities that are 'walled up to heaven' with a rush and a crash, and through the dust and over the ruined rubbish Christ's soldiers will march and take possession. So trust in your Leader, and be sure of the victory, and have patience and keep on at your work.

Do not make Joshua's mistake. 'Art Thou for us?'—'Nay! Thou art for *me*.' That is a very different thing. We have the right to be sure that God is on our side, when we have made sure that we are on God's. So take care of self-will and self-regard, and human passions, and all the other parasitical insects that creep round philanthropic religious work, lest they spoil your service. There is a great deal that calls itself after Jehu's fashion, 'My zeal for the Lord,' which is nothing better than zeal for my own notions and their preponderance. Therefore we must strip ourselves of all that, and not fancy that the cause is ours, and then graciously admit Christ to help us, but recognise that it is *His*, and lowly submit ourselves to His direction, and what we do, do, and when we fight, fight, in His name and for His sake.

III. Here is the Ally in all our warfare with ourselves.

That is the worst fight. Far worse than all these Hittites and Hivites, and the other tribes with their barbarous names, far worse than all external foes, are the foes that each man carries about in his own heart. In that slow hand-to-hand and foot-to-foot struggle I do not believe that there is any conquering power available for a man that can for a moment be compared with the power that comes through submission to Christ's command and acceptance of Christ's help. He has fought every foot of the ground before us. We have to 'run the race'—to take another metaphor—'that is set before us, looking unto Jesus,' the great Leader, and in His own self the Perfecter of the faith which conquers. In Him, His example, the actual communication of His divine Spirit, and in the motives for brave and persistent conflict which flow from His Cross and Passion, we shall find that which alone will make us the victors in this internecine warfare. There can be no better directory given to any man than to tread in Christ's footsteps, and learn how to fight, from Him who in the wilderness repelled the triple assault with the single 'It is written'; thus recognising the word and will of God as the only directory and defence.

Thus, brethren, if we humbly take service in His ranks, and ask Him to show us where our foes within are, and to give us the grace to grapple with them, and cast them out, anything

is possible rather than ultimate defeat, and however long and sore the struggle may be, its length and its severity are precious parts of the discipline that makes us strong, and we shall at last be more than conquerors through Him that loveth us.

IV. Lastly, I see here the Power which it is madness to resist.

Think of this vision. Think of the deep truths, partially shadowed and symbolised by it. Think of Christ, what He is, and what resources He has at His back, of what are His claims for our service, and our loyal, militant obedience. Think of the certain victory of all who follow Him amongst 'the armies of Heaven, clad in fine linen, clean and white.' Think of the crown and the throne for him that 'overcomes.'

Remember the destructive powers that sleep in Him: the 'drawn sword in His hand,' the 'two-edged sword out of His mouth' the 'wrath of the Lamb.' Think of the ultimate certain defeat of all antagonisms; of that last campaign when He goes forth with the 'name written on His vesture and on His thigh "King of kings and Lord of lords."' Think of how He 'strikes through kings in the day of His wrath, and fills the place with the bodies of the dead'; and how His 'enemies become His footstool.'

Ponder His own solemn word, 'He that is not with Me, is against Me.' There is no neutrality in this warfare. Either we are for Him or we are for His adversary. 'Under which King? speak or die!' As sensible men, not indifferent to your highest and lasting well-being, ask yourselves, 'Can I, with my ten thousand, meet Him with His twenty thousand?' Put yourselves under His orders, and He will be on your side. He will teach your hands to war, and your fingers to fight; will cover your heads in the day of battle, and bring you at last, palm-bearing and laurel-crowned, to that blissful state where there will still be service, and He still be the 'Captain of the Lord's host,' but where 'swords will be beaten into ploughshares' and the victors shall need to 'learn war no more.'

## THE SIEGE OF JERICHO

‘And Joshua had commanded the people, saying, Ye shall not shout, nor make any noise with your voice, . . . until the day I bid you shout; then shall ye shout. 11. So the ark of the Lord compassed the city, going about it once: and they came into the camp, and lodged in the camp.’—[JOSHUA vi. 10, 11](#).

The cheerful uniform obedience of Israel to Joshua stands in very remarkable contrast with their perpetual murmurings and rebellions under Moses. Many reasons probably concurred in bringing about this change of tone. For one thing the long period of suspense was over; and to average sense-bound people there is no greater trial of faith and submission than waiting, inactive, for something that is to come. Now they are face to face with their enemies, and it is a great deal easier to fight than to expect; and their courage mounts higher as dangers come nearer. Then there were great miracles which left their impression upon the people, such as the passage of the Jordan, and so on.

So that the Epistle to the Hebrews is right when it says, ‘By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were compassed about seven days.’ And that faith was as manifest in the six days’ march round the city, as on the seventh day of victorious entrance. For, if you will read the narrative carefully, you will see that it says that the Israelites were not told what was to be the end of that apparently useless and aimless promenade. It was only on the morning of the day of the miracle that it was announced. So there are two stages in this instance of faith. There is the protracted trial of it, in doing an apparently useless thing; and there is the victory, which explains and vindicates it. Let us look at these two points now.

### I. Consider that strange protracted trial of faith.

The command comes to the people, through Joshua’s lips, unaccompanied by any explanation or reasons. If Moses had called for a like obedience from the people in their wilderness mood, there would have been no end of grumbling. But whatever some of them may have thought, there is nothing recorded now but prompt submission. Notice, too, the order of the procession. First come the armed men, then seven white-robed priests, blowing, probably, discordant music upon their ram’s horn trumpets; then the Ark, the symbol and token of God’s presence; and then the rereward. So the *Ark* is the centre; and it is not only Israel that is marching round the city, but rather it is God who is circling the walls. Very impressive would be the grim silence of it all. Tramp, tramp, tramp, round and round, six days on end, without a word spoken (though no doubt taunts in plenty were being showered down from the walls), they marched, and went back to the camp, and subsided into inactivity for another four-and-twenty hours, until they ‘turned out’ for the procession once more.

Now, what did all that mean? The blast of the trumpet was, in the Jewish feasts, the solemn proclamation of the presence of God. And hence the purpose of that singular march circumambulating Jericho was to declare ‘Here is the Lord of the whole earth, weaving His invisible cordon and network around the doomed city.’ In fact the meaning of the procession,

emphasised by the silence of the soldiers, was that God Himself was saying, in the long-drawn blasts of the priestly trumpet, 'Lift up your heads, O ye gates! even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in.' Now, whatever Jericho and its people thought about that, Israel, according to the commentary of the New Testament, had to some extent, at all events, learnt the lesson, and knew, of course very rudimentarily and with a great deal of mere human passion mingled with it, but still knew, that this was God's summons, and the manifestation of God's presence. And so round the city they went, and day by day they did the thing in which their faith apprehended its true meaning, and which, by reason of their faith, they were willing to do. Let us take some lessons from that.

Here is a confidence in the divine presence, manifested by unquestioning obedience to a divine command.

'Theirs not to make reply,  
Theirs not to reason why.'

Joshua had spoken; God had spoken through him. And so here goes! up with the Ark and the trumpets, and out on to the hot sand for the march! It would have been a great deal easier to have stopped in the tents. It was disheartening work marching round thus. The sceptical spirit in the host—the folk of whom there are many great-grandchildren living to-day, who always have objections to urge when disagreeable duties are crammed up against their faces—would have enough to say on that occasion, but the bulk of the people were true, and obeyed. Now, we do not need to put out the eyes of our understanding in order to practise the obedience of faith. And we have to exercise common-sense about the things that seem to us to be duties.

But this is plain, that if once we see a thing to be, in Christian language, the will of our Father in heaven, then everything is settled; and there is only one course for us, and that is, unquestioning submission, active submission, or, what is as hard, passive submission.

Then here again is faith manifesting itself by an obedience which was altogether ignorant of what was coming. I think that is quite plain in the story, if you will read it carefully, though I think that it is not quite what people generally understand as its meaning. But it makes the incident more in accordance with God's uniform way of dealing with us that the host should be told on the morning of the first day of the week that they were to march round the city, and told the same on the second day, and on the third the same, and so on until the sixth; and that not until the morning of the seventh, were they told what was to be the end of it all. That is the way in which God generally deals with us. In the passage of the Jordan, too, you will find, if you will look at the narrative carefully, that although Joshua was told what was coming, the people were not told till the morning of the day, when the priests' feet were dipped in the brink of the water. We, too, have to do our day's march,

knowing very little about tomorrow; and we have to carry on all through life 'doing the duty that lies nearest us,' entirely ignorant of the strange issues to which it may conduct. Life is like a voyage down some winding stream, shut in by hills, sometimes sunny and vine-clad, like the Rhine, sometimes grim and black, like an American canon. As the traveller looks ahead he wonders how the stream will find a passage beyond the next bend; and as he looks back, he cannot trace the course by which he has come. It is only when he rounds the last shoulder that he sees a narrow opening flashing in the sunshine, and making a way for his keel. So, seeing that we know nothing about the issues, let us make sure of the motives; and seeing that we do not know what to-morrow may bring forth, nor even what the next moment may bring, let us see that we fill the present instant as full as it will hold with active obedience to God, based upon simple faith in Him. He does not open His whole hand at once; He opens a finger at a time, as you do sometimes with your children when you are trying to coax them to take something out of the palm. He gives us enough light for the moment, He says, 'March round Jericho; and be sure that I mean something. What I do mean I will tell you some day.' And so we have to put all into His hands.

Then here, again, is faith manifesting itself by persistency. A week was not long, but it was a long while during which to do that one apparently useless thing and nothing else. It would take about an hour or so to march round the city, and there were twenty-three hours of idleness. Little progress in reducing Jericho was made by the progress round it, and it must have got rather wearisome about the sixth day. Familiarity would breed monotony, but notwithstanding the deadly influences of habit, the obedient host turned out for their daily round. 'Let us not be weary in well-doing,' for there is a time for everything. There is a time for sowing and for reaping, and in the season of the reaping 'we shall reap, if we faint not.' Dear brethren! we all get weary of our work. Custom presses upon us, 'with a weight heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.' It is easy to do things with a spurt, but it is the keeping on at the monotonous, trivial, and sometimes unintelligible duties that is the test of a man's grit, and of his goodness too. So, although it is a very, very threadbare lesson—one that you may think it was not worth while for me to bring you all here to receive—I am sure that there are few things needed more by us all, and especially by those of us who are on the wrong side of middle life, as people call it—though I think it is the right side in many respects—than that old familiar lesson. Keep on as you have begun, and for the six weary days turn out, however hot the sun, however comfortable the carpets in the tent, however burning the sand, however wearisome and flat it may seem to be perpetually tramping round the same walls of the same old city; keep on, for in due season the trumpet will sound and the walls will fall.

II. So that brings me to the second stage—viz., the sudden victory which vindicates and explains the protracted trial of faith.



I do not need to tell the story of how, on the seventh day, the host encompassed the city seven times, and at last they were allowed to break the long silence with a shout. You will observe the prominence given to the sacred seven, both in the number of days, of circuits made, and the number of the priests' trumpets. Probably the last day was a Sabbath, for there must have been one somewhere in the week, and it is improbable that it was one of the undistinguished days. That was a shout, we may be sure, by which the week's silence was avenged, and all the repressed emotions gained utterance at last. The fierce yell from many throats, which startled the wild creatures in the hills behind Jericho, blended discordantly with the trumpets' clang which proclaimed a present God; and at His summons the fortifications toppled into hideous ruin, and over the fallen stones the men of Israel clambered, each soldier, in all that terrible circle of avengers that surrounded the doomed city, marching straight forward, and so all converging on the centre.

Now, we can discover good reasons for this first incident in the campaign being marked by miracle. The fact that it was the first is a reason. It is a law of God's progressive revelation that each new epoch is inaugurated by miraculous works which do not continue throughout its course. For instance, it is observable that, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the first example of each class of incidents recorded there, such as the first preaching, the first persecution, the first martyrdom, the first expansion of the Gospel beyond Jews, its first entrance into Europe, has usually the stamp of miracle impressed on it, and is narrated at great length, while subsequent events of the same class have neither of those marks of distinction. Take, for example, the account of Stephen, the first martyr. He saw 'the heavens opened' and the Son of Man 'standing at the right hand of God.' We do not read that the heavens opened when Herod struck off the head of James with the sword. But was Jesus any the less near to help His servant? Certainly not.

In like manner it was fitting that the first time that Israel crossed swords with these deadly and dreaded enemies should be marked by a miraculous intervention to hearten God's warriors. But let us take care that we understand the teaching of any miracle. Surely it does not secularise and degrade the other incidents of a similar sort in which no miracle was experienced. The very opposite lesson is the true one to draw from a miracle. In its form it is extraordinary, and presents God's direct action on men or on nature, so obviously that all eyes can see it. But the conclusion to be drawn is not that God acts only in a supernatural manner, but that He is acting as really, though in a less obvious fashion, in the 'natural' order. In these turning-points, the inauguration of new stages in revelation or history, the cause which always produces all nearer effects and the ultimate effects, which are usually separated or united (as one may choose to regard it) by many intervening links, are brought together. But the originating power works as truly when it is transmitted through these many links as when it dispenses with them. Miracle shows us in abbreviated fashion, and therefore conspicuously, the divine will acting directly, that we may see it working when it acts indir-

ectly. In miracle God makes bare His arm,' that we may be sure of its operation when it is draped and partially hid, as by a vesture, by second causes.

We are not to argue that, because there is no miracle, God is not present or active. He was as truly with Israel when there was no Ark present, and no blast of the trumpet heard. He was as truly with Israel when they fought apparently unhelped, as He was when Jericho fell. The teaching of all the miracles in the Old and the New Testaments is that the order of the universe is maintained by the continual action of the will of God on men and things. So this story is a transient revelation of an eternal fact. God is as much with you and me in our fights as He was with the Israelites when they marched round Jericho, and as certainly will He help. If by faith we endure the days of often blind obedience, we shall share the rapture of the sudden victory.

Now, I have said that the last day of this incident was probably a Sabbath day. Does not that suggest the thought that we may take this story as a prophetic symbol? There is for us a week of work, and a seventh day of victory, when we shall enter, not into the city of confusion which has come to nought, but into the city which 'hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God.' The old fathers of the Christian Church were not far wrong, when they saw in this story a type of the final coming of the Lord. Did you ever notice how St. Paul, in writing to the Thessalonians about that coming, seems to have his mind turned back to the incident before us? Remember that in this incident the two things which signalled the fall of the city were the trumpet and the shout. What does Paul say? 'The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a *shout*, with the voice of the archangel, and with the *trump* of God.' Jericho over again! And then, 'Babylon is fallen, is fallen!' 'And I saw the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, like a bride adorned for her husband.'

## RAHAB

‘And Joanna paved Rahab the harlot alive. . . and she dwelleth in Israel even unto this day.’—[JOSHUA vi. 25](#).

This story comes in like an oasis in these terrible narratives of Canaanite extermination. There is much about it that is beautiful and striking, but the main thing is that it teaches the universality of God’s mercy, and the great truth that trust in Him unites to Him and brings deliverance, how black soever may have been the previous life.

I need not tell over again the story, told with such inimitable picturesqueness here: how the two spies, swimming the Jordan in flood, set out on their dangerous mission and found themselves in the house of Rahab, a harlot; how the king sent to capture them, how she hid them among the flax-stalks bleaching on the flat roof, confessed faith in Israel’s God and lied steadfastly to save them, how they escaped to the Quarantania hills, how she ‘perished not’ in the capture, entered into the community of Israel, was married, and took her place—hers!—in the line of David’s and Christ’s ancestresses.

The point of interest is her being, notwithstanding her previous position and history, one of the few instances in which heathen were brought into Israel. The *Epistle to the Hebrews* and *James* both refer to her. We now consider her story as embodying for us some important truths about faith in its nature, its origin, its power.

### I. Faith in its constant essence and its varying objects.

Her creed was very short and simple. She abjured idols, and believed that Jehovah was the one God. She knew nothing of even the Mosaic revelation, nothing of its moral law or of its sacrifices. And yet the *Epistle to the Hebrews* has no scruple in ascribing faith to her. The object of that Epistle is to show that Christianity is Judaism perfected. It labours to establish that objectively there has been advance, not contradiction, and that subjectively there is absolute identity. It has always been faith that has bound men to God. That faith may co-exist with very different degrees of illumination. Not the creed, but the trust, is the all-important matter. This applies to all pre-Christian times and to all heathen lands. *Our* faith has a fuller gospel to lay hold of. Do not neglect it.

Beware lest people with less light and more love get in before you, ‘who shall come from the east and the west.’

### II. Faith in its origin in fear.

There are many roads to faith, and it matters little which we take, so long as we get to the goal. This is one, and some people seem to think that it is a very low and unworthy one, and one which we should never urge upon men. But there are a side of the divine nature and a mode of the divine government which properly evoke fear.

God’s moral government, His justice and retribution, are facts.

Fear is an inevitable and natural consequence of feeling that His justice is antagonistic to us. The work of conscience is precisely to create such fear. Not to feel it is to fall below manhood or to be hardened by sin.

That fear is meant to lead us to God and love. Rahab fled to God. Peter 'girt his fisher's coat to him,' and lost his fear in the sunshine of Christ's face, as a rainbow trembles out of a thunder-cloud when touched by sunbeams.

We have all grounds enough to *fear*.

Urge these as a reason for *trust*.

III. Faith in its relation to the previous life.

It is a strange instance of blindness that attempts have been made to soften down the Bible's plain speaking about Rahab's character.

In her story we have an anticipation of New Testament teaching.

The 'woman that was a sinner.'

Mary Magdalene.

'Then drew near all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him.'

She shows us that there is no hopeless guilt. None is so in regard to the effects of sin on a soul. There is no heart so indurated as that its capacity for being stirred by the divine message is killed.

There is none hopeless in regard to God.

His love embraces all, however bad. The bond which unites to Him is not blamelessness of life but simple trust.

The grossest vice is not so thorough a barrier as self-satisfied self-righteousness.

A thin slice of crystal will bar the entrance of air more effectually than many folds of stuff.

IV. Faith in its practical effects.

Rahab's story shows how living faith, like a living stream, will cut a channel for itself, and must needs flow out into the life.

Hence James is right in using her as an example of how 'we are justified by works and not by faith only,' and the author of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* is equally right in enrolling her in his great muster-roll of heroes and heroines of faith, and asserting that 'by faith' she 'perished not among them who believed not.' The one writer fastens on a later stage in her experience than does the other. James points to the rich fruit, the *Epistle to the Hebrews* goes deeper and lays bare the root from which the life rose to the clusters.

The faith that saves is not a barren intellectual process, nor an idle trust in Christ's salvation, but a practical power. If genuine it *will* mould and impel the life.

So Rahab's faith led her, as ours, if real, will lead us, to break with old habits and associations contrary to itself. She ceased to be 'Rahab the harlot,' she forsook 'her own people and her father's house.' But her conquest of her old self was gradual. A lie was a strange

kind of first-fruits of faith. Its true fruit takes time to flower and swell and come to ripeness and sweetness.

So we should not expect old heads on young shoulders, nor wonder if people, lifted from the dunghills of the world, have some stench and rags of their old vices hanging about them still. That thought should moderate our expectations of the characters of converts from heathenism, or from the degraded classes at home. And it should be present to ourselves, when we find in ourselves sad recurrences of faults and sins that we know should have been cast out, and that we hoped had been so.

This thought enhances our wondering gratitude for the divine long-suffering which bears with our slow progress. Our great Teacher never loses patience with His dull scholars.

V. Faith as the means of deliverance and safety.

From external evils it delivers us or not, as God may will. James was no less dear, and no less faithful, than John, though he was early 'slain with the sword,' and his brother died in extreme old age in Ephesus. Paul looked forward to being 'delivered from every evil work,' though he knew that the time of his being 'offered' was at hand, because the deliverance that he looked for was his being 'saved *into* His heavenly kingdom.'

That true deliverance is infallibly ours, if by faith we have made the Deliverer ours.

There is a more terrible fall of a worse city than Jericho, in that day when 'the city of the terrible ones shall be laid low,' and *our* Joshua brings it 'to the ground, even to the dust.' 'In that same day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah: we have a strong city, salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks,' and into that eternal home He will certainly lead all who are joined to Him, and separated from their foul old selves, and from 'the city of destruction,' by faith in Him.

### ACHAN'S SIN, ISRAEL'S DEFEAT

'But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the Lord was kindled against the children of Israel. 2. And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Beth-aven, on the east side of Beth-ei, and spake unto them, saying, Go up and view the country. And the men went up and viewed Ai. 3. And they returned to Joshua, and said unto him, Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; and make not all the people to labour thither; for they are but few. 4. So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men: and they fled before the men of Ai. 5. And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men: for they chased them from before the Irate even unto Shebarim, and smote them in the going down; wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water. 6. And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads. 7. And Joshua said, Alas, O Lord God, wherefore hast Thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan! 8. O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies! 9. For the Canaanites, and all the inhabitants of the land shall hear of it, and shall environ us round, and cut off our name from the earth: and what wilt Thou do unto Thy great name? 10. And the Lord said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? 11. Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff. 12. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed; neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you.'—**JOSHUA vii. 1-12.**

This passage naturally parts itself into—1. The hidden sin (**v. 1**); 2. The repulse by which it is punished (**vs. 2-5**); 3. The prayer of remonstrance (**vs. 6-9**); and 4. The answer revealing the cause (**vs. 10-12**). We may briefly note the salient points in these four divisions, and then consider the general lessons of the whole.

I. Observe, then, that the sin is laid at the doors of the whole nation, while yet it was the secret act of one man. That is a strange 'for' in verse 1—the people did it; 'for' Achan did it. Observe, too, with what bitter particularity his descent is counted back through three generations, as if to diffuse the shame and guilt over a wide area, and to blacken the ancestors of the culprit. Note also the description of the sin. Its details are not given, but its inmost nature is. The specification of the 'Babylonish garment,' the 'shekels of silver,' and the 'wedge of gold,' is reserved for the sinner's own confession; but the blackness of the deed is set forth in its principle in **verse 1**. It was a 'breach of trust,' for so the phrase 'committed a trespass'

might be rendered. The expression is frequent in the Pentateuch to describe Israel's treacherous departure from God, and has this full meaning here. The sphere in which Achan's treason was evidenced was 'in the devoted thing.' The spoil of Jericho was set aside for Jehovah, and to appropriate any part of it was sacrilege. His sin, then, was double, being at once covetousness and robbing God. Achan, at the beginning of Israel's warfare for Canaan, and Ananias, at the beginning of the Church's conquest of the world, are brothers alike in guilt and in doom. Note the wide sweep of 'the anger of the Lord,' involving in its range not only the one transgressor, but the whole people.

II. All unconscious of the sin, and flushed with victory, Joshua let no grass grow under his feet, but was prepared to push his advantage to the utmost with soldierly promptitude. The commander's faith and courage were contagious, and the spies came back from their perilous reconnaissance of Ai with the advice that a small detachment was enough for its reduction. They had not spied the mound in the middle of Achan's tent, or their note would have been changed. Three thousand, or three hundred, would have been enough, if God had been with them. The whole army would not have been enough since He was not. The site of Ai seems to have been satisfactorily identified on a small plateau among the intricate network of wild wadys and bare hills that rise behind Jericho. The valley to the north, the place where the ambush lay at the successful assault, and a great mound, still bearing the name 'Et Tel' (the heap), are all there. The attacking force does not seem to have been commanded by Joshua. The ark stayed at Gilgal, The contempt for the resistance likely to be met makes the panic which ensued the more remarkable. What turned the hearts of the confident assailants to water? There was no serious fighting, or the slaughter would have been more than thirty-six. 'There went up . . . about three thousand and they'—did what? fought and conquered? Alas, no, but 'they fled before the men of Ai,' rushing in wild terror down the steep pass which they had so confidently breasted in the morning, till the pursuers caught them up at some 'quarries,' where, perhaps, the ground was difficult, and there slew the few who fell, while the remainder got away by swiftness of foot, and brought back their terror and their shame to the camp. As the disordered fugitives poured in, they infected the whole with their panic. Such unwieldy undisciplined hosts are peculiarly liable to such contagious terror, and we find many instances in Scripture and elsewhere of the utter disorganisation which ensues. The whole conquest hung in the balance. A little more and the army would be a mob; and the mob would break into twos and threes, which would get short shrift from the Amorites.

III. Mark, then, Joshua's action in the crisis. He does not try to encourage the people, but turns from them to God. The spectacle of the leader and the elders prone before the ark, with rent garments and dust-bestrewn hair, in sign of mourning, would not be likely to hearten the alarmed people; but the defeat had clearly shown that something had disturbed the relation to God, and the first necessity was to know what it was. Joshua's prayer is per-

plexed, and not free from a wistful, backward look, nor from regard to his own reputation; but the soul of it is an earnest desire to know the 'wherefore' of this disaster. It traces the defeat to God, and means really, 'Show me wherefore Thou contendest with me.' No doubt it runs perilously near to repeating the old complaints at Kadesh and elsewhere, which are almost verbally reproduced in its first words. But the same things said by different people are not the same; and Joshua's question is the voice of a faith struggling to find footing, and his backward look is not because he doubts God's power to help, or hankers after Egypt, but because he sees that, for some unknown reason, they have lost the divine protection. His reference to himself betrays the crushing weight of responsibility which he felt, and comes not from carefulness for his own good fame so much as from his dread of being unable to vindicate himself, if the people should turn on him as the author of their misfortunes. His fear of the news of the check at Ai emboldening not only the neighbouring Amorites (highlanders) of the western Palestine, but the remoter Canaanites (lowlanders) of the coast, to make a combined attack, and sweep Israel out of existence, was a perfectly reasonable forecast of what would follow. The naive simplicity of the appeal to God, 'What wilt Thou do for Thy great name?' becomes the soldier, whose words went the shortest way to their aim, as his spear did. We cannot fancy this prayer coming from Moses; but, for all that, it has the ring of faith in it, and beneath its blunt, simple words throbs a true heart.

IV. The answer sounds strange at first. God almost rebukes him for praying. He gives Joshua back his own 'wherefore' in the question that sounds so harsh, 'Wherefore art thou thus fallen upon thy face?' but the harshness is only apparent, and serves to point the lesson that follows, that the cause of the disaster is with Israel, not with God, and that therefore the remedy is not in prayer, but in active steps to cast out 'the unclean thing.' The prayer had asked two things,—the disclosure of the cause of God's having left them, and His return. The answer lays bare the cause, and therein shows the conditions of His return. Note the indignant accumulation of verbs in [verse 11](#), describing the sin in all its aspects. The first three of the six point out its heinousness in reference to God, as sin, as a breach of covenant, and as an appropriation of what was specially His. The second three describe it in terms of ordinary morality, as theft, lying, and concealment; so many black sides has one sin when God's eye scrutinises it. Note, too, the attribution of the sin to the whole people, the emphatic reduplication of the shameful picture of their defeat, the singular transference to them of the properties of 'the devoted thing' which Achan has taken, and the plain, stringent conditions of God's return. Joshua's prayer is answered. He knows now why little Ai has beaten them back. He asked, 'What shall I say?' He has got something of grave import to say. So far this passage carries us, leaving the pitiful last hour of the wretched troubler of Israel untouched. What lessons are taught here?

First, God's soldiers must be pure. The conditions of God's help are the same to-day as when that panic-stricken crowd ignominiously fled down the rocky pass, foiled before an



insignificant fortress, because sin clave to them, and God was gone from them. The age of miracles may have ceased, but the law of the divine intervention which governed the miracles has not ceased. It is true to-day, and will always be true, that the victories of the Church are won by its holiness far more than by any gifts or powers of mind, culture, wealth, eloquence, or the like. Its conquests are the conquests of an indwelling God, and He cannot share His temples with idols. When God is with us, Jericho is not too strong to be captured; when He is driven from us by our own sin, Ai is not too weak to defeat us. A shattered wall keeps us out, if we fight in our own strength. Fortifications that reach to heaven fall flat before us when God is at our side. If Christian effort seems ever fruitless, the first thing to do is to look for the 'Babylonish garment' and the glittering shekels hidden in our tents. Nine times out of ten we shall find the cause in our own spiritual deficiencies. Our success depends on God's presence, and God's presence depends on our keeping His dwelling-place holy. When the Church is 'fair as the moon,' reflecting in silvery whiteness the ardours of the sun which gives her all her light, and without such spots as dim the moon's brightness, she will be 'terrible as an army with banners.' This page of Old Testament history has a living application to the many efforts and few victories of the churches of to-day, which seem scarce able to hold their own amid the natural increase of population in so-called Christian lands, and are so often apparently repulsed when they go up to attack the outlying heathenism.

'His strength was as the strength of ten,  
Because his heart was pure,'

is true of the Christian soldier.

Again, we learn the power of one man to infect a whole community and to inflict disaster on it. One sick sheep taints a flock. The effects of the individual's sin are not confined to the doer. We have got a fine new modern word to express this solemn law, and we talk now of 'solidarity,' which sounds very learned and 'advanced.' But it means just what we see in this story; Achan was the sinner, all Israel suffered. We are knit together by a mystical but real bond, so that 'no man,' be he good or bad, 'liveth to himself,' and no man's sin terminates in himself. We see the working of that unity in families, communities, churches, nations. Men are not merely aggregated together like a pile of cannon balls, but are knit together like the myriad lives in a coral rock. Put a drop of poison anywhere, and it runs by a thousand branching veins through the mass, and tints and taints it all. No man can tell how far the blight of his secret sins may reach, nor how wide the blessing of his modest goodness may extend. We should seek to cultivate the sense of being members of a great whole, and to ponder our individual responsibility for the moral and religious health of the church, the city, the nation. We are not without danger from an exaggerated individualism, and we need

to realise more constantly and strongly that we are but threads in a great network, endowed with mysterious vitality and power of transmitting electric impulses, both of good and evil.

Again, we have one more illustration in this story of the well-worn lesson,—never too threadbare to be repeated, until it is habitually realised,—that God's eye sees the hidden sins. Nobody saw Achan carry the spoil to his tent, or dig the hole to hide it. His friends walked across the floor without suspicion of what was beneath. No doubt, he held his place in his tribe as an honourable man, and his conscience traced no connection between that recently disturbed patch on the floor and the helter-skelter flight from Ai; but when the lot began to be cast, he would have his own thought, and when the tribe of Judah was taken, some creeping fear would begin to coil round his heart, which tightened its folds, and hissed more loudly, as each step in the lot brought discovery nearer home; and when, at last, his own name fell from the vase, how terribly the thought would glare in on him,—‘And God knew it all the while, and I fancied I had covered it all up so safely.’ It is an awful thing to hear the bloodhounds following up the scent which leads them straight to our lurking-place. God's judgments may be long in being put on our tracks, but, once loose, they are sure of scent, and cannot be baffled. It is an old, old thought, ‘Thou God seest me’; but kept well in mind, it would save from many a sin, and make sunshine in many a shady place.

Again, we have in Achan a lesson which the professing Christians of great commercial nations, like England, sorely need. I have already pointed out the singular parallel between him and Ananias and Sapphira. Covetousness was the sin of all three. It is the sin of the Church to-day. The whole atmosphere in which some of us live is charged with the subtle poison of it. Men are estimated by their wealth. The great aim of life is to get money, or to keep it, or to gain influence and notoriety by spending it. Did anybody ever hear of church discipline being exercised on men who committed Achan's sin? *He* was stoned to death, but we set *our* Achans in high places in the Church. Perhaps if we went and fell on our faces before the ark when we are beaten, we should be directed to some tent where a very ‘influential member’ of Israel lived, and should find that to put an end to his ecclesiastical life had a wonderful effect in bringing back courage to the army, and leading to more unmingled dependence on God. Covetousness was stoned to death in Israel, and struck with sudden destruction in the Apostolic Church. It has been reserved for the modern Church to tolerate and almost to canonise it; and yet we wonder how it comes that we are so often foiled before some little Ai, and so seldom see any walls falling by our assault. Let us listen to that stern sentence, ‘I will not be with you any more, except ye destroy the devoted thing from among you.’

## THE SUN STAYED

‘Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon.’—[JOSHUA x. 12](#).

‘The last time,’ what a sad sound that has! In all minds there is a shrinking from the last time of doing even some common act. The walk down a street that we have passed every day for twenty years, and never cared in the least about, and the very doorsteps and the children in the streets, have an interest for us, as pensively we leave the commonplace familiar scene.

On this last Sunday of another year, there comes a tone of sober meditation over us, as we think that it *is* the last. I would fain let the hour preach. I have little to say but to give voice to its lessons.

My text is only taken as a starting-point, and I shall say nothing about Joshua and his prayer. I do not discuss whether this was a miracle or not. It seems, at any rate, to be taken by the writer of the story as one. What a picture he draws of the fugitives rushing down the rocky pass, blind in their fear, behind them the flushed and eager conqueror, the burst of the sudden tempest and far in the west the crescent moon, the leader on the hilltop with his prayer for but one hour or two more of daylight to finish the wild work so well begun! And, says the story, his wish was granted, and no day has been ‘like it before or since, in which the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man.’ Once, and only once, did time seem to stand still; from the beginning till now it has been going steadily on, and even then it only seemed to stand. That day seemed longer, but life was passing all the same.

And so the first thought forced upon us here by our narrative and by the season is the old one, so commonplace and yet so solemn.

I. Life inexorably slides away from us.

Once, and only once, it seemed to pause. How often since has Joshua’s prayer been prayed again! By the fearful,—the wretch to be hanged at eight o’clock to-morrow morning, the man whom the next train will part from all he loves. By the hopeful,—the child wearying for the holidays, the bridegroom,

‘Gallop apace, ye fiery-footed steeds!’

By the suffering,—

‘Would God it were evening!’

By the martyr amid the flames,

‘Come quickly, Lord Jesus!’

But all in vain. We cannot expand the moments to hours, nor compress the hours to moments. Leaden or winged, the hours are hours. The cold-blooded pendulum ticks on, equable and unaltered, and after sixty minutes, no sooner and no later, the hour strikes. 'There is a time for every purpose.'

How solemn is the thought of that constant process! It goes on for ever, like the sea fog creeping up from the wide ocean and burying life and sunshine in its fatal folds, or like the ever-flowing river, or like the fall plunging over the edge of the cliff, or like the motions of the midnight sky. Each moment in its turn passes into the colourless stony past, and the shadow creeps up the hillside.

And how unnoticed it is! We only know motion by the jolts. The revolution of the earth and its rush along its orbit are unfelt by us. We are constantly startled to feel how long ago such and such a thing took place. The mother sees her little girl at her knee, and in a few days, as it seems, finds her a woman. How immense is our life in the prospect, how awfully it collapses in the retrospect! Only by seeing constellation after constellation set, do we know that the heavens are in motion. We have need of an effort of serious reflection to realise that it is of *us* and of *our* lives that all these old commonplaces are true.

That constant, unnoticed progress has an end. Our life is a definite period, having a bounded past behind it, a present, and a bounded future before it. We have a sandglass and it runs out. We are like men sliding down a rope or hauling a boat towards a fixed point. The sea is washing away our sandy island, and is creeping nearer and nearer to where we stand, and will wash over us soon. No cries, nor prayers, nor wishes will avail. It is vain for *us* to say, 'Sun! stand thou still!'

II. Therefore our chief care should be to finish our work in our day.

Joshua had his day lengthened; we can come to the same result by crowding ours with service. What is the purpose of life? Is it a shop? or a garden? a school? No. Our 'chief end' is to become like God and a little to help forward His cause. All is intended to develop character; all life is disciplinary.

God's purpose should be our desire. That desire should mould all our thoughts and acts. There should be no mere sentimental regrets for the past, but the spirit of consecration should affect our thoughts about it. There should be penitence, thankfulness, not vain mourning over what is gone. There should be no waste or selfish use of the present. What is it given us for but to use for God?

Strenuous work is the true way to lengthen each day. Time is infinitely elastic. The noblest work is to do 'the works of Him that sent me.' There should be no care for the future. It is in His hand. There will be room in it for doing all His will.

‘Lord, it belongs not to my care,  
Whether I die or live.’

III. If so, the passing day will have results that never pass.

Joshua’s day was long enough for his work, and that work was a victory which told on future generations. So life, short as it is, will be long enough for all that we have to do and learn and be.

Christ’s servant is immortal till his work is done.

God gives every man time enough for his salvation.

What may we bring out of life? Character, Christ-likeness, thankful memories, union with God, capacity for heaven. The transient leaves the abiding. The flood foams itself away, but deposits rich soil on the plain.

IV. Thus the passing away of what must pass may become a joy.

Why should we be sad? There are reasons enough, as many sad, lonely hearts among us know too well. To some men dark thoughts of death and judgment make the crumbling away of life too gloomy a fact to be contemplated, but it may and should be calm joy to us that the weary world ends and a blessed life begins. We may count the moments and see them pass, as a bride watches the hours rolling on to her marriage morning; not, indeed, without tremor and sadness at leaving her old home, but yet with meek hope and gentle joy.

It is possible for men to see that life is but ‘as a shadow that declineth,’ and yet to be glad. By faith in Christ, united to ‘Him Who is for ever and ever,’ our souls shall ‘triumph over death and thee, O time.’

We need not cry, ‘Sun! stand still!’ but rather, ‘Come quickly, Lord Jesus!’

Then Time shall be ‘the lackey to eternity,’ and Death be the porter of heaven’s gate, and we shall pass from the land of setting suns and waning moons and change and sorrow, to that land where ‘thy sun shall no more go down,’ and ‘there shall be no more time.’

## UNWON BUT CLAIMED

‘There remaineth yet very much land to be possessed, . . . them will I drive out from before the children of Israel; only divide thou it by lot unto Israel for an inheritance’—[JOSHUA xiii. 1-8](#).

Joshua was now a very old man and had occupied seven years in the conquest. His work was over, and now he had only to take steps to secure the completion by others of the triumph which he would never see. This incident has many applications to the work of the Church in the world, but not less important ones to individual progress, and we consider these mainly now.

### I. The clear recognition of present imperfection.

That is essential in all regions, ‘Not as though’; the higher up, the more clearly we see the summit. The ideal grows loftier, as partially realised. The mountain seems comparatively low and easy till we begin to climb. We should be continually driven by a sense of our incompleteness, and drawn by the fair vision of unattained possibilities. In all regions, to be satisfied with the attained is to cease to grow.

This is eminently so in the Christian life, with its goal of absolute completeness.

How blessed this dissatisfaction is! It keeps life fresh: it is the secret of perpetual youth.

Joshua’s work was incomplete, as every man’s must be. We each have our limitations, the defects of our qualities, the barriers of our environment, the brevity of our day of toil, and we have to be content to carry the fiery cross a little way and then to give it up to other hands. There is only One who could say, ‘It is done.’ Let us see that we do our own fragment.

### II. The confident reckoning on complete possession.

Joshua’s conquest was very partial. He subdued part of the central mountain nucleus, but the low-lying stretch of country on the coast, Philistia and the maritime plain up to Tyre and Sidon and other outlying districts, remained unsubdued. Yet the whole land was now to be allotted out to the tribes. That allotment must have strengthened faith in their ultimate possession, and encouraged effort to make the ideal a reality, and to appropriate as their own in fact what was already theirs in God’s purpose. So a great part of Christian duty, and a great secret of Christian progress, is to familiarise ourselves with the hope of complete victory. We should acquire the habit of contemplating as certainly meant by God to be ours, complete conformity to Christ’s character, complete appropriation of Christ’s gifts. God bade Jeremiah buy a ‘field that was in Anathoth’ at the time an invading army held the land. A Roman paid down money for the ground on which the besiegers of Rome were encamped. It does not become Christians to be less confident of victory. But we have to take heed that our confidence is grounded on the right foundation. God’s commandment to Joshua to allot the land, even while the formidable foes enumerated in the context held it firmly, was based on the assurance ([verse 6](#)): ‘Them will I drive out before the children of Israel.’ Confidence based on self is presumption, and will end in defeat; confidence based on God will brace to

noble effort, which is all the more vigorous and will surely lead to victory, because it distrusts self.

III. The vigorous effort animated by both the preceding.

How the habit of thinking the unconquered land theirs would encourage Israel. Efforts without hope are feeble; hope without effort is fallacious.

Israel's history is significant. The land was never actually all conquered. God's promises are all conditional, and if we do not work, or if we work in any other spirit than in faith, we shall not win our allotted part in the 'inheritance of the saints in light.' It is possible to lose 'thy crown.' 'Work out your own salvation.' 'Trust in the Lord and do good, so shalt thou dwell in the land.'

### CALEB—A GREEN OLD AGE

‘And Caleb. . . said unto him (Joshua), Thou knowest the thing that the Lord said unto Moses the man of God concerning me and thee in Kadesh-barnea.’—**JOSHUA xiv. 6.**

Five and forty years had passed since the Lord had ‘said this thing.’ It was the promise to these two, now old men, of the prolongation of their lives, and to Caleb of his inheritance in the land. Seven years of fighting have been got through, and the preparations are being made for the division of the land by lot. But, before that is done, it is fitting that Caleb, whose portion had been specially secured to him by that old promise, should have the promise specially recognised and endorsed by the action of the leader, and independent of the operation of the lot. So he appears before Joshua, accompanied by the head men of his tribe, whose presence expresses their official consent to the exceptional treatment of their tribesman, and urges his request in a little speech, full of pathos and beauty and unconscious portraiture of the speaker. I take it as a picture of an ideal old age, showing in an actual instance how happy, vigorous, full of buoyant energy and undiminished appetite for enterprise a devout old age may be. And my purpose now is not merely to comment on the few words of our text, but upon the whole of what falls from the lips of Caleb here.

I. I see then here, first, a life all built upon God’s promise.

Five times in the course of his short plea with Joshua does he use the expression ‘the Lord spake.’ On the first occasion of the five he unites Joshua with himself as a recipient of the promise, ‘Thou knowest the thing that the Lord said concerning me and thee.’ But in the other four he takes it all to himself; not because it concerned him only, but because his confidence, laying hold of the promise, forgot his brother in the earnestness of his personal appropriation of it. And so, whatsoever general words God speaks to the world, a true believer will make them his very own; and when Christ says, ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish,’ faith translates it into ‘He loved me, and gave Himself for me.’ This is the first characteristic of a life built upon the promise of God, that it lays its hand upon that promise and claims it all for its very own.

Then notice, still further, how for all these forty-five years Caleb had ‘hid the word in his heart,’ had lived upon it and thought about it and believed it, and recognised the partial fulfilment of it, and cherished the secret fire unknown to any besides. And now at last, after so long an interval, he comes forward and stretches out a hand, unweakened by the long delay, to claim the perfect fulfilment at the end of his days. So ‘the vision may tarry,’ but a life based upon God’s promise has another estimate of swiftness and slowness than is current amongst men who have only the years of earthly life to reckon by; and that which to sense seems a long, weary delay, to faith seems but as ‘a watch in the night’. The world, which only measures time by its own revolutions, has to lament over what seem to the sufferers long years of pains and tears, but in the calendar of faith ‘weeping endures for a night, joy



cometh in the morning.’ The weary days dwindle into a point when they are looked at with an eye that has been accustomed to gaze on the solemn eternities of a promising and a faithful God. To it, as to Him, ‘a thousand years are as one day’; and ‘one day,’ in the possibilities of divine favour and spiritual growth which it may enfold, ‘as a thousand years.’ To the men who measure time as God measures it, His help, howsoever long it may tarry, ever comes ‘right early.’

Further, note how this life, built upon faith in the divine promise, was nourished and nurtured by instalments of fulfilment all along the road. Two promises were given to Caleb—one, that his life should be prolonged, and the other, that he should possess the territory into which he had so bravely ventured. The daily fulfilment of the one fed the fire of his faith in the ultimate accomplishment of the other, and he gratefully recounts it now, as part of his plea with Joshua—‘Now, behold, the Lord hath kept me alive as He spake, these forty and five years, even since the Lord spake this word unto Moses. And now, lo! I am this day fourscore and five years old.’

Whosoever builds his life on the promise of God has in the present the guarantee of the better future. As we are journeying onwards to that great fountain-head of all sweetness and felicity, there are ever trickling brooks from it by the way, at which we may refresh our thirsty lips and invigorate our fainting strength. The present instalment carries with it the pledge of the full discharge of the obligation, and he whose heart and hope is fixed with a forward look on the divine inheritance, may, as he looks backward over all the years, see clearly in them one unbroken mass of preserving providences, and thankfully say, ‘The Lord hath kept me alive, as He spake.’

And, still further, the life that is built upon faith like this man’s, is a life of buoyant hopefulness till the very end. The hopes of age are few and tremulous. When the feast is nearly over, and the appetite is dulled, there is little more to be done, but to push back our chairs and go away. But God keeps ‘the good wine’ until the last. And when all earthly hopes are beginning to wear thin and to burn dim, then the great hope of ‘the mountain of the inheritance’ will rise brighter and clearer upon our horizon. It is something to have a hope so far in front of us that we never get up to it, to find it either less than our expectations or more than our desires; and this is not the least of the blessednesses of the living ‘hope that maketh not ashamed,’ that it lies before us till the very end, and beckons and draws us across the gulf of darkness. ‘The Lord hath kept me alive, as He said; now give me this mountain whereof the Lord spake.’

II. Further, I see here a life that bears to be looked back at.

Caleb becomes almost garrulous in telling over the old story of that never-to-be-forgotten day, when he and Joshua stood alone and tried to put some heart into the cowardly mob before them. There is no mock modesty about the man. He says that, amidst many temptations to be untrue, he gave his report with sincerity and veracity, ‘speaking as it was

in mine heart,' and then he quotes twice, with a permissible satisfaction, the eulogium that had come upon him from the divine lips, 'I wholly followed the Lord my God.' The private soldier's cheek may well flush and his eye glitter as he repeats over again his general's praise. And for Caleb, half a century has not dimmed the impression that was made on his heart when he received that praise, through the lips of Moses, from God.

Now, of course, such a tone of speaking about one's past savours of an earlier stage in revelation than that in which we live, and, if this were to be taken as a man's total account of his whole life, we could not free it from the charge of unpleasing self-complacency and self-righteousness. But for all that, it is not the same thing in the retrospect whether you and I have to look back upon years that have been given to self, and the world, and passion, and pride, and covetousness, and frivolities and trifles of all sorts, or upon years that in the main, and regard being had to their deepest desires and governing direction, have been given to God and to His service. Many a man looking back upon his life—I wonder if there are any such men listening to me now—can only see such a sight as Abraham did on that morning when he looked down on the plain of Sodom, and 'Lo! the smoke of the land went up as the smoke of a furnace.' Dear friends I the only thing that makes life in the retrospect tolerable is that it shall have been given to God, and that we can say, 'I wholly followed the Lord my God.'

III. Again, I see here a life which has discovered the secret of perpetual youth.

'I,' says the old man—'am as strong this day as I was in the day when Moses sent me. As my strength was then, even so is my strength now, for war, both to go out and to come in.' For fighting, and for all the intercourse and manifold activities of life, his sinews are as braced, his eyes as clear, his spirit and limbs as alert as they were in those old days. No doubt you will say that was due to miraculous intervention. No doubt it was; but is it not true that, in a very real sense, a man may keep himself young all his life, if he will go the right way to work? And the secret of perpetual youthfulness lies here, in giving our hearts to God and in living for Him. Christianity, with its self-restraint and its exhortations to all, and especially to the young, to be chaste and temperate and to subdue the animal passions, has a direct tendency to conserve physical vigour; and Christianity, by the inspiration that it imparts, the stimulus that it gives, and the hopes that it permits us to cherish, has a direct tendency to keep alive in old age all the best of the characteristics of youth. Its buoyancy, its undimmed interest, its cheeriness, its freedom from anxiety and care—all these things are directly ministered to, and preserved by, a life of simple faith that casts itself upon God, and dwells securely, in joy and in restfulness, and not without a great light of hope, even when the shadows of evening are falling.

One of the greatest and most blessed of the characteristics of youth is the consciousness that the most of life lies before us; and to a Christian man, in any stage of his earthly life, that consciousness is possible. When he stands on the verge of the last sinking sandbank of

time, and the water is up to his ankles, he may well feel that the best and the most of life is yet to be.

‘The last of life, for which the first was made:  
Our times are in His hand  
Who saith, “A whole I planned.  
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid.”’

‘They shall still bring forth fruit in old age, they shall be full of sap and green.’ A gnarled old tree may be green in all its branches, and blossom and fruit may hang together there. The ideal of life is, that into each stage we shall carry the best of the preceding, harmonised with the best of the new, and that is possible to a Christian soul. The fountain of perpetual youth, of which the ancients fabled, is no fable, but a fact; and it rises, where the prophet in his vision saw the stream coming out, from beneath the threshold of the Temple door.

IV. So, lastly, I see here a beautiful example of a life which to the last is ready for danger and enterprise.

Caleb’s words as to his undiminished strength were not meant for a boast. They express thankfulness and praise, and they are put as the ground of the request that he has to make. He gives a chivalrous reason for his petition when he says, ‘Now, therefore, give me this mountain, *for* the Anakims (the giants) are there; and the cities great and fenced.’

Caleb’s readiness for one more fight was fed by his reliance on God’s help in it. When he says, ‘It may be the Lord will be with me,’ the *perhaps* is that of humility, not of doubt. The old warrior’s eye flashes, and his voice sounds strong and full, as he ends his words with ‘I *shall* drive them out, as *the Lord spake*.’ That has the true ring. What were the three Anak chiefs, with their barbarous names, Sheshai, and Ahiman, and Talmi, and their giant stature, to the onset of a warrior faith like that? Of course, ‘Caleb drove out thence the three sons of Anak,’ and Hebron became his inheritance. Nothing can stand against us, if we seek for our portion, not where advantages are greatest, but where difficulties and dangers are most rife, and cast ourselves into the conflict, sure that God is with us, though humbly wondering that we should be worthy of His all-conquering presence, and sure, therefore, that victory marches by our sides.

Old age is generally much more disposed to talk about its past victories than to fight new ones; to rest upon its arms, or upon its laurels, than to undertake fresh conflicts. Now and then we see a man, statesman or other, who, bearing the burden of threescore years and ten lightly, is still as alert of spirit, as eager for work, as bold for enterprise, as he was years before. And in nine cases out of ten such a man is a Christian; and his brilliant energy of service is due, not only, nor so much, to natural vigour of constitution as to religion, which

has preserved his vigour because it has preserved his purity, and been to him a stimulus and an inspiration.

Danger is an attraction to the generous mind. It is the coward and the selfish man who are always looking for an easy place, where somebody else will do the work. This man felt that this miraculously prolonged life of his bound him to special service, and the fact that up in Hebron there were a fenced city and tall giants behind the battlements, was an additional reason for picking out that bit of the field as the place where he ought to be. Thank God, that spirit is not dead yet! It has lived all through the Christian Church, and flamed up in times of martyrdom. On missionary fields to-day, if one man falls two are ready to step into his place. It is the true spirit of the Christian soldier. 'A great door and effectual is opened,' says Paul, 'and there are many adversaries.' He knew the door was opened because the adversaries were many. And because there were so many of them, would he run away? Some of us would have said: 'I must abandon that work, it bristles with difficulties; I cannot stop in that post, the bullets are whistling too fast.' Nay! says Paul; 'I abide till Pentecost'—a good long while— because the post is dangerous, and promises to be fruitful.

So, dear friends, if we would have lives on which we can look back, lives in which early freshness will last beyond the 'morning dew,' lives in which there shall come, day by day and moment by moment, abundant foretastes to stay our hunger until we sit at Christ's table in His kingdom, we must 'follow the Lord alway,' with no half-hearted surrender, nor partial devotion, but give ourselves to Him utterly, to be guided and sent where He will. And then, like Caleb, we shall be able to say, with a 'perhaps,' not of doubt, but of wonder, that it should be so, to us unworthy, 'It may be the Lord will be with me, and I shall drive them out.' In all these things 'we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.'

### THE CITIES OF REFUGE

‘The Lord also spake unto Joshua, saying, 2. Speak to the children of Israel, saying, Ap-  
point out for you cities of refuge, whereof I spake unto you by the hand of Moses: 3. That  
the slayer that killeth any person unawares and unwittingly may flee thither: and they shall  
be your refuge from the avenger of blood. 4. And when he that doth flee unto one of those  
cities shall stand at the entering of the gate of the city, and shall declare his cause in the ears  
of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city unto them, and give him a place,  
that he may dwell among them. 5. And if the avenger of blood pursue after him, then they  
shall not deliver the slayer up into his hand; because he smote his neighbour unwittingly,  
and hated him not beforetime. 6. And he shall dwell in that city, until he stand before the  
congregation for judgment, and until the death of the high priest that shall be in those days:  
then shall the slayer return, and come unto his own city, and unto his own house, unto the  
city from whence he fled. 7. And they appointed Kedesh in Galilee in mount Naphtali, and  
Shechem in mount Ephraim, and Kirjath-arba, which is Hebron, in the mountain of Judah.  
8. And on the other side Jordan by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer in the wilderness  
upon the plain out of the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead out of the tribe of Gad,  
and Golan in Bashan out of the tribe of Manasseh. 9. These were the cities appointed for all  
the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourneth among them, that whosoever  
killeth any person at unawares might flee thither, and not die by the hand of the avenger of  
blood, until he stood before the congregation.’—[JOSHUA xx. 1-9](#).

Our Lord has taught us that parts of the Mosaic legislation were given because of the  
‘hardness’ of the people’s hearts. The moral and religious condition of the recipients of  
revelation determines and is taken into account in the form and contents of revelation. That  
is strikingly obvious in this institution of the ‘cities of refuge.’ They have no typical meaning,  
though they may illustrate Christian truth. But their true significance is that they are instances  
of revelation permitting, and, while permitting, checking, a custom for the abolition of  
which Israel was not ready.

I. Cities of refuge were needed, because the ‘avenger of blood’ was recognised as per-  
forming an imperative duty. ‘Blood for blood’ was the law for the then stage of civilisation.  
The weaker the central authority, the more need for supplementing it with the wild justice  
of personal avenging. Neither Israel nor surrounding nations were fit for the higher com-  
mandment of the Sermon on the Mount. ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,’ corres-  
ponded to their stage of progress; and to have hurried them forward to ‘I say unto you,  
Resist not evil,’ would only have led to weakening the restraint on evil, and would have had  
no response in the hearers’ consciences. It is a commonplace that legislation which is too  
far ahead of public opinion is useless, except to make hypocrites. And the divine law was  
shaped in accordance with that truth. Therefore the *goel*, or kinsman-avenger of blood, was  
not only permitted but enjoined by Moses.

But the evils inherent in his existence were great. Blood feuds were handed down through generations, involving an ever-increasing number of innocent people, and finally leading to more murders than they prevented. But the thing could not be abolished. Therefore it was checked by this institution. The lessons taught by it are the gracious forbearance of God with the imperfections attaching to each stage of His people's moral and religious progress; the uselessness of violent changes forced on people who are not ready for them; the presence of a temporary element in the Old Testament law and ethics.

No doubt many things in the present institutions of so-called Christian nations and in the churches are destined to drop away, as the principles of Christianity become more clearly discerned and more honestly applied to social and national life. But the good shepherd does not overdrive his flock, but, like Jacob, 'leads on softly, according to the pace of the cattle that is before' him. We must be content to bring the world gradually to the Christian ideal. To abolish or to impose institutions or customs by force is useless. Revolutions made by violence never last. To fell the upas-tree maybe very heroic, but what is the use of doing it, if the soil is full of seeds of others, and the climate and conditions favourable to their growth? Change the elevation of the land, and the 'flora' will change itself. Institutions are the outcome of the whole mental and moral state of a nation, and when that changes, and not till then, do they change. The New Testament in its treatment of slavery and war shows us the Christian way of destroying evils; namely, by establishing the principles which will make them impossible. It is better to girdle the tree and leave it to die than to fell it.

II. Another striking lesson from the cities of refuge is the now well-worn truth that the same act, when done from different motives, is not the same. The kinsman-avenger took no heed of the motive of the slaying. His duty was to slay, whatever the slayer's intention had been. The asylum of the city of refuge was open for the unintentional homicide, and for him only, Deliberate murder had no escape thither. So the lesson was taught that motive is of supreme importance in determining the nature of an act. In God's sight, a deed is done when it is determined on, and it is not done, though done, when it was not meant by the doer. 'Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer,' and he that killeth his brother unawares is none. We suppose ourselves to have learned that so thoroughly that it is trivial to repeat the lesson.

What, then, of our thoughts and desires which never come to light in acts? Do we recognise our criminality in regard to these as vividly as we should? Do we regulate the hidden man of the heart accordingly? A man may break all the commandments sitting in an easy-chair and doing nothing. Von Moltke fought the Austro-Prussian war in his cabinet in Berlin, bending over maps. The soldiers on the field were but pawns in the dreadful game. So our battles are waged, and we are beaten or conquerors, on the field of our inner desires and purposes. 'Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.'

III. The elaborately careful specification of cases which gave the fugitive a right to shelter in the city is set forth at length in [Numbers xxxv. 15-24](#), and [Deuteronomy xix. 4-13](#). The broad principle is there laid down that the cities were open for one who slew a man 'unwittingly.' But the plea of not intending to slay was held to be negated, not only if intention could be otherwise shown but if the weapon used was such as would probably kill; such, for instance, as 'an instrument of iron,' or a stone, or a 'weapon of wood, whereby a man may die.' If we do what is likely to have a given result, we are responsible for that result, should it come about, even though we did not consciously seek to bring it. That is plain common sense. 'I never thought the house would catch fire' is no defence from the guilt of burning it down, if we fired a revolver into a powder barrel. Further, if the fatal blow was struck in 'hatred,' or if the slayer had lain in ambush to catch his victim, he was not allowed shelter. These careful definitions freed the cities from becoming nests of desperate criminals, as the 'sanctuaries' of the Middle Ages in Europe became. They were not harbours for the guilty, but asylums for the innocent.

IV. The procedure by which the fugitive secured protection is described at length in the passages cited, with which the briefer account here should be compared. It is not quite free from obscurity, but probably the process was as follows. Suppose the poor hunted man arrived panting at the limits of the city, perhaps with the avenger's sword within half a foot of his neck; he was safe for the time. But before he could enter the city, a preliminary inquiry was held 'at the gate' by the city elders. That could only be of a rough-and-ready kind; most frequently there would be no evidence available but the man's own word. It, however, secured *interim* protection. A fuller investigation followed, and, as would appear, was held in another place,—perhaps at the scene of the accident. 'The congregation' was the judge in this second examination, where the whole facts would be fully gone into, probably in the presence of the avenger. If the plea of non-intention was sustained, the fugitive was 'restored to his city of refuge,' and there remained safely till the death of the high-priest, when he was at liberty to return to his home, and to stay there without fear.

Attempts have been made to find a spiritual significance in this last provision of the law, and to make out a lame parallel between the death of the high-priest, which cancelled the crime of the fugitive, and the death of Christ, which takes away our sins. But—to say nothing of the fact that the fugitive was where he was just because he had done no crime—the parallel breaks down at other points. It is more probable that the death of one high-priest and the accession of another were regarded simply as closing one epoch and beginning another, just as a king's accession is often attended with an amnesty. It was natural to begin a new era with a clean sheet, as it were.

V. The selection of the cities brings out a difference between the Jewish right of asylum and the somewhat similar right in heathen and mediaeval times. The temples or churches were usually the sanctuaries in these. But not the Tabernacle or Temple, but the priestly

cities, were chosen here. Their inhabitants represented God to Israel, and as such were the fit persons to cast a shield over the fugitives; while yet their cities were less sacred than the Temple, and in them the innocent man-slayer could live for long years. The sanctity of the Temple was preserved intact, the necessary provision for possibly protracted stay was made, evils attendant on the use of the place of worship as a refuge were avoided.

Another reason—namely, accessibility swiftly from all parts of the land—dictated the choice of the cities, and also their number and locality. There were three on each side of Jordan, though the population was scantier on the east than on the west side, for the extent of country was about the same. They stood, roughly speaking, opposite each other,—Kedesh and Golan in the north, Shechem and Ramoth central, Hebron and Bezer in the south. So, wherever a fugitive was, he had no long distance between himself and safety.

We too have a 'strong city' to which we may 'continually resort.' The Israelite had right to enter only if his act had been inadvertent, but we have the right to hide ourselves in Christ just because we have sinned wilfully. The hurried, eager flight of the man who heard the tread of the avenger behind him, and dreaded every moment to be struck to the heart by his sword, may well set forth what should be the earnestness of our flight to 'lay hold on the hope set before us in the gospel.' His safety, as soon as he was within the gate, and could turn round and look calmly at the pursuer shaking his useless spear and grinding his teeth in disappointment, is but a feeble shadow of the security of those who rest in Christ's love, and are sheltered by His work for sinners. 'I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall pluck them out of My hand.'



## THE END OF THE WAR

‘And the Lord gave unto Israel all the land which He swore to give unto their fathers; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein. 44. And the Lord gave them rest round about, according to all that He swore unto their fathers: and there stood not a man of all their enemies before them; the Lord delivered all their enemies into their hand. 45. There failed not ought of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass.

‘Then Joshua called the Reubenites, and the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, 2. And said unto them, Ye have kept all that Moses, the servant of the Lord commanded you, and have obeyed my voice in all that I commanded you: 3. Ye have not left your brethren these many days unto this day, but have kept the charge of the commandment of the Lord your God. 4. And now the Lord your God hath given rest unto your brethren, as He promised them: therefore now return ye, and get you unto your tents, and unto the land of your possession, which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side Jordan. 5. But take diligent heed to do the commandment and the law, which Moses the servant of the Lord charged you, to love the Lord your God, and to walk in all His ways, and to keep His commandments, and to cleave unto Him, and to serve Him with all your heart, and with all your soul. 6. So Joshua blessed them, and sent them away: and they went unto their tents. 7. Now to the one half of the tribe of Manasseh Moses had given possession in Bashan: but unto the other half thereof gave Joshua among their brethren on this side Jordan westward. And when Joshua sent them away also unto their tents, then he blessed them, 8. And he spake unto them, saying, Return with much riches unto your tents, and with very much cattle, with silver, and with gold, and with brass, and with iron, and with very much raiment: divide the spoil of your enemies with your brethren. 9. And the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned, and departed from the children of Israel out of Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go unto the country of Gilead, to the land of their possession, whereof they were possessed, according to the word of the Lord by the hand of Moses.’—[JOSHUA xxi. 43-45; xxii. 1-9](#).

‘The old order changeth, giving place to new.’ In this passage we have the breaking up of the congregation and the disbanding of the victorious army. The seven years of fighting had come to an end. The swords were to be ‘beaten into plowshares,’ and the comrades who had marched shoulder to shoulder, and shared the fierce excitement of many a bloody field, were to be scattered, each becoming a peaceful farmer or shepherd. A picturesque historian, of the modern ‘special correspondent’ sort, would have overlaid the narrative with sentiment and description; but how quietly the writer tells it, so that we have to bethink ourselves before we apprehend that we are reading the account of an epoch-making event! He fixes attention on two things,— the complete fulfilment of God’s promises ([xxi. 43-45](#)) and the dismissal to their homes of the contingent from the trans-Jordanic tribes, whose departure was the

signal that the war was ended ([xxii. 1-8](#)). We may consider the lessons from these two separately.

I. The triumphant record of God's faithfulness ([xxi. 43-45](#)). These three verses are the trophy reared on the battlefield, like the lion of Marathon, which the Greeks set on its sacred soil. But the only name inscribed on this monument is Jehovah's. Other memorials of victories have borne the pompous titles of commanders who arrogated the glory to themselves; but the Bible knows of only one conqueror, and that is God. 'The help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself.' The military genius and heroic constancy of Joshua, the eagerness for perilous honour that flamed, undimmed by age, in Caleb, the daring and strong arms of many a humble private in the ranks, have their due recognition and reward; but when the history that tells of these comes to sum up the whole, and to put the 'philosophy' of the conquest into a sentence, it has only one name to speak as cause of Israel's victory.

That is the true point of view from which to look at the history of the world and of the church in the world. The difference between the 'miraculous' conquest of Canaan and the 'ordinary' facts of history is not that God did the one and men do the other; both are equally, though in different methods, His acts. In the field of human affairs, as in the realm of nature, God is immanent, though in the former His working is complicated by the mysterious power of man's will to set itself in antagonism to His; while yet, in manner insoluble to us, His will is supreme. The very powers which are arrayed against Him are His gift, and the issues which they finally subserve are His appointment. It does not need that we should be able to pierce to the bottom of the bottomless in order to attain and hold fast by the great conviction that 'there is no power but of God,' and that 'from Him are all things, and to Him are all things.'

Especially does this trophy on the battlefield teach a needful lesson to us in the Christian warfare. We are ever apt to think too much of our visible weapons and leaders, and to forget our unseen and ever-present Commander, from whom comes all our power. We 'burn incense to our own net, and sacrifice to our own drag,' and, like the heathen conqueror of whom Habakkuk speaks, make our swords our gods ([Hab. i. 11, 16](#)). The Church has always been prone to hero-worship, and to the idolatry of its organisation, its methods, or its theology. Augustine did so and so; Luther smote the 'whited wall' (the Pope) a blow that made him reel; the Pilgrim Fathers carried a slip of the plant of religious liberty in a tiny pot across the Atlantic, and watered it with tears till it has grown a great tree; the Wesleys revived a formal Church,—let us sing hallelujahs to these great names! By all means; but do not let us forget whence they drew their power; and let us listen to Paul's question, 'Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but servants through whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?'

And let us carve, deep-cut and indelible, in solitary conspicuousness, on the trophy that we rear on each well-fought field, the name of no man save 'Jesus only.' We read that on a

pyramid in Egypt the name and sounding titles of the king in whose reign it was erected were blazoned on the plaster facing, but beneath that transitory inscription the name of the architect was hewn, imperishable, in the granite, and stood out when the plaster dropped away. So, when all the short-lived records which ascribe the events of the Church's progress to her great men have perished, the one name of the true builder will shine out, and 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.' Let us not rely on our own skill, courage, talents, orthodoxy, or methods, nor try to 'build tabernacles' for the witnessing servants beside the central one for the supreme Lord, but ever seek to deepen our conviction that Christ, and Christ only, gives all their powers to all, and that to Him, and Him only, is all victory to be ascribed. That is an elementary and simple truth; but if we really lived in its power we should go into the battle with more confidence, and come out of it with less self-gratulation.

We may note, too, in these verses, the threefold repetition of one thought, that of God's punctual and perfect fulfilment of His word. He 'gave unto Israel all the land which He swore to give'; 'He gave them rest, . . . according to all that He swore'; 'there failed not aught of any good thing which the Lord had spoken.' It is the joy of thankful hearts to compare the promise with the reality, to lay the one upon the other, as it were, and to declare how precisely their outlines correspond. The finished building is exactly according to the plans drawn long before. God gives us the power of checking His work, and we are unworthy to receive His gifts if we do not take delight in marking and proclaiming how completely He has fulfilled His contract. It is no small part of Christian duty, and a still greater part of Christian blessedness, to do this. Many a fulfilment passes unnoticed, and many a joy, which might be sacred and sweet as a token of love from His own hand, remains common and unhallowed, because we fail to see that it is a fulfilled promise. The eye that is trained to watch for God's being as good as His word will never have long to wait for proofs that He is so. 'Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even he shall understand the loving kindness of the Lord.' And to such a one faith will become easier, being sustained by experience; and a present thus manifestly studded with indications of God's faithfulness will merge into a future still fuller of these. For it does not need that we should wait for the end of the war to have many a token that His every word is true. The struggling soldier can say, 'No good thing has failed of all that the Lord has spoken.' We look, indeed, for completer fulfilment when the fighting is done; but there are 'brooks by the way' for the warriors in the thick of the fight, of which they drink, and, refreshed, 'lift up the head.' We need not postpone this glad acknowledgment till we can look back and down from the land of peace on the completed campaign, but may rear this trophy on many a field, whilst still we look for another conflict to-morrow.

II. The disbanding of the contingent from the tribes across Jordan ([xxii. 1-8](#)). Forty thousand fighting men, of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half of Manasseh, had willingly helped in the conquest, leaving their own newly-won homes on the eastern side of Jordan,

and for seven long years taking their share in the hardships and dangers of their brethren. It was no small tax which they had thus cheerfully paid for the sake of brotherly unity. Their aid had not only been valuable as strengthening Joshua's force, but still more so as a witness of the unbroken oneness of the nation, and of the sympathy which the tribes already settled bore to the others. Politically, it was wise to associate the whole people in the whole conquest; for nothing welds a nation together like the glories of common victories and the remembrance of common dangers survived. The separation of the trans-Jordanic tribes by the rapid river, and by their pastoral life, was a possible source of weakness, and would, no doubt, have led to more complete severance, if it had not been for the uniting power of the campaign. If the forty thousand had been quietly feeding sheep on the uplands while their brethren were fighting among the stony hills of Canaan, a great gulf would have opened between them. Even as it was, the eastern tribes drifted somewhat away from the western; but the disintegration would have been still more complete if no memories of the war, when all Israel stood side by side, had lived on among them. Their share in the conquest was not only a piece of policy,—it was the natural expression of the national brotherhood. Even if Joshua had not ordered their presence, it would have been impossible for them to stop in their peacefulness and let their brethren bear the brunt of battle.

The law for us is the same as for these warriors. In the family, the city, the nation, the Church, and the world, union with others binds us to help them in their conflicts, and that especially if we are blessed with secure possessions, while they have to struggle for theirs. We are tempted to selfish lives of indulgence in our quiet peace, and sometimes think it hard that we should be expected to buckle on our armour, and leave our leisurely repose, because our brethren ask the help of our arms. If we did as Reuben and Gad did, would there be so many rich men who never stir a finger to relieve poverty, so many Christians whose religion is much more selfish than beneficent? Would so many souls be left to toil without help, to struggle without allies, to weep without comforters, to wander in the dark without a guide? All God's gifts in providence and in the Gospel are given that we may have somewhat wherewith to bless our less happy brethren. 'The service of man' is not the substitute for, but the expression of, Christianity. Are we not kept here, on this side Jordan, away for a time from our inheritance, for the very same reason that these men were separated from theirs,—that we may strike some strokes for God and our fellows in the great war? Dives, who lolls on his soft cushions, and has less pity for Lazarus than the dogs have, is Cain come to life again; and every Christian is either his brother's keeper or his murderer. Would that the Church of to-day, with infinitely deeper and sacred ties knitting it to suffering, struggling humanity, had a title of the willing relinquishment of legitimate possessions and patient participation in the long campaign for God which kept these rude soldiers faithful to their flag and forgetful of home and ease, till their general gave them their discharge!

Note the commander's parting charge. They were about to depart for a life of comparative separation from the mass of the nation. Their remoteness and their occupations drew them away from the current of the national life, and gave them a kind of quasi-independence. They would necessarily be less directly under Joshua's control than the other tribes were. He sends them away with one commandment, the Imperative stringency of which is expressed by the accumulation of expressions in [verse 5](#). They are to give diligent heed to the law of Moses. Their obedience is to be based on love to God, who is their God no less than the God of the other tribes. It is to be comprehensive—they are 'to walk in all His ways'; it is to be resolute—they are 'to cleave to Him'; it is to be wholehearted and whole-souled service, that will be the true bond between the separated parts of the whole. Independence so limited will be harmless; and, however wide apart their paths may lie, Israel will be one. In like manner the bond that knits all divisions of God's people together, however different their modes of life and thought, however unlike their homes and their work, is the similarity of relation to God. They are one in a common faith, a common love, a common obedience. Wider waters than Jordan part them. Graver differences of tasks and outlooks than separated these two sections of Israel part them. But all are one who love and obey the one Lord. The closer we cleave to Him, the nearer we shall be to all His tribes.

We need only note in a word how these departing soldiers, leaving the battlefield with their commander's praise and benediction, laden with much wealth, the spoil of their enemies, and fording the stream to reach the peaceful homes, which had long stood ready for them, may be taken, by a permissible play of fancy, as symbols of the faithful servants and soldiers of the true Joshua, at the end of their long warfare passing to the 'kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world,' bearing in their hands the wealth which, by God's grace, they had conquered from out of things here. *They* are not sent away by their Commander, but summoned by Him to the great peace of His own presence; and while His lips give them the praise which is praise indeed, they inscribe on the perpetual memorial which they rear no name but His, who first wrought all their works in them, and now has ordained eternal peace for them.

### THE NATIONAL OATH AT SHECHEM

‘And Joshua said unto the people. Ye cannot serve the Lord: for He is an holy God; He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. 20. If ye forsake the Lord, and serve strange gods, then He will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that He hath done you good. 21. And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the Lord. 22. And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves, that ye have chosen you the Lord, to serve Him. And they said, We are witnesses. 23. Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the Lord God of Israel. 24. And the people said unto Joshua, The Lord our God will we serve, and His voice will we obey. 25. So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. 26. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. 27. And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which He spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God. 28. So Joshua let the people depart, every man unto his inheritance.’—[JOSHUA xxiv. 19-28](#).

We reach in this passage the close of an epoch. It narrates the last public act of Joshua and the last of the assembled people before they scatter ‘every man unto his inheritance.’ It was fitting that the transition from the nomad stage to that of settled abode in the land should be marked by the solemn renewal of the covenant, which is thus declared to be the willingly accepted law for the future national life. We have here the closing scene of that solemn assembly set before us.

The narrative carries us to Shechem, the lovely valley in the heart of the land, already consecrated by many patriarchal associations, and by that picturesque scene ([Joshua viii. 30-35](#)), when the gathered nation, ranged on the slopes of Ebal and Gerizim, listened to Joshua reading ‘all that Moses commanded.’ There, too, the coffin of Joseph, which had been reverently carried all through the desert and the war, was laid in the ground that Jacob had bought five hundred years ago, and which now had fallen to Joseph’s descendants, the tribe of Ephraim. There was another reason for the selection of Shechem for this renewal of the covenant. The gathered representatives of Israel stood, at Shechem, on the very soil where, long ago, Abram had made his first resting-place as a stranger in the land, and had received the first divine pledge, ‘unto thy seed will I give this land,’ and had piled beneath the oak of Moreh his first altar (of which the weathered stones might still be there) to ‘the Lord, who appeared unto him.’ It was fitting that this cradle of the nation should witness their vow, as it witnessed the fulfilment of God’s promise. What Plymouth Rock is to one side of the Atlantic, or Hastings Field to the other, Shechem was to Israel. Vows sworn there had sanctity added by the place. Nor did these remembrances exhaust the appropriateness of the site. The oak, which had waved green above Abram’s altar, had looked down on an-

other significant incident in the life of Jacob, when, in preparation for his journey to Bethel, he had made a clean sweep of the idols of his household, and buried them ‘under the oak which was by Shechem’ (*Gen. xxxv. 2-4*). His very words are quoted by Joshua in his command, in *verse 23*, and it is impossible to overlook the intention to parallel the two events. The spot which had seen the earlier act of purification from idolatry was for that very reason chosen for the later. It is possible that the same tree at whose roots the idols from beyond the river, which Leah and Rachel had brought, had been buried, was that under which Joshua set up his memorial stone; and it is possible that the very stone had been part of Abram’s altar. But, in any case, the place was sacred by these past manifestations of God and devotions of the fathers, so that we need not wonder that Joshua selected it rather than Shiloh, where the ark was, for the scene of this national oath of obedience. Patriotism and devotion would both burn brighter in such an atmosphere. These considerations explain also the designation of the place as ‘the sanctuary of the Lord,’—a phrase which has led some to think of the Tabernacle, and apparently occasioned the Septuagint reading of ‘Shiloh’ instead of ‘Shechem’ in *verses 1 and 25*. The precise rendering of the preposition in *verse 26* (which the Revised Version has put in the margin) shows that the Tabernacle is not meant; for how could the oak-tree be ‘in’ the Tabernacle? Clearly, the open space, hallowed by so many remembrances, and by the appearance to Abram, was regarded as a sanctuary.

The earlier part of this chapter shows that the people, by their representatives, responded with alacrity—which to Joshua seemed too eager—to his charge, and enumerated with too facile tongues God’s deliverances and benefits. His ear must have caught some tones of levity, if not of insincerity, in the lightly-made vow. So he meets it with a douche of cold water in *verses 19, 20*, because he wishes to condense vaporous resolutions into something more tangible and permanent. Cold, judiciously applied, solidifies. Discouragements, rightly put, encourage. The best way to deepen and confirm good resolutions which have been too swiftly and inconsiderately formed, is to state very plainly all the difficulty of keeping them. The hand that seems to repel, often most powerfully attracts. There is no better way of turning a somewhat careless ‘we will’ into a persistent ‘nay, but we *will*’ than to interpose a ‘ye cannot.’ Many a boy has been made a sailor by the stories of hardships which his parents have meant as dissuasives. Joshua here is doing exactly what Jesus Christ often did. He refused glib vows because He desired whole hearts. His very longing that men should follow Him made Him send them back to bethink themselves when they promised to do it. ‘Master, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest!’ was answered by no recognition of the speaker’s enthusiasm, and by no word of pleasure or invitation, but by the apparently cold repulse: ‘Foxes have holes, birds of the air roosting-places; but the Son of Man has not where to lay His head. That is what you are offering to share. Do you stand to your words?’ So, when once ‘great multitudes’ came to Him He turned on them, with no invitation in His words, and told them the hard conditions of discipleship as being entire self-renunciation. He will



have no soldiers enlisted under false pretences. They shall know the full difficulties and trials which they must meet; and if, knowing these, they still are willing to take His yoke upon them, then how exuberant and warm the welcome which He gives!

There is a real danger that this side of the evangelist's work should be overlooked in the earnestness with which the other side is done. We cannot be too emphatic in our reiteration of Christ's call to all the 'weary and heavy-laden' to come unto Him, nor too confident in our assurance that whosoever comes will not be 'cast out'; but we may be, and, I fear, often are, defective in our repetition of Christ's demand for entire surrender, and of His warning to intending disciples of what they are taking upon them. We shall repel no true seeker by duly emphasising the difficulties of the Christian course. Perhaps, if there were more plain speaking about these at the beginning, there would be fewer backsliders and dead professors with 'a name to live.' Christ ran the risk of the rich ruler's going away sorrowful, and so should His messengers do. The sorrow tells of real desire, and the departure will sooner or later be exchanged for return with a deeper and more thorough purpose, if the earlier wish had any substance in it. If it had not, better that the consciousness of its hollowness should be forced upon the man, than that he should outwardly become what he is not really,—a Christian; for, in the one case, he may be led to reflection which may issue in thorough surrender; and in the other he will be a self-deceived deceiver, and probably an apostate.

Note the special form of Joshua's warning. It turns mainly on two points,—the extent of the obligations which they were so lightly incurring, and the heavy penalties of their infraction. As to the former, the vow to 'serve the Lord' had been made, as he fears, with small consideration of what it meant. In heathenism, the 'service' of a god is a mere matter of outward acts of so-called worship. There is absolutely no connection between religion and morality in idolatrous systems. The notion that the service of a god implies any duties in common life beyond ceremonial ones is wholly foreign to paganism in all its forms. The establishment of the opposite idea is wholly the consequence of revelation. So we need not wonder if the pagan conception of service was here in the minds of the vowing assembly. If we look at their vow, as recorded in [verses 16-18](#), we see nothing in it which necessarily implies a loftier idea. Jehovah is their national God, who has fought and conquered for them, therefore they will 'serve Him.' If we substitute Baal, or Chemosh, or Nebo, or Ra, for Jehovah, this is exactly what we read on Moabite stones and Assyrian tablets and Egyptian tombs. The reasons for the service, and the service itself, are both suspiciously external. We are not judging the people more harshly than Joshua did; for he clearly was not satisfied with them, and the tone of his answer sufficiently shows what he thought wrong in them. Observe that he does not call Jehovah 'your God.' He does so afterwards; but in this grave reply to their exuberant enthusiasm he speaks of Him only as 'the Lord,' as if he would put stress on the monotheistic conception, which, at all events, does not appear in the people's words, and was probably dim in their thoughts. Then observe that he broadly asserts the impossibility



of their serving the Lord; that is, of course, so long as they continued in their then tone of feeling about Him and His service.

Then observe the points in the character of God on which he dwells, as indicating the points which were left out of view by the people, and as fitted to rectify their notions of service. First, 'He is an holy God.' The scriptural idea of the holiness of God has a wider sweep than we often recognise. It fundamentally means His supreme and inaccessible elevation above the creature; which, of course, is manifested in His perfect separation from all sin, but has not regard to this only. Joshua here urges the infinite distance between man and God, and especially the infinite moral distance, in order to enforce a profounder conception of what goes to God's service. A holy God cannot have unholy worshippers. His service can be no mere ceremonial, but must be the bowing of the whole man before His majesty, the aspiration of the whole man after His loftiness, the transformation of the whole man into the reflection of His purity, the approach of the unholy to the Holy through a sacrifice which puts away sin.

Further, He is 'a jealous God.' 'Jealous' is an ugly word, with repulsive associations, and its application to God has sometimes been explained in ugly fashion, and has actually repelled men. But, rightly looked at, what does it mean but that God desires our whole hearts for His own, and loves us so much, and is so desirous to pour His love into us, that He will have no rivals in our love? The metaphor of marriage, which puts His love to men in the tenderest form, underlies this word, so harsh on the surface, but so gracious at the core.

There is still abundant need for Joshua's warning. We rejoice that it takes so little to be a Christian that the feeblest and simplest act of faith knits the soul to the all-forgiving Christ. But let us not forget that, on the other hand, it is hard to be a Christian indeed; for it means 'forsaking all that we have,' and loving God with all our powers. The measure of His love is the measure of His 'jealousy,' and He loves us no less than He did Israel. Unless our conceptions of His service are based upon our recognition of His holiness and demand for our all, we, too, 'cannot serve the Lord.'

The other half of Joshua's warnings refers to the penalties of the broken vows. These are put with extraordinary force. The declaration that the sins of the servants of God would not be forgiven is not, of course, to be taken so as to contradict the whole teaching of Scripture, but as meaning that the sins of His people cannot be left unpunished. The closer relation between God and them made retribution certain. The law of Israel's existence, which its history ever since has exemplified, was here laid down, that their prosperity depended on their allegiance, and that their nearness to Him ensured His chastisement for their sin. 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.'

The remainder of the incident must be briefly disposed of. These warnings produced the desired effect; for Joshua did not seek to prevent, but to make more intelligent and firm,

the people's allegiance. The resolve, repeated after fuller knowledge, is the best reward, as it is the earnest hope, of the faithful teacher, whose apparent discouragements are meant to purify and deepen, not to repress, the faintest wish to serve God. Having tested their sincerity, he calls them to witness that their resolution is perfectly voluntary; and, on their endorsing it as their free choice, he requires the putting away of their 'strange gods,' and the surrender of their inward selves to Him who, by this their action as well as by His benefits, becomes in truth 'the God of Israel.' Attempts have been made to evade the implication that idolatry had crept in among the people; but there can be no doubt of the plain, sad meaning of the words. They are a quotation of Jacob's, at the same spot, on a similar occasion centuries before. If there were no idols buried now under the old oak, it was not because there were none in Israel, but because they had not been brought by the people from their homes. Joshua's commands are the practical outcome of his previous words. If God be 'holy' and 'jealous,' serving Him must demand the forsaking of all other gods, and the surrender of heart and self to Him. That is as true to-day as ever it was. The people accept the stringent requirement, and their repeated shout of obedience has a deeper tone than their first hasty utterance had. They have learned what service means,—that it includes more than ceremonies; and they are willing to obey His voice. Blessed those for whom the plain disclosure of all that they must give up to follow Him, only leads to the more assured and hearty response of willing surrender!

The simple but impressive ceremony which ratified the covenant thus renewed consisted of two parts,—the writing of the account of the transaction in 'the book of the law'; and the erection of a great stone, whose grey strength stood beneath the green oak, a silent witness that Israel, by his own choice, after full knowledge of all that the vow meant, had reiterated his vow to be the Lord's. Thus on the spot made sacred by so many ancient memories, the people ended their wandering and homeless life, and passed into the possession of the inheritance, through the portal of this fresh acceptance of the covenant, proclaiming thereby that they held the land on condition of serving God, and writing their own sentence in case of unfaithfulness. It was the last act of the assembled people, and the crown and close of Joshua's career.

## **THE BOOK OF JUDGES**

## **A SUMMARY OF ISRAEL'S FAITHLESSNESS AND GOD'S PATIENCE**

'And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, I made you to go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which I sware unto your fathers; and I said, I will never break my covenant with you. 2. And ye shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars: but ye have not obeyed my voice: why have ye done this? 3. Wherefore I also said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you. 4. And it came to pass, when the angel of the Lord spake these words unto all the children of Israel, that the people lifted up their voice, and wept. 5. And they called the name of that place Bochim: and they sacrificed there unto the Lord. 6. And when Joshua had let the people go, the children of Israel went every man unto his inheritance to possess the land. 7. And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the Lord that He did for Israel. 8. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being an hundred and ten years old. 9. And they buried him in the border of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the mount of Ephraim, on the north side of the hill Gaash. 10. And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which He had done for Israel.'—[JUDGES ii. 1-10](#).

The Book of Judges begins a new era, the development of the nation in its land. [Chapters i. to iii. 6](#) contain two summaries: first, of the progress of the conquest; and second, of the history about to be unfolded in the book. The first part of this passage ([verses 1-5](#)) belongs to the former, and closes it; the second ([verses 6-10](#)) introduces the latter, and contrasts it with the state of things prevailing as long as the soldiers of Joshua lived.

I. 'The Angel of the Lord' had appeared to Joshua in Gilgal at the beginning of the war, and issued his orders as 'Captain of the Lord's host.' Now He reappears to ask why his orders had not been carried out, and to announce that victory was no longer to attend Israel's arms. Nothing can be plainer than that the Angel speaks as one in whom the divine name dwells. His reiterated 'I's' are incomprehensible on any other hypothesis than that He is that mysterious person, distinct from and yet one with Jehovah, whom we know as the 'Word made flesh.' His words here are stern. He enumerates the favours which He had showed to Israel, and which should have inspired them to glad obedience. He recalls the conditions on which they had received the land; namely, that they were to enter into no entangling alliances with the remnant of the inhabitants, and especially to have no tolerance for their idolatry. Here we may observe that, according to Joshua's last charge, the extermination of the native peoples was not contemplated, but that there should be no such alliances as would peril Israel's observance of the covenant ([Joshua xxiii. 7, 12](#)). He charges them with disobedience, and asks the same question as had been asked of Eve, 'What is this ye have done?' And He declares the punishment about to follow, in the paralysing of Israel's conquering arm by

the withdrawal of His conquering might, and in the seductions from the native inhabitants to which they would fall victims.

Note, then, how God's benefits aggravate our disobedience, and how He bases His right to command on them. Further, note how His promises are contingent on our fulfilment of their conditions, and how a covenant which He has sworn that He will never break He does count as non-existent when men break it. Again, observe the sharp arraignment of the faithless, and the forcing of them to bethink themselves of the true character of their deeds, or, if we adopt the Revised Version's rendering, of the unreasonableness of departing from God. No man dare answer when God asks, 'What hast thou done?' No man can answer reasonably when He asks, 'Why hast thou done it?' Once more, note that His servants sin when they allow themselves to be so mixed up with the world that they are in peril of learning its ways and getting a snare to their souls. We have all unconquered 'Canaanites' in our hearts, and amity with them is supreme folly and crying wickedness. 'Thorough' must be our motto. Many times have the conquered overcome their conquerors, as in Rome's conquest of Greece, the Goths' conquest of Rome, the Normans' conquest of England. Israel was in some respects conquered by Canaanites and other conquered tribes. Let us take care that we are not overcome by our inward foes, whom we fancy we have subdued and can afford to treat leniently.

Again, God punishes our making truce with our spiritual foes by letting the effects of the truce work themselves out. He said to Israel, in effect: 'If you make alliances with the people of the land, you shall no longer have power to cast them out. The swift rush of the stream of victory shall be stayed. You have chosen to make them your friends, and their friendship shall produce its natural effects, of tempting you to imitation.' The increased power of our unsubdued evils is the punishment, as it is the result, of tolerance of them. We wanted to keep them, and dreamed that we could control them. Keep them we shall, control them we cannot. They will master us if we do not expel them. No wonder that the place was named Bochim ('Weepers'), when such stern words were thundered forth. Tears flow easily; and many a sin is wept for once, and afterwards repeated often. So it was with Israel, as the narrative goes on to tell. Let us take the warning, and give heed to make repentance deep and lasting.

II. [Verses 6-10](#) go back to an earlier period than the appearance of the Angel. We do not know how long the survivors of the conquering army lived in sufficient numbers to leaven opinion and practice. We may, however, roughly calculate that the youngest of these would be about twenty when the war began, and that about fifty years would see the end of the host that had crossed Jordan and stormed Jericho. If Joshua was of about the same age as Caleb, he would be about eighty at the beginning of the conquest, and lived thirty years afterwards, so that about twenty years after his death would be the limit of 'the elders that outlived Joshua.'

Verses 6-9 substantially repeat [Joshua xxiv. 28-31](#), and are here inserted to mark not only the connection with the former book, but to indicate the beginning of a new epoch. The facts narrated in this paragraph are but too sadly in accord with the uniform tendencies of our poor weak nature. As long as some strong personality leads a nation or a church, it keeps true to its early fervour. The first generation which has lived through some great epoch, when God's arm has been made bare, retains the impression of His power. But when the leader falls, it is like withdrawing a magnet, and the heap of iron filings tumbles back to the ground inert. Think of the post-Apostolic age of the Church, of Germany in the generation after Luther, not to come nearer home, and we must see that Israel's experience was an all but universal one. It is hard to keep a community even of professing Christians on the high level. No great cause is ever launched which does not lose 'way' as it continues. 'Having begun in the Spirit,' all such are too apt to continue 'in the flesh.' The original impulses wane, friction begins to tell. Custom clogs the wheels. The fiery lava-stream cools and slackens. So it always has been. Therefore God has to change His instruments, and churches need to be shaken up, and sometimes broken up, 'lest one good,' when it has degenerated into 'custom,' should 'corrupt the world.'

But we shall miss the lesson here taught if we do not apply it to tendencies in ourselves, and humbly recognise that we are in danger of being 'hindered,' however 'well' we may have begun to 'run,' and that our only remedy is to renew continually our first-hand vision of 'the great works of the Lord,' and our consecration to His service. It is a poor affair if, like Israel, our devotion to God depends on Joshua's life, or, like King Joash, we do that which is 'right in the eyes of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest.'

### ISRAEL'S OBSTINACY AND GOD'S PATIENCE

‘And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim; 12. And they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that were round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the Lord to anger. 13. And they forsook the Lord, and served Baal and Ashtaroath. 14. And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and He delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and He sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies. 15. Whithersoever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn unto them: and they were greatly distressed. 16. Nevertheless the Lord raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them. 17. And yet they would not hearken unto their judges, but they went a whoring after other gods, and bowed themselves unto them: they turned quickly out of the way which their fathers walked in, obeying the commandments of the Lord; but they did not so. 18. And when the Lord raised them up judges, then the Lord was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge: for it repented the Lord because of their groanings, by reason of them that oppressed them, and vexed them. 19. And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they returned, and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them, and to bow down unto them; they ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way. 20. And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel; and He said, Because that this people hath transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and have not hearkened unto My voice; 21. I also will not henceforth drive out any from before them of the nations which Joshua left when he died: 22. That through them I may prove Israel, whether they will keep the way of the Lord, to walk therein, as their fathers did keep it, or not. 23. Therefore the Lord left those nations, without driving them out hastily; neither delivered He them into the hand of Joshua.’—[JUDGES ii. 11-23](#).

This passage sums up the Book of Judges, and also the history of Israel for over four hundred years. Like the overture of an oratorio, it sounds the main themes of the story which follows. That story has four chapters, repeated with dreary monotony over and over again. They are: Relapse into idolatry, retribution, respite and deliverance, and brief return to God. The last of these phases soon passes into fresh relapse, and then the old round is gone all over again, as regularly as the white and red lights and the darkness reappear in a revolving lighthouse lantern, or the figures recur in a circulating decimal fraction. That sad phrase which begins this lesson, ‘The children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord,’ is repeated at the beginning of each new record of apostacy, on which duly follow, as outlined here, the oppression by the enemy, the raising up of a deliverer, the gleam of brightness which dies with him, and then, *da capo*, ‘the children of Israel did evil,’ and all the rest as

before. The names change, but the incidents are the same. There is something extremely impressive in this uniformity of the plan of the book, which thus sets in so strong light the persistence through generations of the same bad strain in the nation's blood, and the unwearied patience of God. The story of these successive recurrences of the same sequence of events occupies the book to the end of chapter xvi., and the remainder of it is taken up with two wild stories deeply stained with the lawlessness and moral laxity of these anarchic times. We may best bring out the force of this summary by considering in their order the four stages signalised.

I. The first is the continual tendency to relapse into idolatry. The fact itself, and the frank prominence given to it in the Old Testament, are both remarkable. As to the latter, certainly, if the Old Testament histories have the same origin as the chronicles of other nations, they present most anomalous features. Where do we find any other people whose annals contain nothing that can minister to national vanity, and have for one of their chief themes the sins of the nation? The history of Israel, as told in Scripture, is one long indictment of Israel. The peculiarity is explicable, if we believe that, whoever or how numerous soever its authors, God was its true Author, as He is its true theme, and that the object of its histories is not to tell the deeds of Israel, but those of God for Israel.

As to the fact of the continual relapses into idolatry, nothing could be more natural than that the recently received and but imperfectly assimilated revelation of the one God, with its stringent requirements of purity, and its severe prohibition of idols, should easily slip off from these rude and merely outward worshippers. Joshua's death without a successor, the dispersion of the tribes, the difficulty of communication when much of the country was still in the hands of its former possessors, would all weaken the sense of unity, which was too recent to be firm, and would expose the isolated Israelites to the full force of the temptation to idolatry. It is difficult for us fairly to judge the immense strain required for resistance to it. The conception of one sole God was too high to be easily retained. A shrine without a deity seemed bare and empty. The Law stringently bridled passions which the hideous worship of the Canaanites stimulated. No wonder that, when the first generation of the conquerors had passed away, their successors lapsed into the universal polytheism, with its attendant idolatry and immorality. Instead of thinking of the Israelites as monsters of ingratitude and backsliding, we come nearer the truth, and make a better use of the history, when we see in it a mirror which shows us our own image. The strong earthward pull is ever acting on us, and, unless God hold us up, we too shall slide downwards. 'Hath a nation changed their gods, which yet are no gods? but My people hath changed their glory for that which doth not profit.' Idolatry and worldliness are persistent; for they are natural. Firm adherence to God is less common, because it goes against the strong forces, within and without, which bind us to earth.



Apparently the relapses into idolatry did not imply the entire abandonment of the worship of Jehovah, but the worship of Baalim and Ashtaroth along with it. Such illegitimate mixing up of deities was accordant with the very essence of polytheism, and repugnant to that of the true worship of God. The one may be tolerant, the other cannot be. To unite Baal with Jehovah was to forsake Jehovah.

These continual relapses have an important bearing on the question of the origin of the 'Jewish conception of God.' They are intelligible only if we take the old-fashioned explanation, that its origin was a divine revelation, given to a rude people. They are unintelligible if we take the new-fashioned explanation that the monotheism of Israel was the product of natural evolution, or was anything but a treasure put by God into their hands, which they did not appreciate, and would willingly have thrown away. The foul Canaanitish worship was the kind of thing in which, if left to themselves, they would have wallowed. How came such people by such thoughts as these? The history of Israel's idolatry is not the least conclusive proof of the supernatural revelation which made Israel's religion.

II. Note the swift-following retribution. We have two sections in the context dealing with this, each introduced by that terrible phrase, which recurs so often in the subsequent parts of the book, 'The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.' That phrase is no sign of a lower conception of God than that which the gospel brings. Wrath is an integral part of love, when the lover is perfectly righteous and the loved are sinful. The most terrible anger is the anger of perfect gentleness, as expressed in that solemn paradox of the Apostle of love, when he speaks of 'the wrath of the Lamb.' God was angry with Israel because He loved them, and desired their love for their own good. The fact of His choice of the nation for His own and the intensity of His love were shown no less by the swift certainty with which suffering dogged sin, than by the blessings which crowned obedience. The first section, referring to the punishment, is in [verses 14 and 15](#), which seems to describe mainly the defeats and plunderings which outside surrounding nations inflicted. The brief description is extraordinarily energetic. It ascribes all their miseries to God's direct act. He 'delivered' them over, or, as the next clause says still more strongly, 'sold' them, to plunderers, who stripped them bare. Their defeats were the result of His having thus ceased to regard them as His. But though He had 'sold' them, He had not done with them; for it was not only the foeman's hand that struck them, but God's 'hand was against them,' and its grip crushed them. His judgments were not occasional, but continuous, and went with them 'whithersoever they went out.' Everything went wrong with them; there were no gleams breaking the black thunder-cloud. God's anger darkened the whole sky, and blasted the whole earth. And the misery was the more miserable and awful because it had all been foretold, and in it God was but doing 'as He had said' and sworn. It is a dreadful picture of the all-withering effect of God's anger,—a picture which is repeated in inmost verity in many an outwardly prosperous life to-day.

The second section is in [verses 20-23](#), and describes the consequence of Israel's relapse in reference to the surviving Canaanite and other tribes in the land itself. Note that 'nation' in [verse 20](#) is the term usually applied, not to Israel, but to the Gentile peoples; and that its use here seems equivalent to cancelling the choice of Israel as God's special possession, and reducing them to the level of the other nations in Canaan, to whom the same term is applied in [verse 21](#). The stern words which are here put into the mouth of God may possibly refer to the actual message recorded in the first verses of the chapter; but, more probably, 'the Lord said' does not here mean any divine communication, but only the divine resolve, conceived as spoken to himself. It embodies the divine *lex talionis*. The punishment is analogous to the crime. Israel had broken the covenant; God would not keep His promise. That involves a great principle as to all God's promises,—that they are all conditional, and voidable by men's failure to fulfil their conditions. Observe, too, that the punishment is the retention of the occasions of the sin. Is not that, too, a law of the divine procedure to-day? Whips to scourge us are made of our pleasant vices. Sin is the punishment of sin. If we yield to some temptation, part of the avenging retribution is that the temptation abides by us, and has power over us. The 'Canaanites' whom we have allowed to lead us astray will stay beside us when their power to seduce us is done, and will pull off their masks and show themselves for what they are, our spoilers and foes.

The rate of Israel's conquest was determined by Israel's faithful adherence to God. That is a standing law. Victory for us in all the good fight of life depends on our cleaving to Him, and forsaking all other.

The divine motive, if we may so say, in leaving the unsubdued nations in the land, was to provide the means of proving Israel. Would it not have been better, since Israel was so weak, to secure for it an untempted period? Surely, it is a strange way of helping a man who has stumbled, to make provision that future occasions of stumbling shall lie in his path. But so the perfect wisdom which is perfect love ever ordains. There shall be no unnatural greenhouse shelter provided for weak plants. The liability to fall imposes the necessity of trial, but the trial does not impose the necessity of falling! The Devil tempts, because he hopes that we shall fall. God tries, in order that we may stand, and that our feet may be strengthened by the trial. 'I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for,—not without dust and heat.'

III. Respite and deliverance are described in [verses 16 and 18](#). The Revised Version has wisely substituted a simple 'and' for 'nevertheless' at the beginning of [verse 16](#). The latter word implies that the raising up of the judges was a reversal of what had gone before; 'and' implies that it was a continuation. And its use here is not merely an instance of inartificial Hebrew style, but carries the lesson that God's judgment and deliverance come from the same source, and are harmonious parts of one educational process. Nor is this thought

negatived by the statement in [verse 18](#) that 'it repented the Lord.' That strong metaphorical ascription to Him of human emotion simply implies that His action, which of necessity is the expression of His will, was changed. The will of the moment before had been to punish; the will of the next moment was to deliver, because their 'groaning' showed that the punishment had done its work. But the two wills were one in ultimate purpose, and the two sets of acts were equally and harmoniously parts of one design. The surgeon is carrying out one plan when he cuts deep into the quivering flesh, and when he sews up the wounds which he himself has made. God's deliverances are linked to His chastisements by 'and,' not by 'nevertheless.' We need not discuss that remarkable series of judges, who were champions rather than the peaceful functionaries whom we understand by the name. The vivid and stirring stories associated with their names make the bulk of this book, and move the most peace-loving among us like the sound of a trumpet. These wild warriors, with many a roughness and flaw in their characters, of whom no saintly traits are recorded, are yet treated in this section as directly inspired, and as continually upheld by God. The writer of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* claims some of them as heroes of 'faith.' And one chief lesson for us to learn, as we look on the strange garb in which in them faith has arrayed itself, and the strange work which it does in nerving hands to strike with sharp swords, is the oneness of the principle amid the most diverse manifestations, and the nobleness and strength which the sense of belonging to God and reliance on His help breathe into the rudest life and shed over the wildest scenes.

These judges were raised up indiscriminately from different tribes. They belonged to different ranks, and were of different occupations. One of them was a woman. The when and the where and the how of their appearance were incalculable. They authenticated their commission by no miracles except victory. For a time they started to the front, and then passed, leaving no successors, and founding no dynasty. They were an entirely unique order, plainly raised up by God, and drawing all their power from Him. Let us be thankful for the weaknesses, and even sins, recorded of some of them, and for the boldness with which the book traces the physical strength of a Samson, in spite of his wild animalism, and the bravery of a Jephthah, notwithstanding his savage vow and subsequent lapse into idolatry, to God's inspiration. Their faith was limited, and acted but imperfectly on their moral nature; but it was true faith, in the judgment of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. Their work was rough and bloody, and they were rough tools, as such work needed; but it was God's work, and He had made them for His instruments, in the judgment of the Book of *Judges*. If we try to understand the reasons for such judgments, we may learn some useful lessons.

IV. A word only can be given to the last stage in the dreary round. It comes back to the first. The religion of the delivered people lasted as long as the judge's life. When he died, it died. There is intense bitterness in the remark to that effect in [verse 19](#). Did God then die with the judge? Was it Samson, or Jehovah, that had delivered? Why should the death of

the instrument affect gratitude to the hand that gave it its edge? What a lurid light is thrown back on the unreality of the people's return to God by their swift relapse! If it needed a human hand to keep them from departing, had they ever come near? We may press the questions on ourselves; for none of us knows how much of our religion is owing to the influence of men upon us, or how much of it would drop away if we were left to ourselves.

This miserable repetition of the same weary round of sin, punishment, respite, and renewed sin, sets in a strong light the two great wonders of man's obstinate persistency in unfaithfulness and sin, and of God's unwearied persistency in discipline and patient forgiveness. His charity 'suffers long and is kind, is not easily provoked.' We can weary out all forbearance but His, which is endless. We weary Him indeed, but we do not weary Him out, with our iniquities. Man's sin stretches far; but God's patient love overlaps it. It lasts long; but God's love is eternal. It resists miracles of chastisement and love; but He does not cease His use of the rod and the staff. We can tire out all other forbearance, but not His. And however old and obstinate our rebellion, He waits to pardon, and smites but to heal.

## RECREANT REUBEN

‘Why satest then among the sheepfolds, to hear the pipings for the flocks? At the water-courses of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.’—[JUDGES v. 16 \(R.V.\)](#).

### I. The fight.

The warfare is ever repeated, though in new forms. In the highest form it is Christ *versus* the World, And that conflict must be fought out in our own souls first. Our religion should lead not only to accept and rely on what Christ does for us, but to do and dare for Christ. He has given Himself for us, and has thereby won the right to recruit us as His soldiers. We have to fight against ourselves to establish His reign over ourselves.

And then we have to give our personal service in the great battle for right and truth, for establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. There come national crises when every man must take up arms, but in Christ’s kingdom that is a permanent obligation. There the nation is the army. Each subject is not only His servant but His soldier. The metaphor is well worn, but it carries everlasting truth, and to take it seriously to heart would revolutionise our lives.

II. The reason for standing aloof. Reuben ‘abode in the sheepfolds to hear the pipings to the flocks.’ For Dan his ships, for Asher his havens held them apart. Reuben and the other trans-Jordanic tribes held loosely by the national unity. They had fallen in love with an easy life of pastoral wealth, they did not care to venture anything for the national good. It is still too true that like reasons are largely operative in producing like results. It is seldom from the wealthy and leisurely classes that the bold fighters for great social reformations are recruited. Times of commercial prosperity are usually times of stagnation in regard to these. Reuben lies lazily listening to the ‘drowsy tinklings’ that ‘lull’ not only ‘the distant folds’ but himself to inglorious slumber, while Zebulon and Naphtali are ‘venturing their lives on the high places of the field.’ The love of ease enervates many a one who should be doing valiantly for the ‘Captain of his salvation.’ The men of Reuben cared more for their sheep than for their nation. They were not minded to hazard these by listening to Deborah’s call. And what their flocks were to that pastoral tribe, their business is to shoals of professing Christians. The love of the world depletes the ranks of Christ’s army, and they are comparatively few who stick by the colours and are ‘ready, aye ready’ for service, as the brave motto of one English regiment has it. The lives of multitudes of so-called Christians are divided between strained energy in their business or trade or profession and self-regarding repose. No doubt competition is fierce, and, no doubt, a Christian man is bound, ‘whatsoever his hand finds to do, to do it with his might,’ and, no doubt, rest is as much a duty as work. But must not loyalty to Jesus have become tepid, if a servant of His has so little interest in the purposes for which He gave His life that he can hear no call to take active part in promoting them, nor find rest in the work by which he becomes a fellow-worker with his Lord?

III. The recreant’s brave resolves which came to nothing. The indignant question of our text is, as it were, framed between two clauses which contrast Reuben’s indolent holding

aloof with his valorous resolves. 'By the watercourses of Reuben there were great resolves of heart.' . . . 'At the watercourses of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.' Resolves came first, but they were not immediately acted on, and as the Reubenites sate among the sheepfolds and felt the charm of their peaceful lives, the 'native hue of resolution was sicklied o'er,' and doubts of the wisdom of their gallant determination crept in, and their valour oozed out. And so for all their fine resolves, they had no share in the fight nor in the triumph.

So let us lay the warning of that example to heart, and if we are stirred by noble impulses to take our place in the ranks of the fighters for God, let us act on these at once. Emotions evaporate very soon if they are not used to drive the wheels of conduct. The Psalmist was wise who 'delayed not, but made haste and delayed not to keep God's commandments.' Many a man has over and over again resolved to serve God in some specific fashion, and to enlist in the 'effective force' of Christ's army, and has died without ever having done it.

IV. The question in the hour of victory. 'Why?'

Deborah asks it with vehement contempt.

That victory is certain. Are *you* to have part in it?

The question will be asked on the judgment day by Christ, and by our own consciences. 'And he was speechless.'

To be neutral is to be on the side of the enemy, against whom the 'stars fight,' and whom Kishon sweeps away.

'Who is on the Lord's side?'—Who?

### **'ALL THINGS ARE YOURS'**

'They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera.'—**JUDGES v. 20.**

'For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.'—**JOB v. 23.**

These two poetical fragments present the same truth on opposite sides. The first of them comes from Deborah's triumphant chant. The singer identifies God with the cause of Israel, and declares that heaven itself fought against those who fought against God's people. There may be an allusion to the tempest which Jewish tradition tells us burst over the ranks of the enemy, or there may be some trace of ancient astrological notions, or the words may simply be an elevated way of saying that Heaven fought for Israel. The silent stars, as they swept on their paths through the sky, advanced like an avenging host embattled against the foes of Israel and of God. All things fight against the man who fights against God.

The other text gives the other side of the same truth. One of Job's friends is rubbing salt into his wounds by insisting on the commonplace, which needs a great many explanations and limitations before it can be accepted as true, that sin is the cause of sorrow, and that righteousness brings happiness; and in the course of trying to establish this heartless thesis to a heavy heart he breaks into a strain of the loftiest poetry in describing the blessedness of the righteous. All things, animate and inanimate, are upon his side. The ground, which Genesis tells us is 'cursed for his sake,' becomes his ally, and the very creatures whom man's sin set at enmity against him are at peace with him. All things are the friends and servants of him who is the friend and servant of God.

I. So, putting these two texts together, we have first the great conviction to which religion clings, that God being on our side all things are for us, and not against us.

Now, that is the standing faith of the Old Testament, which no doubt was more easily held in those days, because, if we accept its teaching, we shall recognise that Israel lived under a system in so far supernatural as that moral goodness and material prosperity were a great deal more closely and indissolubly connected than they are to-day. So, many a psalmist and many a prophet breaks out into apostrophes, warranted by the whole history of Israel, and declaring how blessed are the men who, apart from all other defences and sources of prosperity, have God for their help and Him for their hope.

But we are not to dismiss this conviction as belonging only to a system where the supernatural comes in, as it does in the Old Testament history, and as antiquated under a dispensation such as that in which we live. For the New Testament is not a whit behind the Old in insisting upon this truth. 'All things work together for good to them that love God.' 'All things are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's.' 'Who is he that will harm you if ye be followers of that which is good?' The New Testament is committed to the same con-

viction as that to which the faith of Old Testament saints clung as the sheet anchor of their lives.

That conviction cannot be struck out of the creed of any man, who believes in the God to whom the Old and the New Testament alike bear witness. For it rests upon this plain principle, that all this great universe is not a chaos, but a cosmos, that all these forces and creatures are not a rabble, but an ordered host.

What is the meaning of that great Name by which, from of old, God in His relations to the whole universe has been described—the 'Lord of Hosts'? Who are the 'hosts' of which He is 'the Lord,' and to whom, as the centurion said, He says to this one, 'Go!' and he goeth; and to another, 'Come!' and he cometh; and to another, 'Do this!' and he doeth it? Who are 'the hosts'? Not only these beings who are dimly revealed to us as rational and intelligent, who 'excel in strength,' because they 'hearken to the voice of His word', but in the ranks of that great army are also embattled all the forces of the universe, and all things living or dead. 'All are Thy servants; they continue this day'—angels, stars, creatures of earth—' according to Thine ordinances.'

And if it be true that the All is an ordered whole, which is obedient to the touch and to the will of that divine Commander, then all His servants must be on the same side, and cannot turn their arms against each other. As an old hymn says with another reference—

'All the servants of our King  
In heaven and earth are one,'

and none of them can injure, wound, or slay a fellow-servant. If all are travelling in the same direction there can be no collision. If all are enlisted under the same standard they can never turn their weapons against each other. If God sways all things, then all things which God sways must be on the side of the men that are on the side of God. 'Thou shalt make a league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.'

II, Note the difficulties arising from experience, in the way of holding fast by this conviction of faith.

The grim facts of the world, seen from their lowest level, seem to shatter it to atoms. Talk about 'the stars in their courses fighting' for or against anybody! In one aspect it is superstition, in another aspect it is a dream and an illusion. The prose truth is that they shine down silent, pitiless, cold, indifferent, on battlefields or on peaceful homes; and the moonlight is as pure when it falls upon broken hearts as when it falls upon glad ones. Nature is utterly indifferent to the moral or the religious character of its victims. It goes on its way unswerving and pitiless; and whether the man who stands in its path is good or bad matters not. If he gets into a typhoon he will be wrecked; if he tumbles over Niagara he will be drowned. And what becomes of all the talk about an embattled universe on the side of goodness, in the



face of the plain facts of life—of nature's indifference, nature's cruelty which has led some men to believe in two sovereign powers, one beneficent and one malicious, and has led others to say, 'God is a superfluous hypothesis, and to believe in Him brings more enigmas than it solves,' and has led still others to say, 'Why, if there is a God, does it look as if either He was not all-powerful, or was not all-merciful?' Nature has but ambiguous evidence to give in support of this conviction.

Then, if we turn to what we call Providence and its mysteries, the very book of Job, from which my second text is taken, is one of the earliest attempts to grapple with the difficulty and to untie the knot; and I suppose everybody will admit that, whatever may be the solution which is suggested by that enigmatical book, the solution is by no means a complete one, though it is as complete as the state of religious knowledge at the time at which the book was written made possible to be attained. The seventy-third psalm shows that even in that old time when, as I have said, supernatural sanctions were introduced into the ordinary dealings of life, the difficulties that cropped up were great enough to bring a devout heart to a stand, and to make the Psalmist say, 'My feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped.' Providence, with all its depths and mysteries, often to our aching hearts seems in our own lives to contradict the conviction, and when we look out over the sadness of humanity, still more does it seem impossible for us to hold fast by the faith 'that all which we behold is full of blessings.'

I doubt not that there are many of ourselves whose lives, shadowed, darkened, hemmed in, perplexed, or made solitary for ever, seem to them to be hard to reconcile with this cheerful faith upon which I am trying to insist. Brethren, cling to it even in the darkness. Be sure of this, that amongst all our mercies there are none more truly merciful than those which come to us shrouded in dark garments, and in questionable shapes. Let nothing rob us of the confidence that 'all things work together for good.'

III. I come, lastly, to consider the higher form in which this conviction is true for ever.

I have said that the facts of life seem often to us, and are felt often by some of us, to shatter it to atoms; to riddle it through and through with shot. But, if we bring the Pattern-life to bear upon the illumination of all life, and if we learn the lessons of the Cradle and the Cross, and rise to the view of human life which emerges from the example of Jesus Christ, then we get back the old conviction, transfigured indeed, but firmer than ever. We have to alter the point of view. Everything always depends on the point of view. We have to alter one or two definitions. Definitions come first in geometry and in everything else. Get *them* right, and you will get your theorems and problems right.

So, looking at life in the light of Christ, we have to give new contents to the two words 'good' and 'evil,' and a new meaning to the two words 'for' and 'against.' And when we do that, then the difficulties straighten themselves out, and there are not any more knots, but all is plain; and the old faith of the Old Testament, which reposed very largely upon abnormal

and extraordinary conditions of life, comes back in a still nobler form, as possible to be held by us amidst the commonplace of our daily existence.

For everything is my friend, is for me and not against me, that helps me nearer to God. To live for Him, to live with Him, to be conscious ever of communion with Himself, to feel the touch of His hand on my hand, and the pressure of His breast against mine, at all moments of my life, is my true and the highest good. And if it is true that the 'river of the water of life' which 'flows from the Throne of God' is the only draught that can ever satisfy the immortal thirst of a soul, then whatever drives me away from the cisterns and to the fountain, is on my side. Better to dwell in a 'dry and thirsty land, where no water is,' if it makes me long for the water that rises at the gate of the true Bethlehem—the house of bread—than to dwell in a land flowing with milk and honey, and well watered in every part! If the cup that I would fain lift to my lips has poison in it, or if its sweetness is making me lose my relish for the pure and tasteless river that flows from the Throne of God, there can be no truer friend than that calamity, as men call it, which strikes the cup from my hands, and shivers the glass before I have raised it to my lips. Everything is my friend that helps me towards God.

Everything is my friend that leads me to submission and obedience. The joy of life, and the perfection of human nature, is an absolutely submitted will, identified with the divine, both in regard to doing and to enduring. And whatever tends to make my will flexible, so that it corresponds to all the sinuosities, so to speak, of the divine will, and fits into all its bends and turns, is a blessing to me. Raw hides, stiff with dirt and blood, are put into a bath of bitter infusion of oak-bark. What for? For the same end as, when they are taken out, they are scraped with sharp steels,—that they may become flexible. When that is done the useless hide is worth something.

'Our wills are ours, we know not how;  
Our wills are ours, to make them Thine.'

And whatever helps me to that is my friend.

Everything is a friend to the man that loves God, in a far sweeter and deeper sense than it can ever be to any other. Like a sudden burst of sunshine upon a gloomy landscape, the light of union with God and friendship with Him flooding my daily life flashes it all up into brightness. The dark ribbon of the river that went creeping through the black copses, when the sun glints upon it, gleams up into links of silver, and the trees by its bank blaze out into green and gold. Brethren! 'Who follows pleasure follows pain'; who follows God finds pleasure following him. There can be no surer way to set the world against me than to try to make it for me, and to make it my all. They tell us that if you want to count those stars that 'like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid' make up the Pleiades, the surest way

to see the greatest number of them is to look a little on one side of them. Look away from the joys and friendships of creatural things right up to God, and you will see these sparkling and dancing in the skies, as you never see them when you gaze at them only. Make them second and they are good and on your side. Make them first, and they will turn to be your enemies and fight against you.

This conviction will be established still more irrefragably and wonderfully in that future. Nothing lasts but goodness. 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.' To oppose it is like stretching a piece of pack-thread across the rails before the express comes; or putting up some thin wooden partition on the beach on one of the Western Hebrides, exposed to the whole roll of the Atlantic, which will be battered into ruin by the first winter's storm. Such is the end of all those who set themselves against God.

But there comes a future in which, as dim hints tell us, these texts of ours shall receive a fulfilment beyond that realised in the present condition of things. 'Then comes the statelier Eden back to man,' and in a renewed and redeemed earth 'they shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain'; and the ancient story will be repeated in higher form. The servants shall be like the Lord who, when He had conquered temptation, 'was with the wild beasts' that forgot their enmity, and 'angels ministered unto Him.' That scene in the desert may serve as a prophecy of the future when, under conditions of which we know nothing, all God's servants shall, even more markedly and manifestly than here, help each other; and every man that loves God will find a friend in every creature.

If we take Him for our Commander, and enlist ourselves in that embattled host, then all weathers will be good; 'stormy winds, fulfilling His word,' will blow us to our port; 'the wilderness will rejoice and blossom as the rose'; and the whole universe will be radiant with the light of His presence, and ringing with the music of His voice. But if we elect to join the other army—for there is another army, and men have wills that enable them to lift themselves up against God, the Ruler of all things—then the old story, from which my first text is taken, will fulfil itself again in regard to us—'the stars in their courses will fight against' us; and Sisera, lying stiff and stark, with Jael's tent-peg through his temples, and the swollen corpses being swirled down to the stormy sea by 'that ancient river, the river Kishon,' will be a grim parable of the end of the men that set themselves against God, and so have the universe against them. 'Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.'

## LOVE MAKES SUNS

‘Let them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.’—JUDGES v. 51.

These are the closing words of Deborah, the great warrior-prophetess of Israel. They are in singular contrast with the tone of fierce enthusiasm for battle which throbs through the rest of the chant, and with its stern approval of the deed of Jael when she slew Sisera. Here, in its last notes, we have an anticipation of the highest and best truths of the Gospel. ‘Let them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in His might.’ If we think of the singer, of the age and the occasion of the song, such purely spiritual, lofty words must seem very remarkable.

I. Note, then, first of all, how here we have a penetrating insight into the essence of religion.

This woman had been nourished upon a more or less perfect edition of what we know as the ‘Mosaic Law.’ Her faith had been fed by forms. She moved amidst a world full of the cruelties and dark conceptions of a mysterious divine power which torture heathenism apart from Christianity. She had forced her way through all that, and laid hold of the vital centre. And there, a way out amidst cruelty and murder, amidst the unutterable abominations and terrors of heathenism, in the centre of a rigid system of ceremonial and retaliation, the woman’s heart spoke out, and taught her what was the great commandment. Prophetess she was, fighter she was, she could burst into triumphant approval of Jael’s bloody deed; and yet with the same lips could speak this profound word. She had learned that ‘Thou shalt *love* the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind,’ summed up all duty, and was the beginning of all good in man. That precept found an echo in her heart. Whatever part in her religious development may have been played by the externalisms of ceremonial, she had pierced to the core of religion. Advanced modern critics admit the antiquity of Deborah’s song, and this closing stanza witnesses to the existence, at that early period, of a highly spiritual conception of the bond between God and man. Deborah had got as far, in a moment of exaltation and insight, as the teaching of the Apostle John, although her thought was strangely blended with the fierceness of the times in which she lived. Her approval of Jael’s deed by no means warrants our approving it, but we may thankfully see that though she felt the fierce throbbing of desire for vengeance, she also felt this—‘Them that *love* Him; that is the Alpha and the Omega of all.’

Our love must depend on our knowledge. Deborah’s knowledge was a mere skeleton outline as compared with ours. Contrast the fervour of emotional affection that manifestly throbbed in her heart with the poor, cold pulsations which we dignify by the name of love, and the contrast may put us to shame. There is a religion of fear which dominates hundreds of professing Christians in this land of ours. There is a religion of duty, in which there is no delight, which has many adherents amongst us. There is a religion of form, which contents

itself with the externals of Christianity, and that is the religion of many men and women in all our churches. And I may further say, there is a religion of faith, in its narrower and imperfect sense, which lays hold of and believes a body of Christian truth, and has never passed through faith into love. Not he who 'believes that God is,' and comes to Him with formal service and an alienated or negligent heart; not he who recognises the duty of worship, and discharges it because his conscience pricks him, but has no buoyancy within bearing him upwards towards the object of his love; not he who cowers before the dark shadow which some call God; but he who, knowing, trusts, and who, knowing and trusting 'the love which God hath to us,' pulses back the throbs of a recipient heart, and loves Him in return—he, and he only, is a worshipper. Let us learn the lesson that Deborah learnt below the palm-trees of Lapidoth, and if we want to understand what a religious man is, recognise that he is a man who loves God.

II. Further, note the grand conception of the character which such a love produces.

'Let them be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.' Think of the fierce Eastern sun, with 'sunbeams like swords,' that springs up from the East, and rushes to the zenith, and 'nothing is hid from the heat thereof—a sun the like of which we, in our cloudy skies, never see nor feel, but which, to the Oriental, is the very emblem of splendour and of continuous, victorious power. There are two things here, radiance and energy, light and might.

'As the sun when he goeth forth in his strength.' Deborah was a 'prophetess,' and people say, 'What did she prophesy?' Well, she prophesied the heart of religion—as I have tried to show—in reference to its essence, and, as one sees by this phrase, in reference to its effects. What is her word but a partial anticipation of Christ's saying, 'Ye are the light of the world'; and of His disciple's utterance, 'Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light'?

It is too plain to need any talking about, that the direct tendency of what we venture to call love to God, meaning thereby the turning of the whole nature to Him, in aspiration, admiration, longing for likeness, and practical imitation, is to elevate, ennoble, and illuminate the whole character. It was said about one woman that 'to love her was an education.' That was exaggeration; but it is below the truth about God. The true way to refine and elevate and educate is to cultivate love to God. And when we get near to Him, and hold by Him, and are continually occupied with Him; when our being is one continual aspiration after union with Him, and we experience the glow and rapture included in the simple word 'love,' then it cannot but be that we shall be like Him.

That is what Paul meant when he said, 'Now are ye light in the Lord.' Union with Him illuminates. The true radiance of saintly character will come in the measure in which we are in fellowship with Jesus Christ. Deborah's astronomy was not her strong point. The sun shines by its own light. We are planets, and are darkness in ourselves, and it is only the reflection of the central sun that ever makes us look silvery white and radiant before men. But

though it be derived, it is none the less our light, if it has passed into us, as it surely will, and if it streams out from us, as it no less surely will, in the measure in which love to God dominates our whole lives.

If that is so, dear brethren, is not the shortest and the surest way to have our faces shining like that of Moses when he came down from the mountain, or like Stephen's when he 'saw the heavens opened,' to keep near Jesus Christ? It is slow work to hammer bits of ore out of the rock with a chisel and a mallet. Throw the whole mass into the furnace, and the metal will come out separated from the dross. Get up the heat, and the light, which is the consequence of the heat, will take care of itself. 'In the Lord' ye shall be 'light.'

Is Deborah's aspiration fulfilled about me? Let each of us ask that. 'As the sun when he goeth forth in his strength'—would anybody say that about my Christian character? Why not? Only because the springs have run low within is the stream low through the meadows. Only because the love is cold is the light feeble.

There is another thought here. There is power in sunlight as well as radiance. On that truth the prophetess especially lays a finger; 'as the sun when he goeth forth in his *strength*.' She did not know what we know, that solar energy is the source of all energy on this earth, and that, just as in the deepest spiritual analysis 'there is no power but of God,' so in the material region we may say that the only force is the force of the sun, which not only stimulates vegetation and brings light and warmth—as the pre-scientific prophetess knew—but in a hundred other ways, unknown to her and known to modern science, is the author of all change, the parent of all life, and the reservoir of all energy.

So we come to this thought: The true love of God is no weak, sentimental thing, such as narrow and sectional piety has often represented it to be, but it is a power which will invigorate the whole of a man, and make him strong and manly as well as gentle and gracious; being, indeed, the parent of all the so-called heroic and of all the so-called saintly virtues.

The sun 'goeth forth in his strength,' rushing through the heavens to the zenith. As one of the other editions of this metaphor in the Old Testament has it, 'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more until the noontide of the day.' That light, indeed, declines, but that fact does not come into view in the metaphor of the progressive growth towards perfection of the man in whom is the all-conquering might of the true love of Jesus Christ.

Note the context of these words of our text, which, I said, presents so singular a contrast to them. It is a strange thing that so fierce a battle-chant should at the end settle down into such a sweet swan-song as this. It is a strange thing that in the same soul there should throb the delight in battle and almost the delight in murder, and these lofty thoughts. But let us learn the lesson that true love to God means hearty hatred of God's enemy, and that it will always have to be militant and sometimes stern and what people call fierce. Amidst the amenities and sentimentalities of modern life there is much necessity for remembering that

the Apostle of love was a 'son of thunder,' and that it was the lips which summoned Israel to the fight, and chanted hymns of triumph over the corpses borne down by the rushing Kishon, which also said: 'Let them that love Him be as the sun when he shineth forth in his strength.' If you love God, you will surely be a strong man as well as an emotional and affectionate Christian.

That energy is to be continuous and progressive. The sun that Deborah saw day by day spring from his station in the east, and climb to his height in the heavens, and ray down his beams, has been doing that for millions of years, and it will probably keep doing it for uncounted periods still. And so the Christian man, with continuity unbroken and progressive brilliance and power, should shine 'more and more till the unsetting noontide of the day.'

III. That brings me to the last thought, which passes beyond the limits of the prophetic vision. Here is a prophecy of which the utterer was unaware.

There is a contrast drawn in the words of our text and in those immediately preceding. "So," says Deborah, after the fierce description of the slaughter of Sisera—"So let all Thine enemies perish, O Lord! but let them that love Thee be as the sun when he shineth in his strength.' She contrasts the transiency of the lives that pit themselves against God with the perpetuity that belongs to those which are in harmony with Him. The truth goes further than she probably knew; certainly further than she was thinking when she chanted these words. Let us widen them by other words which use the same metaphor, and say, 'they that be wise'—that is a shallower word than 'them that love Thee'—'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.' Let us widen and deepen them by sacred words still; for Jesus Christ laid hold of this old metaphor, and said, describing the time when all the enemies shall have perished, and the weeds have been flung out of the vineyard, 'Then shall the righteous shine forth like the sun, in the Kingdom of their Father,' with a brilliancy that will fill heaven with new splendours, bright beyond all that we see here amidst the thick atmosphere and mists and clouds of the present life!

Nor need we stop even there, for Jesus Christ not only laid hold of this metaphor in order to describe the eternal glory of the children of the Kingdom, but at the last time that human eyes on earth saw Him, the glorified Man Christ Jesus is thus described: 'His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.' Love always tends to likeness; and love to Christ will bring conformity with Him. The perfect love of heaven will issue in perfect and perpetual assimilation to Him. Science tells us that the light of the sun probably comes from its contraction; and that that process of contraction will go on until, at some point within the bounds of time, though far beyond the measure of our calculations, the sun himself shall die, the ineffectual beams will be pale, and there will be a black orb, with neither life nor light nor power. And then, then, and after that for ever, 'they that love Him' shall continue to be as that dead sun once was, when he went forth in his hot might.

## GIDEON'S ALTAR

'Then Gideon built an altar there unto the Lord, and called it Jehovah-shalom [God is peace].'—[JUDGES vi. 24](#).

I need not tell over again, less vividly, the picturesque story in this chapter, of the simple husbandman up in the hills, engaged furtively in threshing out a little wheat in some hollow in the rock where he might hide it from the keen eyes of the oppressors; and of how the angel of the Lord, unrecognised at first, appeared to him; and gradually there dawned upon his mind the suspicion of who He was who spoke. Then follow the offering, the discovery by fire, the shrinking of the man from contact with the divine, the wonderfully tranquillizing and condescending assurance, cast into the form of the ordinary salutation of domestic life: 'And the Lord said unto him Peace be unto thee!'—as any man might have said to any other—'fear not! thou shalt not die.' Then Gideon piles up the unhewn stones on the hillside into a rude altar, apparently not for the purpose of offering sacrifice, but for a monument, to which is given this strange name, strange upon such warrior lips, and strange in contemplation of the fierce conflict into which he was immediately to plunge, 'the Lord is peace.'

How I think that this name, imposed for such a reason and under such circumstances, may teach us a good many things.

I. The first thing that it seems to me to suggest is the great discovery which this man had made, and in the rapture of which he named his altar,—that the sight of God is *not* death, but life and peace.

Gideon was a plain, rude man, with no very deep religious experience. Apparently up to the moment of this vision he had been contentedly tolerating the idolatrous practices which had spread over all the country. He had heard of 'Jehovah.' It was a name, a tradition, which his fathers had told him. That was all that he knew of the God of Israel. Into this hearsay religion, as in a flash, while Gideon is busy about his threshing floor, thinking of his wheat or of the misery of his nation, there comes, all at once, this crushing conviction,—'the *hearsay* God is beside you, speaking to you! You have personal relations to Him, He is nearer you than any human being is, He is no mere Name, here He stands!'

And whenever the lightning edge of a conviction like that cuts its way through the formalisms and traditionalisms and hearsay repetitions of conventional religion, then there comes what came to Gideon, the swift thought, 'And if this be true, if I really do touch, and am touched by, that living Person whose name is Jehovah, what is to become of me? Shall I not shrivel up when His fiery finger is laid upon me? I have seen Him face to face, and I must die.'

I believe that, in the case of the vast majority of men, the first living, real apprehension of a real, living God is accompanied with a shock, and has mingled with it something of awe, and even of terror. Were there no sin there would be no fear, and pure hearts would open in silent blessedness and yield their sweetest fragrance of love and adoration, when



shone on by Him, as flowers do to the kiss of the sunbeams. But, taking into account the sad and universal fact of sin, it is inevitable that men should shrink from the Light which reveals their evil, and that the consciousness of God's presence should strike a chill. It is sad that it should be so. But it is sadder still when it is not so, but when, as is sometimes the case, the sight of God produces no sense of sin, and no consciousness of discord, or foreboding of judgment. For, only through that valley of the shadow of death lies the path to the happy confidence of peace with God, and unless there has been trembling at the beginning, there will be no firm and reasonable trust afterwards.

For Gideon's terror opened the way for the gracious proclamation, which would have been needless but for it—'Peace be unto thee; fear not, thou shalt not die.'

The sight of God passes from being a fear to a joy, from being a fountain of death to a spring of life, Terror is turned to tranquil trust. The narrow and rough path of conscious unworthiness leads to the large place of happy peace. The divine word fits Gideon's condition, and corresponds to his then deepest necessity; and so he drinks it in as the thirsty ground drinks in the water; and in the rapture of the discovery that the Name, that had come down from his fathers to him, was the Name of a real Person, with whom he stood in real relationships, and those of simple friendship and pure amity, he piles up the rough stones of the place, and makes the name of his altar the echo of the divine voice. It is as if he had said with rapture of surprise, 'Then Jehovah *is* peace; which I never dreamed of before.'

Dear friends, do you know anything of such an experience? Can you build your altar, and give it this same name? Can you write upon the memorial of your experiences, 'The Lord is my peace'? Have you passed from hearsay into personal contact? Can you say, 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee'? Do you know the further experience expressed in the subsequent words of the same quotation: 'Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes'? And have you passed out of that stormy ocean of terror and self-condemnation into the quiet haven of trust in Him in whom we have peace with God, where your little boat lies quiet, moored for ever to the Rock of Ages, to 'Jehovah, who is Peace'?

In connection with this rapturous discovery, and to Gideon strange new thought, we may gather the lesson that peace with God will give peace in all the soul. The 'peace with God' will pass into a wider thing, the 'peace of God.' There is tranquillity in trust. There is rest in submission. There is repose in satisfied desires. When we live near Him, and have ceased from our own works, and let Him take control of us and direct us in all our ways, then the storms abate. The things that disturb us are by no means so much external as inward; and there is a charm and a fascination in the thought, 'the Lord is peace,' which stills the inward tempest, and makes us quiet, waiting upon His will and drawing in His grace. The secret of rest is to cease from self, from self as guide, from self as aim, from self as safety. And when self-will is cast out, and self-dependence is overcome, and self-reliance is sublimed

into hanging upon God's hand, and when He, not mine own inclination, is my Director, and the Arbiter of my fate, then all the fever of unrest is swept wholly out of my heart, and there is nothing left in it on which the gnawing tooth of anxiety or of care can prey. God being my peace, and I yielding myself to Him, 'in quietness and confidence' is my 'strength.' 'Thou shalt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed upon Thee, because he trusteth in Thee.'

II. We may look upon this inscription from another point of view, as suggesting the thought that God's peace is the best preparation for, and may be experienced in the midst of, the intensest conflict.

Remember what the purpose of this vision was,—to raise up a man to fight an almost desperate fight, no metaphorical war, but one with real sharp swords, against real strong enemies. The first blow in the campaign was to be struck that night. Gideon was being summoned by the vision, to long years of hardship and bitter warfare, and his preparation for the conflict consisted largely in the revelation to his inmost spirit that 'Jehovah is peace.' We might rather have looked for a manifestation of the divine nature as ready to go forth to battle with the raw levies of timid peasants. We should have expected the thought which inspired their captain to have been 'The Lord is a man of war,' rather than 'The Lord is peace.' But it is not so—and therein lies the deep truth that the peace of God is the best preparation for strife. It gives courage, it leaves the heart at leisure to fling all its power into the conflict, it inspires with the consciousness of a divine ally. As Paul puts it, in his picture of the fully-armed Christian soldier, the feet are 'shod with the preparedness of alacrity which is produced by the gospel of peace.' That will make us 'ready, aye ready' for the roughest march, and enable us to stand firm against the most violent charges of the enemy. There is no such preparation for the conflict of life, whether it be waged against our own inward evil, or against opposing forces without, as to have deep within the soul the settled and substantial peace of God. If we are to come out of the battle with victory sitting on our helmets, we must go into it with the Dove of God brooding in our hearts. As the Lord said to Gideon, 'Go in *this* thy might, and thou shalt save Israel, . . . have not I sent thee?'

But, besides this thought that the knowledge of Jehovah as peace fits us for strife, that hastily-reared altar with its seemingly inappropriate name, may remind us that it is possible, in the midst of the deadliest hand-to-hand grip with evil, and whilst fighting the 'good fight of faith' with the most entire self-surrender to the divine will, to bear within us, deeper than all the surface strife, that inward tranquillity which knows no disturbance, though the outward life is agitated by fierce storms. Deep in the centre of the ocean the waters lie quiet, though the wildest tempests are raging above, and the fiercest currents running. Over the tortured and plunging waters of the cataract there lies unmoving, though its particles are in perpetual flux, the bow of promise and of peace. So over all the rush and thunder of life there may stretch, radiant and many-coloured, and dyed with beauty by the very sun himself, the

abiding bow of beauty, the emblem and the reality of the divine tranquillity. The Christian life is continual warfare, but in it all, 'the peace of God which passeth understanding' may 'garrison our hearts and minds.' In the inmost keep of the castle, though the storm of war may be breaking against the walls, there will be a quiet chamber where no noise of the archers can penetrate, and the shouts of the fight are never heard. Let us seek to live in the 'secret place of the Most High'; and in still communion with Him, keep our inmost souls in quiet, while we bravely front difficulties and enemies. You are to be God's warriors; see to it that on every battlefield there stands the altar 'Jehovah Shalom.'

III. Lastly, we may draw yet another lesson, and say that that altar, with its significant inscription, expressed the aim of the conflict and the hope which sustains in the fight.

Gideon was fighting for peace, and what he desired was that victory should bring tranquillity. The hope which beckoned him on, when he flung himself into his else desperate enterprise, was that God would so prosper his work that the swords might be beaten into ploughshares, and the spears into pruning hooks. Which things may stand as an allegory, and suggest to us that the Christian warfare, whilst it rests upon, and is prompted by, the revelation of God who is peace, aims in all its blows, at the conquering of that sure and settled peace which shall be broken by no rebellious outbursts of self-will, nor by any risings of passions and desires. The aim of our warfare should ever be that the peace of God may be throned in our hearts, and sit there a gentle queen. The true tranquillity of the blessed life is the prize of conflict. David, 'the man of war from his youth,' prepares the throne for Solomon, in whose reign no alarms of war are heard. If you would enter into peace, you must fight your way to it, and every step of the road must be a battle. The land of peace is won by the good fight of faith.

But Gideon's altar not only expressed his purpose in his taking up arms, but his confidence of accomplishing it, based upon the assurance that the Lord would give peace. It was a trophy erected before the fight, and built, not by arrogant presumption or frivolous underestimate of the enemy's strength, but by humble reliance on the power of that Lord who had promised His presence, and had assured triumph. So the hope that named this altar was the hope that war meant victory, and that victory would bring peace. That hope should animate every Christian soldier. Across the dust of the conflict, the fair vision of unbroken and eternal peace should gleam before each of us, and we should renew fainting strength and revive drooping courage by many a wistful gaze.

We may realise that hope in large measure here. But its fulfilment is reserved for the land of peace which we enter by the last conflict with the last enemy.

Every Christian man's gravestone is an altar on which is written 'Our God is peace'; in token that the warrior has passed into the land where 'violence shall no more be heard, wasting, nor destruction within its borders,' but all shall be deep repose, and the unarmed, because unattacked, peace of tranquil communion with, and likeness to, 'Jehovah our Peace.'

So, dear brethren, let us pass from tradition and hearsay into personal intercourse with God, and from shrinking and doubt into the sunshine of the conviction that He is our peace. And then, with His tranquillity in our hearts let us go out, the elect apostles of the peace of God, and fight for Him, after the pattern of the Captain of our salvation, who had to conquer peace through conflict; and was 'first of all King of Righteousness, and *after that* also King of Peace.'

## GIDEON'S FLEECE

'Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that Thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as Thou hast said.'—[JUDGES vi. 37](#).

The decisive moment had come when Gideon, with his hastily gathered raw levies, was about to plunge down to the plain to face immensely superior forces trained to warfare. No wonder that the equally untrained leader's heart beat faster. Many a soldier, who will be steadfastly brave in the actual shock of battle, has tremors and throbbings on its eve. Gideon's hand shook a little as he drew his sword.

### I. Gideon's request.

His petition for a sign was not the voice of unbelief or of doubt or of presumption, but in it spoke real, though struggling faith, seeking to be confirmed. Therefore it was not regarded by God as a sin. When a 'wicked and adulterous generation asked for a sign,' no sign was given it, but when faith asks for one to help it to grasp God's hand, and to go on His warfare in His strength and as His instrument, it does not ask in vain.

Gideon's prayer was wrapped, as it were, in an enfolding promise, for it is preceded and followed by the quotation of words of the Angel of the Lord who had 'looked on him,' and said, 'Go in this thy might and save Israel from the hand of Midian: have not I sent thee?' Prayers that begin and end with 'as Thou hast spoken' are not likely to be repulsed.

### II. God's answer.

God wonderfully allows Gideon to dictate the nature of the sign. He stoops to work it both ways, backwards and forwards, as it were. First the fleece is to be wet and the ground to be dry, then the fleece is to be dry and the ground wet. Miracle was a necessary accompaniment of revelation in those early days, as picture-books are of childhood. But, though we are far enough from being 'men' in Christ, yet we have not the same need for 'childish things' as Gideon and his contemporaries had. We have Christ and the Spirit, and so have a 'word made more sure' than to require signs. But still it is true that the same gracious willingness to help a tremulous faith, which carries its tremulousness to God in prayer, moves the Father's heart to-day, and that to such petitions the answer is given even before they are offered: 'Ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.' No sign that eyes can see is given, but inward whispers speak assurance and communicate the assurance which they speak.

### III. The meaning of the sign.

Many explanations have been offered. The main point is that the fleece is to be made different from the soil around it. It is to be a proof of God's power to endow with characteristics not derived from, and resulting in qualities unlike, the surroundings.

Gideon had no thought of any significance beyond that. But we may allowably let the Scripture usage of the symbol of dew influence our reading into the symbol a deeper meaning than it bore to him.

God makes the fleece wet with dew, while all the threshing-floor is dry. Dew is the symbol of divine grace, of the silently formed moisture which, coming from no apparent source, freshens by night the wilted plants, and hangs in myriad drops, that twinkle into green and gold as the early sunshine strikes them, on the humblest twig. That grace is plainly not a natural product nor to be accounted for by environment. The dew of the Spirit, which God and God only, can give, can freshen our worn and drooping souls, can give joy in sorrow, can keep us from being touched by surrounding evils, and from being parched by surrounding drought, can silently 'distil' its supplies of strength according to our need into our else dry hearts.

The wet fleece on the dry ground was not only a revelation of God's power, but may be taken as a pattern of what God's soldiers must ever be. A prophet long after Gideon said: 'The remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples as dew from the Lord,' bringing to others the grace which they have received that they may diffuse it, and turning the dry and thirsty land where no water is into fertility, and the 'parched ground' into a 'pool.'

We have said that the main point of Gideon's petition was that the fleece should be made unlike the threshing-floor, and that that unlikeness, which could obviously not be naturally brought about, was to be to him the sure token that God was at work to produce it. The strongest demonstration that the Church can give the world of its really being God's Church is its unlikeness to the world. If it is wet with divine dew when all the threshing-floor is dry, and if, when all the floor is drenched with poisonous miasma, it is dry from the diffused and clinging malaria, the world will take knowledge of it, and some souls be set to ask how this unlikeness comes. When Haman has to say: 'There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples . . . and their laws are diverse from those of every people,' he may meditate murder, but 'many from among the people of the land' will join their ranks. Gideon may or may not have thought of the fleece as a symbol of his little host, but we may learn from it the old lesson, 'Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds.'

### **'FIT, THOUGH FEW'**

'Then Jerubbaal, who is Gideon, and all the people that were with him, rose up early, and pitched beside the well of Harod: so that the host of the Midianites were on the north side of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley. 2. And the Lord said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against Me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me. 3. Now therefore go to, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead. And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand. 4. And the Lord said unto Gideon, The people are yet too many; bring them down unto the water, and I will try them for thee there: and it shall be, that of whom I say unto thee, This shall go with thee, the same shall go with thee; and of whomsoever I say unto thee. This shall not go with thee, the same shall not go. 5. So he brought down the people unto the water: and the Lord said unto Gideon, Every one that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise every one that boweth down upon his knees to drink. 6. And the number of them that lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, were three hundred men: but all the rest of the people bowed down upon their knees to drink water. 7. And the Lord said unto Gideon, By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand: and let all the other people go every man unto his place. 8. So the people took victuals in their hand, and their trumpets: and he sent all the rest of Israel every man unto his tent, and retained those three hundred men. And the host of Midian was beneath him in the valley.'—[JUDGES vii. 1-8](#).

Gideon is the noblest of the judges. Courage, constancy, and caution are strongly marked in his character. The youngest son of an obscure family in a small tribe, he humbly shrinks from the task imposed on him,—not from cowardice or indolence, but from conscious weakness. Men who are worthy to do such work as his are never forward to begin it, nor backward in it when they are sure that it is God's will. He began his war against Midian by warring against Baal, whose worship had brought the oppressor. If any thorough deliverance from the misery which departure from God has wrought is to be effected, we must destroy the idols before we attack the spoilers. Cast out sin, and you cast out sorrow. So he first earns his new name of Jerubbaal ('Let Baal plead'), and is known as Baal's antagonist, before he blows the trumpet of revolt. The name is an omen of victory. The hand that had smitten the idol, and had not been withered, would smite Midian. Therefore that new name is used in this chapter, which tells of the preparations for the fight and its triumphant issue. From his home among the hills, he had sent the fiery cross to the three northern tribes, who had been the mainstay of Deborah's victory, and who now rallied around Gideon to the number of thirty-two thousand. The narrative shows us the two armies confronting each other on the opposite slopes of the valley of Jezreel, where it begins to dip steeply towards the Jordan.

Gideon and his men are on the south side of the valley, above the fountain of Harod, or 'Trembling,' apparently so called from the confessed terror which thinned his army. The word 'is afraid,' in [verse 3](#), comes from the same root. On the other side of the glen, not far from the site of the Philistine camp on the day of Saul's last defeat, lay the far-stretching camp of the invaders, outnumbering Israel by four to one. For seven years these Midianite marauders had paralysed Israel, and year by year had swarmed up this valley from the eastern desert, and thence by the great plain had penetrated into every corner of the land, as far south as Gaza, devouring like locusts. It is the same easy route by which, to this day, the Bedouin find their way into Palestine, whenever the weak Turkish Government is a little weaker or more corrupt than usual. Apparently, the Midianites were on their homeward march, laden with spoil, and very contemptuous of the small force across the valley, who, on their part, had not shaken off their terror of the fierce nomads who had used them as they pleased for seven years.

I. Note, as the first lesson taught here, the divinely appointed disproportion between means and end, and its purpose. Many an Israelite would look across to the long lines of black tents, and think, 'We are too few for our task'; but to God's eye they were too many, and the first necessity was to weed them out. The numbers must be so reduced that the victory shall be unmistakably God's, not theirs. The same sort of procedure, and for the same reason, runs through all God's dealings. It is illustrated in a hundred Scripture instances, and is stated most plainly by Paul in his triumphant eloquence. He revels in telling how foolish, weak, base things, that are *no* things in the world's estimate, have been chosen to cover with shame wise, strong, honoured things, which seem to be somewhat; and he gives the same reason as our lesson does, 'that no flesh should glory in His presence.' Eleven poor men on one side, and all the world on the other, made fearful odds. The more unevenly matched are the respective forces, the more plainly does the victory of the weaker demand for its explanation the intervention of God. The old sneer, that 'Providence is always on the side of the strongest battalions,' is an audacious misreading of history, and is the very opposite of the truth. It is the weak battalions which win in the long run, for the history of every good cause is the same. First, it kindles a fire in the hearts of two or three nobodies, who are burned in earlier times, and laughed at as fools, fanatics, impracticable dreamers, in later ages, but whose convictions grow till, one day, the world wakes up to find that everybody believes them, and then it 'builds the tombs of the prophets.'

Why should God desire that there shall be no mistake as to who wins the battle? The answer may very easily be so given as to make what is really a token of His love become an unlovely and repellent trait in His character. It is not eagerness for praise that moves Him, but longing that men may have the blessedness of recognising His hand fighting for them. It is for Israel's sake that He is so solicitous to deliver them from the delusion of their having won the victory. It is because He loves us and would fain have us made restful, confident,



and strong, in the assurance of His fighting for us, that He takes pains so to order the history of His Church in the world, that it is one long attestation of the omnipotence of weakness when His power flows through it. To say 'Mine own hand hath saved me,' is to lose unspeakable peace and blessing; to say 'Not I, but the grace of God in me,' is to be serene and of good cheer in the face of outnumbering foes, and sure of victory in all conflicts. Therefore God is careful to save us from self-gratulation and self-confidence.

One lesson we may learn from this thinning of the ranks; namely, that we need not be anxious to count heads, when we are sure that we are doing His work, nor even be afraid of being in a minority. Minorities are generally right when they are the apostles of new thoughts, though the minorities which cleave to some old fossil are ordinarily wrong. The prophet and his man were alone and ringed around with enemies, when he said, 'They that be with us are more than they that be with them'; and yet he was right, for the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire. Let us be sure that we are on God's side, and then let us not mind how few are in the ranks with us, nor be afraid, though the far-extended front of the enemy threatens to curl around our flanks and enclose us. The three hundred heroes had God with them, and that was enough.

II. Note the self-applied test of courage which swept away so much chaff. According to [Deuteronomy xx. 8](#), the standing enactment was that such a proclamation as that in [verse 3](#) should precede every battle. Much difficulty has been raised about the mention of Mount Gilead here, as the only Mount Gilead otherwise mentioned in Scripture lay to the east of Jordan. But perhaps the simplest solution is the true one,-that there was another hilly region so named on the western side. The map of the Palestine Exploration Fund attaches the name to the northern slopes of the western end of Gilboa, where Gideon was now encamped, and that is probably right. Be that as it may, the effect of the proclamation was startling. Two-thirds of the army melted away. No doubt, many who had flocked to Gideon's standard felt their valour oozing out at their finger ends, when they came close to the enemy, and saw their long array across the valley. It must have required some courage to confess being afraid, but the cowards were numerous enough to keep each other in countenance. Two out of three were panic-struck. I wonder if the proportion would be less in Christ's army to-day, if professing Christians were as frank as Gideon's men?

Why were the 'fearful' dismissed? Because fear is contagious; and, in undisciplined armies like Gideon's, panic, once started, spreads swiftly, and becomes frenzied confusion. The same thing is true in the work of the Church to-day. Who that has had much to do with guiding its operations has not groaned over the dead weight of the timid and sluggish souls, who always see difficulties and never the way to get over them? And who that has had to lead a company of Christian men has not often been ready to wish that he could sound out Gideon's proclamation, and bid the 'fearful and afraid' take away the chilling encumbrance

of their presence, and leave him with thinned ranks of trusty men? Cowardice, dressed up as cautious prudence, weakens the efficiency of every regiment in Christ's army.

Another reason for getting rid of the fearful is that fear is the opposite of faith, and that therefore, where it is uppermost, the door by which God's power can enter to strengthen is closed. Not that faith must be free of all admixture of fear, but that it must subdue fear, if a man is to be God's warrior, fighting in His strength. Many a tremor would rock the hearts of the ten thousand who remained, but they so controlled their terror that it did not overcome their faith. We do not need, for our efficiency in Christ's service, complete exemption from fear, but we do need to make the psalmist's resolve ours: 'I will trust, and not be afraid.' Terror shuts the door against the entrance of the grace which makes us conquerors, and so fulfils its own forebodings; faith opens the door, and so fulfils its own confidences.

III. Note the final test. God required but few men, but He required that these should be fit. The first test had sifted out the brave and willing. The liquor was none the less, though so much froth had been blown off. As Thomas Fuller says, there were 'fewer persons, but not fewer men,' after the poltroons had disappeared. The second test, 'a purgatory of water,' as the same wise and witty author calls it, was still more stringent. The dwindled ranks were led down from their camp on the slopes to the fountain and brook which lay in the valley near the Midianites' camp. Gideon alone seems to have known that a test was to be applied there; but he did not know what it was to be till they reached the spring, and the soldiers did not know that they were determining their fate when they drank. The two ways of drinking clearly indicated a difference in the men. Those who glued their lips to the stream and swilled till they were full, were plainly more self-indulgent, less engrossed with their work, less patient of fatigue and thirst, than those who caught up enough in their curved palms to moisten their lips without stopping in their stride or breaking rank. The former test was self-applied, and consciously so. This is no less self-applied, though unconsciously. God shuts out no man from His army, but men shut themselves out; sometimes knowingly, by avowed disinclination for the warfare, sometimes unknowingly, by self-indulgent habits, which proclaim their unfitness.

The great lesson taught here is that self-restraint in the use of the world's goods is essential to all true Christian warfare. There are two ways of looking at and partaking of these. We may either 'drink for strength' or 'for drunkenness'. Life is to some men first a place for strenuous endeavour, and only secondly a place of refreshment. Such think of duty first and of water afterwards. To them, all the innocent joys and pleasures of the natural life are as brooks by the way, of which Christ's soldier should drink, mainly that he may be re-invigorated for conflict. There are others whose conception of life is a scene of enjoyment, for which work is unfortunately a necessary but disagreeable preliminary. One does not often see such a character in its pure perfection of sensualism; but plenty of approximations to it are visible, and ugly sights they are. The roots of it are in us all; and it cannot be too strongly

insisted on that, unless it be subdued, we cannot enlist in Christ's army, and shall never be counted worthy to be His instruments. Such self-restraint is especially needful to be earnestly inculcated on young men and women, to whom life is opening as if it were a garden of delight, whose passions are strong, whose sense is keen, whose experience is slender, and to whom all earth's joys appeal more strongly than they do to those who have drunk of the cup, and know how bitter is its sediment. It is especially needful to be pealed into the ears of a generation like ours, in which senseless luxury, the result of wealth which has increased faster than the power of rightly using it, has attained such enormous proportions, and is threatening, in commercial communities especially, to drown all noble aspirations, and Spartan simplicity, and Christian self-devotion, in its muddy flood. Surely never was Gideon's test more wanted for the army of the Lord of hosts than it is to-day.

Such self-restraint gives double sweetness to enjoyments, which, when partaken of more freely, pall on the jaded palate. 'The full soul loatheth a honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.' The senses are kept fine-edged, and the rare holidays are sweeter because they are rare. The most refined prudence of the mere sensualist would prescribe the same regimen as the Christian moralist does. But from how different a motive! Christ calls for self-restraint that we may be fit organs for His power, and bids us endure hardness that we may be good soldiers of His. If we know anything of the true sweetness of His fellowship and service, it will not be hard to drink sparingly of earthly fountains, when we have the river of His pleasures to drink from; nor will it be painful sacrifice to cast away imitation jewels, in order to clasp in our hands the true riches of His love and imparted life.

### **A BATTLE WITHOUT A SWORD**

‘And when Gideon was come, behold, there was a man that told a dream unto his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley-bread tumbled into the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along. 14. And his fellow answered and said, This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host. 15. And it was so, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream, and the interpretation thereof, that he worshipped, and returned into the host of Israel, and said, Arise; for the Lord hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian. 16. And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet in every man’s hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers. 17. And he said unto them, Look on me, and do likewise: and, behold, when I come to the outside of the camp, it shall be, that as I do, so shall ye do. 18. When I blow with a trumpet, I and all that are with me, then blow ye the trumpets also on every side of all the camp, and say, The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon. 19. So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands. 20. And the three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal: and they cried, The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon. 21. And they stood every man in his place round about the camp: and all the host ran, and cried, and fled. 22. And the three hundred blew the trumpets, and the Lord set every man’s sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host: and the host fled to Beth-shittah in Zererath, and to the border of Abel-meholah, unto Tabbath. 23. And the men of Israel gathered themselves together out of Naphtali, and out of Asher, and out of all Manasseh, and pursued after the Midianites.’—[JUDGES vii. 13-23](#).

To reduce thirty-two thousand to three hundred was a strange way of preparing for a fight; and, no doubt, the handful left felt some sinking of their courage when they looked on their own small number and then on the widespread Midianite host. Gideon, too, would need heartening. So the first thing to be noted is the encouragement given him. God strengthens faith when it needs strengthening, and He has many ways of doing so. Note that Gideon’s visit to the Midianite camp was on ‘the same night’ on which his little band was left alone after the ordeal by water. How punctually to meet our need, when it begins to be felt, does God’s help come! It was by God’s command that he undertook the daring adventure of stealing down to the camp. We can fancy how silently he and Phurah crept down the hillside, and, with hushed breath and wary steps, lest they should stumble on and wake some sleeper, or even rouse some tethered camel, picked their way among the tents. But they had God’s command and promise, and these make men brave, and turn what would

else be foolhardy into prudence. Ho put his ear to the black camel's-hair wall of one tent, and heard what his faith could not but recognise as God's message to him.

The soldier's dream was just such as such a man would dream in such circumstances. A round loaf of barley (the commonest kind of bread) was dreamed of as rolling down from a height and upsetting *'the tent.'* The use of the definite article seems to point to some particular tent, perhaps simply the one in which the dreamer lay, or perhaps the general's; but the noun may be used as a collective, and what is meant may be that the loaf went through the camp, overturning all the tents in its way. The interpretation needed no Daniel, but the immediate explanation given, shows not only the transparency of the symbol, but the dread in the Midianite ranks of Gideon's prowess. A nameless awe, which goes far to produce the defeat it dreads, was beginning to creep over them. It finds utterance both in the dream and in its translation. The tiny loaf worked effects disproportioned to its size. A rock thundering down the hillside might have mass and momentum enough to level a line of tents, but one poor loaf to do it! Some mightier than human hand must have set it going on its career. So the soldier interprets that God had delivered the army into Gideon's hand.

This dream suggests two or three considerations. In several instances we find God speaking to those outside Israel by dreams; for example, to Pharaoh and his two officers, Nebuchadnezzar, Pilate's wife. It is the lowest form of divine communication, and, like other lower forms, is not to be looked for when the higher teaching of the Spirit of Christ is open to us all.

Again, while both dream and interpretation might be accounted for on simply natural grounds, a deeper insight into the so-called 'natural' brings us to see it as all penetrated by the operations of the ever-present God. And the coincidences which brought Gideon to just that tent among the thousands along the valley at just the moment when the two startled sleepers were talking, might well strike Gideon, as they did, as being God's own fulfilment of the promise that 'what they say' would strengthen his hands for the attack (v. 11).

Further, Gideon had already had the sign of the fleece and the dew; but God does not disdain to let him have an additional encouragement, and to let him draw confirmation of his own token from the talk of two Midianites. Faith may be buttressed by men's words, albeit its only foundation is God's.

Gideon has a place in the muster-roll of heroes of faith in [Hebrews xi.](#), and his whole conduct in this incident proves his right to stand there. 'He worshipped,' for his soul went out in trust to God, whose voice he heard through the two Midianites, and bowed in thankfulness and submissive obedience. There could be no outward worship there, with an army of sleepers close by, but the silent uplifting of confidence and desire reaches God and strengthens the man. So he went back with new assurance of victory, and roused his sleeping band.

Mark his words as another token of his faith. The Midianite interpreter had said, 'God has delivered'; Gideon says, 'The *Lord* has delivered.' The former name is the more general, and is natural on the lips of a heathen; the latter is the covenant name, and to use it implies reliance on the Jehovah revealed by His acts to Israel. The Midianite had said that the host was delivered into Gideon's hand; he says that it is delivered into the hands of the three hundred, suppressing himself and honouring them. God's soldiers must be willing to 'esteem others better than themselves,' and to fight for God's glory, not their own. The Midianite had said, 'This is . . . the sword of Gideon'; he bid his men cry 'the sword of *the Lord, and* of Gideon.' It was God's cause for which they were contending, not his; and yet it was his, inasmuch as he was God's instrument. 'Excellent mixture,' says Thomas Fuller, 'both joined together; admirable method, God put in the first place. Where divine blessing leads up the van, and man's valour brings up the battle, must not victory needs follow in the rear?'

Gideon does not seem to have been divinely directed to the stratagem by which the Midianites were thrown into panic. He had been promised victory, but that does not lead him to idle waiting for fulfilment of the promise. 'To wait for God's performance in doing nothing is to abuse that divine providence, which will so work that it will not allow us to idle' (*Bishop Hall*). True faith will wisely adopt means to reach promised ends, and, having used brain and hand as if all depended on ourselves, will look to Him, as if nothing depended on us, but all on Him.

There was strong faith as well as daring and skilful generalship in leading down the three hundred, with no weapons but trumpets and pitchers, to close quarters with an armed enemy so superior in numbers. And did it not need some faith, too, not only in Gideon but in God, on the part of his band, to plunge down the hill on such an errand, each man with both his hands full, and so unable to strike a blow? The other three hundred at Thermopylae have been wept over and sung; were not these three hundred as true heroes? Let us not count heads when we are called on to take God's side. His soldiers are always in the minority, but, if He is reckoned in, the minority becomes the majority. 'They that be with us are more than they that be with them.'

One can fancy the sleepers starting up dazed by the sudden bray of the trumpets and the wild shout of that war-cry yelled from every side. As they stumbled out of their tents, without leaders, without knowledge of the numbers of their foe, and saw all around the flaring torches, and heard the trumpet-blasts, which seemed to speak of an immense attacking force, no wonder that panic shook them, and they fled. Huge mobs of undisciplined men, as Eastern armies are, and these eminently were, are especially liable to such infectious alarms; and the larger the force, the faster does panic spread, the more unmanageable does the army become, and the more fatal are the results. Each man reflects, and so increases, his neighbour's fear. 'Great armies, once struck with amazement, are like wounded whales. Give them but line enough, and the fishes will be the fishermen to catch themselves.'

So the host broke up in wild disorder, and hurried in fragments towards the Jordan fords, trampling each other down as they raced through the darkness, and each man, as he ran, dreading to feel the enemy's sword in his back next moment. 'The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous is bold as a lion.' Thus without stroke of weapon was the victory won. The battle was the Lord's.

And the story is not antiquated in substance, however the form of the contests which God's soldiers have to-day to fight has changed. Still it is true that we shall only wage war aright when we feel that it is His cause for which we contend, and His sword which wins the victory. If Gideon had put himself first in his warcry, or had put his own name only in it, the issue would have been different.

May we not also venture to apply the peculiar accoutrements of the victorious three hundred to ourselves? Christ's men have no weapons to wield but the sounding out from them, as from a trumpet, of the word of the Lord, and the light of a Christian life shining through earthen vessels. If we boldly lift up our voices in the ancient war-cry, and let that word peal forth from us, and flash the light of holy lives on a dark world, we may break the sleeper's slumbers to a glad waking, and win the noblest of victories by leading them to enlist in the army of our Captain, and to become partakers of His conquests by letting Him conquer, and thereby save them.

### **STRENGTH PROFANED AND LOST**

‘But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison-house. 22, Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven. 23. Then the lords of the Philistines gathered them together for to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god, and to rejoice: for they said, Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand. 24. And when the people saw him, they praised their god: for they said, Our god hath delivered into our hands our enemy, and the destroyer of our country, which slew many of us. 25. And it came to pass, when their hearts were merry, that they said, Call for Samson, that he may make us sport. And they called for Samson out of the prison-house; and he made them sport; and they set him between the pillars. 20. And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand. Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them. 27. Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport. 28. And Samson called unto the Lord, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Phillistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life. 31. Then his brethren and all the house of his father came down, and took him, and brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Ishtaol in the burying place of Munnah his father. And he judged Israel twenty years.’—**JUDGES xvi. 21-31.**

Nobody could be less like the ordinary idea of an Old Testament ‘saint’ than Samson. His gift from ‘the spirit of the Lord’ was simply physical strength, and it was associated with the defects of his qualities. His passions were strong, and apparently uncontrolled. He had no moral elevation or religious fervour. He led no army against the Philistines, nor seems to have had any fixed design of resisting them. He seeks a wife among them, and is ready to feast and play at riddles with them. When he does attack them, it is because he is stung by personal injuries; and it is only with his own arm that he strikes. His exploits have a mixture of grim humour and fierce hatred quite unlike anything else in Scripture, and more resembling the horse-play of Homeric or Norse heroes than the stern purpose and righteous wrath of a soldier who felt that he was God’s instrument. We seem to hear his loud laughter as he ties the firebrands to the struggling jackals, or swings the jaw-bone. A strange champion for Jehovah! But we must not leave out of sight, in estimating his character, the Nazarite vow, which his parents had made before his birth, and he had endorsed all his life.

That supplies the substratum which is lacking, The unshorn hair and the abstinence from wine were the signs of consecration to God, which might often fail of reaching the deepest recesses of the will and spirit, but still was real, and gave the point of contact for the



divine gift of strength. Samson's strength depended on his keeping the vow, of which the outward sign was the long, matted locks; and therefore, when he let these be shorn, he voluntarily cast away his dependence on and consecration to God, and his strength ebbed from him. He had broken the conditions on which he received it, and it disappeared. So the story which connects the loss of his long hair with the loss of his superhuman power has a worthy meaning, and puts in a picturesque form an eternal truth.

We see here, first, Samson the prisoner. Milton has caught the spirit of the sad picture in [verses 21 and 22](#), in that wonderful line,

‘Eyeless, in Gaza, at the mill, with slaves,’

in which the clauses drop heavily like slow tears, each adding a new touch of woe. The savage manners of the times used the literal forcing out of the eyes from their sockets as the easiest way of reducing dangerous enemies to harmlessness. Pitiable as the loss was, Samson was better blind than seeing. The lust of the eye had led him astray, and the loss of his sight showed him his sin. Fetters of brass betrayed his jailers' dread of his possibly returning strength; and the menial task to which he was set was meant as a humiliation, in giving him woman's work to do, as if this were all for which the eclipsed hero was now fit. Generous enemies are merciful; the baser sort reveal their former terror by the indignities they offer to their prisoner.

In Samson we see an impersonation of Israel. Like him, the nation was strong so long as it kept the covenant of its God. Like him, it was ever prone to follow after strange loves. Its Delilahs were the gods of the heathen, in whose laps it laid its anointed head, and at whose hands it suffered the loss of its God-given strength; for, like Samson, Israel was weak when it forgot its consecration, and its punishment came from the objects of its infatuated desires. Like him, it was blinded, bound, and reduced to slavery, for all its power was held, as was his, on condition of loyalty to God. His life is as a mirror, in which the nation might see their own history reflected; and the lesson taught by the story of the captive hero, once so strong, and now so weak, is the lesson which Moses taught the nation: ‘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 which the Lord shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things, and He shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck’ ([Deut. xxviii. 47, 48](#)). The blind Samson, chained, at the mill, has a warning for us, too. That is what God's heroes come to, if once they prostitute the God-given strength to the base loves of self and the flattering world. We are strong only as we keep our hearts clear of lower loves, and lean on God alone. Delilah is most dangerous when honeyed words drop from her lips. The world's praise is more harmful than its censure. Its favours are only meant to draw the secret of our strength from us, that we may be made

weak; and nothing gives the Philistines so much pleasure as the sight of God's warriors caught in their toils and robbed of power.

But Samson's misery was Samson's blessedness. The 'howbeit' of [verse 22](#) is more than a compensation for all the wretchedness. The growth of his hair is not there mentioned as a mere natural fact, nor with the superstitious notion that his hair made him strong. God made him strong on condition of his keeping his vow of consecration. The long matted locks were the visible sign that he kept it. Their loss was the consequence of his own voluntary breach of it. So their growth was the visible token that the fault was being repaired. Chastisement wrought sorrow; and in the bondage of the prison he found freedom from the worse chains of sin, and in its darkness felt the dawning of a better light. As Bishop Hall puts it: 'His hair grew together with his repentance, and his strength with his hair.' The cruelties of the Philistines were better for him than their kindness. The world outwits itself when it presses hard on God's deserters, and thus drives them to repent. God mercifully takes care that His wandering children shall not have an easy time of it; and his chastisements, at their sharpest, are calls to us to come back to Him. Well for those, even if in chains, who know their meaning, and yield to it.

II. We have here Samson,—the occasion of godless triumph. The worst consequence of the fall of a servant of God is that it gives occasion for God's enemies to blaspheme, and reflects discredit on Him, as if He were vanquished. Samson's capture is Dagon's glory. The strife between Philistia and Israel was, in the eyes of both combatants, a struggle between their gods; and so the men of Gaza lit their sacrificial fires and sent up their hymns to their monstrous deity as victor. What would Samson's bitter thoughts be, as the sound of the wild rejoicings reached him in his prison? And is not all this true to-day? If ever some conspicuous Christian champion falls into sin or inconsistency, how the sky is rent with shouts of malicious pleasure! What paragons of virtue worldly men become all at once! How swiftly the conclusion is drawn that all Christians are alike, and none of them any better than the non-Christian world! How much more harm the one flaw does than all the good which a life of service has done! The faults of Christians are the bulwarks of unbelief. 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you.' The honour of Christ is a sacred trust, and it is in the keeping of us His followers. Our sins do not only darken our own reputation, but they cloud His. Dagon's worshippers have a right to rejoice when they have Samson safe in their prison, with his eyes out.

III. We have Samson made a buffoon for drunkards. The feasts of heathenism were wild orgies, very unlike the pure joy of the sacrificial meals in Jehovah's worship. Dagon's temple was filled with a drunken crowd, whose mirth would be made more boisterous by a spice of cruelty. So, a roar of many voices calls for Samson, and this deepest degradation is not spared him. The words employed for 'make sport' seem to require that we should understand that he was not brought out to be the passive object of their gibes and drunken mockery,

but was set to play the fool for their delectation. They imply that he had to dance and laugh, while three thousand gaping Philistines, any one of whom would have run for his life if he had been free, fed their hatred by the sight. Perhaps his former reputation for mirth and riddles suggested this new cruelty. Surely there is no more pathetic picture than that of the blind hero, with such thoughts as we know were seething in him, dragged out to make a Philistine holiday, and set to play the clown, while the bitterness of death was in his soul. And this is what God's soldiers come down to, when they forget Him: 'they that wasted us required of us mirth.'

Wearied with his humiliating exertions, the blind captive begs the boy who guided him to let him lean, till he can breathe again, on the pillars that held up the light roof. We need not discuss the probable architecture of Dagon's temple, of which we know nothing. Only we may notice that it is not said that there were only *two* pillars, but rather necessarily implied that there were more than two, for those against which he leaned were 'the two middle' ones. It is quite easy to understand how, if there were a row of them, knocking out the two strongest central ones would bring the whole thing down, especially when there was such a load on the flat roof. Apparently the principal people were in the best places on the ground floor, sheltered from the sun by the roof, on which the commonalty were clustered, all waiting for what their newly discovered mountebank would do next, after he had breathed himself. The pause was short, and they little dreamed of what was to follow.

IV. We have the last cry and heroic death of Samson. It is not to be supposed that his prayer was audible to the crowd, even if it were spoken aloud. It is not an elevated prayer, but is, like all the rest of his actions at their best, deeply marked with purely personal motives. The loss of his two eyes is uppermost in his mind, and he wants to be revenged for them. Instead of trying to make a lofty hero out of him, it is far better to recognise frankly the limitations of his character and the imperfections of his religion. The distance between him and the New Testament type of God's soldier measures the progress which the revelation of God's will has made, and the debt we owe to the Captain of the host for the perfect example which He has set. The defects and impurity of Samson's zeal, which yet was accepted of God, preach the precious lesson that God does not require virtues beyond the standard of the epoch of revelation at which His servants stand, and that imperfection does not make service unacceptable. If the merely human passion of vengeance throbbed fiercely in Samson's prayer, he had never heard 'Love your enemies'; and, for his epoch, the destruction of the enemies of God and Israel was duty. He was not the only soldier of God who has let personal antagonism blend with his zeal for God; and we have less excuse, if we do it, than he had.

But there is the true core of religion in the prayer. It is penitence which pleads, 'Remember me, O Lord God!' He knows that his sin has broken the flow of loving divine thought to him, but he asks that the broken current may be renewed. Many a silent tear had fallen from Samson's blind eyes, before that prayer could have come to his lips, as he leaned on

the great pillars. Clear recognition of the Source of his strength is in the prayer; if ever he had forgotten, in Delilah's lap, where it came from, he had recovered his conscious dependence amid the misery of the prison. There is humility in the prayer 'Only this once.' He feels that, after such a fall, no more of the brilliant exploits of former days are possible. They who have brought such despite on Jehovah and such honour to Dagon may be forgiven, and even restored to much of their old vigour, but they must not be judges in Israel any more. The best thing left for the penitent Samson is death.

He had been unconscious of the departure of his strength, but he seems to have felt it rushing back into his muscles; so he grasps the two pillars with his mighty hands; the crowd sees that the pause for breath is over, and prepares to watch the new feats. Perhaps we may suppose that his last words were shouted aloud, 'Let me die with the Philistines!' and before they have been rightly taken in by the mob, he sways himself backwards for a moment, and then, with one desperate forward push, brings down the two supports, and the whole thing rushes down to hideous ruin amid shrieks and curses and groans. But Samson lies quiet below the ruins, satisfied to die in such a cause.

He 'counted not his life dear' unto himself, that he might be God's instrument for God's terrible work. The last of the judges teaches us that we too, in a nobler cause, and for men's life, not their destruction, must be ready to hazard and give our lives for the great Captain, who in His death has slain more of our foes than He did in His life, and has laid it down as the law for all His army, 'He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.'

How beautifully the quiet close of the story follows the stormy scene of the riotous assembly and the sudden destruction. The Philistines, crushed by this last blow, let the dead hero's kindred search for his body amid the chaos, and bear it reverently up from the plain to the quiet grave among the hills of Dan, where Manoah his father slept. There they lay that mighty frame to rest. It will be troubled no more by fierce passions or degrading chains. Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it. The penitent heroism of its end makes us lenient to the flaws in its course; and we leave the last of the judges to sleep in his grave, recognising in him, with all his faults and grossness, a true soldier of God, though in strange garb.

**THE BOOK OF RUTH**

### A GENTLE HEROINE, A GENTILE CONVERT

‘And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: 17. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. 18. When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her. 19. So they two went until they came to Beth-lehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Beth-lehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi? 20. And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. 21. I went out full, And the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me? 22. So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Beth-lehem in the beginning of barley harvest.’—[RUTH i. 16-22](#).

The lovely idyl of *Ruth* is in sharp contrast with the bloody and turbulent annals of *Judges*. It completes, but does not contradict, these, and happily reminds us of what we are apt to forget in reading such pages, that no times are so wild but that in them are quiet corners, green oases, all the greener for their surroundings, where life glides on in peaceful isolation from the tumult. Men and women love and work and weep and laugh, the gossips of Bethlehem talk over Naomi’s return (‘they said,’ in [verse 19](#), is feminine), Boaz stands among his corn, and no sounds of war disturb them. Thank God! the blackest times were not so dismal in reality as they look in history. There are clefts in the grim rock, and flowers blooming, sheltered in the clefts. The peaceful pictures of this little book, multiplied many thousand times, have to be set as a background to the lurid pictures of the *Book of Judges*.

The text begins in the middle of Naomi’s remonstrance with her two daughters-in-law. We need not deal with the former part of the conversation, nor follow Orpah as she goes back to her home and her gods. She is the first in the sad series of those, ‘not far from the kingdom of God,’ who needed but a little more resolution at the critical moment, and, for want of it, shut themselves out from the covenant, and sank back to a world which they had half renounced.

So these two lonely widows are left, each seeking to sacrifice herself for the other. Who shall decide which was the more noble and truly womanly in her self-forgetfulness,—the elder, sadder heart, which strove to secure for the other some joy and fellowship at the price of its own deepened solitude; or the younger, which steeled itself against entreaties, and cast away friends and country for love’s sweet sake? We rightly praise Ruth’s vow, but we should not forget Naomi’s unselfish pleading to be left to tread her weary path alone.

Ruth’s passionate burst of tenderness is immortal. It has put into fitting words for all generations the deepest thoughts of loving hearts, and comes to us over all the centuries

between, as warm and living as when it welled up from that gentle, heroic soul. The two strongest emotions of our nature are blended in it, and each gives a portion of its fervour—love and religion. So closely are they interwoven that it is difficult to allot to each its share in the united stream; but, without trying to determine to which of them the greater part of its volume and force is due, and while conscious of the danger of spoiling such words by comments weaker than themselves, we may seek to put into distinct form the impressions which they make.

We see in them the heroism of gentleness. Put the sweet figure of the Moabitess beside the heroes of the *Book of Judges*, and we feel the contrast. But is there anything in its pages more truly heroic than her deed, as she turned her back on the blue hills of Moab, and chose the joyless lot of the widowed companion of a widow aged and poor, in a land of strangers, the enemies of her country and its gods? It is easier far to rush on the spears of the foe, amid the whirl and excitement of battle, than to choose with open eyes so dreary a lifelong path. The gentleness of a true woman covers a courage of the patient, silent sort, which, in its meek steadfastness, is nobler than the contempt of personal danger, which is vulgarly called bravery. It is harder to endure than to strike. The supreme type of heroic, as of all, virtue is Jesus Christ, whose gentleness was the velvet glove on the iron hand of an inflexible will. Of that best kind of heroes there are few brighter examples, even in the annals of the Church which numbers its virgin martyrs by the score, than this sweet figure of Ruth, as the eager vow comes from her young lips, which had already tasted sorrow, and were ready to drink its bitterest cup at the call of duty. She may well teach us to rectify our judgments, and to recognise the quiet heroism of many a modest life of uncomplaining suffering. Her example has a special message to women, and exhorts them to see to it that, in the cultivation of the so-called womanly excellence of gentleness, they do not let it run into weakness, nor, on the other hand, aim at strength, to the loss of meekness. The yielding birch-tree, the 'lady of the woods,' bends in all its elastic branches and tossing ringlets of foliage to the wind; but it stands upright after storms that level oaks and pines. God's strength is gentle strength, and ours is likest His when it is meek and lowly, like that of the 'strong Son of God.'

Ruth's great words may suggest, too, the surrender which is the natural language of true love. Her story comes in among all these records of bloodshed and hate, like a bit of calm blue sky among piles of ragged thunder-clouds, or a breath of fresh air in the oppressive atmosphere of a slaughter-house. Even in these wild times there was still a quiet corner where love could spread his wings. The question has often been asked, what the purpose of the *Book of Ruth* is, and various answers have been given. The genealogical table at the end, showing David's descent from her, the example which it supplies of the reception of a Gentile into Israel, and other reasons for its presence in Scripture, have been alleged, and, no doubt, correctly. But the Bible is a very human book, just because it is a divine one; and surely it would be no unworthy object to enshrine in its pages a picture of the noble working

of that human love which makes so much of human life. The hallowing of the family is a distinct purpose of the Old Testament, and the beautiful example which this narrative gives of the elevating influence of domestic affection entitles it to a place in the canon. How many hearts, since Ruth spoke her vow, have found in it the words that fitted their love best! How often they have been repeated by quivering lips, and heard as music by loving ears! How solemn, and even awful, is that perennial freshness of words which came hot and broken by tears, from lips that have long ago mouldered into dust! What has made them thus 'enduring for ever,' is that they express most purely the self-sacrifice which is essential to all noble love. The very inmost longing of love is to give itself away to the object beloved. It is not so much a desire to acquire as to bestow, or, rather, the antithesis of giving and receiving melts into one action which has a twofold motion,—one outwards, to give; one inwards, to receive. To love is to give one's self away, therefore all lesser givings are its food and delight; and, when Ruth threw herself on Naomi's withered breast, and sobbed out her passionate resolve, she was speaking the eternal language of love, and claiming Naomi for her own, in the very act of giving herself to Naomi, Human love should be the parent of all self-sacrificing as of all heroic virtues; and in our homes we do not live in love, as we ought, unless it leads us to the daily exercise of self-suppression and surrender, which is not felt to be loss but the natural expression of our love, which it would be a crime against it, and a pain to ourselves, to withhold. If Ruth's temper lived in our families, they would be true 'houses of God' and 'gates of heaven.'

We hear in Ruth's words also that forsaking of all things which is an essential of all true religion. We have said that it was difficult to separate, in the words, the effects of love to Naomi from those of adoption of Naomi's faith. Apparently Ruth's adhesion to the worship of Jehovah was originally due to her love for her mother-in-law. It is in order to be one with her in all things that she says, 'Thy God shall be my God.' And it was because Jehovah was Naomi's God that Ruth chose Him for hers. But whatever the origin of her faith, it was genuine and robust enough to bear the strain of casting Chemosh and the gods of Moab behind her, and setting herself with full purpose of heart to seek the Lord. Abandoning them was digging an impassable gulf between herself and all her past, with its friendships, loves, and habits. She is one of the first, and not the least noble, of the long series of those who 'suffer the loss of all things, and count them but dung, that they may win' God for their dearest treasure. We have seen how, in her, human love wrought self-sacrifice. But it was not human love alone that did it. The cord that drew her was twisted of two strands, and her love to Naomi melted into her love of Naomi's God. Blessed they who are drawn to the knowledge and love of the fountain of all love in heaven by the sweetness of the characters of His representatives in their homes, and who feel that they have learned to know God by seeing Him in dear ones, whose tenderness has revealed His, and whose gracious words have spoken of His grace! If Ruth teaches us that we must give up all, in order truly to follow



the Lord, the way by which she came to her religion may teach us how great are the possibilities, and consequently the duties, of Christians to the members of their own families. If we had more elder women like Naomi, we should have more younger women like Ruth.

The self-sacrifice which is possible and blessed, even to inferior natures, at the bidding of love, is too precious to be squandered on earthly objects. Men's capacities for it, at the call of dear ones here, should be the rebuke of their grudging surrender to God. He gave the capacity that it might find its true field of operation in our relation to Him. But how much more ready we all are to give up everything for the sake of our Naomis than for His sake: and how we may be our own accusers, if the measure of our devotion to them be contrasted with the measure of our devotion to God!

Finally, we may see, in Ruth's entrance into the religion of Israel, a picture of what was intended to be the effect of Israel's relation with the Gentile world.

The household of Elimelech emigrated to Moab in a famine, and, whether that were right or wrong, they were there among heathens as Jehovah worshippers. They were meant to be missionaries, and, in Ruth's case, the purpose was fulfilled. She became the 'first-fruits of the Gentiles'; and one aim of the book, no doubt, is to show how the believing Gentile was to be incorporated into Israel. Boaz rejoices over her, and especially over her conversion, and prays, 'A full reward be given thee of Jehovah, the God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.' She is married to him, and becomes the ancestress of David, and, through him, of the Messiah. All this is a beautiful completion to the other side of the picture which the fierce fighting in Judges makes prominent, and teaches that Israel's relation to the nations around was not to be one of mere antagonism, but that they had another mission than destruction, and were set in their land, as the candlestick in the Tabernacle, that light might stream out into the darkness of the desert. The story of the Moabitess, whose blood flowed in David's veins, was a standing protest against the later narrow exclusiveness which called Gentiles 'dogs,' and prided itself on outward connection with the nation, in the exact degree in which it lost real union with the nation's God, and real understanding of the nation's mission.

We have left ourselves no space to speak of the remainder of this passage, which is of less importance. It gives us a lively picture of the stir in the little town of Bethlehem, as the two way-worn women came into it, in their strange attire, and attracting notice by travelling alone. As we have observed, 'they said,' in [verse 19](#), is feminine. The women of the village buzzed round the strangers, as they sat in silence, perhaps by that well at the gate, of which, long after, David longed to drink. Wonder, curiosity, and possibly a spice of malice, mingle in the question, 'Is *this* Naomi?' It is heartless, at any rate; it had been better to have found them food and shelter than to have let them sit, the mark for sharp tongues. Naomi's bitter words seem to be moved partly by a sense of the coldness of the reception. She realises that she has indeed come back to a changed world, where there will be little sympathy except

such as Ruth can give. It is with almost passion that she abjures her name 'Pleasant,' as a satire on her woful lot, and bids them call her 'Bitter,' as truer to fact now. The burst of sorrow is natural, as she finds herself again where she had been a wife and mother, and 'remembers happier things.' Her faith wavers, and her words almost reproach God. The exaggerations in which memory is apt to indulge colour them. 'I went out full.' She has forgotten that they 'went out' to seek for bread. She only remembers that four went away, and three sleep in Moab. Possibly she thinks of their emigration as a sin, and traces her dear ones' deaths to God's displeasure on its account. His 'testifying' against her probably means that His providence in bereaving her witnessed to His disapprobation. But, whether that be so or not, her wild words are not those of a patient sufferer, who bows to His will. But true faith may sometimes break down, and Ruth's 'trusting under the wings of Jehovah' is proof enough that, in the long years of lonely sorrow, Naomi's example had shown how peaceful and safe was the shelter there.

**THE FIRST BOOK OF SAMUEL**

### THE CHILD PROPHET

‘And the child Samuel ministered unto the Lord before Eli. And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision. 2. And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see; 8. And ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was, and Samuel was laid down to sleep; 4. That the Lord called Samuel: and he answered, Here am I. 5. And he ran onto Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou calledst me. And he said, I called not; lie down again. And he went and lay down. 6. And the Lord called yet again, Samuel. And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And he answered, I called not, my son; lie down again. 7. Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him. 8. And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And Eli perceived that the Lord had called the child. 9. Therefore Eli said unto Samuel, Go, lie down: and it shall be, if He call thee, that thou shalt say, Speak, Lord; for Thy servant heareth. So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10. And the Lord came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for Thy servant heareth. 11. And the Lord said to Samuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. 12. In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. 13. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. 14. And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever.’—1 SAMUEL iii. 1-14.

The opening words of this passage are substantially repeated from 1 Samuel ii. 11, 18. They come as a kind of refrain, contrasting the quiet, continuous growth and holy service of the child Samuel with the black narrative of Eli’s riotous sons. While the hereditary priests were plunging into debauchery, and making men turn away from the Tabernacle services, Hannah’s son was ministering unto the Lord, and, though no priest, was ‘girt with an ephod.’ This white flower blossomed on a dunghill. The continuous growth of a character, from a child serving God, and to old age walking in the same path, is the great lesson which the story of Samuel teaches us. ‘The child is father of the man,’ and all his long days are ‘bound each to each’ by true religion. There are two types of experience among God’s greatest servants. Paul, made an Apostle from a persecutor, heads the one class. Timothy in the New Testament and Samuel in the Old, represent the other. An Augustine or a Bunyan is made the more earnest, humble, and whole-hearted by the remembrance of a wasted youth and of God’s arresting mercy. But there are a serenity and continuity about a life which has grown up in the fear of God that have their own charm and blessing. It is well to have ‘much transgression’ forgiven, but it may be better to have always been ‘innocent’ and ignorant of

it. Pardon cleanses sin, and even turns the memory of it into an ally of holiness; but traces are left on character, and, at the best, years have been squandered which do not return. Samuel is the pattern of child religion and service, to which teachers should aim that their children may be conformed. How beautifully his double obedience is expressed in the simple words! His service was 'unto the Lord,' and it was 'before Eli'; that is to say, he learned his work from the old man, and in obeying him he served God. The child's religion is largely obedience to human guides, and he serves God best by doing what he is bid,—a lesson needed in our days by both parents and children.

Samuel's peaceful service is contrasted, in the second half of the first verse, with the sad cessation of divine revelations in that dreary time of national laxity. A demoralised priesthood, an alienated people, a silent God,—these are the outstanding features of the period when this fair life of continuous worship unfolded itself. This flower grew in a desert. The voice of God had become a tradition of the past, not an experience of the present. 'Rare' conveys the idea better than 'precious.' The intention is not to tell the estimate in which the word was held, but the infrequency of its utterance, as appears from the following parallel clause. The fact is mentioned in order to complete the picture of Samuel's 'environment' to fling into relief against that background his service, and to prepare the way for the narrative of the beginning of an epoch of divine speech. When priests are faithless and people careless, God's voice will often sound from lowly childlike lips. The man who is to be His instrument in carrying on His work will often come from the very centre of the old order, into which he is to breathe new life, and on which he is to impress a new stamp.

The artless description of the night in the Tabernacle is broken by the more general notice of Eli's dim sight, which the Revised Version rightly throws into a parenthesis. It is somewhat marred, too, by the transposition which the Authorised Version, following some more ancient ones, has made, in order to avoid saying, as the Hebrew plainly does, that Samuel slept in the 'Temple of the Lord, where the ark was.' The picture is much more vivid and tender, if we conceive of the dim-eyed old man, lying somewhat apart; of the glimmering light, nearly extinct but still faintly burning; and of the child laid to sleep in the Tabernacle. Surely the picturesque contrast between the sanctity of the ark and the innocent sleep of childhood is meant to strike us, and to serve as connecting the place with the subsequent revelation. Childlike hearts, which thus quietly rest in the 'secret place of the Most High,' and day and night are near His ark, will not fail of hearing His voice. He sleeps secure who sleeps 'beneath the shadow of the Almighty.' May not these particulars, too, be meant to have some symbolic significance? Night hung over the nation. The spiritual eye of the priest was dim, and the order seemed growing old and decrepit, but the lamp of God had not altogether gone out; and if Eli was growing blind, Samuel was full of fresh young life. The darkest hour is that before the dawn; and that silent sanctuary, with the slumbering old half-blind priest and the expiring lamp, may stand for an emblem of the state of Israel.

The thrice-repeated and misunderstood call may yield lessons of value. We note the familiar form of the call. There is no vision, no symbol of the divine glory, such as other prophets had, but an articulate voice, so human-like that it is thought to be Eli's. Such a kind of call fitted the child's stature best. We note the swift, cheery obedience to what he supposes to be Eli's voice. He sprang up at once, and 'ran to Eli,'—a pretty picture of cheerful service, grudging not his broken sleep, which, no doubt, had often been similarly broken by similar calls. Perhaps it was in order to wait on Eli, quite as much as to tend the lamp or open the gates, that the singular arrangement was made of his sleeping in the Temple; and the reason for the previous parenthesis about Eli's blindness may have been to explain why Samuel slept near him. Where were Eli's sons? They should have been their father's attendants, and the watchers 'by night . . . in the house of the Lord'; but they were away rioting, and the care of both Temple and priest was left to a child.

The old man's heart evidently went out to the boy. How tenderly he bids him lie down again! How affectionately he calls him 'my son,' as if he was already beginning to feel that this was his true successor, and not the blackguards that were breaking his heart! The two were a pair of friends: on the one side were sedulous care and swift obedience by night and by day; on the other were affection and a discernment of coming greatness, made the clearer by the bitter contrast with his own children's lives. The old and the young are good companions for one another, and often understand each other better and help each other more than either does his contemporaries.

Samuel mistook God's voice for Eli's, as we all often do. And not less often we make the converse blunder, and mistake Eli's voice for God's. It needs a very attentive ear, and a heart purged from selfishness and self-will, and ready for obedience, to know when God speaks, though men may be His mouthpieces, and when men speak, though they may call themselves His messengers. The child's mistake was venial. It is less pardonable and more dangerous when repeated by us. If we would be guarded against it, we must be continually where Samuel was, and we must not *sleep* in the Temple, but 'watch and be sober.'

Eli's perception that it was God who spoke must have had a pang in it. It is not easy for the old to recognise that the young hear God's voice more clearly than they, nor for the superior to be glad when he is passed over and new truth dawns on the inferior. But, if there were any such feeling, it is silenced with beautiful self-abnegation, and he tells the wondering child the meaning of the voice and the answer he must make. What higher service can any man do to his fellows, old or young, than to help them to discern God's call and to obey it? What nobler conception of a teacher's work is there than that? Eli heard no voice, from which we may probably conclude that, however real the voice, it was not audible to sense; but he taught Samuel to interpret and answer the voice which he heard, and thus won some share of a prophet's reward.

With what expectation in his young heart Samuel lay down again in his place! This time there is an advance in the form of the call, for only now do we read that the Lord 'came, and stood, and called' as before. A manifestation, addressed to the inward eye, accompanied that to the ear. There is no attempt at describing, nor at softening down, the frank 'anthropomorphism' of the representation, which is the less likely to mislead the more complete it is. Samuel had heard Him before; he sees Him now, and mistake is impossible. But there is no terror nor recoil from the presence. The child's simplicity saves from that, and the child's purity; for his little life had been a growing in service and 'in favour with God and man.'

The answer that came from the child's lips meant far more than the child knew. It is the answer which we are all bound to make. Let us see how deep and wide its scope is. It expresses the entire surrender of the will to the will of God. That is the secret of all peace and nobleness. There is nothing happy or great for man in this world but to love and do God's will. All else is nought. This is solid. 'The world passeth away, . . . but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.' Everything besides is show and delusion, and a life directed to it is fleeting as the cloud-wrack that sweeps across the sky, and, whether it is shone on or is black, is equally melting away. Happy the child who begins with such surrender of self to be God's instrument, and who, like Samuel, can stand up at the end and challenge men's judgment on his course!

The answer vows prompt obedience to yet undisclosed duty. God ever calls His servants to tasks which only by degrees are made known. So Paul in his conversion was bid to go into Damascus, and there learn what more he was to do. We must first put ourselves in God's hands, and then He will lead us round the turn in the road, and show us our work. We get it set for us bit by bit, but the surrender must be entire. The details of His will are revealed as we need them for the moment's guidance. Let us accept them in bulk, and stand to the acceptance in each single case! That is no obedience at all which says, 'Tell me first what you are going to bid me do, and then I will see whether I will do it.' The true spirit of filial submission says, 'I delight to do Thy will; now show me what it is.' It was a strange, long road on which Samuel put his foot when he answered this call, and he little knew where it was to lead him. But the blessing of submission is that we do not need to know. It is enough to see where to put our lifted foot. What comes next we can let God settle.

The answer supplicated further light because of present obedience. 'Speak! for Thy servant heareth,' is a plea never urged in vain. The servant's open ear is a reason for the Lord's open lips. We may be quite sure that, if we are willing to hear, He is more than willing to speak; and anything is possible rather than that His children shall be left, like ill-commanded soldiers on a battlefield, waiting for orders which never come. 'If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know.'

The sad prophecy which is committed to such apparently incongruous lips reiterates a former message by 'a man of God.' Eli was a kindly, and, in his way, good man, but wanting

in firmness, and acquiescent in evil, partly, perhaps, from lack of moral courage and partly from lack of fervent religion. He is not charged with faults in his own administration of his office, but with not curbing his disreputable sons. The threatenings are directed, not against himself, but against his 'house,' who are to be removed from the high priestly office. Nothing less than a revolution is foretold. The deposition of Eli's family would shake the whole framework of society. It is to be utterly destroyed, and no sacrifice nor offering can purge it. The ulcer must have eaten deep which required such stern measures for its excision. The sin was mainly the sons'; but the guilt was largely the father's. We may learn how cruel paternal laxity is, and how fatal mischief may be done, by neglect of the plain duty of restraining children. He who tolerates evil which it is his province to suppress, is an accomplice, and the blood of the doers is red on his hands.

It was a terrible message to give to a child; but Samuel's calling was to be the guide of Israel in a period of transition, and he had to be broken early into the work, which needed severity as well as tenderness. Perhaps, too, the stern message was somewhat softened, for the poor old man, by the lips through which it came to him. All that reverent love could do, we may be sure, the young prophet would do, to lighten the heavy tidings. Secrecy would be secured, too; for Samuel, who was so unwilling to tell even Eli what the Lord had said, would tell none besides.

God calls each child in our homes as truly as He did Samuel. From each the same obedience is asked. Each may, like the boy in the Tabernacle, grow up 'in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,' and so escape the many scars and sorrows of a life wrongly begun. Let parents see to it that they think rightly of their work, and do not content themselves with conveying information, but aim at nothing short of helping all their children to hear and lovingly to yield to the gentle call of the incarnate God!



### FAITHLESSNESS AND DEFEAT

‘And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Eben-ezer: and the Philistines pitched in Aphek. 2. And the Philistines put themselves in array against Israel: and when they joined battle, Israel was smitten before the Philistines: and they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men. 3. And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the Lord smitten us today before the Philistines? Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies. 4. So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from thence the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, which dwelleth between the cherubims: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. 5. And when the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again. 6. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, What meaneth the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews? And they understood that the ark of the Lord was come into the camp. 7. And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, God is come into the camp. And they said, Woe unto us! for there hath not been such a thing heretofore. 8. Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods? these are the gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness. 9. Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you: quit yourselves like men, and fight. 10. And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man into his tent: and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen. 11. And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain. 12. And there ran a man of Benjamin out of the army, and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes rent, and with earth upon his head. 13. And when he came, lo, Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching: for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city, and told it, all the city cried out. 14. And when Eli heard the noise of the crying, he said, What meaneth the noise of this tumult? And the man came in hastily, and told Eli. 15. Now Eli was ninety and eight years old; and his eyes were dim, that he could not see. 16. And the man said unto Eli, I am he that came out of the army, and I fled to-day out of the army. And he said, What is there done, my son? 17. And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken. 18. And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.’—1 SAMUEL iv. 1-18.

The first words of [verse 1](#) are closely connected with the end of [chapter iii.](#), and complete the account of Samuel’s inauguration. ‘The word of the Lord’ came to Samuel, and ‘the word

of Samuel came to all Israel.' The one clause tells of the prophet's inspiration, the other of his message and its reception by the nation. This bond of union between the clauses has been broken by the chapter division, apparently for the sake of representing the revolt against the Philistines as due to Samuel's instigation. But its being so is very doubtful. If God had sent the army into the field, He would have prepared it, by penitent return to Him, for victory, as no defeat follows on war which He commands. Probably Samuel's mission made an unwholesome ferment in minds which were quite untouched by its highest significance, and so led to a precipitate rebellion, preceded by no religious reformation, and therefore sure to fail. It was twenty years too soon ([1 Sam. vii. 3](#)). Samuel took no part in the struggle, and his name is never mentioned till, at the end of that period, he emphatically condemns all that had been done, and points the true path of deliverance, in 'return to the Lord with all your heart.' So the great lesson of this story is that when Israel fights Philistines, unbidden and unrepentant, it is sure to be beaten,—a truth with manifold wide applications.

The first disastrous defeat took place on a field, which was afterwards made memorable by a great victory, and by a name which lives still as a watchword for hope and gratitude. Happy they who at last conquer where they once failed, and in the retrospect can say, 'Hitherto the Lord helped,' both by defeat and by the victory for which defeat prepared a way! That opening struggle, bloody and grave as it was, was not decisive; for the Israelites regained their fortified camp unmolested, and held together, and kept their communications open, as appears from what followed.

[Verses 3 to 5](#) give us a glimpse into the camp of Israel, and [verses 6 to 9](#) into that of the Philistines. These two companion pictures are worth looking at. The two armies are very much alike, and we may say that the purpose of the picture is to show how Israel was practically heathen, taking just the same views of its relation to God which the Philistines did. Note, too, the absence of central authority. 'The elders' hold a kind of council. Where were Eli the judge and Samuel the prophet? Neither had part in this war. The question of the elders was right, inasmuch as it recognised that the Lord had smitten them, but wrong inasmuch as it betrayed that they had not the faintest notion that the reason was their own moral and religious apostasy. They had not learned the A B C of their history, and of the conditions of national prosperity. They stand precisely on the Pagan level, believing in a national God, who ought to help his votaries, but from some inexplicable caprice does not; or who, perhaps, is angry at the omission of some ritual observance. What an answer they would have got if Samuel had been there! There ought to have been no need for the question, or, rather, there was need for it, and the answer ought to have been clear to them; their sin was the all-sufficient reason for their defeat. There are plenty of Christians, like these elders, who, when they find themselves beaten by the world and the devil, puzzle their brains to invent all sorts of reasons for God's smiting, except the true one,—their own departure from Him.

The remedy suggested by the united wisdom of the leaders was as heathen as the consultation which resulted in it. 'Let us send for the ark' 'Those who regarded not the God of the ark,' says Bishop Hall, 'think themselves safe and happy in the ark of God.' They thought, with that confusion between symbol and reality which runs through all heathen worship, and makes the danger of 'images,' whether in heathenism or in sensuous Christianity, that if they brought the ark, they brought God with it. It was a kind of charm, which would help them, they hardly knew how. Its very name might have taught them better. They call it 'the ark of the covenant of the Lord'; and a covenant has two parties to it, and promises favour on conditions. If they had kept the conditions, these four thousand corpses would not have been lying stiff and stark outside the rude encampment. As they did not keep them, bringing the chest which contained the transcript of them into their midst was bringing a witness of their apostasy, not a helper of their feebleness. Repentance would have brought God. Dragging the ark thither only removed Him farther away. We need not be too hard upon these people; for the natural disposition of us all is to trust to the externals of worship, and to put a punctilious attention to these in the place of a true cleaving of heart to the God who dwells near us, and is in us and on our side, if we cling to Him with penitent love. Even God-appointed symbols become snares. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are treated by multitudes as these elders did the ark. The fewer and simpler the outward observances of worship are, the less danger is there of the poor sense-bound soul tarrying in them, instead of passing by means of them into the higher, purer air beyond.

What right had these presumptuous elders to bring the ark from Shiloh? Eli was its guardian; and he, as appears probable from his anxiety about its fate, did not approve of its removal. But 'the people' took the law into their own hands. There seems some hint that their action was presumptuous profanation, in the solemn, full title given in [verse 4](#): 'The ark of the covenant of the Lord of Hosts which dwelleth between the cherubim,'—as if contrasting His awful majesty, His universal dominion over the armies of heaven and the embattled powers of the universe, and the dazzling light of that 'glory,' which shone in the innermost chamber of the Tabernacle, with the unanointed hands that presumed to press in thither and drag so sacred a thing into the light of common day and the tumult of the camp. Nor is the profanation lessened, but rather increased, by the priestly attendants, Eli's two sons, themselves amongst the worst men in Israel. When Hophni and Phinehas are its priests, the ark can bring no help. Heathenism separates religion from morality altogether. In it there is no connection between worship and purity, and the Old Testament religion for the first time welded these two inseparably together. That tumultuous procession from Shiloh, with these two profligates for the priests of God, and the bearers thinking that they were sure of their God's favour now, whatever their sin, shows how completely Israel had forgotten its own law, and, whilst professedly worshipping Jehovah, had really become a heathen people. The reception of the ark with that fierce shout, which echoed among the

hills and was heard in the Philistines' encampment, shows the same thing. Not so should the ark have been received, but with tears and confessions and silent awe. No man in all that host had ever looked upon it before. No man ought to have seen it *then*. Once a year, and not without blood sprinkled on its cover, the high priest might look on it through the cloud of incense which kept him from death, while all the people waited hushed till he came forth, but now it is dragged into the camp, and welcomed with a yell of mad delight, as a pledge of victory. What could display more strikingly the practical heathenism of the people?

Verses 6 to 9 take us into the other camp, and show us the undisguised heathens. The Philistines think just as the other side did, only, in their polytheistic way, they do not use the name 'Jehovah,' but speak first of 'God' and then of 'gods' as having arrived in the camp. The nations dreaded each other's gods, though they worshipped their own; and the Philistines believed quite as much that 'Jehovah' was the Hebrew's God, as that 'Dagon' was theirs. There was to be a duel then between the two superhuman powers. The vague reports which they had heard of the Exodus, nearly five hundred years ago, filled the Philistines with panic. They had but a confused notion of the facts of that old story, and thought that Egypt had met the ten plagues 'in the wilderness.' The blunder is very characteristic, and helps to show the accuracy of our narrative. It would not have occurred to a legend-maker. It sounds strange to us that the Philistines' belief that the Hebrews' God had come to their help should issue in exhortations to 'fight like men.' But polytheism makes that quite a natural conclusion; and there is something almost fine in the truculent boldness with which they set their teeth for a fierce struggle. They reiterate to one another the charge to 'quit themselves like men'; and while they do not hide from themselves that the question whether they are to be still masters is hanging on the coming struggle, a dash of contempt for the 'Hebrews' who had been their 'slaves' is perceptible.

According to [verse 10](#), the Philistines appear to have begun the attack, perhaps taking the enemy by surprise. The rout this time was complete. The grim catalogue of disaster in [verses 10 and 11](#) is strangely tragic in its dreadful, monotonous plainness, each clause adding something to the terrible story, and each linked to the preceding by a simple 'and.' The Israelites seem to have been scattered. 'They fled, every man to his tent.' The army, with little cohesion and no strong leaders, melted away. The ark was captured, and its two unworthy attendants slain. Bringing it had not brought God, then. It was but a chest of shittimwood, with two slabs of lettered stone in it,—and what help was in that? But its capture was the sign that the covenant with Israel was for the time annulled. The whole framework of the nation was disorganised. The keystone was struck out of their worship, and they had fallen, by their own sin, to the level of the nations, and even below these; for they had their gods, but Israel had turned away from their God, and He had departed from them. Superstition fancied that the presence of the ark secured to impenitent men the favour of God; but it was no superstition which saw in its absence from Shiloh His averted face.

Is there in poetry or drama a more vivid and pathetic passage than the closing verses of this narrative, which tell of the panting messenger and the old blind Eli?

'Eben-ezer' cannot have been very far from Shiloh, for the fugitive had seen the end of the fight, and reached the city before night. He came with the signs of mourning, and, as it would appear from [verse 13](#), passed the old man at the gate without pausing, and burst into the city with his heavy tidings. One can almost hear the shrill shrieks of wrath and despair which first told Eli that something was wrong. Blind and unwieldy and heavy-hearted, he sat by the gate to which the news would first come; but yet he is the last to hear,—perhaps because all shrank from telling him, perhaps because in the confusion no one remembered him. Only after he had asked the meaning of the tumult, of which his foreboding heart and conscience told him the meaning before it was spoken, is the messenger brought to the man to whom he should have gone first. How touchingly the story pauses, even at this crisis, to paint the poor old man! A stronger word is used to describe his blindness than in [1 Samuel iii. 2](#), as the Revised Version shows. His fixed eyeballs were sightless now; and there he sat, dreading and longing to hear. The fugitive's account of himself is shameless in its avowal of his cowardice, and prepares Eli for the worst. But note how he speaks gently and with a certain dignity, crushing down his anxiety,—'How went the matter, my son?' Then, with no merciful circumlocution or veiling, out comes the whole dismal story once again.

Eli spoke no more. His sons' death had been the sign given him years before that the threatenings against his house should be fulfilled; but even that blow he can bear. But the capture of the ark is more than a personal sorrow, and his start of horror overbalances him, and he falls from his seat (which probably had no back to it), and dies, silent, of a broken neck and a broken heart. His forty years of judgeship ended thus. He was in many respects good and lovable, gentle, courteous, devout. His kindly treatment of Hannah, his fatherly training of Samuel, his submission to the divine message through the child, his 'trembling for the ark,' his death at the news of its being taken, all indicate a character of real sweetness and true godliness. But all was marred by a fatal lack of strong, stern resolve to tolerate no evil which he ought to suppress. Good, weak men, especially when they let foolish tenderness hinder righteous severity, bring terrible evils on themselves, their families, and their nation. It was Eli who, at bottom, was the cause of the defeat and the disasters which slew his sons and broke his own heart. Nothing is more cruel than the weak indulgence which, when men are bringing a curse on themselves by their sin, 'restrains them not.'

### REPENTANCE AND VICTORY

‘And the men of Kirjath-jearim came, and fetched up the ark of the Lord, and brought it into the house of Abinadab in the hill, and sanctified Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the Lord. 2. And it came to pass, while the ark abode in Kirjath-jearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years: and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord. 3. And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashteroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the Lord, and serve Him only: and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. 4. Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashteroth, and served the Lord only. 5. And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the Lord. 6. And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the Lord. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh. 7. And when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel were gathered together to Mizpeh, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard it, they were afraid of the Philistines. 8. And the children of Israel said to Samuel, Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us, that He will save us out of the hand of the Philistines. 9. And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a burnt-offering wholly unto the Lord: and Samuel cried unto the Lord for Israel; and the Lord heard him. 10. And as Samuel was offering up the burnt-offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the Lord thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them: and they were smitten before Israel. 11. And the men of Israel went out of Mizpeh, and pursued the Philistines, and smote them, until they came under Beth-car. 12. Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.’—1 SAMUEL vii. 1-12.

The ark had spread disaster in Philistia and Beth-shemesh, and the willingness of the men of Kirjath-jearim to receive it was a token of their devotion. They must have been in some measure free from idolatry and penetrated with reverence. The name of the city (*City of the Woods*, like our *Woodville*) suggests the situation of the little town, ‘bosomed high in tufted trees,’ where the ark lay for so long, apparently without sacrifices, and simply watched over by Eleazar, who was probably of the house of Aaron. Eli’s family was exterminated; Shiloh seems to have been destroyed, or, at all events, forsaken; and for twenty years internal disorganisation and foreign oppression, relieved only by Samuel’s growing influence, prevailed. But during these dark days a better mind was slowly appearing among the people. ‘All . . . Israel lamented after the Lord.’ Lost blessings are precious. God was more prized when withdrawn. Happy they to whom darkness brightens that Light which brightens all darkness! Our text gives us three main points,—the preparation for victory in repentance

and return ([verses 3-9](#)); the victory ([verses 10, 11](#)); the thankful commemoration of victory ([verse 12](#)).

I. We have first the preparation for victory in repentance and return. At the time of the first fight at Eben-ezer, Israel was full of idolatry and immorality. Then their preparation for battle was the mere bringing the ark into the camp, as if it were a fetish or magic charm. That was pure heathenism, and they were idolaters in such worship of Jehovah, just as much as if they had been bowing to Baal. Many of us rely on our baptism or on churchgoing precisely in the same spirit, and are as truly pagans. Not the name of the Deity, but the spirit of the worshipper, makes the 'idolater.'

How different this second preparation! Samuel, who had never been named in the narrative of defeat, now reappears as the acknowledged prophet and, in a sense, dictator. The first requirement is to come back to the Lord 'with the whole heart,' and that return is to be practically exhibited in the complete forsaking of Baal and the Ashtoreths. 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon.' It must be 'Him only,' if it is Him at all. Real religion is exclusive, as real love is. In its very nature it is indivisible, and if given to two is accepted by neither. So there was some kind of general and perhaps public giving up of the idols, and some, though probably not the fully appointed, public service of Jehovah. If we are to have His strength infused for victory, we must cast away our idols, and come back to Him with all our hearts. The hands that would clasp Him, and be upheld by the clasp, must be emptied of trifles. To yield ourselves wholly to God is the secret of strength.

The next step was a solemn national assembly at Samuel's town of Mizpeh, situated on a conspicuous hill, north-west of Jerusalem, which still is called 'the prophet Samuel.' Sacrifices were offered, which are no part of the Mosaic ritual. A significant part of these consisted in the pouring out of water 'before the Lord,' probably as emblematic of the pouring out of soul in penitence; for it was accompanied by fasting and confession of sin. The surest way to the true victory, which is the conquest of our sins, is confessing them to God. When once we have seen any sin in its true character clearly enough to speak to Him about it, we have gone far to emancipate ourselves from it, and have quickened our consciences towards more complete intolerance of its hideousness. Confession breaks the entail of sin, and substitutes for the dreary expectation of its continuance the glad conviction of forgiveness and cleansing. It does not make a stiff fight unnecessary; for assured freedom from sin is not the easy prize of confession, but the hard-won issue of sturdy effort in God's strength. But it is like blowing the trumpet of revolt,—it gives the signal for, and itself begins, the conflict. The night before the battle should be spent, not in feasting, but in prayer and lowly shriving of our souls before the great Confessor.

The watchful Philistines seem to have had their attention attracted by the unusual stir among their turbulent subjects, and especially by this suspicious gathering at Mizpeh, and they come suddenly up the passes from their low-lying territory to disperse it. A whiff of



the old terror blows across the spirits of the people, not unwholesomely; for it sets them, not to desire the outward presence of the ark, not to run from their post, but to beseech Samuel's intercession. They are afraid, but they mean to fight all the same, and, because they are afraid, they long for God's help. That is the right temper, which, if a man cherish, he will not be defeated, however many Philistines rush at him. Twenty years of slavery had naturally bred fear in them, but it is a wise fear which breeds reliance on God. Our enemy is strong, and no fault is more fatal than an underestimate of his power. If we go into battle singing, we shall probably come out of it weeping, or never come out at all. If we begin bragging, we shall end bleeding. It is only he who looks on the advancing foe, and feels 'They are too strong for me,' who will have to say, as he watches them retreating, 'He delivered me from my strong enemy.' We should think much of our foes and little of ourselves. Such a temper will lead to caution, watchfulness, wise suspicion, vigorous strain of all our little power, and, above all, it will send us to our knees to plead with our great Captain and Advocate.

Samuel acts as priest and intercessor, offering a burnt-offering, which, like the pouring out of water, is no part of the Mosaic sacrifices. The fact is plain, but it is neither unaccountable nor large enough to warrant the sweeping inferences which have been drawn from it and its like, as to the non-existence at this period of the developed ceremonial in Leviticus. We need only remember Samuel's special office, and the seclusion in which the ark lay, to have a sufficient explanation of the cessation of the appointed worship and the substitution of such 'irregular' sacrifices. We are on surer ground when we see here the incident to which [Psalm xcix. 6](#) refers ('Samuel among them that call upon His name. They called upon the Lord, and He answered them'), and when we learn the lesson that there is a power in intercession which we can use for one another, and which reaches its perfection in the prevailing prayer of our great High-priest, who, like Samuel and Moses, is on the mountain praying, while we fight in the plain.

II. We have next the victory on the field of the former defeat. The battle is joined on the old ground. Strategic considerations probably determined the choice as they did in the case of the many battles on the plain of Esdraelon, for instance, or on the fields of the Netherlands. Probably the armies met on some piece of level ground in one of the wadies, up which the Philistines marched to the attack. At all events, there they were, face to face once more on the old spot. On both sides might be men who had been in the former engagement. Depressing remembrances or burning eagerness to wipe out the shame would stir in those on the one side; contemptuous remembrance of the ease with which the last victory had been won would animate the other. God Himself helped them by the thunderstorm, the solemn roll of which was 'the voice of the Lord' answering Samuel's prayer. The ark had brought only defeat to the impure host; the sacrifice brings victory to the penitent army. Observe that the defeat is accomplished before 'the men of Israel went out of Mizpeh.' God scattered the en-



emy, and Israel had only to pursue flying foes, as they hurried in wild confusion down the pass, with the lightning flashing behind them. The same pregnant expression is used for the rout of the Philistines as for the previous one of Israel. 'They were smitten *before*,' not *by*, the victors. The true victor was God.

The story gives boundless hope of victory, even on the fields of our former defeats. We can master rooted faults of character, and overcome temptations which have often conquered us. Let no man say: 'Ah! I have been beaten so often that I may as well give up the fight altogether. Years and years I have been a slave, and everywhere I tread on old battlefields, where I have come off second-best. It will never be different. I may as well cease struggling.' However obstinate the fault, however often it has re-established its dominion and dragged us back to slavery, when we thought that we had made good our escape,— that is no reason to 'bate one jot of heart or hope.' We have every reason to hope bravely and boundlessly in the possibility of victory. True, we should rightly despair if we had only our own powers to depend on. But the grounds of our confidence lie in the inexhaustible fulness of God's Spirit, and the certain purpose of His will that we should be purified from all iniquity, as well as in the proved tendency of the principles and motives of the gospel to produce characters of perfect goodness, and, above all, in the sacrifice and intercession of our Captain on high. Since we have Christ to dwell in us, and be the seed of a new life, which will unfold into the likeness of that life from which it has sprung; since we have a perfect Example in Him who became like us in lowliness of flesh, that we might become like Him in purity of spirit; since we have a gospel which enjoins and supplies the mightiest motives for complete obedience; and since the most rooted and inveterate evils are no part of ourselves, but 'vipers' which may be 'shaken from the hand' into which they have struck their fangs, we commit faithless treason against God, His message, and ourselves, when we doubt that we shall overcome all our sins. We should not, then, go into the fight downhearted, with our banners drooping, as if defeat sat on them. The belief that we shall conquer has much to do with victory. That is true in all sorts of conflicts. So, though the whole field may be strewn with relics, eloquent of former disgrace, we may renew the struggle with confidence that the future will not always copy the past. We 'are saved by hope'; by hope we are made strong. It is the very helmet on our heads. The warfare with our own evils should be waged in the assurance that every field of our defeat shall one day see set up on it the trophy of, not our victory, but God's in us.

III. We have here the grateful commemoration of victory. Where that gray stone stands no man knows to-day, but its name lives for ever. This trophy bore no vaunts of leader's skill or soldier's bravery. One name only is associated with it. It is 'the stone of help,' and its message to succeeding generations is: 'Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.' That 'Hitherto' is the word of a mighty faith. It includes as parts of one whole the disaster no less than the victory. The Lord was helping Israel no less by sorrow and oppression than by joy and de-

liverance. The defeat which guided them back to Him was tender kindness and precious help. He helps us by griefs and losses, by disappointments and defeats; for whatever brings us closer to Him, and makes us feel that all our bliss and wellbeing lie in knowing and loving Him, is helpful beyond all other aid, and strength-giving above all other gifts.

Such remembrance has in it a half-uttered prayer and hope for the future. 'Hitherto' means more than it says. It looks forward as well as backward, and sees the future in the past. Memory passes into hope, and the radiance in the sky behind throws light on to our forward path. God's 'hitherto' carries 'henceforward' wrapped up in it. His past reveals the eternal principles which will mould His future acts. He has helped, therefore he will help, is no good argument concerning men; but it is valid concerning God.

The devout man's 'gratitude' is, and ought to be, 'a lively sense of favours to come.' We should never doubt but that, as good John Newton puts it, in words which bid fair to last longer than Samuel's gray stone:—

'Each sweet Ebenezer I have in review  
Confirms His good pleasure to help me quite through.'

We may write that on every field of our life's conflicts, and have it engraved at last on our gravestones, where we rest in hope.

The best use of memory is to mark more plainly than it could be seen at the moment the divine help which has filled our lives. Like some track on a mountain side, it is less discernible to us, when treading it, than when we look at it from the other side of the glen. Many parts of our lives, that seemed unmarked by any consciousness of God's help while they were present, flash up into clearness when seen through the revealing light of memory, and gleam purple in it, while they looked but bare rocks as long as we were stumbling among them. It is blessed to remember, and to see everywhere God's help. We do not remember aright unless we do. The stone that commemorates our lives should bear no name but one, and this should be all that is read upon it: 'Now unto Him that kept us from falling, unto Him be glory!'

### **'MAKE US A KING'**

'Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel, onto Ramah, 5. And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. 6. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the Lord. 7. And the Lord said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. 8. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, wherewith they have forsaken Me, and served other gods, so do they also unto thee. 9. Now therefore hearken unto their voice: howbeit yet protest solemnly unto them, and shew them the manner of the king that shall reign over them. 10. And Samuel told all the words of the Lord unto the people that asked of him a king. 11. And he said, This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: He will take your sons, and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen: and some shall run before his chariots, 12. And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots. 13. And he will take your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to be bakers. 14. And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants. 15. And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants. 16. And he will take your men-servants, and your maid-servants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work. 17. He will take the tenth of your sheep: and ye shall be his servants. 18. And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the Lord will not hear you in that day. 19. Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us; 20. That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.'—1 SAMUEL viii. 4-20.

The office of judge was as little capable of transmission from father to son as that of prophet, so that Samuel's appointment of his sons as judges must be regarded as contrary to its true idea. It was God who made the judges, and the introduction, in however slight a degree, of the hereditary principle, was not only politically a blunder, but religiously wrong. Our narrative, like Scripture generally, pronounces no opinion on the facts it records, but its unfavourable judgment may be safely inferred from its explanation that Samuel was 'old' when he made the appointment, and that his sons were corrupt and unjust. Our text deals with the unexpectedly wide consequences of that act, in the clamour for a king.

I. Note the ill-omened request. A formal delegation of the representatives of the nation comes to Ramah, unsummoned by Samuel, with the demand for a king. There must have been much talk through Israel before the general mind could have been ascertained, and

this step taken. Not a whisper of what was passing seems to have reached Samuel, and the request is flung at him in harsh language. It is not pleasant for any one, least of all for a ruler, to be told that everybody sees that he is getting old, and should provide for what is to come next. Fathers do not like to be told that their sons are disreputable, but Samuel had to hear the bitter truth. The old man was pained by it, and felt that the people were tired of him, as is plain enough from the divine words which followed, and bade him look beyond the ingratitude displayed towards himself, to that shown to God. But from the 'practical' point of view, there was a great deal to be said for the reasonableness and political wisdom of the elders' suggestion. Samuel had shown that he felt the danger of leaving the nation without a leader, by his nomination of his sons, and the proposal of a king is but carrying his policy a little farther. The hereditary principle once admitted, a full-blown king was evidently the best. There were many inconveniences in the rule by judges. They had no power but that of force of personal character and the authority of an unseen Lord. They left no successors; and long intervals had elapsed, and might again elapse, between the death of one and the rise of another, during which the nation appeared to have no head to guide nor arm to defend it. Examples of strong monarchies surrounded them, and they wanted to have a centre of unity and a defender in the person of a king.

Samuel's displeasure seems to have been mainly on the ground of the insult to himself in the proposal, and its bearing on the rule of Jehovah over the people does not seem to have occurred to him till it was pointed out by the divine voice. But, like a good and wise man, he took his perplexity and trouble to God; and there he got light. The divine judgment of the request cuts down to its hidden, and probably unconscious, motive, and shows Samuel that weariness of him was only its surface, while the true bottom of it was rejection of God. The parallel drawn with idolatry is very instructive. The two things were but diverse forms of the same sense-ridden disposition: the one being an inability to grasp the thought of the unseen God; the other, a precisely similar inability to keep on the high level of trust in an unseen defender, and obedience to an unseen monarch. They wished for a king 'to go out before them' and 'fight their battles' (v. 20). Had they forgotten Eben-ezer, and many another field, where they and their fathers had but to stand still and see the Lord fight for them?

The very same difficulty in living in quiet reliance on a power which is perceptible by no sense, besets us. We too are ever being tempted to prefer the solid security, as our foolish senses call it, of visible supports and delights, to the shadowy help of an unseen Arm. How many of us would feel safer with a good balance at our banker's than with God's promises! How many of us live as if we thought that men or women were better recipients of our love and of our trust than God! How few, even of professing Christians, really and habitually 'walk by faith, not by sight'! Do we not see ourselves in the mirror of this story? If we do not, we should. Note that the elders had, apparently, no idea that they were rejecting God in wanting a king. Samuel says nothing of the sort to them, and they could scarcely have

made the request so boldly and briefly if they had been conscious that it was upsetting the very basis of their national life. Men are slow to appreciate the full force of their craving for visible good. The petitioners could plead many strong reasons, and, no doubt, fancied themselves simply taking proper precautions for the future. A great deal of unavowed and unconscious unbelief wears the mask of wise foresight. We rather pride ourselves on our prudence, when we should be ashamed of our distrust.

Note, too, that we cannot combine reliance on the seen and the unseen. Life must be moulded by one or the other. The craving for a king was the rejection of Jehovah. We must elect by which we shall live, and from which we shall draw our supreme good.

The desire to be like their neighbours was another motive with the elders. It is hard to be singular, and to foster reliance on the invisible, when all around us are dazzling examples of the success attending the other course. One of the first lessons which we have to learn, and one of the last which we have to practise, is a wholesome disregard of other people's ways. If we are to do anything worth doing, we must be content to be in a minority of one, if needful.

II. Note God's concession of the foolish wish. The divine word to Samuel throws light on the nature of prophetic inspiration. He is bidden to 'hearken to the people's voice'—a procedure directly opposite to his own ideas. This is not a case of subsequent reflection modifying first impressions, but of an authoritative voice discerned by the hearer to be not his own, contradicting his own thoughts, and leaving no room for further consideration.

Further, the granting to Israel of the king whom they desired, is but one instance of the law which is exemplified in God's dealing with nations and individuals, according to which He lets them have their own way, that they may 'be filled with their own devices.' Such experience is the best teacher, though her school fees are high. The surest way to disgust men with their own folly, is to let it work out its results,— just as boys in sweetmeat shops are allowed to eat as much as they like at first, and so get a distaste for the dainties. 'Try it, then, and see how you like it,' is not an unkind thing to say, and God often says it to us. When argument and appeals to duty and the like fail, there is nothing more to be done but to let us have our request, and find out the poison that lurked under the fair outside. The prodigal son gets his coveted portion, and is allowed to go into the far country, that he may prove how good and happy it is to starve among the swine, not because his father is angry with him, but because such experience is the only way to re-awaken his dormant love, and to make him long for the despised place in his father's house. There are some fevers of the desires which must run their course before the patient can be well again. Let us keep a careful watch over ourselves, that we entertain no wishes but such as run parallel with God's manifest will, lest He may have in His anger, which is still love, to give us our request, that we may find out our error by the bitter fruits of a granted desire.

III. Note the obstinacy that, with eyes open to the consequences, persists in its demands. Samuel is bidden to 'show them the manner of the king that shall reign over them.' He sketches, in sombre outline, the picture of an Eastern despot, the only kind of king which the world then knew. The darker features of these monarchies are not included. There is no harem, nor cruelty, nor monstrous vice, in the picture; but the diversion of labour to minister to royal pomp, the establishment of a standing army, the alienation of land to officials, heavy taxation and forced labour make up the items. To these is added (v. 18) that the royalty, now so eagerly desired, would sooner or later become a burden, and that then they or their sons would find it was easier to put on than to put off the yoke; for 'the Lord will not hear you in that day,' in reference, that is, to the removal of the king. They were exchanging an unseen King who gave all things for one who would take, and not give. A wise exchange! The consequences of our wishes are not always drawn out so clearly before us as in this instance; but we are not left in darkness as to the broad issues, and we all know enough to make our persistence in evil, after such warnings, the deepest mystery and most flagrant sin. The drunkard is not deterred by his knowledge that there is such a thing as *delirium tremens*; nor the thief, by the certainty that the officer's hand will be laid on his shoulder one day or other; nor the young profligate, by the danger that his bones shall be 'full of the sin of his youth'; nor are any of us kept from our sins, by the clear sight of their end. 'I have loved strangers, and after them will I go,' notwithstanding all knowledge of the fatal issue. Surely there is nothing sadder than that power of neglecting the most certain known result of our acts. Wilfully blind, and hurried on by lust, passion, or other impulse, like bulls which shut their eyes when they charge, we rush at our mark, and often dash ourselves to pieces on it. If a man saw the consequences of his sin at the moment of temptation, he would not do it; but this is the wonder, that he does not see them, though he knows them well enough, and that the knowledge has no power to restrain him.

IV. Note the divine purpose which uses man's sin as its instrument in advancing its designs. God had promised Israel a king (*Deut. xvii. 14*, etc.), and the elders may have thought that they were only asking for what was in accordance with His plan. So they were; but their motive was wrong, and so their prayer, though for what God meant to give, was wrong. In this case, as always, God uses men's sins as occasions for the furtherance of His own eternal purpose, as that profound saying has it, 'Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee.' The kingly office was a step in advance, and gave occasion to the development of Messianic expectations of the true King of Israel and of men, which would have been impossible without it. In many ways it was for the good of the nation, and the holders of the office were 'the Lord's anointed.' Modern criticism has found traces of two opposite views in this story, as compared with the passage in Deuteronomy above referred to; but surely it is a more sober, though less novel, view, to regard the whole incident as illustrating the two truths, that men may wish for right things in a wrong way, and that God uses sin as well as

obedience as His instrument. No barriers can stop the march of His great purpose through the ages, any more than a bit of glass can stay a sunbeam. However the currents run and the storms howl, they carry the ship to the haven; for He holds the helm, and all winds help. The people rejected Him, and in seeking a king followed but their own earthly minds; but they prepared the way for David and David's Son. Their children long after, moved by the same spirit, shouted, 'We have no king but Caesar!' but they prepared the throne for the true King, for whom they destined a Cross. Man's greatest sin, the rejection of the visible King of the world, brought about the firm establishment of His dominion on earth and in heaven. The cross is the great instance of the same law as is embodied in this history,—the overruling providence which bends the antagonism of men into a tool for effecting the purpose of God.

Alas for those who only thus carry on God's designs! They perish, and their work is none the less their sin, because God has used it. How much better to enter with a willing heart and a clear intelligence into sympathy with His designs, and, delighting to do His will, to share in the eternal duration of His triumphant purpose! 'The world passeth away, and the fashion thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

### THE OLD JUDGE AND THE YOUNG KING

‘Now the Lord had told Samuel In his ear a day before Saul came, saying, 16, To-morrow, about this time I will send thee a man out of the land of Benjamin, and thou shalt anoint him to be captain over My people Israel, that he may save My people out of the hand of the Philistines: for I have looked upon My people, because their cry is come unto Me. 17. And when Samuel saw Saul, the Lord said unto him, Behold the man whom I spake to thee of! this same shall reign over My people. 18. Then Saul drew near to Samuel in the gate, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, where the seer’s house is. 19. And Samuel answered Saul, and said, I am the seer: go up before me unto the high place; for ye shall eat with me to-day, and to-morrow I will let thee go, and will tell thee all that is in thine heart. 20. And as for thine asses that were lost three days ago, set not thy mind on them; for they are found. And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on thee, and on all thy father’s house? 21. And Saul answered and said, Am not I a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? wherefore then speakest thou so to me? 22. And Samuel took Saul and his servant, and brought them into the parlour, and made them sit in the chiefest place among them that were bidden, which were about thirty persons. 23. And Samuel said unto the cook, Bring the portion which I gave thee, of which I said unto thee, Set it by thee. 24. And the cook took up the shoulder, and that which was upon it, and set it before Saul. And Samuel said, Behold that which is left I set it before thee, and eat: for unto this time hath it been kept for thee since I said, I have invited the people. So Saul did eat with Samuel that day. 25. And when they were come down from the high place into the city, Samuel communed with Saul upon the top of the house. 26. And they arose early: and it came to pass about the spring of the day, that Samuel called Saul to the top of the house, saying, Up, that I may send thee away. And Saul arose, and they went out both of them, he and Samuel, abroad. 27. And as they were going down to the end of the city, Samuel said to Saul, Bid the servant pass on before us, (and he passed on,) but stand thou still a while, that I may shew thee the word of God.’—1 SAMUEL ix. 15-27.

Both the time and the place of the incidents here told are unknown. No note is given of the interval that had elapsed since the elders’ deputation. All that we know is that on the previous day Samuel had had the divine communication mentioned in [verse 15](#), and that some days are implied as spent by Saul in his quest for his fathers asses, Equally uncertain is the name of the city. It was not Samuel’s ordinary residence; it was in the ‘land of Zuph,’ an unknown district; it was perched, like most of the cities, on a hill; it had fountains lower down the slope, and a ‘high place’ farther up, where there was a building large enough for a feast. How strangely vivid the picture of this anonymous city is, and how we can yet see the maidens coming down to the fountains, the wearied travellers toiling up, and the voluble abundance of the directions given them!



I. The first thing we have to note is the premonitory word of the Lord. Observe the picturesque and forcible expression, 'had uncovered the ear of Samuel.' It is more than picturesque. It gives in the strongest form the fact of a revelation, both as to its origin and its secrecy. It is vain to represent the transition from judgeship to monarchy as a mere political revolution, inaugurated by Samuel as a fore-seeing statesman. It is misleading to speak of him, as Dean Stanley does, as one of the men who mediate between the old and the new. His opinions and views go for just nothing in the transaction, and he is simply God's instrument. The people's desire for the king, and God's answer to it, were equally independent of him. His own ideas were dead against the change, and at each step in bringing it about the divine causality is everything, and he is nothing but its obedient servant. It is hopeless to sift out a naturalistic explanation from the narrative, which is either supernatural or nothing. Note the three points of this communication,— God's sending Saul, the command to anoint, and the motive ascribed to God. As to the first, how striking that full-toned authoritative 'I will send' is! Think of the chain of ordinary events which brought Saul to the little city,—the wandering of a drove of asses, the failure to get on their tracks, the accident of being in the land of Zuph when he got tired of the search, the suggestion of the servant; and behind all these, and working through them, the will and hand of God, thrusting this man, all unconscious, along a path which he knew not. Our own purposes we may know, but God's we do not know. There is something awful in the thought of the issues that may spring from the smallest affairs, and we shall be bewildered and paralysed if once we get a glimpse of the complicated web which is ever being woven in the loom of time, unless we, too, can, by faith, see the Weaver, and then we shall be at rest. Call nothing trivial, and seek to be conscious of His guiding hand.

The command to Samuel to anoint Saul is no product of Samuel's own reflection, but comes to him, in this imperative form, before he has seen Saul, like a commission in blank, in regard to which he has no option, and in the origin of which he had no share. It was a piece of painful work to devolve his authority, like Aaron's having to strip off his robes before he died, and to put them on his son. But there is no trace of wounded feeling in Samuel. He is true to his childhood's word, 'Speak, for Thy servant heareth,' and, no doubt, he had the reward which obedience ever has to sweeten the bitterest draught, the reward of a quiet heart.

The reason as given in the last clause of the verse ought to have made Samuel's self-abnegation easier. God sets him the example. Israel had rejected Him, but He still calls them 'My people,' and looks upon them in tender care, and hears their cry. There is no contradiction here with the aspect of the concession to the people's wish, which appeared in the former section. Hasty criticism tries to make out discrepancies in the accounts, because it does not recognise one of the plainest characteristics of Scripture; namely, its habit of stating strongly and exclusively that side of a complicated matter which is relevant to the purpose

in hand, and leaving the other sides to be presented in due time. The three accounts of the election give three different reasons for it. In [chapter viii.](#), the people put it on the ground of Samuel's age and his son's unfitness, and God treats it as national rejection of Him. Here it appears as due, on the part of the people, to their fear of the Philistines, and on the part of God to His loving yielding to their cry. In [1 Samuel xii. 12](#), Samuel traces it to the fear of Ammonite invasion. Are these contradictory or supplementary accounts? Certainly the latter. Though Israel had in heart rejected God, and He gave them a king that they might learn how much better they would have been without one, it is as true that He lovingly listened to the cry of their fear, and answered them, in pity and tender care, by giving them the king whom they desired, and who would deliver them from their enemies. Let us learn how patient of our faithless follies, and how full of long-suffering love, even in 'anger,' He is. The same gift of His providence, regarded in one light, is loving chastisement, and in another is loving compliance with our cry and swift help to our need in the shape that we desire, but in both aspects is good and perfect. Note, too, that God's look is active, and is the bringing of the needed aid, and that He waits for our cry before He comes with His help.

II. The meeting of Samuel and Saul. They encounter each other in the gate,—the prophet on his way to the sacrifice, the future king with his head full of his humble quest. Samuel knows Saul by divine intimation as soon as he sees him, but Saul does not know Samuel. His question indicates the noble simplicity, without attendants or trappings, of the judge's life; but it also suggests the strange isolation of these early days, and the probable indifference of Saul to religion. If he had cared much about God's rule in Israel, he could scarcely have been so ignorant as his servant's words about 'the seer,' and his failure to know him when he saw him, show Saul to have been. He had not cared to see Samuel in any of the latter's circuits, and now he only wants to get some information from a diviner about these unfortunate asses. What a contrast between the thoughts of the two, as they looked at each other! Saul begins by consulting Samuel as a magician; he ends by seeking counsel from the witch at Endor. Samuel's words are beautiful in their smothering of all personal feeling, and dignified in their authority. He at once takes command of Saul, and prepares him by half-hints for something great to come. The direction to 'go up before me' is a sign of honour. The invitation to the sacrificial feast is another. The promise to disclose his own secret thoughts to Saul may, perhaps, point to some hidden ambitions, the knowledge of which would prove Samuel's prophetic character. The assurance as to the asses answers the small immediate occasion of Saul's resort to him, and the dim hint in the last words of [verse 20](#), rightly translated, tells him that 'all that is desirable in Israel' is for him, and for all his father's house. He went out to look for his father's asses, and he found a kingdom. The words were enigmatical; but if Saul knew of the impending revolution, they could scarcely fail to dazzle him and take away his breath. His answer is more than mere Oriental self-depreciation. Its bashful modesty contrasts sadly with the almost insane masterfulness and arrogant self-

will of his later years. Fair beginnings may end ill, and those who are set in positions of influence have hard work to keep steady heads, and to sail with low sails.

III. The feast. Up at the high place was some chamber used for the feasts which followed the sacrifices. A company of thirty—or, according to another reading, of seventy—persons had been invited, and the stately young stranger from Benjamin, with his servant (a trait of the simple manners of these days), is set in the place of honour, where wondering eyes fasten on him. Attention is still more emphatically centred on him when Samuel bids ‘the cook’ bring a part of the sacrifice which he had been ordered to set aside. It proves to be the ‘shoulder’ or ‘thigh,’ the priest’s perquisite, and therefore probably Samuel’s. To give this to another was equivalent to putting him in Samuel’s place; and Samuel’s words in handing it to Saul make its meaning plain. It is ‘that which hath been reserved.’ It has been ‘kept for thee’ till ‘the appointed time,’ and that with a view to the assembled guests. All this is in true prophetic fashion, which delighted in symbols, and these of the homeliest sort. The whole transaction expressed the transference of power to Saul, the divine reserving of the monarchy for him, and the public investiture with it, by the prophet himself. The veil was intentional, and intentionally thin. Cannot we see the flush of surprise and modesty on Saul’s cheek, as he tore the pieces from the significant ‘shoulder,’ and hear the whispers that ran through the guest-chamber?

IV. The private colloquy. When the simple feast was over, the strangely assorted pair went down to Samuel’s house, and there, on the quiet house-top, where were no curious ears, held long and earnest talk. No doubt Samuel told Saul all that was in his heart, as he had said that he would, and convinced him thereby that it was God who was speaking to him through the prophet. Nor would exhortations and warnings be wanting, which the old man’s experience would be anxious to give, and the young one’s modesty not unwilling to receive. Saul is a listener, not a speaker, in this unreported interview; and Samuel is in it, as throughout, the superior. The characteristic which marked the beginning of the Jewish monarchy was stamped on it till the end. The king was inferior to the prophet, and was meant to take his instructions from him when he appeared. Saul was docile on that first day, when he was half dazed with his new prospects, and wholly grateful to Samuel; but the history will show us how soon the fair promise of concord was darkened, and how fiercely he chafed at Samuel’s attempted control.

One can fancy his thoughts as he lay in the starlight, on the house-top, that night, and gazed into the astounding future that had opened before him. Had there been any true religion in him, it would have been a wakeful night of prayer. But, more likely, as the event proves, the ambition and arrogance which were deep in his nature, though hitherto undeveloped, were his counsellors, and drove Samuel’s wisdom out of his head.

As soon as the morning-red began to rise in the East, Samuel sent him away, to secure, as would appear, privacy in his departure. With simple courtesy the prophet accompanied

his guest, and as soon as they had got down the hill beyond the last house of the city, he bids Saul send on his servant, that he may speak a last word to him alone. Our text stops before the solemn anointing, and leaves these two standing there, in the fresh morning, type of the new career opening for one of them. What a contrast in the men! The one has all his long life been true to his first vow, 'Speak, for Thy servant heareth,' and now has come, in fulness of years, and revered by all men, near the end of his patient, faithful service. His work is all but done, and his heart is quiet in the peace which is the best reward of loving and doing God's law. Ripened wisdom, calm trust, unhesitating submission cast a glory round the old man, who is now performing the supreme act of self-abnegation of his lifetime, and, not without a sense of relief, is laying the burden, so long and uncomplainingly borne, on the great shoulders of this young giant. The other has a humble past of a few years rapidly sinking out of his dazzled sight, and is in a whirl of emotion at the startling suddenness of his new dignity. When one thinks of Gilboa, and the desperate suicide there, how pathetic is that strong, jubilant young figure, in the morning light, below the city, as he bows his head to receive the anointing which, little as he knew it, was to prove his ruin! A life begun by obedient listening to God's voice, and continued in the same, comes at last to a blessed end, and is crowned with many goods. A life which but partially accepts God's will as its law, and rather takes counsel of its own passions and arrogant self-sufficiency, may have much that is bright and lovable at its beginning, but will steadily darken as it goes on, and will set at last in eclipse and gloom.

### THE KING AFTER MAN'S HEART

‘And Samuel called the people together unto the Lord to Mizpeh; 18. And said unto the children of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all kingdoms, and of them that oppressed you; 19. And ye have this day rejected your God, who Himself saved you out of all your adversities and your tribulations; and ye have said unto Him, Nay, but set a king over us. Now therefore present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes, and by your thousands. 20. And when Samuel had caused all the tribes of Israel to come near, the tribe of Benjamin was taken. 21. When he had caused the tribe of Benjamin to come near by their families, the family of Matri was taken, and Saul the son of Kish was taken: and when they sought him, he could not be found. 22. Therefore they enquired of the Lord further, if the man should yet come thither. And the Lord answered, Behold, he hath hid himself among the stuff. 23. And they ran and fetched him thence: and when he stood among the people, he was higher than any of the people from his shoulders and upward. 24. And Samuel said to all the people, See ye him whom the Lord hath chosen, that there is none like him among all the people? And all the people shouted, and said, God save the king. 25. Then Samuel told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the Lord. And Samuel sent all the people away, every man to his house. 26. And Saul also went home to Gibeah; and there went with him a band of men, whose hearts God had touched. 27. But the children of Belial said, How shall this man save us? And they despised him, and brought him no presents. But he held his peace.’—1 SAMUEL x. 17-27.

These verses fit on to [chapter viii.](#), [chapters ix. to x. 16](#), being probably from another source, inserted here because the anointing of Saul, told in them, did occur between Samuel's dismissal of the people and his summoning of the national assembly which is here related. That private anointing of Saul was the divine call to him individually; the text tells of his public designation to the nation. The two are perfectly consistent, and, indeed, the private anointing is presupposed in the incident recorded in this passage, of Saul's hiding himself, for he could not have known the result that he would be 'taken,' unless he had had that previous intimation. The assembly at Mizpah was not convened in order to choose a king, but to accept God's choice, which was then to be declared.

But before the choice was announced, a last appeal was made to the people, if, perchance, they might still be persuaded to forgo their rebellious desire. It is not, indeed, said that this final, all but hopeless attempt was made by Samuel at the divine command, and we are not told that he had any further revelation than that in [chapter viii. 7-9](#). But, no doubt, he was speaking as Jehovah's mouthpiece, and so we have here one more instance of that long-suffering divine patience and love which 'hopeth all things,' and lingers pleadingly round the alienated heart, seeking to woo it back to itself, and never ceasing to labour to avert the evil deed, till it is actually and irrevocably done. It may be said that God knew that the appeal

was sure to fail, and therefore could not have made it. But is not that mysterious continuance of effort, foreknown to be futile, the very paradox of God's love? Did not Jesus give the traitor the sop, as a last token of friendship, a last appeal to his heart? And does not God still in like manner deal with us all?

Observe how He seeks to win Israel back. It is not by threatenings, but by reminders of His great benefits. He will not drive men back to His service, like a slave-driver with brandished whip, but He wishes to draw them back by 'the cords of love.' It is service from hearts melted by thankfulness, and therefore overflowing in joyful, willing obedience and grateful acts, that He desires. 'The mercies of God' should lead to men offering themselves as 'living sacrifices.'

The last appeal failed, and Samuel at once went on to give the people the desired bitter which they thought so sweet. Of course, it was by their representatives that the tribes presented themselves before God. The manner of making God's choice known is not told, and speculations as to it are idle. Probably a simple yes or no, as each tribe, family or individual was 'presented' was the mode, but how it was conveyed is quite unknown. That is a small matter; more important is it to note that Saul was chosen simply because he was the very type of the national ideal of a hero-king. Both here and in [chapter ix. 2](#) his stature and bravery are the only qualities mentioned. What Israel wanted was a rough fighter, with physical strength, plenty of bone and muscle. About moral, intellectual or spiritual qualities they did not care, and they got the kind of king that they wanted,—the only kind that they could appreciate. The only way to teach them that one who was a head and shoulders taller than any of them was not thereby certified to be the ideal king, was to give them such a man, and let them see what good he would do them.

There is no surer index nor sharper test of national or individual character than the sort of 'heroes' they worship. *Vox populi* has not been very much refined since Saul's day. Athletes and soldiers still captivate the crowd, and a mere prophet like Samuel has no chance beside the man of broad shoulders and well-developed biceps. And very often communities, especially democratic ones, get the 'king' they desire, the leader, statesman or the like, who comes near their ideal. The man whom they choose is the man whom, generally, they deserve. Israel had an excuse for its burst of ardour for a soldier, for it was in deadly danger from the Philistines. Is there as good an excuse for us in Britain, in our recent adoration of successful generals? Israel found out that its idol lacked higher gifts than thews and sinews, and experience taught them the falseness of their ideal.

Saul's hiding among the piles of miscellaneous baggage, which the multitude of representatives had brought with them, is usually set down to his credit, as indicating an engaging modesty; but there is another and more probable explanation of it, less creditable to him. Was it not rather occasioned by his shrinking from the heavy task that God was laying on him? He was not being summoned to a secure throne, but to 'go out before us, and fight

our battles.' He might well shrink, but if he had been God-fearing and God-obeying and God-trusting, he would have cried, 'Here am I! send me,' instead of skulking among the stuff. There was another Saul, who could say, 'I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.' It had been better for the son of Kish if he had been like the young Pharisee from Tarsus. We too have divine calls in *our* lives, and alas! we too not seldom hide ourselves among the stuff, and try to avoid taking up some heavy duty, by absorbing our minds in material good. Few things have greater power of obscuring 'the heavenly vision,' and of rendering us unwilling to obey it, than the clinging to the things of this world, which are in their place as the traveller's luggage needful on the road, but very much out of their place when they become a hiding-place for a man whom God is calling to service.

The 'manner of the kingdom,' which Samuel wrote and laid up before the Lord, was probably not the same as 'the manner of the king' ([chapter viii. 9-18](#)), but a kind of constitution, or solemn statement of the principles which were to govern the monarchy. The reading in [verse 26](#) should probably be 'the men of valour,' instead of 'a band of men.' They were brave men, 'whose hearts God had touched.' Now that Saul was chosen by God, loyalty to God was shown by loyalty to Saul. The sin of the people's desire, and the drop from the high ideal of the theocracy, and the lack of lofty qualities in Saul, may all be admitted. But God has made him king, and that is enough. Henceforward, God's servants will be Saul's partisans. The malcontents were apparently but a small faction. They, perhaps, had had a candidate of their own, but, at all events, they criticised God's appointed deliverer, and saw nothing in him to warrant the expectation that he would be able to do much for Israel. Disparaging criticism of God's chosen instruments comes from distrust of God who chose them. To doubt *the* divinely sent Deliverer's power to 'save' is to accuse God of not knowing our needs and of miscalculating the power of His supply of them. But not a few of us put that same question in various tones of incredulity, scorn or indifference. Sense makes many mistakes when it takes to trying to weigh Christ in its vulgar balances, and to settling whether He looks like a Saviour and a King.

### **SAMUEL'S CHALLENGE AND CHARGE**

‘And Samuel said unto all Israel, Behold, I have hearkened unto your voice in all that ye said unto me, and have made a king over you. 2. And now, behold, the king walketh before you: and I am old and grayheaded; and, behold, my sons are with you: and I have walked before you from my childhood unto this day. 3. Behold, here I am: witness against me before the Lord, and before His anointed: whose ox have I taken? or whose ass have I taken? or whom have I defrauded? whom have I oppressed? or of whose hand have I received any bribe to blind mine eyes therewith? and I will restore it you. 4. And they said, Thou hast not defrauded us, nor oppressed us, neither hast thou taken ought of any man’s hand. 5. And he said unto them, The Lord is witness against you, and His anointed is witness this day, that ye have not found ought in my hand. And they answered, He is witness. 6. And Samuel said unto the people, It is the Lord that advanced Moses and Aaron, and that brought your fathers up out of the land of Egypt. 7. Now therefore stand still, that I may reason with you before the Lord of all the righteous acts of the Lord, which he did to you and to your fathers. 8. When Jacob was come into Egypt, and your fathers cried unto the Lord, then the Lord sent Moses and Aaron, which brought forth your fathers out of Egypt, and them dwell in this place. 9. And when they forgot the Lord their God, He sold them into the hand of Sisera, captain of the host of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab, and they fought against them. 10. And they cried unto the Lord, and said, We have sinned, because we have forsaken the Lord, and have served Baalim and Ashtaroth: but now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, and we will serve Thee. 11. And the Lord sent Jerubbaal, and Bedan, and Jephthah, and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and ye dwelled safe. 12. And when ye saw that Nahash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, ye said unto me, Nay; but a king shall reign over us: when the Lord your God was your king. 13. Now therefore behold the king whom ye have chosen, and whom ye have desired! and, behold, the Lord hath set a king over you. 14. If ye will fear the Lord, and serve Him, and obey His voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall both ye and also the king that reigneth over you continue following the Lord your God: 15. But if ye will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, as it was against your fathers.’—[1 SAMUEL xii. 1-15](#).

The portion of Samuel’s address included in this passage has three main sections: his noble and dignified assertion of his official purity, his summary of the past history, and his solemn declaration of the conditions of future wellbeing for the nation with its new king.

I. Probably the war with the Ammonite king Nahash, which had postponed the formal inauguration of the king, had been carried on in the neighbourhood of the Jordan valley; and thus Gilgal would be a convenient rendezvous. But it was chosen for other reasons also, and, as appears from [1 Samuel x. 8](#), had been fixed on by Samuel at his first interview with



Saul. There the Covenant had been renewed, after the wanderers had crossed the river, with Joshua at their head, and it was fitting that the beginnings of the new form of the national life should be consecrated by worship on the same site as had witnessed the beginnings of the national life on the soil of the promised land. Perhaps the silent stones, which Joshua reared, stood there yet. At all events, sacred memories could scarcely fail, as the rejoicing crowd, standing where their fathers had renewed the Covenant, saw the blackened ruins of Jericho, and the foaming river, now, as then, filling all its banks in the time of harvest, which their fathers had crossed with the ark, that was now hidden at Kirjath-jearim, for their guide. The very place spoke the same lessons from the past which Samuel was about to teach them.

There is just a faint trace of Samuel's disapproval of the new order in his first words. He takes care to throw the whole responsibility on the people; but, at the same time, he assumes the authoritative tone which becomes him, and quietly takes the position of superiority to the king whom he has made. [I Samuel xi. 15](#) seems to imply that he took no part in the rejoicings. It was 'Saul and all the men of Israel' who were so glad. He was still hesitant as to the issue, and obeyed the divine command with clearer insight into its purpose than the shouting crowd and the proud young king had. There is something very pathetic in the contrast he draws between Saul and himself. 'The king walketh before you,' in all the vigour of his young activity, and delighting all your eyes, and 'I am old and gray-headed,' feeble, and fit for little more work, and therefore, as happens to such worn-out public servants, cast aside for a new man. Samuel was not a monster of perfection without human feelings. His sense of Israel's ingratitude to himself and practical revolt from God lay together in his mind, and colour this whole speech, which has a certain tone of severity, and an absence of all congratulation. Probably that accounts for the mention of his sons. The elders' frank statement of their low opinion of them had been a sore point with Samuel, and he cannot help alluding to it. It was not for want of possible successors in his own house that they had cried out for a king. If this be not the bearing of the allusion to his sons, it is difficult to explain; and this obvious explanation would never have been overlooked if Samuel had not been idealised into a faultless saint. The dash of human infirmity and fatherly blindness gives reality to the picture. 'I have walked before you from my youth unto this day.' Note the recurrence of the same expression as is applied to Saul in the former part of the verse. It is as if he had said, 'Once I was as he is now,—young and active in your sight, and for your service. Remember these past years. May your new fancy's record be as stainless as mine is, when he is old and grayheaded!' The words bring into view the characteristic of Samuel's life which is often insisted on in the earlier chapters,—its calm, unbroken continuity and uniformity of direction, from the long-past days when he wore 'the little coat' his mother made him, with so many tears dropped on it, till this closing hour. While everything was rushing down to destruction in Eli's time, and his sons were rioting at the Tabernacle door, the child was growing up in the stillness; and from then till now, amid all changes, his

course had been steady, and pointed to one aim. Blessed they whose age is but the fruitage of the promise of their youth! Blessed they who begin as 'little children,' with the forgiveness of sin and the knowledge of the Father, and who go on, as 'young men,' to overcome the Evil One, and end, as 'fathers,' with the deeper knowledge of Him who is 'from the beginning,' which is the reward of childhood's trust and manhood's struggles!

Samuel is still a prophet, but he is ceasing to be the sole authority, and, in his conscious integrity, calls for a public, full discharge, in the presence of the king. Note that [verse 3](#) gives the first instance of the use of the name 'Messiah,' and think of the contrast between Saul and Jesus. Observe, too, the simple manners of these times, when 'ox and ass' were the wealth. They would be poor plunder nowadays. Note also the various forms of injustice of which he challenges any one to convict him. Forcible seizure of live stock, fraud, harsh oppression, and letting suitors put gold on his eyes that he might not see, are the vices of the Eastern ruler to-day, and rampant in that unhappy land, as they have been ever since Samuel's time. I think I have heard of politicians in some other countries further west than Gilgal, who have axes to grind and logs to roll, and of the wonderful effects, in many places of business, of certain circular gold discs applied to the eyes. This man went away a poor man. He does not seem to have had salary, or retiring pension; but he carried away a pair of clean hands, as the voice of a nation witnessed.

II. Having cleared himself, Samuel recounts the outlines of the past, in order to emphasise the law that cleaving to God had ever brought deliverance; departure, disaster; and penitence, restoration. It is history with a purpose, and less careful about chronology than principles. Facts are good, if illuminated by the clear recognition of the law which they obey; but, without that, they are lumber. The 'philosophy of history' is not reached without the plain recognition of the working of the divine will. No doubt the principles which Samuel discerned written as with a sunbeam on the past of Israel were illustrated there with a certainty and directness which belonged to it alone; but we shall make a bad use of the history of Israel, if we say, 'It is all miraculous, and therefore inapplicable to modern national life.' It would be much nearer the mark to say, 'It is all miraculous, and therefore meant as an exhibition for blind eyes of the eternal principles which govern the history of all nations.' It is as true in Britain to-day as ever it was in Judea, that righteousness and the fear of God are the sure foundations of real national as of individual prosperity. The kingdoms of this world are not the devil's, though diplomatists and soldiers seem to think so. If any nation were to live universally by the laws of God, it might not have what the world calls national success; it would have no story of wholesale robbery, called military glory, but it would have peace within its borders, and life would go nobly and sweetly there. 'Happy is the people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is the people, whose God is the Lord.'

The details of Samuel's *resume* need not occupy much time. Note the word in [verse 7](#), 'reason,' or, as the Revised Version renders, 'plead.' He takes the position of God's advocate

in the suit, and what he will prove for his client is the 'righteousness' of his dealings in the past. The story, says he, can be brought down to very simple elements,—a cry to God, an answer of deliverance, a relapse, punishment, a renewed cry to God, and all the rest of the series as before. It is like a repeating decimal, over and over again, each figure drawing the next after it. The list of oppressors in [verse 9](#), and that of deliverers in [verse 11](#), do not follow the same order, but that matters nothing. Clearly the facts are assumed as well known, and needing only summary reference. The new-fashioned way of treating Biblical history, of course, takes that as an irrefutable proof of the late date and spuriousness of this manufactured speech put into Samuel's mouth. Less omniscient students will be content with accepting the witness to the history. Nobody knows anything of a judge named Bedan, and the conjectural emendation 'Barak' is probable, especially remembering the roll-call in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where Gideon, Barak, and Jephthah appear in the same order, with the addition of Samson. The supposition that 'Samuel,' in this verse, is an error for 'Samson,' is unnecessary; for the prophet's mention of himself thus is not unnatural, in the circumstances, and is less obtrusive than to have said 'me.'

The retrospect here given points the lesson of the sin and folly of the demand for a king. The old way had been to cry to God in their distresses, and the old experience had been that the answer came swift and sufficient; but this generation had tried a new method, and fear of 'Nahash the Ammonite' had driven them to look for a man to help them. The experience of God's responses to prayer does not always wean even those who receive them from casting about for visible helpers. Still less does the experience of our predecessors keep us from it. Strange that after a hundred plain instances of His aid, the hundred and first distress should find us almost as slow to turn to Him, and as eager to secure earthly stays, as if there were no past of our own, or of many generations, all crowded and bright with tokens of His care! We are always disposed to doubt whether the power that delivered from Sisera, Philistines, and Moab, will be able to deliver us from Nahash. The new danger looks the very worst of all, and this time we must have a king. All the while Israel had God for its king. Our dim eyes cannot see the realities of the invisible world, and so we cleave to the illusions of the visible, which, at their best, are but shadows of the real, and are often made, by our weak hearts, its rival and substitute. What does the soldier, who has an impenetrable armour to wear, want with pasteboard imitations, like those worn in a play? It is doubtful wisdom to fling away the substance in grasping at the shadow. Saul was brave, and a head and shoulders above the people, and he had beaten Nahash for them; but Saul for God is a poor exchange. Do we do better, when we hanker after something more tangible than an unseen Guide, Helper, Stay, Joy, and Peace-bringer for our hearts, and declare plainly, by our eager race after created good, that we do not reckon God by Himself enough for us?

III. The part of Samuel's address with which we are concerned here closes with the application of the history to the present time. The great point of the last three verses is that

the new order of things has not changed the old law, which bound up well-being inseparably with obedience. They have got their king, and there he stands; but if they think that that is to secure their prosperity, they are much mistaken. There is a touch of rebuke, and possibly of sarcasm, in pointing to Saul, and making so emphatic, as in [verse 13](#), the vehemence of their anxiety to get him. It is almost as if Samuel had said, 'Look at him, and say whether he is worth all that eagerness. Do you like him as well, now that you have him, as you did before?' There are not many of this world's goods which stand that test. The shell that looked silvery and iridescent when in the sea is but a poor, pale reminder of its former self, when we hold it dry in our hands. One object of desire, and only one, brings no disappointment in possessing it. He, and only he, who sets his hope on God, will never have to feel that he is not so satisfied with the fulfilment as with the dream.

Israel had rejected God in demanding a king; but the giver of their demand had been God, and their rejection had not abolished the divine government, nor altered one jot of the old law. They and their king were equally its subjects. There is great emphasis in the special mention of 'your king' as bound to obedience as much as they; and, if we follow the Septuagint reading of [verse 15](#), the mention is repeated there in the threatening of punishment. No abundance of earthly supports or objects of our love or trust in the least alters the unalterable conditions of well-being. Whether surrounded with these or stripped of all, to fear and serve the Lord and to hearken to His voice is equally the requisite for all true blessedness, and is so equally to the helper and the helped, the lover and the loved. We are ever tempted to think that, when our wishes are granted, and some dear or strong hand is stretched out for aid, all will be well; and we are terribly apt to forget that we need God as much as before, and that the way of being blessed has not changed. Those whose hearts and homes are bright with loved faces, and whose lives are guarded by strong and wise hands, have need to remember that they and their dear ones are under the same conditions of well-being as are the loneliest and saddest; and they who 'have none other that fighteth for' them have no less need to remember that, if God be their companion, they cannot be utterly solitary, nor altogether helpless if He be their aid.

### **OLD TRUTH FOR A NEW EPOCH**

‘Now therefore behold the king whom ye have chosen, and whom ye have desired! and, behold, the Lord hath set a king over you. 14. If ye will fear the Lord, and serve Him, and obey His voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord; then shall both ye, and also the king that reigneth over you, continue following the Lord your God: 15. But if ye will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord; then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, as it was against your fathers. 16. Now therefore stand and see this great thing, which the Lord will do before your eyes. 17. Is it not wheat-harvest to-day! I will call unto the Lord, and He shall send thunder and rain; that ye may perceive and see that your wickedness is great, which ye have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking you a king. 18. So Samuel called unto the Lord; and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day: and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. 19. And all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the Lord thy God, that we die not: for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king. 20. And Samuel said unto the people, Fear not: ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart; 21. And turn ye not aside: for then should ye go after vain things, which cannot profit nor deliver, for they are vain. 22. For the Lord will not forsake His people for His great name’s sake: because it hath pleased the Lord to make you His people. 23. Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way: 24. Only fear the Lord, and serve Him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things He hath done for you. 25. But if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king.’ — [1 SAMUEL xii. 13-25](#).

Samuel’s office as judge necessarily ended when Saul was made king, but his office of prophet continued. This chapter deals with both the cessation and the continuance, giving at first his dignified, and somewhat pained, vindication of his integrity, and then passing on to show him exercising his prophetic function in exhortation, miracle, and authoritative declaration of Jehovah’s will.

I. The first point is the sign which Samuel gave. Usually there is no rain in Palestine from about the end of April till October. Samuel was speaking during the wheat harvest, which falls about the beginning of June. We note that he volunteered the sign, and, what is still more remarkable, that he is sure that God will send it in answer to his prayer. Why was he thus certain? Because he recognised that the impulse to proffer the sign came from God. We know little of the mental processes by which a prophet could discriminate between his own thinkings and God’s speech, but such discrimination was possible, or there could have been no ring of confidence in the prophet’s ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ Not even a ‘Samuel among them that call upon His name’ had a right to assume that every asking would certainly have

an answer. It is when we ask 'anything according to His will' that we know that 'He heareth us,' and are entitled to predict to others the sure answer.

It seems a long leap logically from hearing the thunder and seeing the rain rushing down on the harvest field, to recognising the sin of asking for a king. But the connecting steps are plain. Samuel announced the storm, he asked God to send it, it came at his word; therefore he was approved of God and was His messenger; therefore his words about the desire for a king were God's words. Again, God sent the tempest; therefore God ruled the elemental powers, and wielded them so as to affect Israel, and therefore it had been folly and sin to wish for another defender. So the result of the thunder-burst was twofold—they 'feared Jehovah and Samuel,' and they confessed their sin in desiring a king. They were but rude and sense-bound men, like children in many respects; their religion was little more than outward worship and a vague awe; they needed 'signs' as children need picture-books. The very slightness and superficiality of their religion made their confession easy and swift, and neither the one nor the other went deep enough to be lasting. The faith that is built on 'signs and wonders' is easily battered down; the repentance that is due to a thunderstorm is over as soon as the sun comes out again. The shallowness of the contrition in this case is shown by two things,—the request to Samuel to pray for them, and the boon which they begged him to ask, 'that we die not.' They had better have prayed for themselves, and they had better have asked for strength to cleave to Jehovah. They were like Simon Magus cowering before Peter, and beseeching him, 'Pray ye for me to the Lord, that none of the things which ye have spoken may come upon me.' That is not the voice of true repentance, the 'godly sorrow' which works healing and life, but that of the 'sorrow of the world which worketh death.' The real penitent will press the closer to the forgiving Father, and his cry will be for purity even more than for pardon.

II. Samuel's closing words are tender, wise, and full of great truths. He begins with encouragement blended with reiteration of the people's sin. It is not safe for a forgiven man to forget his sin quickly. The more sure he is that God has forgotten, the more careful he should be to remember it, for gratitude, humility and watchfulness. But it should never loom so large before him as to shut out the sunshine of God's love, for no fruits of goodness will ripen in character without that light. It is a great piece of practical wisdom always to keep one's forgiven sin in mind, and yet not to let it paralyse hopefulness and effort. 'Ye have indeed done all this evil, . . . yet turn not aside from following Jehovah.' That is a truly evangelical exhortation. The memory of past failures is never to set the tune for future service. Again, Samuel based the exhortation to whole-hearted service of Jehovah on Jehovah's faithfulness and great benefits (*vs. 22-24*), It is suicidal folly to turn away from Him who never turns away from us; it is black ingratitude, as well as suicidal folly, to refuse to serve Him whose mercies encompass us. That divine good pleasure, which has no source but in Himself, flows out like an artesian well, unceasing. His 'nature and property' is to love. His

past is the prophecy of His future. He will always be what He has been, and always do what He has done. Therefore we need not fear, though we change and are faithless. 'He cannot deny Himself.' His revealed character would be dimmed if He abandoned a soul that clung to Him. So our faith should, in some measure, match His faithfulness, and we should build firmly on the firm foundation.

III. Samuel answers the people's request for his prayers with a wise word, full of affection, and also full of dignity and warning, all the more impressive because veiled. He promises his continued intercession, but he puts it as a duty which he owes to God rather than to them only, and he thus sufficiently asserts his God-appointed office. He promises to do more than pray for them; namely, to continue as their ethical and religious guide, which they had not asked him to be. That at once makes his future position in the monarchy clear. He is still the prophet, though no longer the judge, and, as the future was to show, he has to direct monarch as well as people. But it also hints to the people that his prayers for them will be of little avail unless they listen to his teaching. Whether a Samuel prays for us or not, if we do not listen to the voices that bid us serve God, we 'shall be consumed.'

## SAUL REJECTED

‘Then came the word of the Lord unto Samuel, saying, 11. It repenteth Me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following Me, and hath not performed My commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the Lord all night. 12. And when Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning, it was told Samuel, saying, Saul came to Carmel, and, behold, he set him up a place, and is gone about, and passed on, and gone down to Gilgal. 13. And Samuel came to Saul: and Saul said unto him, Blessed be thou of the Lord: I have performed the commandment of the Lord. 14. And Samuel said, What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear? 15. And Saul said, They have brought them from the Amalekites: for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed. 16. Then Samuel said unto Saul, Stay, and I will tell thee what the Lord hath said to me this night. And he said unto him, Say on. 17. And Samuel said, When thou wast little in thine own sight, wast thou not made the head of the tribes of Israel, and the Lord anointed thee king over Israel? 18. And the Lord sent thee on a journey, and said, Go and utterly destroy the sinners the Amalekites, and fight against them until they be consumed. 19. Wherefore then didst thou not obey the voice of the Lord, but didst fly upon the spoil, and didst evil in the sight of the Lord? 20. And Saul said unto Samuel, Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, and have gone the way which the Lord sent me, and have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. 21. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in Gilgal. 22. And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. 23. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He hath also rejected thee from being king.’—[1 SAMUEL xv. 10-23](#).

Again the narrative takes us to Gilgal,—a fateful place for Saul, There they ‘made Saul king before the Lord’; there he had taken the first step on his dark way of gloomy, proud self-will, down which he was destined to plunge so far and fatally. There he had, in consequence, received the message of the transference of the kingdom from his house, though not from himself. Now, flushed with his victory over Amalek, he has come there with his troops, laden with spoil. They had made a swift march from the south where Amalek dwelt, passing by Nabal’s Carmel, where they had put up some sort of monument of their exploit in a temper of vain-glory, very unlike the spirit which reared the stone of help at Eben-ezer; and apparently they purpose sacrifices and a feast. But Samuel comes into camp with no look of congratulation. Probably the vigorous old man had walked that day from his home, some fifteen miles off, and on the way seems to have picked up tidings of Saul’s victory and



position, which ought to have reached him from the king himself, and would have done so if Saul's conscience had been clear. The omission to tell him was studied neglect, which revealed much.

Samuel had 'cried unto the Lord all night,' if perchance the terrible sentence might be reversed; and his cries had not been in vain, for they had brought him into complete submission, and had nerved him to do his work calmly, without a quiver or a pang of personal feeling, as becomes God's prophet.

I. We must go back a step beyond this passage to understand it. Note, first, the command which was disobeyed. The campaign against Amalek was undertaken by express divine direction through Samuel's lips. It was the delayed fulfilment of a sentence passed in the times of the Conquest, but not executed then. The terrible old usages of that period are brought into play again, and the whole nation with its possessions is 'devoted'. The word explains the dreadful usage. There are two kinds of devotion to God: that of willing, and that of unwilling, men; the one brings life, the other, death. The massacre of the foul nations of Canaan was thereby made a direct divine judgment, and removed wholly from the region of ferocious warfare. No doubt, the whole plane of morals in the earlier revelation is lower than that of the New Testament. If Jesus has not taught a higher law than was given to 'them of old time,' one large part of His gift to men disappears. The wholesale destruction of 'babe and suckling' with the guilty makes us shudder; and we are meant to feel the difference between the atmosphere of that time and ours. But we are not meant to question the reality of the divine command, nor His right to give it. He slays, and makes alive. His judgments strike the innocent with the guilty. In many a case, and often, the sin is one generation's, and the bitter fruit another's. The destruction of Canaanites and Amalekites does not change its nature because God used men to do it; and the question is not whether the Israelites were fiercely barbarous in their warfare, but whether God has the right of life and death. We grant all the dreadfulness, and joyfully admit the distance between such acts and Jesus Christ; but we recognise them as not incongruous with the whole revealed character of the God who is justice as well as love, as parallel in substance, though different in instrument, with many of His dealings with men,—as the execution of righteous sentence on rank corruption, and as sweetening the world by its removal. Most of the difficulty and repugnance has been caused by forgetting that Israel was but the sword, while the hand was God's.

II. Note the disobedience. Partial obedience is complete disobedience. Saul and his men obeyed as far as suited them; that is to say, they did not obey God at all, but their own inclinations, both in sparing the good and in destroying the worthless. What was not worth carrying off they destroyed,—not because of the command, but to save trouble. This one fault seems but a small thing to entail the loss of a kingdom. But is it so? It was obviously not an isolated act on Saul's part, but indicated his growing impatience of the divine control, exercised on him through Samuel. He was in a difficult position. He owed his kingdom to the

prophet; and the very condition on which he held it was that of submission to Samuel's authority. No wonder that his elevation quickened the growth of his masterfulness and gloomy, impetuous self-will,—traits in his character which showed themselves very early in his reign! No wonder either that such a king, held in leading-strings by a prophet, should chafe! The more insignificant the act in itself, the more significant it may be as a flag of revolt. Disobedience which will not do a little thing is great disobedience. Nor was this the first time that Saul had 'kicked,' like another Saul, 'against the pricks,' Gilgal had seen a previous instance of his impetuous self-assertion, masked by apparent deference; and the inference is fair that the interval between the two pieces of rebellion had been of a piece with them. Trivial acts, especially when repeated, show deep-seated evil. There may be only a coil of the snake visible, but that betrays the presence of the slimy folds, though they are covered from sight among the leaves. The tiny shoot of a plant, peeping above the ground, does not augur that the roots are short; they may run for yards. Nor can any act be called small, of which the motive is disregard of God's plain command: 'He that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.' Saul had never much religion. He had never heard of Samuel till that day when he came to consult him about the asses. It was a wonder to his acquaintances to find him 'among the prophets'; and all his acts of worship have about them a smack of self, and an exclusive regard to the mere externals of sacrifice, which imply a shallow notion of religion and a spirit un-subdued by its deeper influences.

Such a man habitually acts in disregard of God's will; and that is great sin, though it be manifested in small acts. It is to be remembered, too, that the excepting of the best of the spoil from the general destruction, changed the whole character of the transaction, and brought it down from the level of a solemn act of divine justice, of which Saul and his army were the executors by divine mandate, to that of a mere cattle-lifting foray, in which they were but thieves for their own gain. The mingling of personal advantage with any sort of service of God, ruins the whole, and turns it into mere selfishness. Samuel, in [verse 19](#), puts the two sides of this 'evil in the sight of the Lord' as being disobedience and swooping down on the booty, like some bird of prey.

III. Note Saul's excuses. Throughout the whole interview he plays a sorry part, and is evidently cowed by the hated authority and personality of the old man; while Samuel, on his side, is curt, stern, and takes the upper hand, as becomes God's messenger. The relative positions of the two men are the normal ones of their offices, and explain both Saul's revolt and the chronic impatience of kings at the interference of prophets. Here we have Saul coming to meet Samuel with affected heartiness and welcome, and with the bold lie, 'I have performed the commandment of the Lord.' That is more than true obedience is quick to say. If Saul had done it, he would have been slower to boast of it. 'Those vessels yield the most sound that have the least liquor.' He 'doth protest too much'; and the protestation comes from an uneasy conscience. Or did he, like a great many other men who have no

deep sense of the sanctity of every jot and tittle of a divine law, please himself with the notion that it was enough to keep it approximately, in the 'spirit' of the precept, without slavish obedience to the 'letter'? In a later part of the interview (v. 20) he insists that he has obeyed, and tries to prove it by dwelling on the points in which he did so, and gliding lightly over the others.

'Samuel had reason to believe the sheep and oxen above Saul'; and there is a tone of almost contempt for the shuffling liar in his quiet question: 'What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?' There was no answering that; so Saul shifts his ground without a blush or a moment's hesitation. 'The people spared.' It is a new character for him to appear in,—that of a weak ruler who cannot keep his unruly men in order! Had he tried to restrain them? If he had, and had failed, he was not fit to be a king. If he had not, he was a coward to shift the blame on to them. How ready men are to vilify themselves in some other direction, in order to escape the consciousness of sin, which God is seeking to force home on them! No doubt the people were very willing to have a finger in the affair; but so was he. And if the cattle was their share, Agag, who could be held to ransom, was his; and the arrangement suited all round. As to the purpose of sacrificing at Gilgal, perhaps that was true; but if it were, no doubt the same process of selection, which had destroyed the worthless and kept the best, would have been repeated; and the net result would have been a sacrifice of the least valuable, and 'the survival of the fittest' in many a pasture and stall.

But note Saul's attitude towards Jehovah, betrayed by him in that one word: 'the Lord *thy* God,' No wonder that he had been content with a partial and perfunctory obedience, if he had no closer sense of connection with God than that! There is almost a sneer in it, too, as if he had said, 'What needs all this fuss about saving the cattle? You should be pleased; for this Jehovah, with whom you profess to have special communication, will be honoured with sacrifice, and you will share in the feast.' If the words do not mean abjuring Jehovah, they go very near it, and, at all events, betray the shallowness of Saul's religion. Samuel, in his answer, reminds him of his early modesty and self-distrust, and of the source of his elevation. He then sweeps away the flimsy cobwebs of excuses, by the curt repetition of the plain, dreadful terms of Saul's commission, and then flashes out the piercing question, like a sword, 'Wherefore then didst thou not?' The reminder of past benefits, and the reiteration of the plain injunctions which have been broken, are the way to cut through the poor palliations which men wrap around their sins.

It speaks of a very obstinate and gloomy determination that, in answer, Saul should reiterate his protestation of having done as he was bid. He doggedly says over again all that he had said before, unmoved by the prophet's solemn words. He is steeling his heart against reproof; and there is only one end to that. Sin unacknowledged, after God has disclosed it, is doubly sin. The heart that answers the touch of God's rebukes by sullenly closing more

tightly on its evil, is preparing itself for the blow of the hammer which will crush it. 'He that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.' Let us beware of meeting God's prophet with shuffling lies about our obedience, and of opposing to the words which are loving though they pierce, the armour of impenetrable self-righteousness and conceit.

IV. Note the punishment. To the vain talk about honouring God by sacrifice, Samuel opposes the great principle which was the special message committed to every prophet in Israel, and which was repeated all through its history, side by side with the divinely appointed sacrificial system. In the intensity of his spiritual emotion, Samuel speaks in lyric strains, in the measured parallelism which was the Hebrew dress of poetry, and gives forth in words 'which will live for ever' the great truth that God delights in obedience more than in sacrifice. Whilst, on the one hand, he lifts the surrender of the will, and the consequent submission of the life, high above all mere ritual, on the other hand, by the same process, he sinks the rebellion of the will and the stubbornness of the nature, unsubdued either by kindness or threats, as Saul was showing his to be, to the level of actual idolatry.

'Rebellion is divination,  
And stubbornness is idols and teraphim.'

Then comes the stern sentence of rejection. Why was Saul thus irrevocably set aside? Was it not a harsh punishment for such a crime? As we have already remarked, Saul's act is not to be judged as an isolated deed, but as the outcome of a deep tendency in him, which meant revolt from God. It was not because of the single act, but because of that which it showed him to be, that he was set aside. The sentence is pronounced, not because 'thou didst spare Amalek,' but because 'thou didst reject the word of the Lord.' Further, it is to be remembered that the punishment was but the carrying out of his act. His own hand had cut the bond between him and God, and had disqualified himself for the office which he filled. Saul had said, 'I will reign by myself.' God said, 'Be it so! By thyself thou shalt reign.' For the consequence of his deposition was not outward change in his royalty. David indeed was anointed but in secret, so Samuel consented to honour Saul before the people. All the external difference was that Samuel never saw him again, and he was relieved from the incubus of the prophet's 'interference'; that is to say, he ceased to be God's king, and became a phantom, ruling only by his own will and power, as he had wished to do. How profound may be the difference while all externals remain unchanged! When we set up ourselves as our own lords, and shake off God's rule, we cast away His sanction and help in all the deeds of our self-will, however unaltered their outward appearance may remain. But God left him to 'walk in his own ways, and be filled with the fruit of his own devices,' by no irrevocable abandonment, however the decree of rejection from the kingship was irrevocable. The gates

of repentance stood open for him; and the very sentence that came stern and laconic from Samuel's lips, rightly accepted, might have drawn him in true penitence to a forgiving God. His subsequent confession was rejected because it expressed no real contrition; and the worship which he proceeded to offer, without the sanction of the prophet's presence, was as unreal as his protestation of obedience, and showed how little he had learned the lesson of the great words, 'To obey is better than sacrifice.'

### THE SHEPHERD-KING

‘And the Lord said unto Samuel, How long wilt thou mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel! fill thine horn with oil, and go, I will send thee to Jesse the Beth-lehemite: for I have provided Me a king among his sons. 2. And Samuel said, How can I go? If Saul hear it, he will kill me. And the Lord said, Take an heifer with thee, and say, I am come to sacrifice to the Lord. 3. And call Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show thee what thou shalt do: and thou shalt anoint unto Me him whom I name unto thee. 4. And Samuel did that which the Lord spake, and came to Beth-lehem. And the elders of the town trembled at his coming, and said, Comest thou peaceably? 5. And he said, Peaceably: I am come to sacrifice unto the Lord: sanctify yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice. And he sanctified Jesse and his sons, and called them to the sacrifice. 6. And it came to pass, when they were come, that he looked on Eliab, and said, Surely the Lord’s anointed is before him. 7. But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart. 8. Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, Neither hath the Lord chosen this. 9. Then Jesse made Shammah to pass by. And he said, Neither hath the Lord chosen this. 10. Again, Jesse made seven of his sons to pass before Samuel. And Samuel said unto Jesse, The Lord hath not chosen these. 11. And Samuel said unto Jesse, Are here all thy children? And he said, There remaineth yet the youngest, and, behold, he keepeth the sheep. And Samuel said unto Jesse, Send and fetch him: for we will not sit down till he come hither. 12. And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to. And the Lord said, Arise, anoint him: for this is he. 13. Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward. So Samuel rose up, and went to Ramah.’—[1 SAMUEL xvi. 1-13](#).

The chief purpose in these verses is to bring out that the choice of David was purely God’s. The most consummate art could have taken no better way of heightening the effect of his first appearance than that adopted in this perfectly unartificial story, which leads us up a long avenue to where the shepherd-boy stands. First, we have Samuel, with his regrets and objections; then Jesse with his seven stalwart sons; and at last, when expectation has been heightened by delay and by the minute previous details, the future king is disclosed,—a stripling with his ruddy locks glistening with the anointing oil, and his lovely eyes. We shall best catch the spirit by simply following the letter of the story.

I. We have Samuel and his errand to Bethlehem. After that sad day at Gilgal, he and Saul met no more, though their homes were but a few miles apart, and it must have been difficult to avoid each other. Samuel yearned over the man whom he had learned to love, and it must have been pain to him to see the shattering of the vessel which he had formed.

However natural his mourning, and however indicative of his sweet nature, it was wrong, because it showed that he had not yet reconciled himself to God's purpose, though his conduct obeyed. The mourning which submits while it weeps, and which interferes with no duty, is never rebuked by God. He never says, 'How long dost thou mourn?' unless sorrow has deepened into accusation of His providence, or tears have blinded us to the duty that ensues. But the true cure for overmuch sorrow is work, and, for vain regrets after vanished good, the welcome to the new good which God ever sends to fill the empty place. His resources are not exhausted because one man has failed. 'There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.' Saul has been rejected, but a king shall be found; and Samuel is to dry his tears and anoint him. He evidently had no thought of a successor to Saul till this command came; and when it comes, how little it tells him! He gets light enough for the next step, but no more. That is always God's way. Duty opens by degrees, and the way to see farther ahead is to go as far as we see.

Samuel's sorrow and the incomplete command show plainly that he was but an instrument. At every step the view is confuted which makes him a far-seeing statesman who inaugurated and carried through a peaceful revolution. The history, which is our only source, tells another story, and makes God the actor, and the prophet only a tool in His hands. If we cut the supernatural out of the story, the fragments do not hang together, and no reason is forthcoming why they should be any more true than are the rejected pieces. Samuel does not show to advantage in either of the two things mentioned about him here. In neither was he true to his early vow, 'Speak, for Thy servant heareth.' But there was much reason for his fear, if once God was left out of the account; for Saul's ever-wakeful suspicion had become a disease, and it was not wonderful that he should be on the watch for any act which looked like putting the sentence of deposition into effect. If ever a man lived with a sword hanging by a hair over him, it was this unhappy king, who knew that he was dethroned, and did not know when or by whom the divine rejection would be made visible to all men. But Samuel had faced worse dangers without a murmur; and no doubt his alarm now, which makes him venture all but flatly to refuse to obey, indicates that, to some extent, he had lost his hold of God by his indulgence in his sorrow. If he had been true to his high calling, he would have 'filled his horn,' and gone on God's errand, careless of a hundred Sauls or a hundred deaths. But it is easy for us, who have never perilled anything for obedience, to sit in judgment on him. 'Wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself.' God judges him mercifully, and provides a shelter for his weakness, which he should not have needed. To hide his true errand behind the cloak of the sacrifice was second-best, and only permitted in consideration of his fear which had a touch of sin in it. He was not, at the moment, up to treading the heroic plain path; and God opened an easier one for him. It is sometimes allowable to use an avowed purpose to conceal the real one, but it is a permission which should be very sparingly used.

II. We have Samuel at Bethlehem, with Jesse and his sons. An old man is suddenly seen coming up the hill to the gate of the little city on foot, driving or leading a heifer, and carrying a horn in his hand. In such humble fashion did the prophet travel; but reverential awe met him, and his long years of noble service surrounded him as with a halo. Apparently, Bethlehem had not been included in his usual circuits, and the village elders were somewhat scared by his sudden appearance. Their question may give a glimpse into the severity which Samuel sometimes had to show, and is a strange testimony to the reality of his power: 'Comest thou peaceably?' One old man was no very formidable assailant of a village, even if he did not come with friendly intent; but, if he is recognised as God's messenger, his words are sharper than any two-edged sword, and his unarmed hand bears weapons mighty to 'pull down strongholds.' Why should the elders have thought that he came 'with a rod'? Because they knew that they and their fellow-villagers deserved it. If men were not dimly conscious of sin, they would not be afraid of God's messenger or of God.

The narrative does not tell whether or not the sacrifice preceded the review of Jesse's sons. Probably it did, and the interval between it and the feast was occupied in the interview. It is evident that Samuel kept the reason of his wish to see Jesse's sons to himself; for disclosure would have brought about the danger which he was so anxious to avoid. It appears, too, from [verse 13](#), that only the family of Jesse were present. So we have to fancy the wondering little cluster of burly husbandmen with their father surrounding the prophet, and: one by one, bracing themselves to meet his searching gaze. Again the choice is emphatically represented as God's, by the mention of Samuel's hasty conclusion, from the look of the eldest, that he was the man. Had not Samuel had enough of kings of towering stature? Strange that he should have been in such a hurry to fix on a second edition of Saul! The most obedient waiters on God sometimes outrun His intimations, and they always go wrong when they do. Samuel has to learn two lessons, as he is bidden to repress the too quick thought: one, that he is not choosing, but only registering God's choice; and one, that the qualifications for God's king are inward, not bodily. In these old days, the world's monarchs had to be men of thews and sinews, for power rested on mere brute force: but God's chosen had to rule, not by the strength of his own arm, but by leaning on God's. The genius of the kingdom determined the principle of selection of its king. Samuel does not again attempt to forecast the choice; but he lets the other six pass, and, hearing no inward voice from God, tells Jesse, as it would seem, that the Lord has not chosen them for whatsoever mysterious purpose was in His mind.

III. We have 'the Lord's chosen.' Samuel was staggered by the apparent failure of his errand. God had told him that he had provided a king from this family, and now they had passed in review before him, and none was chosen. Again he is made to feel his own impotence, and his question, 'Are here all thy children?' has a touch of bewilderment in it. God seldom shows us His choice at first; and both in thought and practice we get at the precious



and the true by a process of exclusion, having often to reject 'seven' before we find in some all-but-forgotten 'eighth' that which we seek. David's insignificance in Jesse's eyes was such that his father would never have remembered his existence but for the question, and his answer is a kind of assurance to the prophet that he need not take the trouble to see the boy, for he will never do for whatever he may have in view. His youth and occupation put him out of the question. We know, from the other parts of his story, that his brothers had no love for him; nor does his father seem to have had much. Probably the lad had the usual lot of genius,—to grow up among uncongenial, commonplace people, understanding him little, and liking him less. It is a hard school; but where it does not sour, it makes strong men. His solitary shepherd life taught him many precious lessons, and, at any rate, gave him the priceless gift of solitude, which is the nurse of poetry, heroism, and religion. The glorious night-piece in [Psalm viii.](#), and its companion day-piece in [Psalm xix.](#), may bear the impress of the shepherd life; which is idealised and sanctified for ever in the immortal sweetness of [Psalm xxiii.](#) There were many worse schools for the future king than a solitary shepherd's life on the bare hills round Bethlehem.

The delay of the feast and the pause of idle waiting heighten the expectation with which we look for David's coming. When he does come, what a bright young figure is lovingly painted for us! He is 'ruddy, and withal fair of eyes, and goodly to look upon,'—of fair complexion, with golden hair (rare among these swarthy Orientals), and with lustrous poet's eyes. What a contrast to Saul's grim face and figure,—like a sunbeam streaming athwart a thunder-cloud seamed with its own lightning! Silently the divine voice spoke, and silently, as it would seem, Samuel poured the oil on the boy's bowed curls. No word of the purpose escaped his lips, and the awestruck youth was left to wonder for what high destiny he was chosen. One can fancy the looks of his brothers as they bitterly watched the anointing with hearts full of envy, contempt, and rage. [I Samuel xvii. 28](#) shows what they felt to David.

What was the use of this enigmatical anointing for an undisclosed purpose? It is Samuel's last act, and his last appearance, except for the mention of David's flight to him from the court of Saul, and that weird scene of Saul prophesying and lying naked before Samuel and David for a day and a night. It was therefore the solemn final act of the prophet,—transferring the monarchy; but it was for David the beginning of his training for the throne, in two ways, 'The Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward.' There was an actual communication of divine gifts fitting him for his unknown office, and he was conscious of a new spirit stirring in him. Beside this, the consciousness of a call to unknown tasks would mature him fast, and bring graver thoughts, humbler sense of weakness, and clinging trust in God who had laid the burden on him; and the necessity for repressing his dreams of the future, in order to do his obscure present duties, would add patience and self-control to his youthful ardour. What a whirl of thoughts he carried back to his flock, and how welcome would the solitude be!

The great lesson here is the one so continually reiterated in Scripture, from Isaac downwards, that God 'chooses the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty,' and thereby magnifies both the sovereign freedom of His choice and the power of His Spirit, which takes the stripling from the shepcotes and qualifies him to be the antagonist of the grim Saul, and the king of Israel. There are subsidiary lessons, especially for young and ardent souls confined for the present to lowly tasks, and feeling some call to something higher in a dim future. Patience, the faithful doing of to-day's trivial tasks, the habit of self-repression, the quiet trust in God who opens the way in due time,—these, and such like, were the signs that David was called to a throne, and that God's Spirit was preparing him for it. They are the virtues which will best prepare us for whatever the future may have in store for us, and will be in themselves abundant reward, whether they draw after them a high position, which is a heavy burden, or, more happily, leave us in our sheltered obscurity.

### **THE VICTORY OF UNARMED FAITH**

‘And David said to Saul, Let no man’s heart fail because of him; thy servant will go and fight with this Philistine. 33. And Saul said to David, Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him: for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth. 34. And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father’s sheep, and there came a lion and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock; 35. And I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. 36. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he hath defied the armies of the living God. 37. David said moreover, The Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, He will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine. And Saul said unto David, Go, and the Lord be with thee. 38. And Saul armed David with his armour, and he put an helmet of brass upon his head; also he armed him with a coat of mail. 39. And David girded his sword upon his armour, and he assayed to go; for he had not proved it. And David said unto Saul, I cannot go with these; for I have not proved them. And David put them off him. 40. And he took his staff in his hand, and chose him five smooth stones out of the brook, and put them in a shepherd’s bag which he had, even in a scrip; and his sling was in his hand: and he drew near to the Philistine. 41. And the Philistine came on and drew near unto David; and the man that bare the shield went before him. 42. And when the Philistine looked about, and saw David, he despised him: for he was but a youth, and ruddy, and of a fair countenance. 43. And the Philistine said unto David, Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves? And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. 44. And the Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field. 45. Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. 46. This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcasses of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. 47. And all this assembly shall know that the Lord saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle is the Lord’s, and He will give you into our hands. 48. And it came to pass, when the Philistine arose, and came and drew nigh to meet David, that David hasted, and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine. 49. And David put his hand in his bag, and took thence a stone, and slang it, and smote the Philistine in his forehead, that the stone sunk into his forehead; and he fell upon his face to the earth. 50. So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and smote the Philistine, and slew him; but there was no sword in the hand of David. 51. Therefore David ran, and stood upon the Philistine, and took his sword, and

drew it out of the sheath thereof, and slew him, and cut off his head therewith. And when the Philistines saw their champion was dead, they fled.’—1 SAMUEL xvii. 32-51.

The scene of David’s victory has been identified in the present Wady Es-Sunt, which still possesses one of the terebinth-trees which gave it its name of ‘Elah.’ At that point it is about a quarter of a mile wide, and runs nearly east and west. In the centre is ‘a deep trench or gully, the sides and bed of which are strewn with rounded and water-worn pebbles.’ This is the ‘valley,’ or rather ‘ravine’ of [verse 3](#) of this chapter, which is described by a different word from that for ‘vale’ in [verse 2](#)—the one meaning a much broader opening than the other—and from it came the ‘five smooth stones.’ Notice the minute topographical accuracy, which indicates history, not legend. The pebble-bed may supply a missile to hit the modern ‘giant’ of sceptical criticism, who boasts much after Goliath’s fashion.

The two armies lay looking at each other across the valley, with occasional skirmishes; and for forty days (probably a round number) Goliath paraded on his own, the south, side of the gully, shouting out his taunts and challenge with a voice like a bull. Many a similar scene in classical and mediaeval warfare confirms the truth of the picture, so unlike modern battles. The story is, for all time, the example of the victory of unarmed faith over the world’s utmost might. It is in little the history of the Church and the type of all battles for God. It is a pattern for the young especially. The youthful athlete leaps into the arena, and overcomes, not because of his own strength, but because he trusts in God.

I. Note the glowing youthful enthusiasm which dares the conflict. When the Spirit of the Lord left Saul, his courage seems to have gone too, and he is cowed, like the rest, by Goliath. His interview with David shows him as timid and unlike his former self, when he dashed at Nahash and any odds. Now he is hardly to be roused, even by David’s contagious boldness, and is full of objections and precautions. The temper of the two, as they front each other in Saul’s tent, shows that the one has lost, and the other received, the Spirit which strengthens. David has become the encourager, and his cheery words bring some hopefulness to the gloomy, faint-hearted king. The Septuagint has a variant reading in [verse 32](#), which brings this out and suits the context, ‘Let not my lord’s heart fail.’ But, whether this be adopted or no, David appears as quite unaffected by the terror which had unmanned the army, and as bringing a buoyant disregard of the enemy, like a reviving breeze. It was not merely youthful daring, nor foolish under-estimation of the danger, which prompted his stimulating words. The ring of true faith is in them, and they show us how we may surround ourselves with an atmosphere which will keep prevailing faint-heartedness off us, and make us, like Gideon’s fleece, impervious to the chill mists of faithless fear which saturate all around. He who trusts in God should be as a pillar of fire, burning bright in the darkness of terror, and making a rallying point for weaker hearts. When panic has seized others, the Christian soul has the more reason for courage. David conquered the temptation to share in the general

cowardice, before he conquered Goliath, and perhaps the former fight was the worse of the two.

While David is the embodiment of the courage of faith, Saul embodies worldly wisdom and calculating prudence. A touch of tenderness blends with his attempt to dissuade the lad from the unequal conflict. He speaks of probabilities, and, like all such calculation, his results are quite right, only that he has not taken all the forces into account, and the omission vitiates the conclusion. It is quite true that David is but a youth, and Goliath a giant and a veteran; but is that all that is to be said? If it be, then the lad cannot fight the Philistine bully; but if Saul has made the small omission of leaving out God, that makes a difference. The same mistake is constantly made still, and so the victories of faith are a constant surprise to the world and to a worldly Church. David's eager story of his fights with wild beasts is meant both to answer Saul's objection on his own ground, by showing him that, youth as the speaker was, he had proved his power, and still more to supply the lacking element in the calculation. So he tells, first, how 'I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him,' and then at the end brings in the true ground of his confidence: 'The Lord that delivered me . . . He will deliver.' As Thomas Fuller says, 'He made an experimental syllogism, and from most practical premises (major a lion, minor a bear), inferred the direct conclusion that God would give him victory over Goliath. Faith has the right thus to argue from the past to the future, because it draws from God whose resources and patience are equally inexhaustible. An echo of the words comes from Paul's 'Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that He will yet deliver.' There is infinite pathos in Saul's parting blessing. 'The Lord be with thee!' is spoken as if from the consciousness that the Lord had left *him*, and that *his* day for going into battle with the assurance of His help was gone for ever. If that softened mood had lasted, how different his future might have been! If we modestly and boldly show the power of faith in our lives, we may kindle yearnings in some gloomy hearts, that would lead them to peace, if followed out.

II. The equipment of faith. Saul meant to honour as well as to secure David by dressing him in his own royal attire, and by encumbering him by the help of sword and helmet. And David was willing to be so fitted out, for it is no part of the courage of faith to disdain any outward helps. But he soon found that he could not move freely in the unaccustomed armour, and flung it off, like a wise man. His motive was partly common sense, which told him not to choose weapons that his antagonist could handle better than he; and partly reliance on God, which told him that he was safer with no armour but his shepherd's dress and with only his sling in his hand. So there he stands, drawn for us with wonderful vividness, in one hand his staff, in the other his sling, both familiar and often used, and by his side the simple wallet which had held his frugal meal, and now received the smooth pebbles that he picked up as he passed the gully to the Philistine side of the valley.

How graphically the contrast is drawn between him and Goliath, as the latter conies forth swelling with his own magnificence, and preceded by his shield-bearer! He was 'brass' all over; note the kind of amused emphasis with which the word is repeated in the half-satirical and marvellously lifelike portrait of him in [verses 5-8](#); 'brass' here, 'brass' there, 'brass' everywhere; and, not content with one shield dangling at his back, he has a man to carry another in front of him as he struts. David seems to have crossed the ravine, and to have come close up to Goliath before he was observed; and then, with almost a snort of contempt, the giant resents the insult of sending such a foe to fight *him* with such weapons. Perhaps he was nearer the truth than he thought, when he asked if he was a dog; and any stick will do, as the proverb says, to beat that animal, especially if God guards the hand that holds it.

The five smooth stones have become the symbol of the insignificant means, in the world's estimate, which God uses in faithful hands to slay the giants of evil. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but they are mighty. Faith unarmed is armed with more than triple steel, and a sling in its hand is more fatal than a sword. Sometimes in kindness and sometimes in malice, the world tempts us to fight evil with its own weapons, and to put on its unfamiliar armour. The Church as a whole, and individual Christians, have often been hampered, and all but smothered, in Saul's harness. The more simply we keep ourselves to the simple methods which the word of God enjoins, and to the simple weapons which ought to be the easiest for a Christian, the more likely shall we be to conquer. Goliath is not to be encountered with sword and armour which is, after all, but a shabby copy of the tons of brass which he wears, but he does not know what to make of the sling, and does not see the stone till it crashes his skull in.

III. Note faith's anticipation of victory. The dialogue before the battle has many parallels in classical times and among savage peoples. Goliath's bluster is full of contempt of David and truculent self-confidence. Its coarseness is characteristic,—he will make his boyish antagonist food for vultures and jackals. It is exactly what a bully would say. David's answer throbs with buoyant confidence, and stands as a stimulating example of the temper in which God's soldiers should go out to every fight, no matter against what odds. It fully recognises the formidable armoury of the enemy,—sword for close quarters, spear to thrust with, and javelin to fling from a distance, every weapon that ingenuity could fashion and trained skill could wield. Goliath was a walking arsenal, and little David took count of his weapons as they clanked and flashed. It is no part of faith's triumph to ignore the number and sharpness of the enemy's arms. But faith sees them all, and keeps unterrified and unashamed of the poor leathern sling and smooth stones. The unarmed hand which grasps God's hand should never tremble; and he who can say 'I come . . . in the name of the Lord of hosts,' has no need to be afraid of an army of Goliaths, though each bristled with swords and spears like a porcupine.

The great name on which David's faith rested, 'the Lord of hosts,' appears to have sprung into use in this epoch, and to have been one precious fruit of its frequent wars. Conflict is blessed if it teaches the knowledge of the unseen Commander who marshals not only men, but all the forces of the universe and the armies of heaven, for the defence of His servants and the victory of His own cause. The fulness of the divine name is learned by degrees, as our needs impress the various aspects of His character; and the revelation contained in this appellation is the gift of that fierce and stormy time, a possession for ever. He who defies the armies of Israel has to reckon with the Lord of these armies, whose name proclaims at once His eternal, self-originated, and self-sustained being, His covenant, His presence with His earthly host, and the infinite ranks of obedient creatures who are His soldiers and their allies. That is 'the Name' in the strength of which we may 'set up our banners' and be sure of victory. Note how David flings back Goliath's taunts in his teeth. He is sure that God will conquer through him, and, though he has no sword, that he will somehow hack the big head off; and that it is the host of the Philistines on whom the vultures and jackals are to feed to-day.

His faith sees the victory before the battle is begun, and trusts, not in his own weak power, but only 'in the name of the Lord.' Note, too, the result which he expects—no glory for himself, though that came unsought, when the shrill songs from the women of Israel met the victors, but to all the world the proof that Israel had a God, and to Israel ('this assembly') the renewed lesson of their true weapons and of their Almighty Helper. Such utter suppression of self is inseparable from trust in God, and without it no soldier of His has a right to expect victory. To fight 'in the name of the Lord' requires hiding our own name. If we are really going to war for Him, and in His strength, we ought to expect to conquer. Believe that you will be beaten, and you will be. Trust to Him to make you 'more than conquerors,' and the trust will bring about its own fulfilment.

IV. Observe the contrast in [verse 48](#) between the slow movements of the heavy-armed Philistine and the quick run of the shepherd, whose 'feet were as hind's feet' ([Psalm xviii. 33](#)). Agility and confident alacrity were both expressed. His feet were shod with 'the preparedness of faith.' Observe, too, the impetuous brevity of the account in [verse 49](#), of the actual fall of Goliath. The short clauses, coupled by a series of 'ands,' reproduce the swift succession of events, which ended the fight before it had begun; and one can almost hear the whiz of the stone as it crashes into the thick head, so strangely left unprotected by all the profusion of brass that clattered about him. The vulnerable heel of Achilles and the unarmed forehead of Goliath illustrate the truth, ever forgotten and needing to be repeated, that, after all precautions, some spot is bare, and that 'there is no armour against fate.'

The picture of the huge 'man-mountain' fallen upon his face to the earth, a huddled heap of useless mail, recalls the words of a psalm, 'When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell' ([Psalm xxvii. 2](#)). Is

it fanciful to hear in that triumphant chant an echo of Goliath's boast about giving his flesh to the fowls and the beasts, and a vision of the braggart as he tottered and lay prostrate? Observe, too, the contemptuous reiteration of 'the Philistine,' which occurs six times in the four verses (48-51). National feeling speaks in that. There is triumph in the sarcastic repetition of the dreaded name in such a connection. This was what one of the brood had got, and his fate was an omen of what would befall the rest. The champion of Israel, the soldier of God, standing over the dead Philistine, all whose brazen armour had been useless and his brazen insolence abased, and sawing off his head with his own sword, was a prophecy for the Israel of that day, and will be a symbol till the end of time of the true equipment, the true temper, and the certain victory, of all who, in the name of the Lord of hosts, go forth in their weakness against the giants of ignorance, vice, and sin. 'This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.'



### A SOUL'S TRAGEDY

‘And David went out whithersoever Saul sent him, and behaved himself wisely: and Saul set him over the men of war; and he was accepted in the sight of all the people, and also in the sight of Saul’s servants. 6. And it came to pass as they came, when David was returned from the slaughter of the Philistine, that the women came out of all cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of musick. 7. And the women answered one another as they played, and said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands. 8. And Saul was very wroth, and the saying displeased him; and he said, They have ascribed unto David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed but thousands: and what can he have more but the kingdom? 9. And Saul eyed David from that day and forward. 10. And it came to pass on the morrow, that the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, and he prophesied in the midst of the house: and David played with his hand, as at other times: and there was a javelin in Saul’s hand. 11. And Saul cast the javelin; for he said, I will smite David even to the wall with it. And David avoided out of his presence twice. 12. And Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him, and was departed from Saul. 13. Therefore Saul removed him from him, and made him his captain over a thousand; and he went out and came in before the people. 14. And David behaved himself wisely in all his ways; and the Lord was with him. 15. Wherefore, when Saul saw that he behaved himself very wisely, he was afraid of him. 16. But all Israel and Judah loved David, because he went out and came in before them.’—1 SAMUEL xviii. 5-16.

Verse 5 anticipates verses 13-16. It is the last verse of a section which interrupts the even flow of the story, and which is absent from the Septuagint. Verse 6 follows immediately on xvii. 54 in that version. Taking that verse as our starting-point, we have three stages in Saul’s growing hatred and awe of the young champion, and of David’s growing influence and reputation. It is deeply tragic to watch the gradual darkening of the once bright light, side by side with the irresistible increase in brilliance of the new star. ‘He must increase, but I must decrease,’ became Saul’s bitter conviction; but instead of meekly accepting the necessity, his gloomy spirit struggled against it, like stormy waves against a breakwater, and, like them, was shivered into foam in the vain effort.

I. The first stage was Saul’s jealousy of David’s fame as a warrior. The returning victorious army was met, in Oriental fashion, by a triumphal chorus of women, with their shrill songs, accompanied by the dissonant noises which do duty for music to Eastern ears. The words of their chant were startlingly and ominously plain-spoken, and became more emphatic and insulting in Saul’s ears, because they were sung by two answering bands, one of which rang out, ‘Saul hath slain his thousands,’ while the other overtopped them by pealing out still more loudly and exultantly, ‘And David his ten thousands.’ To be brought into comparison with this unknown stripling was bitter enough, but to be used as a foil to set off his superiority was too much to be borne. There are few men, holding high places in any walk

of life, who could have stood such a comparison without wincing. Suppose a great soldier in our day, coming home from a successful campaign, and having his prowess dimmed in every newspaper by the praises lavished on a young lieutenant who had done some brave feat that caught the public fancy— would he be likely to be in a very amiable mood towards either the singers or the object of their triumphal songs? Do great authors rejoice in the rising of young reputations that dim theirs? or do great orators smile when some 'boy' takes the public ear more than they do? Poor Saul had to drink the bitter cup, which all who love the sweet draught of popular applause have sooner or later to taste; and we need not think him a monster of badness because he found it bitter.

It will be more to the purpose that we take care lest we do the very same thing in our little lives and humble spheres; for envy and jealousy of those who threaten to out-shine, or in any way to out-do, us is not confined to people in high places or with great reputations. The roots of them are in us all, and the only way to keep them from growing up rank is to think less of our reputation and more of our duty, to count it a very small matter what men think of us, and the all-important matter what God thinks.

Saul was moved, too, by the consciousness that he had been really deposed by Jehovah, and was only a phantom king, and, as his angry soliloquy shows, what troubled him most in the women's song was that it pointed to David as likely to come in and rob him, not only of glory, but of the kingdom. Ever since Samuel had pronounced his rejection, his uneasy eyes had been furtively scanning men for his possible supplanter, and no wonder that his gloomy suspicions focussed themselves on the gallant youth, who conquered men's hearts and made women's tongues eloquent in his praise. Stormy and dark as Saul's nature had become, and grave as had been his failure to be worthy of the monarchy, one cannot but feel the infinite pathos and pity of his life.

II. The second stage was the attempt on David's life. [Verses 10 and 11](#), which record it, are not in the Septuagint, and the narrative does run more smoothly without them. But if they are retained, they show how the moody suspicion with which Saul 'eyed David' came to a swift, murderous climax. He stands as a terrible example of how suspicion and jealousy, working in a nature utterly without self-control, transport it into the wildest excesses. In the strange phraseology of [verse 9](#), 'an evil spirit from God' laid hold of him, dominating his personality. The writer of this book felt that God was the ultimate cause of all things, and that all beings were under His control; and his devout recognition of that fact led him to the apparent paradox of tracing an 'evil spirit' to God. But we must not be so startled as to overlook the truth that Saul had prepared the fit abode for that evil spirit by his own indulgence in a whirl of sinful passions and acts, and that these were punished by their 'natural' consequence. Any man who lets his own baser nature have full fling invites the devil. Saul had what would now be called a paroxysm of insanity. But perhaps the modern medical phrase is not to be preferred to the old scriptural one. The former is innocent of any explan-

ation of the fact which it designates, and it may possibly be that insanity is sometimes, even now, 'possession.' At all events, since science gives no explanation of it, and a great dim region of consciousness is now being recognised,—'subliminal,' to speak in the new phraseology,—he is a bold man who ventures to deny that possibility.

But be that as it may, what a striking picture is given of Saul, worn with passion and swept away by ungovernable impulses, 'prophesying' or 'raving' with wild gestures and uttering wilder sounds; and of David, young, calm, giving forth melodies on his harp and songs from his lips, that sought to soothe the paroxysms of fury. Browning has drawn the picture in immortal words, which all who can should read. It has been suggested that Saul did not 'cast' his spear, but only brandished it in his fierce threat to pin David to the wall. But the youthful harper would scarcely have 'avoided out of his presence' for a mere threat and the flourish of a lance; and a man, raging mad and madly hostile, would not be likely to waste breath in mere threats. The attempt was more probably a serious one, and the spear, flung by an arm made stronger than ever by insane hatred, quivered in the wall very near the lithe athlete who had agilely escaped it. Envy, allowed to have its way, becomes murderous. Let us suppress its beginning. A tiger pup can be held in and its claws cut, but a full-grown tiger cannot.

III. The third stage is Saul's getting rid of David. The growing awe of him is marked in [verses 12 and 15](#), and the word in the latter verse is stronger than that in the former. It is a pathetic picture of the gradual creeping over a strong man of a nameless terror. Ever-thickening folds of cold dread, like a wet mist, wrap a soul once bright and energetic. And the reason is twofold: first, that God had left that tempestuous, rebellious soul because it had left Him; and second, that, in its desolate solitude, in which there was no trace of softening or penitence, that lightning-riven soul knew that the sunshine, which it had repelled, was now pouring on David. Saul's suspicions were hardened into certainties. He was sure now that what his jealousy had whispered, when the women chanted their chorus, was grim fact. And he could but helplessly watch his supplanter's steady advance in favour with men and God. The two processes of growing darkness and growing light go on side by side in the two men, and each makes the other more striking by contrast. Twice is it repeated that Saul was in awe of David. Twice is it repeated that Jehovah was with David, and that he 'behaved himself wisely,' which last statement includes in the Hebrew word both the idea of prudence and that of success. So, on the one hand, there is a steady growth in all good, godly, and happy qualities and experiences; and on the other, a tragical increase of darkness and gloom, godlessness and despair. And yet Saul had begun so well! And Saul might have been what David was,— companioned by God, prosperous, and the idol of his people. Two souls stand side by side for a moment on the same platform, with the same divine goodness and love encircling them, and the one steadily rises, while the other steadily sinks. How

awful are the endless possibilities of progress in either direction that lie open for every soul of man!

### **JONATHAN, THE PATTERN OF FRIENDSHIP**

‘And David fled from Naioth in Ramah, and came and said before Jonathan, What have I done? what is mine iniquity? and what is my sin before thy father, that he seeketh my life? 2. And he said unto him, God forbid; thou shalt not die: behold, my father will do nothing either great or small, but that he will shew it me: and why should my father hide this thing from me? it is not so. 3. And David sware moreover, and said, Thy father certainly knoweth that I have found grace in thine eyes; and he saith, Let not Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved: but truly, as the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, there is but a step between me and death. 4. Then said Jonathan unto David, Whatsoever thy soul desireth, I will even do it for thee. 5. And David said unto Jonathan, Behold, to-morrow is the new moon, and I should not fail to sit with the king at meat: but let me go, that I may hide myself in the field unto the third day at even. 6. If thy father at all miss me, then say, David earnestly asked leave of me that he might run to Beth-lehem his city: for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the family. 7. If he say thus, it is well; thy servant shall have peace: but if he be very wroth, then be sure that evil is determined by him. 8. Therefore thou shalt deal kindly with thy servant; for thou hast brought thy servant into a covenant of the Lord with thee: notwithstanding, if there be in me iniquity, slay me thyself; for why shouldest thou bring me to thy father? 9. And Jonathan said, Far be it from thee: for if I knew certainly that evil were determined by my father to come upon thee, then would not I tell it thee? 10. Then said David to Jonathan, Who shall tell me? or what if thy father answer thee roughly? 11. And Jonathan said unto David, Come, and let us go out into the field. And they went out both of them into the field. 12. And Jonathan said unto David, O Lord God of Israel when I have sounded my father about to-morrow any time, or the third day, and, behold, if there be good toward David, and I then send not unto thee, and shew it thee; 13. The Lord do so and much more to Jonathan: but if it please my father to do thee evil, then I will shew it thee, and send thee away, that thou mayest go in peace: and the Lord be with thee, as He hath been with my father.’—[1 SAMUEL xx. 1-13.](#)

The friendship of Jonathan for David comes like a breath of pure air in the midst of the heavy-laden atmosphere of hate and mad fury, or like some clear fountain sparkling up among the sulphurous slag and barren scoriae of a volcano. There is no more beautiful page in history or poetry than the story of the passionate love of the heir to the throne for the young champion, whom he had so much cause to regard as a rival. What a proof of the victory of love over self is his saying, ‘Thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee!’ ([1 Samuel xxiii. 17](#)). Truly did David sing in his elegy, ‘Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women’; for in that old world, in which the relations between the sexes had not yet received the hallowing and refinement of Christian times, much of what is now chiefly found in these was manifested in friendship, such as that of these two young men. Jonathan is the foremost figure in it, and the nobility and self-oblivion of his love are beau-

tifully brought out, while David's part is rather that of the loved than of the lover. The scene is laid in Gibeah, where Saul kept his court, and to which all the persons of the story seem to have come back from Samuel's house at Kamah. Saul's strange subjugation to the hallowing influences of the prophet's presence had been but momentary and superficial; and it had been followed by a renewed outburst of the old hate, obvious to David's sharpened sight, though not to Jonathan. In the interview between them, David is pardonably but obviously absorbed in self, while Jonathan bends all his soul to cheer and reassure his friend.

There are four turns in the conversation, in each of which David speaks and Jonathan answers. David's first question presupposes that his friend knows that his death is determined, and is privy to Saul's thoughts. If he had been less harassed, he would have done Jonathan more justice than to suppose him capable of knowing everything without telling him anything; but fear is suspicious. He should have remembered that, when Saul first harboured murderous purposes, Jonathan had not waited to be asked, but had disclosed the plot to him, and perilled his own life by his remonstrances with his father. He should have trusted his friend. His question breathes consciousness of innocence of any hostility to Saul, but unconsciously betrays some defect in his confidence in Jonathan. The answer is magnanimous in its silence as to that aspect of the question, though the subsequent story seems to imply that Jonathan felt it. He tries to hearten David by strong assurances that his life is safe. He does not directly contradict David's implication that he knew more than he had told, but, without asserting his ignorance, takes it for granted, and quietly argues from it the incorrectness of David's suspicions. Incidentally he gives us, in the picture of the perfect confidence between Saul and himself, an inkling of how much he had to sacrifice to his friendship. Wild as was Saul's fury when aroused, and narrow as had been his escape from it at an earlier time ([1 Samuel xiv. 44](#)), there was yet love between them, and the king made a confidant of his gallant eldest son. They 'were lovely and pleasant in their lives.' However gloomy and savage in his paroxysms Saul was, the relations between them were sweet. The most self-introverted and solitary soul needs some heart to pour itself out to, and this poor king found one in Jonathan. All the harder, then, was the trial of friendship when the trusted son had to take the part of the friend whom his father deemed an enemy, and had the pain of breaking such close ties. How his heart must have been torn asunder! On the one side was the lonely father who clung to him: on the other, the hunted friend to whom he clung. It is a sore wrench when kindred are on one side, and congeniality and the voice of the heart on the other. But there are ties more sacred than those of flesh and blood; and the putting of them second, which is sometimes needful in obedience to earthly love or duty, is always needful if we would rightly entertain our heavenly Friend.

Jonathan's soothing assurances did not satisfy David, and he 'sware' in the earnestness of his conviction. David gives a very good reason for his friend's ignorance, which he has at once believed, in the suggestion that Saul had not taken him into his confidence, out of

tenderness to his feelings. Their friendship, then, was notorious, and, indeed, was an element in Saul's dread of David, who seemed to have some charm to steal hearts, and had bewitched both Saul's son and his daughter, thus making a painful rift in the family unity. It does not appear how David came to be so sure of Saul's designs. The incident at Ramah might have seemed to augur some improvement in his mood; and certainly there could have been no overt acts, or Jonathan could not have disputed the suspicions. Possibly some whispers may have reached David through his wife Michal, Saul's daughter, or in the course of his attendance on the king, which he had now resumed, his quick eye may have noticed ominous signs. At all events, he is so sure, that he makes solemn attestation to his friend, and convinces him that, in the picturesque phrase which has become so familiar, 'There is but a step between me and death.' Such temper was scarcely in accordance with 'the prophecies which went before on' him. If he had been walking by faith, he would have called Samuel's anointing to mind, and have drawn arguments from the victory over Goliath, for trust in victory over Saul, as he had done for the former from that over the lion and the bear. But faith does not always keep high-water mark, and we can only too easily sympathise with this momentary ebb of its waters.

None the less is it true that David's terror was unworthy, and showed that the strain of his anxious position was telling on his spirit, and making him not only suspect his earthly friend, but half forget his heavenly One. There was but a step between him and death; but, if he had been living in the serenity of trust, he would have known that the narrow space was as good as a thousand miles, and that Saul could not force him across it, for all his hatred and power.

Jonathan does not attempt to alter his conviction and probably is obliged to admit the justice of the explanation of his own ignorance and the truth of the impression of Saul's purposes. But he does what is more to the purpose; he pledges himself to do whatever David desires. It is an unconditional desertion of his father and alliance with David; it is the true voice of friendship or love, which ever has its delight in knowing and doing the will of the beloved. It answers David's thoughts rather than his words. He will not discuss any more whether he or David is right; but, in any event, he is his friend's.

The touchstone of friendship is practical help and readiness to do what the friend wishes. It is so in our friendships here, which are best cemented so. It is so in the highest degree in our friendship with the true Friend and Lover of us all, the sweetness and power of our friendship with whom we do not know until we say, 'Whatsoever thou desirest, I will do it,' and so lose the burden of self-will, and find that He does for us what we desire when we make His desires our law of conduct.

Secure of Jonathan's help, David proposed the stratagem for finding out Saul's disposition, which had probably been in his mind all along. It says more for his subtlety than for his truthfulness. With all his nobility, he had a streak of true Oriental craft and stood on the

moral level of his times and country, in his readiness to eke out the lion's skin with the fox's tail. It was a shrewd idea to make Saul betray himself by the way in which he took David's absence; but a lie is a lie, and cannot be justified, though it may be palliated, by the straits of the liar. At the same time it is fair to remember the extremity of David's danger and the morality of his age, in estimating, not the nature of his action, but the extent of his guilt in doing it. The same relaxation of the vigour of his faith which left him a prey to fear, led him to walk in crooked paths, and the impartial narrative tells of them without a word of comment. We have to form our own estimate of the fitness of a lie to form the armour of a saint. The proposal informs us of two facts,—the custom of having a feast for three days at the new moon, and that of having an annual family feast and sacrifice, neither of which is prescribed in the law. I do not here deal with the grave question as to the date of the ceremonial law, as affected by these and similar phenomena; but I may be allowed the passing remark that the irregularities do not prove the non-existence of the law, but may be accounted for by supposing that, in such unsettled times, it had been loosely observed, and that many accretions and omissions, some of them inevitable in the absence of a recognised centre of worship, had crept in. That is a much less brilliant and much more old-fashioned explanation than the new one, but perhaps it is none the worse for that. This generation is fond of making 'originality' and 'brilliancy' the tests of truth.

David's words in [verse 8](#) have a touch of suspicion in them, in their very appeal for kind treatment, in their reminder of the 'covenant' of friendship, as if Jonathan needed either, and still more in the bitter request to slay him himself instead of delivering him to Saul. He almost thinks that Jonathan is in the plot, and means to carry him off a prisoner. Note, too, that he does not say, 'We made a covenant,' but 'Thou hast brought me into' it, as if it had been the other's wish rather than his. All this was beneath true friendship, and it hurt Jonathan, who next speaks with unusual emotion, beseeching David to clear all this fog out of his heart, and to believe in the genuineness and depth of his love, and in the frankness of his speech. True love 'is not easily provoked,' is not soon angry, and his was true in spite of many obstacles which might have made him as jealous as his father, and in the face of misconstruction and suspicion. May we not think of a yet higher love, which bears with our suspicions and faithless doubts, and ever answers our incredulity by its gentle 'If it were not so, I would have told you'?

David is not yet at the end of his difficulties, and next suggests, how is he to know Saul's mind? Jonathan takes him out into the privacy of the open country (they had apparently been in Gibeah), and there solemnly calls God to witness that he will disclose his father's purposes, whatever they are. The language is obscure and broken, whether owing to corruption in the text, or to the emotion of the speaker. In half-shaped sentences, which betray how much he felt his friend's doubts, and how sincere he was, he invokes evil on himself if he fails to tell all. He then unfolds his ingenious scheme for conveying the information, on



which we do not touch. But note the final words of Jonathan,—that prayer, so pathetic, so unselfish in its recognition of David as the inheritor of the kingdom that had dropped from his own grasp, so sad in its clear-eyed assurance of his father's abandonment, so deeply imbued with faith in the divine word, and so resigned to its behests. Both in the purity of his friendship and in the strength of his faith and submission, Jonathan stands here above David, and is far surer than the latter himself is of his high destiny and final triumph. It was hard for him to believe in the victory which was to displace his own house, harder still to rejoice in it, without one trace of bitterness mingling in the sweetness of his love, hardest of all actively to help it and to take sides against his father; but all these difficulties his unselfish heart overcame, and he stands for all time as the noblest example of human friendship, and as not unworthy to remind us, as from afar off and dimly, of the perfect love of the Firstborn Son of the true King, who has loved us all with a yet deeper, more patient, more self-sacrificing love. If men can love one another as Jonathan loved David, how should they love the Christ who has loved them so much! And what sacrilege it is to pour such treasures of affection at the feet of dear ones here, and to give so grudgingly such miserable doles of heart's love to Him!

### LOVE FOR HATE, THE TRUE QUID PRO QUO

‘And the men of David said unto him, Behold the day of which the Lord said unto thee, Behold, I will deliver thine enemy into thine hand, that thou mayest do to him as it shall seem good unto thee. Then David arose, and cut off the skirt of Saul’s robe privily. 5. And it came to pass afterward, that David’s heart smote him, because he had out off Saul’s skirt. 6. And he said unto his men, The Lord forbid that I should do this thing unto my master, the Lord’s anointed, to stretch forth mine hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the Lord. 7. So David stayed his servants with these words, and suffered them not to rise against Saul. But Saul rose up out of the cave, and went on his way. 8. David also arose afterward, and went out of the cave, and cried after Saul, saying, My Lord the king. And when Saul looked behind him, David stooped with his face to the earth, and bowed himself, 9. And David said to Saul, Wherefore hearest thou men’s words, saying, Behold, David seeketh thy hurt? 10. Behold, this day thine eyes have seen how that the Lord had delivered thee to-day into mine hand in the cave: and some bade me kill thee: but mine eye spared thee; and I said, I will not put forth mine hand against my lord; for he is the Lord’s anointed. 11. Moreover, my father, see, yea, see the skirt of thy robe in my hand: for in that I cut off the skirt of thy robe, and killed thee not, know thou and see that there is neither evil nor transgression in mine hand, and I have not sinned against thee; yet thou huntest my soul to take it. 12. The Lord judge between me and thee, and the Lord avenge me Of thee; but mine hand shall not be upon thee. 13. As saith the proverb of the ancients, Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked: but mine hand shall not be upon thee. 14. After whom is the king of Israel come out? after whom dost thou pursue? after a dead dog, after a flea. 15. The Lord therefore be judge, and judge between me and thee, and see, and plead my cause, and deliver me out of thine hand. 16. And it came to pass, when David had made an end of speaking these words unto Saul, that Saul said, Is this thy voice, my son David? And Saul lifted up his voice, and wept. 17. And he said to David, Thou art more righteous than I; for thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil.’—1 SAMUEL xxiv. 4-17.

A sudden Philistine invasion had saved David, when hard pressed by Saul, and had given him the opportunity of flight to the wild country on the west of the Dead Sea, near the place where En-Gedi (‘the Fountain of the Wild Goat’) sparkles into light on the hill above the weird lake. In these savage gorges Saul’s three thousand men would be of little use against the light-footed outlaw and his troop. The whole district is seamed with ravines, and these are honeycombed with great caverns, where dangerous outcasts still lurk and defy capture. Travellers go into raptures over the beauty of some of these ‘fairy grottoes’ draped with maiden-hair fern, cool and moist, and blessedly dark after the fierce light outside. In some one of these the beautiful story which makes our lesson occurred.

I. We have the scene in the cave. The interior would be black as night to one looking inward with eyes fresh from the blinding glare of such sunlight upon limestone, but it would

hold a glimmering twilight for one looking outward, with eyes accustomed to the gloom. David and his men, keeping close to the walls and hiding behind angles, might well be unobserved by Saul at the mouth, and probably never looking in at all. How vividly the whispered eagerness of the outcasts round David is reproduced! They think it would be 'tempting Providence' to let such a chance slip. They put a religious varnish on their advice. It would be almost impious not to kill Saul, for here was the hand of God evidently fulfilling a prophecy! There may have been some unrecorded prediction of the sort which they seem to quote; but more probably they are only referring to David's designation to the crown, which they had come to know. It never struck them as possible that it could 'seem good' to a wise man not to cut his enemy's throat when he could do it without danger to himself. So they would watch David stealing down quietly to the place where the unconscious king was crouching, and getting close behind him, knife in hand. How disgusted they must have been when the blade, that flashed for a moment in the light at the cave's mouth, was not buried in Saul's great back, but only hacked off the end of his robe spread out behind him! No personal animosity was in David. However he had been driven to consort with outlaws, and to live a kind of freebooter's life, his natural sweetness was unspoiled, and was reinforced by solemn veneration for the sanctity of the Lord's anointing, which he revered all the more because himself had received it. He clambered back to his disappointed men, and, as soon as he was up in the dark again, his chivalry and his religion made him ashamed of his coarse practical jest. The humour of the thing had tempted him to do it; but it was a rude insult, which lowered him more than it did Saul, and, like a true man, he blushes there in the gloom at what he has done. Then he has to defend himself to his men for not coming up to their expectations, and he does it by insisting on the sacredness which still surrounded Saul as 'the Lord's anointed.' David knew that the unhappy king had been rejected and forsaken by 'the Spirit of the Lord,' and that he himself was the true bearer of the regal unction; but he will not take the law into his own hands, and still regards Saul as his 'lord.' He sets the example, much needed by us all, of leaving God to carry out His purposes at His own time, and patiently waiting till that time comes. He had hard work to keep his men from rushing down on the king; but, having commanded himself, is able to restrain them. How many virtues may be in exercise in one action! Here we have generosity, clemency, sensitiveness of conscience, reverence, self-abnegation, patience, loyalty, firmness, sway over lower natures for high ends,—a whole constellation shining star-like in the dark cavern.

II. We have, next, David's pathetic remonstrance. Saul was alone, and David could easily escape among the cliffs, if the king summoned his men; but he risks capture, in the gush of ancient friendship. His words are full of nobleness, and his silence is no less so. He has no reproaches, no anger nor hate. He will not even suppose that Saul has followed his own impulses in his persecution, but assumes that he has been led astray by calumnies. He points to the fragment of Saul's robe in his hand as the disproof of the lie that he had designs against

him, and passionately asserts his innocence now and in all the past. He compares himself to some timid wild thing, like one of the goats among the cliffs, and Saul to a hunter. He solemnly calls God to judge between them, and appeals from the slanders and misjudgings of men to the perfect tribunal of God, to whom he commits his cause. He abjures all intention of striking at Saul in his own defence. He quotes, in true Eastern manner, a scrap of proverbial wisdom, which contains the homely truth that character determines action; for it needs a wicked man to do a wicked thing, and he implies that he is not wicked, and that Saul knows that well enough,—by what has just happened, if by nothing else. Then he puts his own insignificance and the disproportion between him and his ragged band and the imposing force of Saul in vivid light by his half-humorous and wholly humble description of himself as a ‘dead dog,’ and a ‘flea’; as harmless as the one, as hard to catch as the other, as little important as either. Finally, he reiterates his devout reference of the whole cause to God, and his fixed resolution to take no steps to right himself, but to leave all to Him.

So ought we to deal with slanders and enmity. The eternal law for us in all opposition and hostility is enshrined in David’s noble words and deeds. To repay evil with benefits, to abstain from retaliation when it is in our power, to keep our tongues from bitter and wounding words, to appeal to the adversary’s better self, even at the cost of our own ‘dignity,’—all that is not easy nor usual among professing Christians. But it ought to be. David’s Lord, ‘when He suffered, threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously.’ We are poor followers of Him, if David surpasses us in patience and magnanimity. It has taken nineteen hundred years to teach us that passive endurance is more heroic than fighting for our own hand, and that repaying scorn and hate with their like is less noble than meeting them with endless forgiveness.

[Psalm vii.](#) is all but universally regarded as David’s, and as belonging to this period. In it we find a clause, ‘I have delivered him that without cause was mine enemy,’ which may fairly be supposed to refer to the scene in the cave, and we read the same vehement protestations of innocence, the same figure of himself as a hunted wild animal, the same appeal to God’s judgment, as in his remonstrance with Saul. The psalm is the poetic echo of our lesson.

III. We have the momentary melting of Saul’s heart. He breaks into passionate weeping. With that sudden flashing out into vehement emotion, so characteristic of him throughout, and, in these latter days of his life, so significant of enfeebled self-control, he recognises David’s generous forbearance in its contrast to his own hate, which, for the moment, he feels to be causeless. There is a piteous remembrance of the days when David soothed him by song, in his mention of the sweet ‘voice,’ and some rekindling of ancient love in his calling him ‘My son.’ Then follow the sad words which confess the hopelessness of his struggle against the divine purpose, and his appeal for mercy to his house. The picture may well move solemn thoughts and pity for that scathed and solitary soul, seeing for a moment, as

by a lightning flash, the madness of his course, and yet held so fast in the grip of his dark passions that he cannot shake off their tyranny.

Two great lessons are taught by that tragic figure of the weeping and yet unchanged king. One is of the power of forbearing gentleness to exorcise hate. The true way to 'overcome evil' is to melt it by fiery coals of gentleness. That is God's way. An iceberg may be crushed to powder, but every fragment is still ice. Only sunshine that melts it will turn it into sweet water. Love is conqueror, and the only conqueror, and its conquest is to transform hate into love. The other lesson is the worthlessness of mere feeling, which by its very nature passes away, and, like unstored rain, leaves the rock in its obstinate hardness more exposed. Saul only increased his guilt by reason of the fleeting glimpse of his folly which he did not follow up; and our gleams of insight into some sin and madness of ours but add to our responsibility. Emotion which does not lead to action hardens the heart, and adds to our guilt and condemnation.

### LOVE AND REMORSE

‘And David arose, and came to the place where Saul had pitched: and David beheld the place where Saul lay, and Abner the son of Ner, the captain of his host: and Saul lay in the trench, and the people pitched round about him. 6. Then answered David and said to Ahimelech the Hittite, and to Abishai the son of Zeruiah, brother to Joab, saying, Who will go down with me to Saul to the camp? And Abishai said, I will go down with thee. 7. So David and Abishai came to the people by night: and, behold, Saul lay sleeping within the trench, and his spear stuck in the ground at his bolster: but Abner and the people lay round about him. 8. Then said Abishai to David, God hath delivered thine enemy into thine hand this day: now therefore let me smite him, I pray thee, with the spear even to the earth at once, and I will not smite him the second time. 9. And David said to Abishai, Destroy him not: for who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord’s anointed, and be guiltless? 10. David said furthermore, As the Lord liveth, the Lord shall smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall descend into battle, and perish. 11. The Lord forbid that I should stretch forth mine hand against the Lord’s anointed: but, I pray thee, take thou now the spear that is at his bolster, and the cruse of water, and let us go. 12. So David took the spear and the cruse of water from Saul’s bolster; and they gat them away, and no man saw it, nor knew it, neither awaked: for they were all asleep; because a deep sleep from the Lord was fallen upon them . . . 21. Then said Saul, I have sinned: return, my son David: for I will no more do thee harm, because my soul was precious in thine eyes this day: behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly. 22. And David answered and said, Behold the king’s spear! and let one of the young men come over and fetch it. 23. The Lord render to every man his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the Lord delivered thee into my hand today, but I would not stretch forth mine hand against the Lord’s anointed. 24. And, behold, as thy life was much set by this day in mine eyes, so let my life be much set by in the eyes of the Lord, and let Him deliver me out of all tribulation. 25. Then Saul said to David, Blessed be thou, my son David: thou shalt both do great things, and also shalt still prevail. So David went on his way, and Saul returned to his place.’—1 SAMUEL xxvi 5-12; 21-25.

It is fashionable at present to regard this incident and the other instance of David’s sparing Saul, when in his power, as two versions of one event. But it is not improbable that the hunted outlaw should twice have taken refuge in the same place, or that his hiding-place should have been twice betrayed. He had but a small choice of safe retreats, and the Ziphites had motive for a second betrayal in the fact of the first, and of its failure to secure David’s capture. The whole cast of the two incidents is so different that it is impossible to see how the one could have been evolved from the other, and either they are both true, or they are both unhistorical, or, at best, are both the product of fancy working on, and arbitrarily filling up, a very meagre skeleton of fact. Many of the advocates of the identity of the incident at the bottom of the two accounts would accept the latter explanation; we take the former.

Saul had three thousand men with him; David had left his little troop ‘in the wilderness,’ and seems to have come with only his two companions, Ahimelech and his own nephew, Abishai, to reconnoitre. He sees, from some height, the camp, with the transport wagons making a kind of barricade in the centre—just as camps are still arranged in South Africa and elsewhere,—and Saul established therein as in a rude fortification. A bold thought flashes into his mind as he looks. Perhaps he remembered Gideon’s daring visit to the camp of Midian. He will go down, and not only into the camp, but ‘to Saul,’ through the ranks and over the barrier. What to do he does not say, but the two fierce fighters beside him think of only one thing as sufficient motive for such an adventure. Abishai volunteers to go with him; no doubt Ahimelech would have been ready also, but two were enough, and three would only have increased risk. So they lay close hid till night fell, and then stole down through the sleeping ranks with silent movements, like a couple of Indians on the war-trail, climbed the barricade, and stood at last where Saul lay, with his spear, as the emblem of kingship, stuck upright at his head, and a cruse of water for slaking thirst, if he awoke, beside him. Those who should have been his guards lay sleeping round him, for a ‘deep sleep from Jehovah was fallen upon them.’ What a vivid, strange picture it is, and how characteristic of the careless discipline of unscientific Eastern warfare!

The tigerish lust for blood awoke in Abishai. Whatever sad, pitying, half-tender thoughts stirred in David as he looked at the mighty form of Saul, with limbs relaxed in slumber, and perhaps some of the gloom and evil passions charmed out of his face, his nephew’s only thought was, ‘What a fair mark! what an easy blow!’ He was brutally eager to strike once, and truculently sure that his arm would make sure that once would be enough. He was religious too, after a strange fierce fashion. God-significantly he does not say ‘Jehovah’; his religion was only the vague belief in a deity-had delivered Saul into David’s hands, and it would be a kind of sin not to kill him. How many bloody tragedies that same unnatural alliance of religion and murderous hate has varnished over! Very beautifully does David’s spirit contrast with this. Abishai represents the natural impulse of us all—to strike at our enemies when we can, to meet hate with hate, and do to another the evil that he would do to us.

David here, though he could be fierce and cruel enough sometimes, and had plenty of the devil in him, listens to his nobler self, which listens to God, and, at a time when everything tempted him to avenge himself, resists and overcomes. He is here a saint after the New Testament pattern. Abishai had, in effect, said, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.’ David’s finely-tuned ear heard, long before they were spoken on earth, the great Christian words, 11 say unto you, Love your enemies; do good to them that hate you.’ He knew that Saul had been ‘rejected,’ but he was ‘Jehovah’s anointed,’ and the unction which had rested on that sleeping head lingered still. It was not for David to be the executor of God’s retribution. He left himself and his cause in Jehovah’s hands, and no doubt it was

with sorrow and pitying love, not altogether quenched by Saul's mad hate, that he foresaw that the life which he spared now was certain one day to be smitten. We may well learn the lesson of this story, and apply it to the small antagonisms and comparatively harmless enmities which may beset our more quiet lives. David in Saul's 'laager,' Stephen outside the wall, alike lead up our thoughts to Jesus' prayer, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'

The carrying off of the spear and the cruse was a couch of almost humour, and it, with the ironical taunt flung across the valley to Abner, gives relief to the strain of emotion in the story. Saul's burst of passionate remorse is morbid, paroxysmal, like his fits of fury, and is sure to foam itself away. The man had no self-control. He had let wild, ungoverned moods master him, and was truly 'possessed.' One passion indulged had pushed him over the precipice into insanity, or something like it. Let us take care not to let any passion, emotion, or mood get the upper hand. 'That way madness lies.' 'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, without walls.'

And let us not confound remorse with repentance 'The sorrow of the world worketh death.' Saul grovelled in agony that day, but tomorrow he was raging again with more than the old frenzy of hate. Many a man says, 'I have played the fool,' and yet goes on playing it again when the paroxysm of remorse has stormed itself out. David's answer was by no means effusive, for he had learned how little Saul's regrets were to be trusted. He takes no notice of the honeyed words of invitation to return, and will not this time venture to take back the spear and cruse, as he had done, on the previous occasion, the skirt of Saul's robe. He solemnly appeals to Jehovah's righteous judgment to determine his and Saul's respective 'righteousness and faithfulness.' He is silent as to what that judgment may have in reserve for Saul, but for himself he is calmly conscious that, in the matter of sparing Saul's life, he has done right, and expects that God will deliver him 'out of all tribulation.' That is not self-righteous boasting, although it does not exactly smack of the Christian spirit; but it is faith clinging to the confidence that God is 'not unrighteous to forget' his servant's obedience, and that the innocent will not always be the oppressor's victim.

What a strange, bewildered, self-contradictory chaos of belief and intention is revealed in poor, miserable Saul's parting words! He blesses the man whom he is hunting to slay. He knows that all his wild efforts to destroy him are foredoomed to failure, and that David 'shall surely prevail'; and yet he cannot give up fighting against the inevitable,—that is, against God. How many of us are doing the very same thing—rushing on in a course of life which we know, when we are sane, to be dead against God's will, and therefore doomed to utter collapse some day!



## SAUL

‘And Saul answered, I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me.’—1 SAMUEL xxviii. 15.

Among all the persons of Scripture who are represented as having fallen away from God and wrecked their lives, perhaps there is none so impressive as the giant form of the first king of Israel. Huge and black, seamed and scarred with lightning marks of passions, moody and suspicious, devil-ridden and lonely, doubting his truest friends, and even his son, striking blindly in his fury at the gracious, sunny poet-warrior who shows so bright, so full of resource, so nimble, so generous, by contrast with the heavy strength of the moody giant, and ever escapes the javelin that quivers harmlessly in the wall, with an inevitable destiny hanging over his head, and at last creeping to ‘wizards that peep and mutter,’ and dying a suicide, with his army in full flight and his son dead at his feet—what a course and what an end for the chosen of the Lord, on whom the Spirit of the Lord came with the anointing oil, and gave him a new heart for his kingly office.

I know not anywhere a sadder story: and I know not where human lips ever poured out a more awful wail—like a Titan in his rage of pain— than these words of our text. Bright hopes and fair promise, and much that was good and true in performance—all came to this. A few hours more and the ‘battle went sore against Saul, and the archers hit him, and he was greatly distressed by reason of the archers.’ Madness, despair, defeat, death, all were the sequel of, ‘Because thou hast rejected the commandment of the Lord, the Lord hath also rejected thee from being king.’ A true soul’s tragedy! Let us look together at its course, and gather the lessons that lie on the surface. We have neither space nor wish here to enter upon the many points of minute interest and curiosity which are in the story. We have to be contented with large outlines.

Look then

I. At the bright dawn.

The early story gives us many traits of beauty in Saul’s character. Not only physical strength but a winning personality are apparent. His modesty and humility when Samuel salutes him are made plain. And we are distinctly told that as he turned away from Samuel, ‘God gave him another heart,’ by which we are to understand not ‘regeneration’ but an inspiration, that equipped him for his office.

How many a man finds that sudden elevation ruins him! But often it evokes what is good, brings an entire change of disposition, as with ‘Harry of Mon-mouth.’ But it was not only his new responsibility which brought into action powers that had previously been dormant. New circumstances, no doubt, did something, but Saul’s ‘new’ heart was God’s gift.

The story of the beginning of his reign reveals a very noble and lovable character. We can but mention his modesty in hiding among the stuff, his disregard of the murmurs of

those who would not do homage ('made as though he had been deaf'), his return, as it would seem, to his home-life and farm-work, his chivalrous boldness and warlike energy, which sprung at once to activity on the call of a great exigency in Jabesh-Gilead, his humane and sweet repression of the people's desire, in their first flush of pride in their soldier king, to slay his enemies, and his devout acknowledgment that not he but God has wrought this salvation.

So for the first year of his reign all went well.

How much of divine influence a man may have and yet fling it all away! How unreliable a thing mere natural goodness is! How much apparent goodness may coexist with deep-seated evil! How bright a beginning may darken into a tempestuous day! How seeds of evil may lurk in the fairest character! How little one can be judged by part of his life! How it is not the possession, but the retention, of goodness and devout impressions that makes a man good.

## II. The gathering clouds.

The acts recorded as darkening the fair dawn of Saul's reign may seem too trivial to deserve the stern retribution that followed them, but small acts may be great sins. The first of them was his offering sacrifices without authority, an act which Samuel stigmatised as wanton, deliberate disobedience to 'the commandment of the Lord thy God.' Next came his rash and absurd laying of a curse on any soldier who should eat food before evening, and his consequent mad determination to kill Jonathan, for 'taking a little honey' on the end of his rod. Next came his flagrant disobedience to the divine command transmitted to him through Samuel, to 'smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not,' We shudder at such ferocious extermination, but we are to remember that Saul was moved by no pity, but by mere lust for loot, and tried to deceive God, in the person of His representative Samuel, by the lie that the people had coerced him, and that the motive for preserving the best of the cattle was to sacrifice them to the Lord. Samuel's blaze of indignation gave the world the great word: 'Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice.'

Putting all these acts together, we have the sad picture of a character steadily deteriorating. He is growing daily more self-willed and impatient of the restraint of God's commanding will. He is chafing at his position as a viceroy, not an absolute sovereign. He is becoming tyrannical, careless of his subjects' lives, intolerant of opposition, remonstrance, or advice. The tragedy of his decadence is summed up in Samuel's stern word: 'Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He hath also rejected thee from being king.'

Trivial acts may show great and deep-seated evil. A small swelling under the arm-pit is the sign of the plague and the precursor of swift death.

The master-sin is disobedience, self-willed departure from God. That disobedience may be as virulently active in a trifle as in a deed that men call great. Self-will is the tap root of all sin, however labyrinthine the outgrowth from it.

Disobedience honeycombs a soul. The attractive early traits in Saul's character slowly perhaps but steadily, disappeared. The fair morning sky was heavy with thunder-clouds by midday, and they all began with a light fleecy film that none noticed at first.

III. The long eclipse.

'An evil spirit from the Lord troubled him, and the Spirit of God departed from him.'

Modern psychologists would call Saul's case an instance of insanity brought about by indulgence in passion and self-will. Is there any reason why the deeper, more religious explanation should not be united with the scientific one? Does not God work in the working of 'natural' phenomena?

What we nowadays call insanity is not very far off from a man who habitually indulges in passionate self will, and spurns God from any authority over his life. What were Saul's characteristics now? The story tells of bursts of ungovernable fury, of unslumbering and universal suspicions, of utter misery, seeing enemies everywhere and complaining, 'None of you hath pity upon me,' of ferocious cruelty and gloomy despair, of paroxysms of agonising but transient remorse.

It is an awful picture, and it grimly teaches lessons that we shall be wise to write deeply on our hearts.

What a ruin a man makes of himself!

How hideous a godless soul is!

What unhappiness is certain if we dismiss God from ruling our lives!

How useless remorse is unless it leads to repentance!

IV. The stormy sunset.

The scene at Endor makes one's flesh creep. No more tragic picture of failure and despair was ever painted. The greatest dramatists, whose creations move the terror and pity of the world, have imagined no more heart-touching figure.

It matters very little—nothing at all in fact—either for the dramatic force or for the religious impressiveness of the scene, whether the woman 'brought up' Samuel, or whether she was as much awed as Saul was, by the coming up of 'an old man' covered with the well-known 'mantle.' The boding prophecy of to-morrow's defeat and death filled yet fuller the cup that had seemed to be already full of all misery. And that collapse of strength in the huddled figure, prostrate in the witch's den, may well stand for a prophecy of what will be the upshot at the last of a self-will that boasts of its own power, and tries to shake off dependence on God.

### WHAT DOEST THOU HERE?

‘Then said the princes of the Philistines, What do these Hebrews here!’—1 SAMUEL xxix. 3.

‘The word of the Lord came to him, and He said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah?’—1 KINGS xix. 9.

I have put these two verses together, not only because of their identity in form, though that is striking, but because they bear upon one and the same subject, as will appear, if, in a word or two, I set each of them in its setting. David was almost at the lowest point of his fortunes when he fled into foreign territory, and for awhile took service under one of the kings of the Philistines. He served him faithfully, and so, when the last great fight, in which Saul lost his life, was about to be waged between Philistia and Israel, David and his men came as a contingent to the army of the former. The Philistine commanders, very naturally, were suspicious of these allies, just as Englishmen would have been if, on the night before Waterloo, a brigade of Frenchmen had deserted and offered their help to fight Napoleon. So the question ‘What do these Hebrews here?’—amongst our ranks—was an extremely natural one, and it was answered in the only possible way, by the subsequent departure of David and his men from the unnatural and ill-omened alliance.

Now, that suggests to us that Christian people are out of their places, even in the eyes of worldly people, when they are fighting shoulder to shoulder with them in certain causes; and it suggests the propriety of keeping apart. ‘Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord’ ‘What do these Hebrews here?’ is a question that Philistia often asks. But now turn to the other question. Elijah had fallen into the mood of depression which so often follows great nervous tension. He had just offered the sacrifice on Carmel, and brought all Israel back to the Lord, and Jezebel had flamed out and threatened his life. The usually undaunted prophet, in the reaction after his great effort, was fearful for his life and deserted his work, flung himself into solitude and shook the dust off his feet against Israel. Was that not just doing what I have been saying that Christian people ought to do—separating himself from the world? In a sense, yes, but the voice came, ‘What dost thou here, Elijah?’ ‘Go back to your work; to Ahab, to Jezebel. Go back to death if need be. Do not shirk your duty on the pretence of separating yourself from the world.’

So we put the two questions together. They limit one another, and they suggest the *via media*, the course between, and lead me to say one or two plain things about that duty of Christian separation from an evil world.

I. The first thing that I would suggest to you is the inevitable intermingling, which is the law of God, and therefore can never be broken with impunity.

Christ’s parable about the Kingdom of Heaven in the world being like a man that sowed good seed in his field, which sprung up intermingled with tares, contains the lesson, not so much of the purity or nonpurity of the Church as of the inseparable intertwining in the

world of Christian people with others. The roots are matted together, and you cannot pull up a tare without danger of pulling up a wheat-stalk that has got interlaced with it. That is but to say that Society at present, and the earthly form of the Kingdom of God, are not organised on the basis of religious affinity, but upon a great many other things, such as family, kindred, business, a thousand ties of all sorts which mat men together, and make it undesirable, impossible, contrary to God's intention, that the good people should club themselves together, and leave the bad ones to rot and stink. The two are meant to be in close contact. 'Let both grow together till the harvest.' If any Christian man were to do as the monks of old did, fly into solitude to look after his own soul, then the question which came to Elijah would be suitable to him, 'What doest thou here?' Is there not work enough for you out there, in that wicked world? Is that not the place for you? Where is the place for the 'salt'? Where the meat is in danger of putrefaction. Rub it in! That is what it was meant for. 'Ye are the light of the world.' That suggests the picture of a lamp upon a pedestal that it may send out its rays, but itself remains apart. But the companion metaphor suggests the closest possible contact, and such contact is duty for us Christian people. Elijah ran away from his work. There are types of Christian life to-day unwholesomely self-engrossed, and too much occupied with their own spiritual condition, to realise and discharge the duty of witnessing in the world. Wherever you find a Christian man—whether he is a monk with bare foot, and a rope round his brown robe, and shaven head, or whether he is in the garb of modern Protestantism—that tries more to keep himself apart, in the enjoyment and cultivation of his own religious life, than to fling himself into the midst of the world's worst evil, in order to fight and to cure it, you get a man who is sharing in Elijah's transgression, and needs Elijah's rebuke. The intermingling is inevitable in the present state of things; and family, kindred, business, social and political movements, all require that Christian people should work side by side with men who are not possessors of 'like precious faith.' If ever there have been individuals or communities that have tried to traverse that law, they have developed narrowness and bitterness and stunted growth, and a hundred evils that we all know.

II. And now let me say a word about the second thing, and that is—the imperative separation.

'What do these Israelites here?' is the question. Much of all our lives lies outside these necessary connections with the world, of which I have been speaking. And the question for each of us is, What do we do when we are left to do as we like? Where do we go? When the iron weight fastened by the bit of string is taken off the sapling, it starts back to its original uprightness. Is that what your Christianity does for you? When you are left to yourself, when you have done all the work that is required, and you are free, where do you turn naturally? It is of no use to lay down special regulations. There has been far too much regulation and red-tape in our Christianity all along. Do not let us put so much stress upon individual acts. Let us look at the spirit. Whither do I turn? What do I like to do? Who are my chosen

companions? What are my recreations? Is my life of such a sort as that the world will point to me, and say, 'What! you here I a professing Christian; what are you doing here?'

I remember that in the autobiography of Mr. Spurgeon, there is a story told about what he did when a child, and living with his grandfather, the pastor of a little country church. There was a very prominent member of that church who was in the habit of going into the public-house occasionally; and the small boy stepped into the sanded parlour where this inconsistent man was sitting, walked up to him, and said, 'What doest thou here, Elijah?' It was the turning-point of the man's life. That is the question that I desire us all to ask ourselves—where do we go, and what sort of lives do we live in the moments when our own voluntary choice determines our action?

'A man is known by the company he keeps,' says an old Latin proverb, and I am bound to say that I do not think that it is a good sign of the depth of a Christian professor's religion if he feels himself more at home in the company of people who do not share his religion than in the company of those that do. I do not wish to be strait-laced and narrow, but I do not wish, either, to be so broad as to obliterate altogether the distinction between Christian people and others. The fact of the case is this, dear friends; if we are Christ's servants we have more in common with the most uncongenial Christians than we have with the most congenial man who is not a Christian. And if we were nearer our Master we should feel that it was so. 'Being let go they went to their own company.' Where do you go when you can make your choice?

I am not going to speak in detail about occupations or recreations. I can quite believe that the theatre might be made an instrument of morality. I can quite believe that a race-course might be a perfectly innocent place. I can quite believe that there may be no harm in a dance. All that I say is that there are two questions which every Christian professor ought to ask himself about such subjects. One is, Can I ask God to bless this thing, and my doing it? And the other is, Does this help or hinder my religion? If we will take these two questions with us as tests of conduct and companionship, I do not think that we shall go far wrong, either in the choice of our companions, or in the choice of our surroundings of any kind, or in the choice of our recreations and our occupations. But if we do not, then I am quite sure that we shall go wrong in them all. 'What communion hath light with darkness?' 'What agreement hath the temple of God with idols? Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord.'

The main question is, do I grasp the aim of life with clearness and decision as being to make myself by God's help such a character as God has pleasure in? If I do I shall regulate all these things thereby.

III. Now there is one last suggestion that I wish to make, and that is the double questioning that we shall have to stand.

The lords of the Philistines said, 'What do these Hebrews here?' They saw the inconsistency, if David and his men did not. They were sharp to detect it, and David and his band did not rise in their opinion, but decidedly went down, when they saw them marching there, in such an unnatural place as 'behind Achish,' and ready to flesh their swords in the blood of their brethren. So let me tell you, you will neither recommend your religion nor yourselves to men of the world, by inconsistently trying to identify yourselves with them. There are a great many professing Christians nowadays whose mouths are full of the word 'liberality,' and who seem to try to show how absolutely identical with a godless man's a God-fearing one's life may be made. Do you think that the world respects that type of Christian, or regards his religion as the kind of thing to be admired? No; the question that they fling at such people is the question which David was humiliated by having pitched at his head—'What do these Hebrews here?' 'Let them go back to their mountains. This is no place for *them*.' The world respects an out-and-out Christian; but neither God nor the world respects an inconsistent one.

But there is another question, and another Questioner—'What doest thou here, Elijah?' God did not ask Elijah the question because he did not know the answer; but because he wished to make Elijah put his mood into words, since then Elijah would understand it a little better, and, when he found the tremendous difficulty of making a decent excuse, would begin to suspect that the conduct that wanted so much glozing was not exactly the conduct fit for a prophet. And so let us think that God is looking down upon us, in all our occupation of our free time, and that He is wishing us to put into words what we are about, and why we are where we are.

What do you think you would say if, in some of these moments of unnecessary intermingling with questionable things and doubtful people, you were brought suddenly to this, that you had to formulate into some kind of plausibility your reason for being there? I am afraid it would be a very lame and ragged set of reasons that many of us would have to give. Well! better that we should now have to answer the question 'What doest thou here?' than that we should have to fail in answering the future question, after we have done with the world: 'What didst thou there?'

Dear brethren, let us cleave to Christ, and that will separate us from the world. If we cleave to the world, that will separate us from Christ. I do not insist on details of conduct, but I do beseech you, professing Christians, to recognise that you are set in the world in order to grow like your Master, and that their tendency to help you to that likeness is the one test of all occupations, recreations, and companionships, by which we may know whether we are in or out of the place that pleases Him. And if we are in it, that blessed hope which is held forth in the parable to which I have already referred, will come full of sweetness and of strength to us, that, yonder, men will be grouped according to their moral and religious

character; that the tares will be taken away from the wheat, and, that as Christ says, 'Then shall the righteous flame as the sun in their heavenly Father's Kingdom.'



## THE SECRET OF COURAGE

‘But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.’—1 SAMUEL xxx. 6.

David was at perhaps the very lowest ebb of his fortunes. He had long been a wandering outlaw, and had finally been driven, by Saul’s persistent hostility, to take refuge in the Philistines’ country. He had gathered around himself a band of desperate men, and was living very much like a freebooter. He had found refuge in a little city of the Philistines, far down in the South, from which he and his men had marched as a contingent in the Philistine army, which was preparing an attack upon Saul. But, naturally, the Philistine soldiers doubted their ally, and he was obliged to take himself and his troops back again to their temporary home.

When he came there it was a heap of smoking ruins. Everything was gone; property, cattle, wives, children—and all was desolation. His turbulent followers rose against him, a mutiny broke out—a dangerous thing amongst such a crew—and they were ready to stone him. And at that moment what did he do? Nothing. Was he cast down? No. Was he agitated? No. ‘But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.’

Now the first thing I notice is

I. The grand assurance which this man gripped fast at such a time.

It is not by accident, nor is it a mere piece of tautology, that we read ‘the Lord *his* God.’ For, if you will remember, the very keynote of the psalms which are ascribed to David is just that expression, ‘My God,’ ‘My God.’ So far as the very fragmentary records of Jewish literature go, it would appear as if David was the very first of all the ancient singers to grapple that thought that he stood in a personal, individual relation to God, and God to him. And so it was *his* God that he laid hold of at that dark hour.

Now I am not putting too much into a little word when I insist upon it that the very essence and nerve of what strengthened David, at that supreme moment of desolation, was the conviction that welled up in his heart that, in spite of it all, he had a grip of God’s hand as his very own, and God had hold of him. Just think of the difference between the attitude of mind and heart expressed in the names that were more familiar to the Israelitish people, and this name for Jehovah. ‘The God of Israel’—that is wide, general; and a man might use it and yet fail to feel that it implied that each individual of the community stood by himself in a personal relation to God. But David penetrated through the broad, general thought, and got into the heart of the matter. It was not enough for him, in his time of need, to stay himself upon a vague universal goodness, but he had to clasp to his burdened heart the individualising thought, ‘the God of Israel is *my* God.’

Think, too, of the contrast of the thoughts and emotions suggested by ‘My God,’ and by ‘the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob.’ Great as that name is, it carries the mind away back into the past, and speaks of a historical relation in former days, which may or may not continue in all its tenderness and sweetness and power into the prosaic present.

But when a man feels, not only 'the God of Jacob is our Refuge,' but, 'the God of Jacob is my God,' then the whole thing flashes up into new power. 'My sun'—will one man claim property in that great luminary that pours its light down on the whole world? Yes.

'The sun whose beams most glorious are,  
Disdaineth no beholder,'

as the old song has it. Each man's eye receives the straight impact of its universal beams. It is my sun, though it be the light that lightens all men that come into the world. 'My atmosphere'—will one man claim the free, unappropriated winds of heaven as his? Yes, for they will pour into his lungs; and yet his brother will be none the poorer.

I would not go the length of saying that the living realisation, in heart and mind, of this personal possession of God is the difference between a traditional and vague profession of religion and a vital possession of religion, but if it is not the difference, it goes a long way towards explaining the difference. The man who contents himself with the generality of a Gospel for the world, and who can say no more than that Jesus Christ died for all, has yet to learn the most intimate sweetness, and the most quickening and transforming power, of that Gospel, and he only learns it when he says, 'Who loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*.'

So do not let us be content with saying, 'the God of Israel,' and its many thousands, or 'the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob,' who filled the past with His lustre, but let us bring the general good into our own houses, as men might draw the waters of Niagara into their homes through pipes, and let us cry: 'My Lord and my God!' 'David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.'

II. Now note, secondly, the sufficiency of this one conviction and assurance.

Here is one of the many eloquent 'buts' of the Bible. On the one hand is piled up a black heap of calamities, loss, treachery and peril; and opposed to them is only that one clause: 'But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.' There was only one possession in all the world, except his body and the clothes that he stood in, that he could call his own at that moment. Everything else was gone; his property was carried off by raiders, his home was smouldering embers. But the Amalekites had not stolen God from him. Though he could no longer say, 'My house, my city, my possessions,' he could say, 'My God.' Whatever else we lose, as long as we have Him we are rich; and whatever else we possess, we are poor as long as we have not Him. God is enough; whatever else may go. The Lord his God was the sufficient portion for this man when he stood a homeless pauper. He had lost everything that his heart clung to; wives, children; Abigail and Abinoam were captives in the arms of some Amalekites; his house was left to him desolate; his heart was bleeding. 'But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God' and the bleeding heart was stanching, and the yearning for some one to love and be loved by was satisfied, when he turned himself from the desol-

ation of earth to the riches in the heavens. He was standing on the edge of possible death, for his followers were ready to stone him. He had come through many perils in the past, but he had never been nearer a fatal end than he was at that moment. But the thought of the undying Friend lifted him buoyantly above the dread of death, and he could look with an unwinking eye right into the fleshless eye-sockets of the skeleton, and say, 'I fear no evil, for Thou art with me.'

So for poverty, loss, the blasting of earthly hopes, the crushing of earthly affections, the extremity of danger, and the utmost threatening of death, here is the sufficient remedy—that one mighty assurance: 'The Lord is my God.' For if He is 'the strength of my heart,' He will be my portion for ever.' He is not poor who has God for his, nor does he wander with a hungry heart who can rest his heart on God's; nor need he fear death who possesses God, and in Him eternal life.

So, brethren, in all our changing circumstances, there is more than enough for us in that sweet, simple, strong thought. The end of sorrow (that is to say, the purpose thereof) is to breed in us the conviction that God is ours, to drive us to Him by lack of all beside; and the end of sorrow (that is to say, the termination thereof) is the kindling in our hearts of the light of that blessed assurance, for with Him we shall fear no evil. You never know the good of the breakwater until the storm is rolling the waves against its outer side. Light a little candle in a room, and you will not see the lightning when it flashes outside, however stormy the sky, and seamed with the fiery darts. If we have God in our hearts, we have enough for courage and for strength.

I need not remind you, I suppose, how this darkest moment of David's fortunes was the moment at which the darkness broke. Three days after this *emeute* of his turbulent followers, there came a fugitive into the camp with news that Saul was dead and David was king. So it was not in vain that he had 'strengthened himself in the Lord his God.' Our 'light affliction which is but for a moment' leads on to a manifestation of the true power of God our Friend, and to the breaking of the day.

III. And now the last thing to be noted is the effort by which this assurance is attained and sustained.

The words of the original convey even more forcibly than those of our translation the thought of David's own action in securing him the hold of God as his. He 'strengthened *himself* in the Lord his God.' The Hebrew conveys the notion of effort, persistent and continuous; and it tells us this, that when things are as black as they were round David at that hour—it is not a matter of course, even for a good man, that there shall well up in his heart this tranquillising and victorious conviction; but he has to set himself to reach and to keep it. God will give it, but He will not give it unless the man strains after it. David 'strengthened himself in the Lord,' and if he had not doggedly set about resisting the pressure of circumstances, and flinging himself as it were, by an effort, into the arms of God, circumstances

would have been too strong for him, and despair would have shrouded his soul. In the darkest moment it is possible for a man to surround himself with God's light, but even in the brightest it is not possible to do so unless he makes a serious effort.

That effort must consist mainly in two things. One is that we shall honestly try to occupy our minds, as well as our hearts, with the truth which certifies to us that God is, in very deed, ours. If we never think, or think languidly and rarely, about what God has revealed to us, by the word and life and death and intercession of Jesus Christ, concerning Himself, His heart of love towards us, and His relations to us, then we shall not have, either in the time of disaster or of joy, the blessed sense that He is indeed ours. If a man will not think about Christian truth he will not have the blessedness of Christian possession of God. There is no mystery about the road to the sweetness and holiness and power that may belong to a Christian. The only way to win them is to be occupied, far more than most of us are, with the plain truths of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. If you never think about them they cannot affect you, and they will not make you sure that God is yours.

But we cannot occupy ourselves with these truths unless we have a distinct and resolute purpose running through our lives, of averting our eyes from the things that might make us lose sight of them and of Him. David had his choice. He could either, as a great many of us do, stand there and look, and look, and look, and see nothing but his disasters, or he could look past them; and see beyond them God. Peter had his choice whether he would look at the water, or whether he would look at Jesus Christ. He chose to look at the water; 'and when he saw the wind boisterous he began to sink'—of course, and when he looked at Christ and cried: 'Lord, save me!' he was held up—equally of course. Make the effort not to let the sorrowful things, or the difficult things, or the fearful things, or the joyous things, in your life, absorb you, but turn away, and, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, in another connection, 'look off unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of faith.' David had to put constraint upon himself, to admit any other thoughts into his mind than those that were pressed into it by the facts before his eyes; but he put on the constraint, and so he was encouraged because he encouraged himself.

There is another thing which we have to make an effort to do, if we would have the blessedness of this conviction filling and flooding our hearts. For the possession is reciprocal; we say, 'My God,' and He says, 'My people.' Unless we yield ourselves to Him and say, 'I am Thine,' we shall never be able to say, 'Thou art mine.' We must recognise His possession of us; we must yield ourselves; we must obey; we must elect Him as our chief good, we must feel that we are not our own, but bought with a price. And then when we look up into the heavens thus submissive, thus obedient, thus owning His authority and His rights, as well as claiming His love and His tenderness, and cry: 'My Father,' He will bend down and whisper into our hearts: 'Thou art My beloved son.' Then we shall be 'strong, and of a good

courage,' however weak and timid, and we shall be rich, though, like David, we have lost all things.

### AT THE FRONT OR THE BASE

‘As his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff.’—1 SAMUEL xxx. 24.

David’s city of Ziklag had been captured by the Amalekites, while he and all his men who could carry arms were absent, serving in the army of Achish, the Philistine king of Gath. On their return they found ruin, their homes harried, their wives, children, and property carried off. Wearing already with their long march, they set off at once in pursuit of the spoilers, who had had a long start of them. When they reached the brook Besor, two hundred of them were too weary and footsore to ford it, and so had to be left behind. But these were not useless, for the heavy baggage was left in their charge, and the other four hundred were thus enabled to march more lightly, and therefore more swiftly. They picked up a sick slave, whom his Amalekite master had heartlessly abandoned to die on the ‘veldt.’ He was almost dead, so they fed him, and when he was able to answer, questioned him. He undertook to guide David and his band, and thus, as twilight was beginning to fall and the Amalekites were ‘spread abroad over all the ground, eating and drinking and feasting because of all the great spoil that they had taken.’ the four hundred burst on them, routed them utterly, and won back all their goods and much more.

Then came a quarrel. The four hundred who had gone to the fight insisted that the booty was theirs, and that the two hundred who had had no hand in winning it should have no share in the distribution. But David over-ruled this and laid down a principle of distribution which was adopted as the standing law of Israel—that the soldiers who were actually in the fight and those who stayed behind guarding the baggage, looking after ‘the base of operations,’ should share alike. It was fair that they should do so, for the two hundred would willingly have been in the thick of battle, and, further, though they did not fight, they helped the fighters, and by guarding the heavy baggage contributed to the victory as really as if they had been in the fray and come out of it with swords dripping with Amalekite blood.

I. God’s battle requires two forms of service.

In David’s raid, as in every campaign, some of the available strength has to be taken to guard the camp, the place where the supplies are, the base of operations, and pickets and detachments have to be left behind all the way, to keep open the communication. The sword is not more needful than the long train of baggage carts, and the forwarding of supplies to the front is as indispensable to the conduct of the war as the headlong charge.

In every great work there is the same distinction of parts and functions, all co-operating to produce the effect which seems to be entirely due to that cause which happens to come last in the series. Organisation of labour associates many hands in the different stages of the one result. There are very few things in this world which are the product of one simple cause alone. You cannot grow a grain of corn without the seed with its vital germ, the soil with its mysterious influences, the sunshine and the rain, the sower’s hand and basket, the plougher’s

plough, and all these, except the blessed sunshine, are the results of a series of other causes which lie forgotten, but are really represented in the issue. If one of them were struck out, all the rest would be ineffectual. In a great machine all its parts are equally necessary, and a defect in a cog on a wheel would be as fatal as a flaw in the cylinder or a crack in the mighty shaft. What would become of a ship if the pintle that the rudder works on were away? The effect of a whole orchestra may depend on the coming in of the flute at the right place.

So in the work which God has given to the Church to do, there are the two forms of service, the direct and the indirect. There are the fighters and the guards of the baggage. And these two are equally necessary. That without which a great work could not have been done is great. When Luther came out from the Diet of Worms, and a knight clapped him on the shoulder, and said, 'Well done! little monk,' he had a share in the memorable deed of that day. The man who gave Luther a flagon of beer when his lips were dry with speaking there before emperor and cardinals, was included in the promise to the giver 'of a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple.'

We have brethren in Christ who have gone to the front, hazarding their lives on the high places of the field. Their hands will droop if they do not feel that a chain of sympathy stretches between them and us, for they in their solitude need all the strength which the confidence of a multitude at home feeling with them can give. They are powerfully influenced by the tone of feeling among us. When devotion languishes and faith droops here, these will generally pass through the same phases among them. When we are strong and bold, their hearts will be quickened by the pulsations of ours, and their courage heightened by thoughts of those from whom they come. Our disorders, our heresies, our struggles are all reproduced on the mission field. An epidemic here travels thither before long, and the spiritual condition of the Church at home is one of the most powerful means of determining that of the churches abroad. A blight among our vines soon shows itself in the little gardens just reclaimed from the waste.

The fighters need material helps and appliances for their work. The days in which the law for apostles and missionaries was, 'Go forth without purse or scrip,' ended before Jesus said, 'Go ye into all the world.' That condition was solemnly revoked by our Lord Himself, when He said, 'When I sent you forth without purse and scrip and shoes, lacked ye anything? But now he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip.' The fighters' material wants are now to be met by Christ's administration of natural means, even as before they had been met by Christ's administration of supernatural ones. His messengers cannot live, do their work, or extend the kingdom, but by the help of material appliances. Those who 'abide by the stuff' are to organise the commissariat department, and to see that those who are far ahead, among the ranks of the foe, do not want for either food or weapons, and are not left isolated, hemmed in by the enemy, and languishing because they feel that they are forgotten by those who 'live at home at ease.'

There has always been that division of labour. Our Lord Himself 'had need of many humble instruments as helpers. There were the woman who ministered to His wants, the faithful few whose presence and sympathy were joyful to Him even on the Mount of Transfiguration, and longed for even in the awful solitude of the agony in Gethsemane, the sisters of Bethany whose humble home was His last shelter before the Cross, the owner of the Upper Room, the sad women who prepared sweet spices, the ruler who consecrated his new sepulchre in a garden by His body. Even He, treading the wine-press alone, needed helpers in the background, and, while conquering for us in the awful duel with our enemy, had humble friends who 'tarried by the stuff.' Similarly Paul had his helpers, on whose names he lovingly lingers and has made immortal, a 'Gaius, mine host, and of the whole church,' an 'Epaphroditus, my fellow soldier, who ministered to my wants,' and therefore was a soldier, though he did not fight, an 'Onesiphorus, who oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain.'

But let us remember that these two forms of service which are equally necessary are equally binding on us all, in the measure of our opportunity and capacity. Our performing the indirect is no excuse for our neglecting the direct. The conversion of the world is *our* business and not to be handed over to any society or missionary. No Christian can be only and always a non-combatant, without sin and loss. He is bound to take some share in the actual conflict in one or other of its many parts.

II. Service may be different in kind and one in essence.

The determining element in our actions is their motive. Not what we work in, but what we work for, gives the principle of classification. Not the spots on the skin or the colour of the feathers, but the bony skeleton, is the basis of zoological classification. It is not the size or binding of a book, be it quarto or folio or octavo, be it in leather or cloth or paper covers, but its subject, that settles its place in a catalogue. The Christian motives of love to Christ, self-sacrifice, devotion, love to men, make all deeds the same which have these in them in like strength. It matters not whether the copy of a great picture be in oils or an engraving or a photograph, so long as it *is* a copy. The smallest piece of indirect Christian service may be thus elevated to the same plane as the greatest.

'Mere money-giving' may have in it all these qualities, as truly and in as great a degree, as the deeds of Apostles and martyrs. Remember how Peter puts in one category these two forms of service, as equally flowing from 'the manifold grace of God,' and equally to be exercised as 'good stewards' thereof—'If any man speaketh, speaking as it were the oracles of God; if any man ministereth, ministering as of the strength which God supplieth.' Remember how Paul classes all varieties of service as equally 'gifts according to the grace given to us,' and to be exercised in the same spirit whatever are the difference in their forms: 'or ministry, let us give ourselves to our ministry; or he that teacheth, to his teaching; he that giveth, let him do it with liberality . . . he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.'



Let us learn, then, how we ought to help Christian fighters for Christ —as associating ourselves with them and their work by sympathy and sharing in their spirit and motives.

Let us learn how loftily we ought to think of the possible sacredness of the most secular forms of help, and to try thus to consecrate our indirect service.

III. All work done from the same motive will receive the same reward.

None need be startled by the thought that Christian work is rewarded. Essentially, it is not deeds but character that is rewarded. The 'reward' is the possession of God of which such a character is capable, and the consequent blessedness which fills such a soul, and cannot but fill it, and which can be enjoyed by no other. The faithful servant enters into the joy of the Lord; the faithful administrator of his Lord's talents enters on the rule over cities in number the same as the talents. Capacity for service is the result of stewardship rightly administered here, and new opportunities yonder are sure to be provided for new capacities.

God's judgment takes little note of that which men's judgment all but exclusively notes. The conspicuousness or success of a man's deeds is nothing to Him. Differences of power are of no account. It is *faithfulness* that is required in a steward, and it is all the same whether the stewardship is of millions or of farthings. The saints nearest the glory in heaven will not always be the men whose words or deeds fill the pages of Church history and resound through the ages. There will be astounding new principles of nearness and comparative remoteness then.

Christ was repeating what David made a law in Israel, when He said: 'He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward.' Therein He recognises the identity in spiritual stature and motive for service, of the prophet and of his dumb helper, and assures us that those who, in widely different ways but under the guidance of the same spirit and motives, have contributed their respective shares to the one triumphant result shall be associated and equalised in the immortal reward.

So remember that what is necessary in our indirect work, if it is to be thus honoured, is that it should have our devotion, and our love to Jesus and to men, throbbing in it, and that it should be accompanied by direct work, in so far as we have opportunities for that. Moneygiving may be made sacred, and by it, exercised in the right spirit, we may 'lay up in store for ourselves a good foundation' and may 'lay hold upon eternal life.'

### THE END OF SELF-WILL

‘Now the Philistines fought against Israel; and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain in mount Gilboa. 2. And the Philistines followed hard upon Saul and upon his sons; and the Philistines slew Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Melchi-shua, Saul’s sons. 3. And the battle went sore against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was sore wounded of the archers. 4. Then said Saul unto his armourbearer, Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumsised come and thrust me through, and abuse me. But his armourbearer would not; for he was sore afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell upon it 5. And when his armourbearer saw that Saul was dead, he fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him. 6. So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armourbearer, and all his men, that same day together. 7. And when the men of Israel that were on the other side of the valley, and they that were on the other side Jordan, saw that the men of Israel fled, and that Saul and his sons were dead, they forsook the cities, and fled; and the Philistines came and dwelt in them. 8. And it came to pass on the morrow, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen in mount Gilboa. 9. And they cut off his head, and stripped off his armour, and sent into the land of the Philistines round about, to publish it in the house of their idols, and among the people. 10. And they put his armour in the house of Ashtaroth: and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. 11. And when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard of that which the Philistines had done to Saul; 12. All the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there. 19. And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh. and fasted seven days.’—[1 SAMUEL xxxi. 1-13](#).

The story of Saul’s tragic last days is broken in two by the account, in [chapters xxix.](#) and [xxx.](#), of David’s fortunate dismissal from the invading army, and his exploits against Amalek. The contrast between the two lives, so closely intertwined and powerful for good and evil on each other, reaches its climax at the end of Saul’s. While the one sets in dark thunderclouds, the other is bright with victory. While the fall of Saul lays all northern Israel bleeding at the feet of the enemy, David is sending the spoils of his conquest to the elders of Judah. Saul’s headless and dishonoured body hangs rotting in the sun on the wall of Bethshan, while David sits a conqueror in Ziklag. The introduction of the brightness of the two preceding chapters is intended to heighten the darkness that broods over this one, and to deepen the stern teaching of that terrible death. Defeat, desolation, despair, attend to his self-dug grave the unhappy king, whose end teaches us all what comes of self-willed resistance to the law and the Spirit of God. Everything else is subordinated in the narrative to the account of his death. Next to nothing is said about the battle, the very site of which is left obscure. We cannot tell whether it was fought down in the plain by the fountain at Jezreel, where Israel was encamped, according to [1 Samuel xxix. 1](#), or whether both sides manoeuvred

and changed their ground, and the decisive struggle was on the slope of Gilboa. In any case, the site was almost identical with that of Gideon's victory, but there was no Gideon in command on that dark day. The language of [verse 1](#) seems to imply that the battle was over and the rout begun before the Israelites reached Gilboa. If so, we have to conceive of a short, hopeless struggle on the plain, and then a rush to the hills for safety, in which Saul and his sons and bodyguard were borne along, but held together, closely followed by the 'red pursuing spear' of the conquerors, fierce with ancestral hate and the memories of defeat. There, on the hillside, stands the towering form of Saul with a little ring of his children and retainers round him, the words he had heard last night in the sorceress' tent unnerving his arm, and many a past crime rising before him, and whispering in his ear,

'In the battle think on me,  
And fall thy edgeless sword; despair and die.'

There seems to have been a close encounter with some of the pursuers, and a hand-to-hand fight, in which Jonathan and his two brothers fell, and the rest of the bodyguard were slain or scattered. The prophecy of that mantle-swathed shape last night was in part fulfilled—'Tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me.' They lay stark at his feet, and he knew that he would soon join them. The last heart that loved him had ceased to beat in Jonathan's noble breast, and his own crimes had slain his sons. Who can paint the storm of contending passions in that lonely black soul? or were they all frozen into the numbness of despair?

But whatever else was in his soul, repentance was not there. He may have been seared by remorse, but he was not softened by penitence, and was fierce and proud in despair as he had been in prosperity. The Revised Version substitutes 'overtook' for 'hit' in [verse 3](#); but Saul's fear 'lest these uncircumcised come' is against that rendering, and the fact that the enemy did not know of his death till next day ([v. 8](#)) is a difficulty in the way of accepting it. The word is literally 'found' and possibly means that the archers recognised him, and were making for him, though, as would appear, from some cause they missed him in the confusion. The other change in the Revised Version, that of 'greatly distressed' for 'sore wounded' fits the context; and if it be adopted, we have the picture of the unwounded but desperate man, once brave, but now stricken with a panic which opens his lips for his only word. In grim silence he had met the loss of battle, sons, and kingdom; but the proud sense of personal dignity is strong to the end, and he fiercely issues his last command, and embraces death to escape insult. The haughty spirit was unchanged, crushed but the same, unsoftened, and therefore roused to madder defiance of God and man. What an awful last saying for 'the anointed of Jehovah,' and how the overweening self-will and vehemence and passionate pride of his whole life are gathered up in it!

His last command is disobeyed by the trembling armour-bearer, whose very awe makes him disobedient, Did Saul, at that last moment, send a thought to an armour-bearer whom he had had in happier days, and who was to inherit his lost kingdom? The enemy are coming nearer. No time is to be lost if he would escape the savage mutilations and torments which ancient warfare made the portion of captive kings. Not another word passes his lips, but, in the same grim silence, he fixes his sword upright in the ground, and flings himself on its point, and dies. All through his reign no hand had injured him but his own; and, as he lived, so he died, his own undoer and his own murderer. Suicide, the refuge of defeated monarchs and praised by heathen moralists as heroic, was rare in Israel. Saul, Ahithophel, and Judas are the instances of it. The most rudimentary recognition of the truths taught by the Old Testament would prevent it. If Saul had had any faith in God, any submission, any repentance, he could not have finished a life of rebellion by a self-inflicted death, which was itself the very desperation of rebellion. We have not to pronounce on his fate, but his act was a sin of the darkest dye.

Yet note how the narrative abstains from all comment. It neither condemns nor pities, though a profound sense of the tragic eclipse is audible in that summing up in [verse 6](#): 'So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armour-bearer, and all his men (that is, immediate followers or escort), that same day together.' And there they all lay, bloody corpses in the fellowship of death, on the slopes of Gilboa. Where Scripture is silent, it is not our part to speak; but we can scarcely turn from that mighty form, prone by his own rash act, without seeking to learn the lesson of his life and fate. Saul had many noble and lovable qualities, such as bravery, promptitude, in his earlier days modesty and generosity. All these he had by nature, but there is no sign that he ever sought to cultivate his moral character, or to win any grace that did not come naturally to him; nor is there any reason to suppose that religion had ever any strong hold on him. His whole character may be summed up in Samuel's words in announcing his rejection: 'Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry.' Rebellion persisted in, in spite of all remonstrances and checks, till it becomes master of the whole man, is the keynote of his later years. Before that baleful influence, as before some hot poison wind, all the flowers of good dispositions were burned up, and the bad stimulated to growth. His early virtues disappeared, and passed into their opposites. Modesty became arrogance, and a long course of indulgence in self-will developed cruelty, gloomy suspicion, and passionate anger, and left him the victim and slave of his own causeless hate. He who rebels against God mars his own character. The miserable later years of Saul, haunted and hunted as by a demon by his own indulged and swollen rebellion and unsleeping suspicion, are an example of the sorrows that ever dog sin; and, as he lies there on Gilboa, the terrible saying recurs to our memory: 'He that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.'

The remainder of the chapter is occupied with three points, bearing on the solemn tragedy just recorded. First, we have the disastrous effects of it in the complete loss of the northern territories. 'The men . . . that were on the other side of the valley' are the tribes to the north of the great plain; and 'they that were on the other side Jordan' are probably those on the east bank. So thorough was the defeat, especially as Saul and the royal house were slain, that they abandoned their homes, and the Philistines took possession. 'One sinner destroyeth much good.' When Israel's king was madly rebellious, Israel was smitten, and its inheritance diminished.

Next we have the insults to the headless corpses. The Philistines did not know till the following day how complete was their victory. The account in [1 Chronicles x.](#) adds that Saul's head was sent to the temple of Dagon, probably as a kind of effacing of the shame wrought there by the presence of the ark. The false gods had triumphed, as their worshippers thought, and Saul's death was Jehovah's defeat. That apparent victory of the idols and the mocking exultation over the bloody trophy and dented armour are, to the historian, not the least bitter consequences of the battle.

The last point is the brave midnight march of the men of Jabesh from their home on the eastern uplands beyond Jordan, across the river and up to Bethshan, perched on its lofty cliff, and overlooking the valley of the Jordan. It was a requital of Saul's deed in his early bright days, when, with his hastily raised levies, he scattered the Ammonites. It is one gleam of light amid the stormy sunset. There were men ready to hazard their lives even then, because of the noblest of Saul's acts, which no tyrannical arbitrariness or fierceness of later days had blotted out. So the little band of grateful heroes carried back their ghastly load to Jabesh, and burned the mutilated bodies there, employing an unfamiliar mode, as we may suppose, by reason of their mutilation and decomposition, and then reverently gathering the white bones from the pyre, and laying them below the well-known tamarisk. Saul's one good deed as king sowed seeds of gratitude which flourished again, when the opportunity came. His many evil ones sowed evil seed which bore fatal fruit; and both were seen in his end.

**EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE**

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

**SECOND SAMUEL AND THE BOOKS OF KINGS TO SECOND KINGS VII**

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**THE SECOND BOOK OF SAMUEL**

### THE BRIGHT DAWN OF A REIGN

‘And it came to pass after this, that David enquired of the Lord, saying, Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah? And the Lord said unto him, Go up. And David said, Whither shall I go up? And He said, Unto Hebron. 2. So David went up thither, and his two wives also, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail, Nabal’s wife, the Carmelite. 3. And his men that were with him did David bring up, every man with his household: and they dwelt in the cities of Hebron. 4. And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. And they told David, saying, That the men of Jabesh-gilead were they that buried Saul. 5. And David sent messengers unto the men of Jabesh-gilead, and said unto them, Blessed be ye of the Lord, that ye have shewed this kindness unto your lord, even unto Saul, and have buried him. 6. And now the Lord shew kindness and truth unto you: and I also will requite you this kindness, because ye have done this thing. 7. Therefore now let your hands be strengthened, and be ye valiant: for your master Saul is dead, and also the house of Judah have anointed me king over them. 8. But Abner the son of Ner, captain of Saul’s host, took Ishb-osheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim; 9. And he made him king over Gilead, and over the Ashurites, and over Jezreel, and over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, and over all Israel. 10. Ish-bosheth Saul’s son was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David. 11. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months.’—2 SAMUEL ii. 1-11.

The last stage of David’s wanderings had brought him to Ziklag, a Philistine city. There he had been for over a year, during which he had won the regard of Achish, the Philistine king of Gath. He had, at Achish’s request, accompanied him with his contingent, in the invasion of Israel, which crushed Saul’s house at Gilboa; but jealousy on the part of the other Philistine leaders had obliged his patron to send him back to Ziklag. He found it a heap of ashes. An Amalekite raid had carried off all the women and children, and his soldiers were on the point of mutiny. His fortunes seemed desperate, but his courage and faith were high, and he paused not a moment for useless sorrow, but swept after the robbers, swooped down on them like a bolt out of the blue, and scattered them, recovering the captives and spoil. He went back to the ruins which had been Ziklag, and three days after heard of Saul’s death.

The lowest point of his fortunes suddenly turned into the highest, for now the path to the throne was open. But the tidings did not move him to joy. His first thought was not for himself, but for Saul and Jonathan, whose old love to him shone out again, glorified by their deaths. Swift vengeance from his hand struck Saul’s slayer; the lovely elegy on the great king and his son eased his heart. Then he turned to front his new circumstances, and this passage shows how a God-fearing man will meet the summons to dignity which is duty. It sets forth David’s conduct in three aspects—his assumption of his kingdom, his loving regard for Saul’s memory, and his demeanour in the face of rebellion.

I. David was now about thirty years old, and had had his character tested and matured by his hard experiences. He 'learned in suffering what he taught in song.' Exile, poverty, and danger are harsh but effectual teachers, if accepted by a devout spirit, and fronted with brave effort. The fugitive's cave was a good preparation for the king's palace. The throne to which he was called was no soft seat for repose. The Philistine invasion had torn away all the northern territory. He took the helm in a tempest. What was he to do? Ziklag was untenable; where was he to take his men? He could not stop in the Philistine territory, and he saw no way clear.

God's servants generally find that their promotion means harder duties and multiplied perplexities. 'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.' David did what we shall do, if we are wise—he asked God to guide him. How that guidance was asked and given we are not here told; but the analogy of [1 Samuel xxx. 7, 8](#), suggests that it was by the Urim and Thummim, interpreted by the high-priest. The form of inquiry seems to have been that a course of action, suggested by the inquirer, was decided for him by a 'Yes' or a 'No.' So that there was the exercise of common-sense and judgment in formulating the proposed course, as well as that of God's direction in determining it.

That is how we still get divine direction. Bring your own wits to bear on your action, and then do not obstinately stick to what seems right to you, but ask God to negative it if it is wrong, and to confirm you in it if it is right. If we humbly ask Him, 'Am I to go, or not to go?' we shall not be left unanswered. We note the contrast between David's submission to God's guidance and Saul's self-willed taking his own way, in spite of Samuel. He began right, and, in the main, he continued as he began. Self-will is sin and ruin. Submission is joy, and peace, and success. God's kings are viceroys. They have to rule themselves and the world, but they have to be ruled by His will. If they faithfully continue as His servants, they are masters of all besides.

Hebron was a good capital for the new king, for it was a defensible position, in the centre of his own tribe, and sacred by association with the patriarchs. Established there, David was recognised as king by his fellow-tribesmen, and by them only. No doubt, tribal jealousy was partly the cause of this limited recognition, but probably the confusion incident to the Philistine victory contributed to it. The result was that, though David's designation by Samuel to the kingship was universally known, and his candidature had been popular, he had seven years of precarious sway over this mere fraction of the nation. We read of no impatience on his part. He let events shape themselves, or, rather, he let God shape events.

Passiveness is not always indolence. There are two ways of compassing our desires. One is that which David himself tells us is the 'young lions' way, of struggling and fighting, and that often ends in 'lacking and suffering hunger'; the other is that of waiting on the Lord, and that always ends in 'not lacking any good.' If we are sure that God has promised us

anything, and if He does not seem to have yet opened the way to obtaining it, our 'strength is to sit still.' If He has given us Hebron, we can be patient till He please to give us Jerusalem.

II. Another side of David's character comes beautifully out in his treatment of the men of Jabesh-gilead. That town owed much to Saul ([1 Samuel xi.](#)), and its gratitude lasted, and dared much for him. It was a brave dash that they made across Jordan to carry off Saul's corpse from its ignominious exposure; for it both defied the Philistines, and might be construed as hostile to David. But his heart was too true to ancient friendship to do anything but glow with admiring sympathy at that exhibition of affectionate remembrance. Reconciling death had swept away all memories of Saul's insane jealousy, and he owned a brother in every one who showed kindness to the unfortunate king.

If the Jabesh-Gileadites are a pattern of long-remembered gratitude, David's commendation of them is a model of love which survives injuries, and of forgivingness which forgets them. It was as politic as it was generous. Nothing could have been better calculated to attach Saul's most devoted partisans to him than showing that he honoured their faithful attachment to Saul, and nothing could have more clearly defined his own position during his wanderings as being no rebel. The dictates of true policy and those of devout generosity always coincide. It is ever a blunder to be unforgiving, and mercifulness is always expedient.

But David did not hide his claim to the allegiance of these true hearts. He called on them to transfer their loyalty to himself, and he asserted, not his anointing by Samuel, but his recognition by Judah, the premier tribe, as the motive. No doubt the divine appointment is implied, as it was generally known, but Judah's action is put forward as showing the beginning of the realisation of the divine designation. The men of Jabesh needed to 'be valiant' if they were to acknowledge him; for it was a far cry to Hebron, and the forces of the rival son of Saul were overrunning the northern districts.

We have to take our sides in the age-long and worldwide warfare between God's King and the pretenders to His throne, and it often wants much courage to do so when surrounded by antagonists. It seems a long way off to the true monarch, and Abner's army is a very solid reality, and very near. But it is safest to take the side of the distant, rightful king.

III. David's bearing in the face of opposition and rebellion comes out in [verses 8-11](#). Abner, Saul's cousin, who had been in high position when the stripling from Bethlehem fought Goliath, was not capable of the self-effacement involved in acquiescing in David's accession, though he knew that the Lord had 'sworn to David.' So he set up a 'King Do-nothing' in the person of a weak lad, the only survivor of Saul's sons. A strange state of mind that, which struggles against a recognised divine appointment!

But is it only Abner who knew that he was trying to thwart God's will? Thousands of us are doing the same, and the attempt answers as well as it did in his case.

The puppet king is named Ishbosheth in the lesson, but [I Chronicles viii. 33](#) and [ix. 39](#) show that his real name was Esh-baal. The former word means 'The man of shame'; the

latter, 'The man of Baal.' The existence of Baal as an element in names seems to indicate the incompleteness of the emancipation from idolatry in Saul's time, and the change will then indicate the keener monotheistic conscience of later days. Another explanation is that Baal ('Lord') was in these cases used as a name for Jehovah, and was 'changed at a later period for the purpose of avoiding what was interpreted then as a compound of the name of the Phoenician deity Baal' (Driver, *Notes on Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel*).

Abner set up his tool in Mahanaim, sacred for its associations with Jacob, but, no doubt, recommended to him rather by its position on the east side of Jordan, safe from the attacks of the victorious Philistines. From that fastness he made raids to recover the territory which the victory at Gilboa had won for them. First Gilead, on the same side of the river as Mahanaim; then the territory of the 'Ashurites'—probably a scribe's error for 'Asherites,' the most northern tribe; and then, coming southward, the great plain, with its cities, Ephraim and Benjamin,—in fact, all Israel except Judah's country was reconquered for Saul's house.

The account of the distribution of territory between the two monarchies is broken by the parenthesis in [verse 10](#), which, both by its awkward interposition in the middle of a sentence and by its difficult chronological statements, looks like a late addition.

For seven and a half years David reigned in Hebron, but was rather shut up there than ruling thence. The most noteworthy fact is that he, soldier as he was, took no steps to put down Abner's rebellion. He defended himself when attacked, but that was all. The three figures of David, Ishbosheth, and Abner point lessons. Silent, still, trustful, and therefore patient, David shows us how faith in God can lead to possessing one's soul in patience till 'the vision' comes. We may have to wait for it, but 'it will surely come,' and what is time enough for God should be time enough for us. Saul's son was a poor, weak creature, who would never have thought of resisting David but for the stronger will behind him. To be weak is, in this world full of tempters, to drift into being wicked. We have to learn betimes to say 'No,' and to stick to it. Moral weakness attracts tempters as surely as a camel fallen by the caravan track draws vultures from every corner of the sky. The fierce soldier who fought for his own hand while professing to be moved by loyalty to the dead king, may stand as a type of the self-deception with which we gloss over our ugliest selfishness with fine names, and for an instance of the madness which leads men to set themselves against God's plans, and therefore to be dashed in pieces, as some slim barrier reared across the track of a train would be. To 'rush against the thick bosses of the Almighty's buckler' does no harm to the buckler, but kills the insane assailant.

### ONE FOLD AND ONE SHEPHERD

‘Then came all the tribes of Israel to David unto Hebron, and spake, saying, Behold, we are thy bone and thy flesh. 2. Also in time past, when Saul was king over us, thou wast he that leddest out and broughtest in Israel: and the Lord said to thee, Thou shalt feed My people Israel, and thou shalt be a captain over Israel. 3. So all the elders of Israel came to the king to Hebron; and king David made a league with them in Hebron before the Lord: and they anointed David king over Israel. 4. David was thirty years old when he began to reign; and he reigned forty years. 5. In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and in Jerusalem he reigned thirty and three years over all Israel and Judah, 6. And the king and his men went to Jerusalem unto the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land; which spake unto David, saying, Except thou take away the blind and the lame, thou shalt not come in hither: thinking, David cannot come in hither. 7. Nevertheless, David took the strong hold of Zion: the same is the city of David. 8. And David said on that day, Whosoever getteth up to the gutter, and smiteth the Jebusites, and the lame and the blind, that are hated of David’s soul, he shall be chief and captain. Wherefore they said, The blind and the lame shall not come into the house. 9. So David dwelt in the fort, and called it the city of David. And David built round about from Millo and inward. 10. And David went on, and grew great, and the Lord God of hosts was with him. 11. And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David, and cedar trees, and carpenters, and masons: and they built David an house. 12. And David perceived that the Lord had established him king over Israel, and that He had exalted his kingdom for His people Israel’s sake.’—2 SAMUEL v. 1-12.

The dark day on Gilboa put the Philistines in possession of most of Saul’s kingdom. Only in the south David held his ground, and Abner had to cross Jordan to find a place of security for the remnants of the royal house. The completeness of the Philistine conquest is marked, not only by Abner’s flight to Mahanaim, but by the reckoning that David reigned for seven and a half years and Ishbosheth two; for these periods must be supposed to have ended very nearly at the same time, and thus there would be about five years before the invaders were so far got rid of that Ishbosheth exercised sovereignty over his part of Israel. It is singular that David should have been left unattacked by the Philistines, and it is probably to be explained by the friendly relations which had sprung up between Achish, king of Gath, and him (1 Samuel xxix.). However that may be, his power was continually increasing during his reign at Hebron over Judah, and at last Abner’s death and the assassination of the poor phantom king, Ishbosheth, brought about the total collapse of opposition.

I. This passage deals first with the submission of the tribes and the reunion of the divided kingdom. A comparison of [verse 1](#) with [verse 3](#) shows that a formal delegation of elders from all the tribes which had held by Ishbosheth, came to Hebron with their submission. The account in I Chronicles is a *verbatim* copy of this one, with the addition of a glowing picture of the accompanying feasting and joy. It also places much emphasis on the sincerity

of David's new subjects, which needed some endorsement; for loyalty which has been disloyal as long as it durst, may be suspected. The elders have their mouths full of excellent reasons for recognising David's kingship,—he is their brother; he was their true leader in war, even in Saul's time; he has been appointed by God to be king and commander. Unfortunately, it had taken the elders seven and a half years to feel the force of these reasons, and probably their perceptions would still have remained dull if Abner and Ishbosheth had lived. But David is both magnanimous and politic, and neither bloodshed nor reproaches mar the close of the strife. Seldom has so formidable a civil war been ended with so complete an amnesty. Observe the expression that David 'made a league with them. . . before the Lord.' The Israelitish monarch was no despot, but, in modern language, a constitutional king, between whom and his subjects there was a compact, which he as well as they had to observe. In what sense was it made 'before the Lord'? The ark was not at Hebron, though the priests were; and the phrase is at once a testimony to the religious character of the 'league' and to the consciousness of God's presence, apart from the symbol of His presence. It points to a higher conception than that which brought the ark to Ebenezer, and dreamed that the ark had brought God to the army. Modern theories of the religious development of the Old Testament ask us to recognise these two conceptions as successive. The fact is that they were contemporaneous, and that the difference between them is not one of time, but of spiritual susceptibility. Who anointed David for this third time? Apparently the elders, for priests are not mentioned. Samuel had anointed him, as token of the divine choice and symbol of the divine gifts for his office. The men of Judah had anointed him, and finally the elders did so, in token of the popular confirmation of God's choice.

So David has reached the throne at last. Schooled by suffering, and in the full maturity of his powers, enriched by the singularly varied experiences of his changeful life, tempered by the swift alternations of heat and cold, polished by friction, consolidated by heavy blows, he has been welded into a fitting instrument for God's purposes. Thus does He ever prepare for larger service. Thus does He ever reward patient trust. Through trials to a throne is the law for all noble lives in regard to their earthly progress, as well as in regard to the relation between earth and heaven. But David is not only a pattern instance of how God trains His servants, but he is a prophetic person; and in his progress to his kingdom we have dimly, but really, shadowed the path by which his Son and Lord attains to His,—a path thickly strewn with thorns, and plunging into 'valleys of the shadow of death' compared with which David's darkest hour was sunny. The psalms of the persecuted exile have sounding through them a deeper sorrow; for they 'testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ.' 'No cross, no crown,' is the lesson of David's earlier life.

II. We have, next, the first victory of the reunited nation. Hebron was too far south for the capital of the whole kingdom. Jerusalem was more central, and, from its position, surrounded on three sides with steep ravines, was a strong military post. David's soldier's eye

saw its advantages; and he, no doubt, desired to weld the monarchy together by participation in danger and triumph. The new glow of national unity would seek some great exploit, and would resent as an insult the presence of the Jebusites in their stronghold. The attack on it immediately follows the recognition of David's kingship. It is not necessary here to discuss the difficulties in [verses 6-8](#); but we note that they give, first, the insolent boast of the besieged, then the twofold answer to it in fact and in word, and last, the memorial of the victory in a proverb. Apparently the Jebusites' taunt is best understood as in the margin of the Revised Version, 'Thou shalt not come in hither, but the blind and the lame shall turn thee away,' They were so sure that their ravines made them safe, that they either actually manned their walls with blind men and cripples, or jeeringly shouted to the enemy across the valley that these would do for a garrison. The other possible meaning of the words as they stand in the Authorised Version would make 'the blind and lame' refer to David's men, and the taunt would mean, 'You will have to weed out your men. It will take sharper eyes and more agile limbs than theirs to clamber up here'; but the former explanation is the more probable. Such braggart speeches were quite in the manner of ancient warfare.

[Verse 7](#) tells what the answer to this mocking shout from the ramparts was, David did the impossible, and took the city. Courage built on faith has a way of making the world's predictions of what it cannot do look rather ridiculous. David wastes no words in answering the taunt; but it stirs him to fierce anger, and nerves him and his men for their desperate charge. The obscure words in [verse 8](#), which he speaks to his soldiers, do not need the supplement given in the Authorised Version. The king's quick eye had seen a practical path for scaling the cliffs up some watercourse, where there might be projections or vegetation to pull oneself up by, or shelter which would hide the assailants from the defenders; and he bids any one who would smite the Jebusites take that road up, and, when he is up, 'smite.' He heartens his men for the assault by his description of the enemy. They had talked about 'blind and lame'; that is what they really are, or as unable to stand against the Israelites' fierce and sudden burst as if they were: and furthermore, they are 'hated of David's soul.' It is a flash of the rage of battle which shows us David in a new light. He was a born captain as well as king; and here he exhibits the general's power to see, as by instinct, the weak point and to hurl his men on it. His swift decision and fiery eloquence stir his men's blood like the sound of a trumpet. The proverb that rose from the capture is best read as in the Revised Version: 'There are the blind and the lame; he cannot come into the house.' The point of it seems to be that, notwithstanding the bragging Jebusites, he did 'come into the house'; and so its use would be to ridicule boasting confidence that was falsified by events, as the Jebusites' had been. It was worth while to record the boast and its end; for they teach the always seasonable lesson of the folly of over-confidence in apparently impregnable defences. It is a lesson of worldly prudence, but still more of religion. There is always some 'watercourse' overlooked by us, up which the enemy may make his way. Overestimate of our own strength



and its companion folly, flippant underestimate of the enemy's power, are, in all worldly affairs, the sure precursors of disaster; and in the Christian life the only safe temper is that of the man who 'feareth always,' as knowing his own weakness and the strength of his foe, and thereby is driven to that trust which casts out fear.

On the other hand, David's exploit reads us anew the lesson that to the Christian soldier there is nothing impossible, with Jesus Christ for our Captain. There are many unconquered fortresses of evil still to be carried by assault, and they look steep and inaccessible enough; but there is some way up, and He will show it us. For our own personal struggle with sin, and for the Church's conflict with social evils, this story is an encouragement and a prophecy.

Jerusalem was captured by a reunited nation with its king at its head. As long as our miserable divisions weaken and disgrace us, the Church fights at a disadvantage; and the hoary fortresses of the foe will not be won till Judah ceases to vex Ephraim, and Ephraim no more envies Judah, but all Christ's servants in one host, with the King known by each to be with them, make the assault.

III. We have, lastly, the growth of the kingdom. I pass over topographical questions, which need not concern us here. The points recorded are David's establishment in the stronghold, his additions to the city, his increasing greatness and its reason in the presence and favour of 'the God of hosts,' the special instance of this in the friendly intercourse with Hiram of Tyre and the employment of Tyrian workmen, and the recognition of the source and the purpose of his prosperity by the devout king. We see here the conditions of true success,—'The Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.' We see also the right use of it,—'David perceived that the Lord had established him king.' He was not puffed up into self-importance by his elevation, but devoutly and clearly saw who had set him in his lofty place. And, as he traced his royalty to God, so he recognised that he had received it, not for himself, but as a trust to be used, not in self-indulgence, but for the national good,—'and that He had exalted his kingdom for His people Israel's sake.' Whosoever holds firmly by these two thoughts, and lives them, will adorn his position, whatever it may be, and will be one of God's crowned kings, however obscure his lot and small his duties. He who lacks them will misuse his gifts and mar his life, and the more splendid his endowments and the higher his position, the more conspicuous will be his ruin and the heavier his guilt.

## DEATH AND LIFE FROM THE ARK

‘Again, David gathered together all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2. And David arose, and went with all the people that were with him from Baale of Judah, to bring up from thence the ark of God, whose name is called by the name of the Lord of hosts that dwelleth between the cherubims. 3. And they set the ark of God upon a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab that was in Gibeah: and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drave the new cart. 4. And they brought it out of the house of Abinadab which was at Gibeah, accompanying the ark of God: and Ahio went before the ark. 5. And David and all the house of Israel played before the Lord on all manner of instruments made of fir wood, even on harps, and on psalteries, and on timbrels, and on cornets, and on cymbals. 6. And when they came to Nachon’s thrashing-floor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. 7. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God. 8. And David was displeased, because the Lord had made a breach upon Uzzah: and he called the name of the place Perez-uzzah to this day. 9. And David was afraid of the Lord that day, and said, How shall the ark of the Lord come to me? 10. So David would not remove the ark of the Lord unto him into the city of David: but David carried it aside into the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. 11. And the ark of the Lord continued in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months: and the Lord blessed Obed-edom, and all his household. 12. And it was told king David, saying, The Lord hath blessed the house of Obed-edom and all that pertaineth unto him, because of the ark of God. So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom into the city of David with gladness.’—2 SAMUEL vi. 1-12.

I. The first section ([verses 1-5](#)) describes the joyful reception and procession. The parallel account in 1 Chronicles states that Baalah, or Baale, was Kirjath-jearim. Probably the former was the more ancient Canaanitish name, and indicates that it had been a Baal sanctuary. If so, the presence of the ark there was at once a symbol and an omen, showing Jehovah’s conquest over the obscene and bloody gods of the land, and forecasting His triumph over all the gods of the nations. Every Baale shall one day be a resting-place of the ark of God. The solemn designation of the ark, as ‘called by the Name, the name of the Lord of Hosts, that dwelleth between the cherubim,’ is significant on this, its reappearance after so long eclipse, and, by emphasising its awful sanctity, prepares for the incidents which are to follow. The manner of the ark’s transport was irregular; for the law strictly enjoined its being carried by the Levites by means of bearing-poles resting on their shoulders; and the copying of the Philistines’ cart, though a new one was made for the purpose, indicates the desuetude into which the decencies of worship had fallen in seventy years. In 1 Chronicles, the singular words in [verse 5](#), which describe David as playing before the Lord on the very unlikely things for such a purpose,’ all manner of instruments of fir wood,’ become ‘with all their might:

even with songs' which seems much more reasonable. A slight alteration in three letters and the transposition of two would bring our text into conformity with I Chronicles, and the conjectural emendation is tempting. Who ever heard of fir-wood musical instruments? The specified ones which follow were certainly not made of it, and songs could scarcely fail to be mentioned.

At all events, we see the glad procession streaming out of the little city buried among its woods; the cart drawn by meek oxen, and loaded with the unadorned wooden chest, in the midst; the two sons or descendants of its faithful custodian honoured to be the teamsters; the king with the harp which had cheered him in many a sad hour of exile; and the crowd 'making a joyful noise before the Lord,' which might sound discord in our ears, as some lifted up shrill songs, some touched stringed instruments, some beat on timbrels, some rattled metal rods with movable rings, and some clashed cymbals together. It was a wild scene, in which there was a dangerous resemblance to the frantic jubilations of idolatrous worship. No doubt there were true hearts in that crowd, and none truer than David's. No doubt we have to beware of applying our Christian standards to these early times, and must let a good deal that is sensuous and turbid pass, as, no doubt, God let it pass. But confession of sin in leaving the ark so long forgotten would have been better than this tumultuous joy; and if there had been more trembling in it, it would not have passed so soon into wild terror. Still, on the other hand, that rejoicing crowd does represent, though in crude form, the effect which the consciousness of God's presence should ever have. His felt nearness should be, as the Psalmist says, 'the gladness of my joy.' Much of our modern religion is far too gloomy, and it is thought to be a sign of devotion and spiritual-mindedness to be sad and of a mortified countenance. Unquestionably, Christianity brings men into the continual presence of very solemn truths about themselves and the world which may well sober them, and make what the world calls mirth incongruous.

'There is no music in the life  
That rings with idiot laughter solely.'

But the Man of Sorrows said that His purpose for us was that 'His joy might remain in us, and that our joy might be full'; and we but imperfectly apprehend the gospel if we do not feel that its joys 'much more abound' than its sorrows, and that they even burn brightest, like the lights on safety-buoys, when drenched by stormy seas.

II. The second section contains the dread vindication of the sanctity of the ark, which changed joy into terror, and silenced the songs. At some bad place in the rocky and steep track, the oxen stumbled or were restive. The spot is called in Samuel 'the threshing-floor of Nachon,' but in Chronicles the owner is named 'Chidon.' As the former word means 'a stroke' and the latter 'destruction,' they are probably not to be taken as proper names, but

as applied to the place after this event. The name given by David, however—Perez-uzzah—proved the more permanent ‘to this day.’ Uzzah, who was driving while his brother went in front to pilot the way, naturally stretched out his hand to steady his freight, just as if it had been a sack of corn; and, as if he had touched an electric wire, fell dead, as the story graphically says, ‘by the ark of God.’ What confusion and panic would agitate the joyous singers, and how their songs would die on their lips!

What harm was there in Uzzah’s action? It was most natural, and, in one point of view, commendable. Any careful waggoner would have done the same with any valuable article he had in charge. Yes; that was just the point of his error and sin, that he saw no difference between the ark and any other valuable article. His intention to help was right enough; but there was profound insensibility to the awful sacredness of the ark, on which even its Levitical bearers were forbidden to lay hands. All his life Uzzah had been accustomed to its presence. It had been one of the familiar pieces of furniture in Abinadab’s house, and, no doubt, familiarity had had its usual effect. Do none of us ministers, teachers, and others, to whom the gospel and the worship and ordinances of the Church have been familiar from infancy, treat them in the same fashion? Many a hand is laid on the ark, sometimes to keep it from falling, with more criminal carelessness of its sacredness than Uzzah showed. Note, too, how swiftly an irreverent habit of treating holy things grows. The first error was in breaking the commanded order for removal of the ark by the Levites. Once in the cart, the rest follows. The smallest breach in the feeling of awe and reverence will soon lead to more complete profanation. There is nothing more delicate than the sense of awe. Trifled with ever so little, it speedily disappears. There is far too little of it in our modern religion. Perfect love casts out fear and deepens awe which hath not torment.

Was not the punishment in excess of the sin? We must remember the times, the long neglect of the ark, the decay of religion in Saul’s reign, the critical character of the moment as the beginning of a new era, when it was all-important to print deep the impression of sanctity, and the rude material which had to be dealt with; and we must not forget that God, in His punishments, does not adopt men’s ideas of death as such a very dreadful thing. Many since have followed in David’s wake, and been ‘displeased, because the Lord broke forth upon Uzzah’; but he and they have been wrong. He ought to have known better, and to have understood the lesson of the solemn corpse that lay there by the ark; instead of which he gives way to mere terror, and was ‘afraid of the Lord.’ David afraid of the Lord! What had become of the rapturous love and strong trust which ring clear through his psalms? Is this the man who called God his rock and fortress and deliverer, his buckler and the horn of his salvation and his high tower, and poured out his soul in burning words, which glow yet through all the centuries and the darkness of earth? It was ill for David to fall thus below himself, but well for us that the eclipse of his faith and love should be recorded, to hearten us, when the like emotions fall asleep in our souls. His consciousness of impurity was

wholesome and sound, but his cowering before the ark, as if it were the seat of arbitrary anger, which might flame out destruction for no discernible reason, was a woful darkening of his loving insight into the heart of God.

III. The last section ([verses 10-12](#)) gives us the blessings on the house of Obed-edom and the glad removal of the ark to Jerusalem. Obed-edom is called a 'Gittite,' or man of Gath; but he does not appear to have been a Philistine immigrant, but a native of another Gath, a Levitical city, and himself a Levite. There is an Obededom in the lists of David's Levites in Chronicles who is probably the same man. He did not fear to receive the ark, and, worthily received, the presence which had been a source of disaster and death to idolaters, to profanely curious pryders into its secret, and to presumptuous irreverence, became a fountain of unbroken blessing. This twofold effect of the same presence is but a symbol of a solemn law which runs through all life, and is especially manifest in the effects of Christ's work upon men. Everything has two handles, and it depends on ourselves by which of them we lay hold of it, and whether we shall receive a shock that kills, or blessings. The same circumstances of poverty, or wealth, or sorrow, or temptation, make one man better and another worse. The same presence of God will be to one man a joy; to another, a terror. 'What maketh heaven, that maketh hell.' The same gospel received is the fountain of life, purity, peace; and, rejected or neglected, is the source of harm and death. Jesus Christ is 'set for the fall and rising again of many.' Either He is the savour of life unto life, the rock on which we build, or He is the savour of death unto death, the stone on which we stumble and break our limbs.

### THE ARK OF THE HOUSE OF OBED-EDOM

‘The ark of the Lord continued in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months; and the Lord blessed Obed-edom, and all his household.’—2 SAMUEL vi.11.

Nearly seventy years had elapsed since the capture of the ark by the Philistines on the fatal field of Aphek. They had carried it and set it in insolent triumph in the Temple of Dagon, as if to proclaim that the Jehovah of Israel was the conquered prisoner of the Philistine god. But the morning showed Dagon’s stump prone on the threshold. And so the terrified priests got rid of their dangerous trophy as swiftly as they could. From one Philistine city to another it passed, and everywhere its presence was marked by disease and calamity. So at last they huddled it into some rude cart, leaving the draught-oxen to drag it whither they would. They made straight for the Judaeen hills, and in the first little village were welcomed by the inhabitants at their harvest, as they saw them coming across the plain. But again death attended the Presence, and curiosity, which was profanity, was punished. So the villagers were as eager to get rid of the ark as they had been to welcome it, and they passed it on to the little city of *Kirjath-jearim*, ‘the city of the woods,’ as the name means, or, as we might say, ‘Woodville.’ And there it lay, neglected and all but forgotten, for nearly seventy years. But as soon as David was established in his newly-won capital he set himself to reorganise the national worship, which had fallen into neglect and almost into disuse. The first step was to bring the ark. And so he passed with a joyful company to *Kirjath*. But again swift death overtakes Uzzah with his irreverent hand. And David shrinks, in the consciousness of his impurity, and bestows the symbol of the awful Presence in the house of Obed-edom. As we have already noted, he was probably not a Philistine, as the name ‘Gittite’ at first sight suggests. There is an Obed-edom in the lists of David’s Levites, who was an inhabitant of another Gath, and himself of the tribe of Levi.

He was not afraid to receive the ark. There were no idols, no irreverent curiosity, no rash presumption in his house. He feared and served the God of the ark, and so the Presence, which had been a source of disaster to the unworthy, was a source of unbroken blessing to him and to his household.

I have been the more particular in this enumeration of the wanderings of the ark and the opposite effects which its presence produced according to the manner of its reception, because these effects are symbols of a great truth which runs all through human life, and is most especially manifested in the message and the mission of Jesus Christ.

Let us, then, just trace out two or three of the spheres in which we may see the application of this great principle, which makes life so solemn and so awful, which may make it so sad or so glad, so base or so noble.

I. First, then, note the twofold operation of all God’s outward dealings.

Everything that befalls us, every object with which we come in contact, all the variety of condition, all the variations of our experience, have one distinct and specific purpose.

They are all meant to tell upon character, to make us better in sundry ways, to bring us closer to God, and to fill us more full of Him. And that one effect may be produced by the most opposite incidents, just as in some great machine you may have two wheels turning in opposite ways, and yet contributing to one resulting motion; or, just as the summer and the winter, with all their antitheses, have a single result in the abundant harvest. One force attracts the planet to the sun, one force tends to drive it out into the fields of space; but the two, working together, make it circle in its orbit around its centre. And so, by sorrow and by joy, by light and by dark, by giving and withholding, by granting and refusing, by all the varieties of our circumstances, and by everything that lies around us, God works to prepare us for Himself and to polish His instruments, sometimes plunging the iron into 'baths of hissing tears,' and sometimes heating it 'hot with hopes and fears,' and sometimes 'battering' it 'with the shocks of doom,' but all for the one purpose —that it may be a polished shaft in His quiver.

And whilst, thus, the most opposite things may produce the same effect, the same thing will produce opposite effects according to the way in which we take it. There is nothing that can be relied upon to do a man only good; there is nothing about which we need fear that its mission is only to do evil. For all depends on the recipient, who can make everything to fulfil the purpose for which God has sent him everything.

Here are two men tried by the same poverty. It beats the one down, makes him squalid, querulous, faithless, irreligious, drives him to drink, crushes him; and the other man it steadies and quiets and hardens, and teaches him to look beyond the things seen and temporal to the exceeding riches at God's right hand.

Here are two men tried by wealth; the gold gets into the one man's veins and makes him yellow as with jaundice, and kills him, destroying all that is noble, generous, impulsive, quenching his early dreams and enthusiasms, closing his heart to sweet charity, puffing him up with a false sense of Importance, and laying upon him the dreadful responsibility of misused and selfishly employed possessions. And the other man, tried in the same fashion, out of his wealth makes for himself friends that welcome him into everlasting habitations, and lays up for himself treasures in heaven. The one man is damned and the other man is saved by their use of the same thing.

Here are two men subjected to the same sorrows; the one is absorbed by his selfish regard to his own misery, blinded to all the blessings that still remain, made negligent of tasks and oblivious of the plainest duty. And he goes about saying, 'Oh, if thou hadst been here!' or if, if something else had happened, then this would not have happened. And the other man, passing through the same circumstances, finds that, when his props are taken away, he flings himself on God's breast, and, when the world becomes dark and all the paths dim about him, he looks up to a heaven that fills fuller of meek and swiftly gathering stars as the night falls, and he says, 'It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth Him good.'

Here are two men tried by the same temptation; it leads the one man away captive 'with a dart through his liver'; the other man by God's grace overcomes it, and is the stronger and the sweeter and the gentler and the humbler because of the dreadful fight. And so you might go the whole round of diverse circumstances, and about each of them find the same double result. Nothing is sure to do a man good; nothing necessarily does him hurt. All depends upon the man himself, and the use he makes of what God in His mercy sends. Two plants may grow in the same soil, be fed by the same dews and benediction from the heavens, be shone upon by the same sunshine, and the one of them will elaborate from all, sweet juices and fragrance, and the other will elaborate a deadly poison. So, my brother, life is what you and I will to make it, and the events which befall us are for our rising or our falling according as we determine they shall be, and according as we use them.

Think, then, how solemn, how awful, how great a thing it is to stand here a free agent, able to determine my character and my condition, surrounded by all these circumstances and the subject of all these wise and manifold divine dealings, in each of which there lie dormant, to be evoked by me, tremendous possibilities of elevation even to the very presence of God, or of sinking into the depths of separation from Him. The ark of God, that overthrew Dagon and smote Uzzah, was nothing but a fountain of blessing in the household of Obed-edom.

II. Secondly, note the twofold operation of God's character and presence.

The ark was the symbol of a present God, and His presence is meant to be the life and joy of all creatures, and the revelation of Him is meant to be only for our good, giving strength, righteousness, and peace. But the same double possibility which I have been pointing out as inherent in all externals belongs here too, and a man can determine to which aspect of the many-sided infinitude of the divine nature he shall stand in relation. The glass in stained windows is so coloured as that parts of it cut off, and prevent from passing through, different rays of the pure white light. And men's moral natures, the inclination of their hearts, and the set of their wills and energies, cut off, if I may say so, parts of the infinite, white light of the many-sided divine character, and put them into relations only with some part and aspect of that great whole which we call God. The man that loves the world, the man that is living for self, still more the man that is embruted in the pig-sty of sensuality and vice, cannot see the God whom the pure heart, which loves Him and is purified by its faith, discerns at the centre of all things. But the lower man sees either some very far-off Awfulness, in which he hopes vaguely that there is a kind of good nature that will let him off; or, if he has been shaken out of that superficial creed, which is only a creed for men whose consciences have not been touched, then he can see only a God whose love darkens into retribution, and who is the Judge and the Avenger. And no man can say that such a conception is not part of the truth; but, alas! he on whom the form of such a God glares has



incapacitated himself, by his misuse of his powers and of God's world, from seeing the beauty of the love of the Father of us all, the righteous Father who in Christ loves every man.

And thus the thought of God, the consciousness of His Presence, may be like the ark which was its symbol, either dreadful and to be put away, or to be welcomed and blessing to be drawn from it. To many of us I am sure—though I do not know anything about many of you—that thought, 'Thou God seest me,' breeds feelings like the uneasy discomfort of a prisoner when he knows that somewhere in the wall there is a spy-hole at which at any moment a warder's eye may be. And to some of us, blessed be His name, that same thought, 'Thou art near me,' seems to bathe the heart in a sea of sweet rest, and to bring the assurance of a divine Companion that cheers all the solitude. And why is the difference? There are two people sitting in one pew; to the one man the thought of God is his ghastliest doubt, to the other it is his deepest joy. Wherefore? And which is it to me?

Then, again, this same duality of aspect attaches to the character and presence of God in another way. Because, according to the variety of men's characters, God is obliged to treat them as standing in different relations. He must manifest His judgment, His justice, His punitive justice. There is a solemn verse in one of the Psalms which I may quote in lieu of all words of my own of this matter. 'With the merciful Thou wilt show Thyself merciful, with the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure, with the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward.' The present God has to modify His dealings according to the characters of men.

And so, dear friends, for the present life, and, as I believe, for the next life in a far more emphatic and awful way, the same thing makes blessedness and misery, the same thing makes life and death. The sunshine will kill and wither the slimy plants that grow in the dark recesses of some dripping cave; and if you take a fish out of the water, the air clogs its gills and it dies. Bring a man, such as some of you are, into a close, constant contact with the consciousness of the divine righteousness and presence, and you want nothing else to make a hell. The ark of the Lord will flash out its lightnings and Uzzah will die. That great Infinite Being, before whom we stand, holds in His right hand blessings beyond count or price, even the gift of Himself, and in His left His lightnings and His arrows. On which hand are you standing?

III. Lastly, note the twofold operation of God's gospel.

His dealings, His character and presence, and, most markedly and eminently of all, the gospel that is treasured in Jesus Christ and proclaimed amongst us, have this twofold operation. God sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world. It was meant that His mission and message should only be for life, and that with ever-increasing abundance. But God cannot save men by magic, nor by indiscriminate bestowment of spiritual blessings. It is not in His power to force His salvation upon any one, and whether the Gospel shall turn out to be a man's salvation or his ruin depends on the man himself. The preaching of the gospel and your contact with it, if you have ever come into contact with it really and not by mere outward

hearing, leaves no man as it found him. My poor words—and God knows how poor I feel them to be—leave none of you as they find you; and that is what makes our meeting together so solemn and awful, and sometimes weighs one down as with a sense of insufficiency for these things.

That twofold operation is seen first in the permanent effects of the Gospel upon character. If it has been offered to me, and if I accept it, then blessings beyond all enumeration, and which none but they who have them fully know, follow in its wake. Received by simple faith in Jesus Christ, God's sacrifice for a world's sin, it brings to us the clear consciousness of pardon, the calm sense of communion, the joyful spirit of adoption, righteousness rooted in our hearts and to be manifested day by day in our lives; it brings all elevation and strengthening and ennobling for the whole nature, and is the one power that makes us really men as God would have us all to be.

Rejected or neglected or passed by apparently without our having done anything in regard to it, what are the issues? What does it do? Well, it does this for one thing, it turns unconscious worldliness into conscious worldliness. If the offer has been clearly before your minds, 'Christ or the world?' and you have said 'I take the world!' you know that you have made the choice, and the act will tell on your character.

Rejection strengthens all the evil motives for rejection, and adds to the insensibility of the man who has rejected. The ice on our pavements in the winter time, that melts on the surface in the day and freezes again at night, becomes dense and slippery beyond all other. And a heart, like that which beats in some of our bosoms, that has been melted and then has frozen again, is harder than ever it was before. Hammering that does not break solidifies and makes tougher the thing that is struck. There are no men so hard to get at as men and women, like multitudes of you, that have been hammered at by preaching ever since they were children, and have not yielded their hearts to God. The ark has done you hurt if it has not done you good.

I do not dwell upon the other solemn thought, of the harmful results of contact with a gospel which we do not accept, as exemplified in the increase of responsibility and the consequent increase of condemnation. I only quote Christ's words, 'The servant that knew his Lord's will, and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.'

My brother, Christ's gospel is never inert, one thing or other it does for every soul that it reaches. Either it softens or it hardens. Either it saves or it condemns. 'This Child is set for the rise or for the fall of many.' Jesus Christ may be for me and for you the Rock on which we build. If He is not, He is the Stone against which we stumble and break our limbs. Jesus Christ may be for you and for me the Pillar that gives light by night to those on the one side; He either is that, or He is the Pillar that sheds darkness and dismay on those on the other. Jesus Christ and His Gospel may be to each of us 'the savour of life unto life'; He either is that, or He is 'the savour of death unto death.' Oh! dear friends, if you have neglected,

turned away, delayed to receive Him or have forgotten impressions in the midst of the whirl of daily life, do not do so any longer. Take Him for yours, your Brother, Friend, Sacrifice, Inspirer, Lord, Aim, End, Reward, and very Heaven of Heaven. Take Him for your own by simple trusting; and say to Him, 'Arise! O Lord, into Thy rest, Thou and the Ark of Thy strength.' So He will come into your hearts and smile His gladness as He whispers: 'Here will I dwell for ever; this is My rest, for I have desired it.'

### **THE PROMISED KING AND TEMPLE-BUILDER**

‘And it came to pass that night, that the word of the Lord came unto Nathan, saying, 5. Go and tell My servant David, Thus saith the Lord, Shalt thou build Me an house for Me to dwell in! 6. Whereas I have not dwelt in any house since the time that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle. 7. In all the places wherein I have walked with all the children of Israel spake I a word with any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to feed My people Israel, saying, Why build ye not Me an house of cedar! 8. Now therefore so shalt thou say unto My servant David, Thus saith the Lord of hosts, I took thee from the shepcote, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people, over Israel: 9. And I was with thee whithersoever thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight, and have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great men that are in the earth. 10. Moreover I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime, 11. And as since the time that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel, and have caused thee to rest from all thine enemies. Also the Lord telleth thee that He will make thee an house. 12. And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish His kingdom. 13. He shall build an house for My name; and I will establish the throne of His kingdom for ever. 14. I will be his father, and He shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten Him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: 16. But My mercy shall not depart away from Him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. 16. And thine home and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.’—2 SAMUEL vii. 4-16.

The removal of the ark to Jerusalem was but the first step in a process which was intended to end in the erection of a permanent Temple. The time for the next step appeared to David to have come when he had no longer to fight for his throne. Rest from enemies should lead to larger work for God, else repose will be our worst enemy, and peace will degenerate into self-indulgent sloth. A devout heart will not be content with personal comfort and dwelling in a house of cedar, while the ark has but a tent for its abode. There should be a proportion between expenditure on self and on religious objects. How many professing Christians might go to school to David! Luxury at home and niggardliness in God’s work make an ugly pair, but, alas! a common one.

Nathan approved, as was natural. But he knew the difference between his own thoughts and ‘the word of the Lord’ that came to him, and, like a true man, he went in the morning and contradicted, by God’s authority, his own precipitate sanction of the king’s proposal. Clearly, divine communications were unmistakably distinguishable from the recipient’s own thoughts.

The divine message first negatives the intention to build a house. In 1 Chronicles a positive prohibition takes the place of the question in [verse 5](#), but that is only a difference of form, for the question implies a negative answer. From David's last words ([1 Chron. xxviii. 3](#)) we learn that a reason for the prohibition was 'because thou art a man of war, and hast shed blood.' His wars were necessary, and tended to establish the kingdom, but their existence showed that the time for building the Temple had not come, and there was a certain incongruity in a warrior king rearing a house for the God whose kingdom was in its essence peace.

The prohibition rests on a deep insight into the nature of Jehovah's reign, and draws a broad distinction between His worship and the surrounding paganism. But the reason given in the text is very remarkable. God did not desire a permanent Temple. If we may so say, He preferred the less solid Tabernacle, as corresponding better to the simplicity and spirituality of His worship. A gorgeous stone Temple might easily become the sepulchre, rather than the shrine, of true devotion. The movable tent answered to the temporary character of the 'dispensation.' The more fixed and elaborate the externals of worship, the more danger of the spirit being stifled by them. The Old Testament worship was necessarily ceremonial, but here is a caveat against the stiffening of ceremonial into stereotyped formalism.

The prohibition was accompanied by gracious and far-reaching promises, designed to assure David of God's approbation of his motive, and to open up to him the vision of the future and the wonders that should be. We need say little about the retrospective part of the message ([verses 8, 9 a](#)). God had been the agent in all David's past, had lifted him from the quiet following of his sheep, had given him rule, which was but a delegated authority. Israel was 'My people,' and therefore he was but an instrument in God's hand, and was not to govern by his own fancies or for his own advantage.

Every devout man's life is the realisation of a plan of God's, and we sin against ourselves as well as Him if we do not often let thankful thoughts retrace all the way by which the Lord our God has led us.

With [verse 9 b](#) the prophecy turns to the future. David personally is promised the continuance of God's help; then a permanent, peaceful possession of the land is promised to the nation, and finally the perpetuity of the kingdom in the Davidic line is promised. The prophecy as to the nation, like all such prophecies, is contingent on national obedience. The future of the kingdom will stand in blessed contrast with the wild times of the Judges, if—and only if—Israel behaves as 'My people' should.

But the main point of the prophecy is the promise to David's 'seed.' In form it attaches itself very significantly to David's intention to build a house for Jehovah. That would invert the true order, for Jehovah was about to build a house, that is, a permanent posterity, for David. God must first give before man can requite. All our relations to Him begin with His free mercy to us. And our building for Him should ever be the result of His building for us,

and will, in some humble way, resemble the divine beneficence by which it has been quickened into action. The very foundation principles of Christian service are expressed here, in guise fitted to the then epoch of revelation.

But the relation of the two things, God's building and Solomon's, is not exhausted by such considerations. The consolidation of the monarchy in David's family was an essential preliminary to the rearing of the Temple. That work needed tranquil times, abundant resources, leisure, and assured dominion. So the prophet goes on to promise that David shall be succeeded by his 'seed,' who shall build the Temple.

Further, three great promises are given in reference to David's seed,— a perpetual kingdom, a personal relation of sonship to Jehovah, and paternal chastisement, if necessary, but no such departure of Jehovah's mercy as had darkened the close of Saul's sad reign. Then, finally, the assurance is reiterated of the perpetuity of David's house and throne. The remarkable expression in [verse 16](#), 'established before thee' (that is, David), if it is the true reading, suggests a hint of the life after death, and conceives of the long-dead king as in some manner cognisant of the fortunes of his descendants. But the Septuagint reads 'before Me,' and that reading is confirmed by [verses 26 and 29](#), and by [Psalm lxxxix. 36 b](#).

Now it is clear that these promises were in part directed to, and fulfilled in, Solomon. But it is as clear that the great promise of an eternal dominion, which is emphatically repeated thrice, goes far beyond him. We are obliged to recognise a second meaning in the prophecy, in accordance with Old Testament usage, which often means by 'seed' a line of successive generations of descendants. But no succession of mortal men can reach to eternal duration.

Apart from the fact that the kingdom, in the form in which David's descendants ruled over it, has long since crumbled away, the large words of the promise must be regarded as inflated and exaggerated, if by 'for ever' is only meant 'for long generations.' A 'seed,' or line of perishable men, can only last for ever if it closes in a Person who is not subject to the law of mortality. Unless we can with our hearts rejoicingly confess, 'Thou art the King of glory, O Christ! Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,' we do not pierce to the full understanding of Nathan's prophecy.

All the glorious prerogatives shadowed in it were but partially fulfilled in Israel's monarchs. Their failures and their successes, their sins and their virtues, equally declared them to be but shadowy forerunners of Him in whom all that they at the best imperfectly aimed at and possessed is completely and for ever fulfilled. They were prophetic persons by their office, and pointed on to Him.

He has built the true Temple, in that His body is the seat of sacrifice and of revelation, and the meeting-place of God and man, and inasmuch as through Him we are built up into a spiritual house for an habitation of God. In Him is fulfilled the great prophecy of 'My Servant the Branch,' who 'shall build the Temple of the Lord' and 'be a Priest upon His throne.' In Him, too, is fulfilled in highest truth the filial relationship. The Israelitish kings

were by office sons of God. He is *the* Son in ineffable derivation and eternal unity of life with the Father, and their communion is in closest oneness of will and mutual interchange of love. In that filial relation lies the assurance of Christ's everlasting kingdom, for 'the Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand.'

The prophecy is echoed in many places of Scripture, and is ever taken to refer to a single person. The angel of the annunciation moulded his salutation to the meek Virgin on it, when he declared that her Son 'shall be called the Son of the Most High: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David: and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.'

### DAVID'S GRATITUDE

'Then went king David in, and sat before the Lord, and he said, Who am I, O Lord God? and what is my house, that Thou hast brought me hitherto? 19. And this was yet a small thing in Thy sight, O Lord God; but Thou hast spoken also of Thy servant's house for a great while to come. And is this the manner of man, O Lord God? 20. And what can David say more unto Thee? for Thou, Lord God, knowest Thy servant. 21. For Thy word's sake, and according to Thine own heart, hast Thou done all these great things, to make Thy servant know them. 22. Wherefore Thou art great, O Lord God: for there is none like Thee, neither is there any God besides Thee, according to all that we have heard with our ears. 23. And what one nation in the earth is like Thy people, even like Israel, whom God went to redeem for a people to Himself, and to make Him a name, and to do for you great things and terrible, for Thy land, before Thy people, which Thou redeemedst to Thee from Egypt, from the nations and their gods? 24. For Thou hast confirmed to Thyself Thy people Israel to be a people unto Thee for ever: and Thou, Lord, art become their God. 25. And now, O Lord God, the word that Thou hast spoken concerning Thy servant, and concerning his house, establish it for ever, and do as Thou hast said. 26. And let Thy name be magnified for ever, saying, The Lord of hosts is the God over Israel; and let the house of Thy servant David be established before Thee. 27. For Thou, O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, hast revealed to Thy servant, saying, I will build thee an house: therefore hath Thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto Thee. 28. And now, O Lord God, Thou art that God, and Thy words be true, and Thou hast promised this goodness unto Thy servant: 29. Therefore now let it please Thee to bless the house of Thy servant, that it may continue for ever before Thee: for Thou, O Lord God, hast spoken it: and with Thy blessing let the house of Thy servant be blessed for ever.'—[2 SAMUEL vii. 18-29](#).

God's promise by Nathan of the perpetuity of the kingdom in David's house made an era in the progress of revelation. A new element was thereby added to devout hope, and a new object presented to faith. The prophecy of the Messiah entered upon a new stage, bearing a relation, as its successive stages always did, to the history which supplies a framework for it. Now, for the first time, He can be set forth as the king of Israel; now the width of the promise, which at first embraced the seed of the woman, and then was limited to the seed of Abraham, and thereafter to the tribe of Judah, is still further limited to the house of David. The beam is narrowed as it is focussed into greater brilliance, and the personal Messiah begins to be faintly discerned in words which are to have a partial, preparatory fulfilment, in itself prophetic, in the collective Davidic monarchs whose office is itself a prophecy. This passage is the wonderful burst of praise which sprang from David's heart in answer to Nathan's words. In many of the Psalms later than this prophecy we find clear traces of that expectation of the personal Messiah, which gradually shaped itself, under divine inspiration, in David, as contained in Nathan's message But this thanksgiving prayer, which



was the immediate reflection of the astounding new message, has not yet penetrated its depth nor discovered its rich contents, but sees in it only the promise of the continuance of kingship in his descendants. We do not learn the fulness of God's gracious promises on first hearing them. Life and experience and the teaching of His Spirit are needed to enable us to count our treasure, and we are richer than we know.

This prayer is a prose psalm outside the Psalter. It consists of two parts,—a burst of astonished thanksgiving and a stream of earnest petition, grasping the divine promise and turning it into a prayer.

I. Note the burst of thanksgiving ([vs. 18-24](#)). The ark dwelt 'in curtains,' and into the temporary sanctuary went the king with his full heart. The somewhat peculiar attitude of sitting, while he poured it out to God, has offended some punctilious commentators, who will have it that we should translate 'remained,' and not 'sat'; but there is no need for the change. The decencies of public worship may require a posture which expresses devotion; but individual communion is free from such externals, and absorbed contemplation naturally disposes of the body so as least to hinder the spirit. The tone of almost bewildered surprise at the greatness of the gift is strong all through the prayer. The man's breath is almost taken away, and his words are sometimes broken, and throughout palpitating with emotion. Yet there is a plain progress of feeling and thought in them, and they may serve as a pattern of thanksgiving. Note the abrupt beginning, as if pent-up feeling forced its way, regardless of forms of devotion. The first emotion excited by God's great goodness is the sense of unworthiness. 'I do not deserve it,' is the instinctive answer of the heart to any lavish human kindness, and how much more to God's! 'I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies,' springs to the devout lips most swiftly, when gazing on His miracles of bestowing love. He must know little of himself, and less of God, who is not most surely melted down to contrition, which has no bitterness or pain in it, by the coals of loving fire heaped by God on his head.

The consciousness of unworthiness passes, in [verse 19](#), to adoring contemplation of God's astounding mercy, and especially of the new element in Nathan's prophecy,—the perpetuity of the Davidic sovereignty in the dim, far-off future. Thankfulness delights to praise the Giver for the greatness of His gift. Faith strengthens its hold of its blessings by telling them over, as a miser does his treasure. To recount them to God is the way to possess them more fully.

The difficult close of the verse cannot be discussed here. 'The law for man' is nearer the literal meaning of the words than 'the manner of men' (Rev. Ver.); and, unfortunately, man's manner is not the same as man's law. But the usual explanations are unsatisfactory. We would hazard the suggestion that 'this' means that which God has spoken 'of thy servant's house,' and that to call it 'the law for man' is equivalent to an expression of absolute confidence in the authority, universality, and certain fulfilment of the promise. The speech of God

is ever the law for man, and this new utterance stands on a level with the older law, and shall rule all mankind. The king's faith not only gazes on the great words of promise, but sees them triumphant on earth.

Then in [verse 20](#) comes another bend of the stream of praise. The more full the heart, the more is it conscious of the weakness of all words. The deepest praise, like the truest love, speaks best in silence. It is blessed when, in earthly relations, we can trust our dear ones' knowledge of us to interpret our poor words. It is more blessed when, in our speech to God, we can feel that our love and faith are deeper than our word, and that He does not judge them by it, but it by them.

'Silence is His least injurious praise.'

Here, too, we may note the two instances, in this verse, of what runs through the whole prayer,—David's avoidance of using 'I.' Except in the lowly 'What am I?' at the beginning, it never occurs; but he calls himself 'David' twice and 'Thy servant' ten times,—a striking, because unconscious, proof of his lowly sense of unworthiness.

But he can say more; and what he does further say goes yet deeper than his former words. The personal aspect of the promise retreats into the background, and the ground of all God's mercy in His 'own heart' fills the thoughts. Some previous promise, perhaps that through Samuel, is referred to; but the great truth that God is His own motive, and that His love is not drawn forth by our deserts, but wells up by its own energy, like a perennial fountain, is the main thought of the verse. God is self-moved to bless, and He blesses that we may know Him through His gifts. The one thought is the central truth, level to our apprehension, concerning His nature; the other is the key to the meaning of all His workings. All comes to pass because He loves with a self-originated love, and in order that we may know the motive and principle of His acts. We can get no farther into the secret of God than that. We need nothing more for peaceful acceptance of His providences for ourselves and our brethren. All is from love; all is for the manifestation of love. He who has learned these truths sits at the centre and lives in light.

[Verse 22](#) strikes a new note. The effect of God's dealing with David is to magnify His name, to teach His incomparable greatness, and to confirm by experience ancient words which celebrate it. The thankful heart rejoices in hearsay being changed into personal knowledge. 'As we have heard, so have we seen.' Old truths flash up into new meaning, and only he who tastes and sees that God is good to him to-day really enters into the sweetness of His recorded past goodness.

Note the widening of David's horizon in [verses 23 and 24](#) to embrace all Israel. His blessings are theirs. He feels his own relation to them as the culmination of the long series of past deliverances, and at the same time loses self in joy over Israel's confirmation as God's

people by his kingship. True thankfulness regards personal blessings in their bearing on others, and shrinks from selfish use of them. Note, too, the parallel, if we may call it so, between Israel and Israel's God, in that 'there is none like Thee,' and by reason of its choice by this incomparable Jehovah, no nation on earth is like 'Thy people, even like Israel.'

Thus steadily does this model of thanksgiving climb up from a sense of unworthiness, through adoration and gazing on its treasures, to God's unmotivated love as His impulse, and men's knowledge of that love as His aim, and pauses at last, rapt and hushed, before the solitary loftiness of the incomparable God, and the mystery of the love, which has intertwined the personal blessings which it celebrates, with its great designs for the welfare of the people, whose unique position corresponds to the unapproachable elevation of its God.

II. [Verses 25 to 29](#) are prayer built on promise and winged by thankfulness. The whole of these verses are but the expansion of 'do as Thou hast said.' But they are not vain repetitions. Rather they are the outpourings of wondering thankfulness and faith, that cannot turn away from dwelling on the miracle of mercy revealed to it unworthy. God delights in the sweet monotony and persistence of such reiterated prayers, each of which represents a fresh throb of desire and a renewed bliss in thinking of His goodness. Observe the frequency and variety of the divine names in these verses,—in each, one, at least: Jehovah God ([v. 25](#)); Jehovah of hosts ([v. 26](#)); Jehovah of hosts, God of Israel ([v. 27](#)); Lord Jehovah ([vs. 28, 29](#)). Strong love delights to speak the beloved name. Each fresh utterance of it is a fresh appeal to His revealed nature, and betokens another wave of blessedness passing over David's spirit as he thinks of God. Observe, also, the other repetition of 'Thy servant,' which occurs in every verse, and twice in two of them. The king is never tired of realising his absolute subjection, and feels that it is dignity, and a blessed bond with God, that he should be His servant. The true purpose of honour and office bestowed by God is the service of God, and the name of 'servant' is a plea with Him which He cannot but regard. Observe, too, how echoes of the promise ring all through these verses, especially the phrases 'establish the house' and 'for ever.' They show how profoundly David had been moved, and how he is labouring, as it were, to make himself familiar with the astonishing vista that has begun to open before his believing eyes. Well is it for us if we, in like manner, seek to fix our thoughts on the yet grander 'for ever' disclosed to us, and if it colours all our look ahead, and makes the refrain of all our hopes and prayers.

But the main lesson of the prayer is that God's promise should ever be the basis and measure of prayer. The mould into which our petitions should run is, 'Do as Thou hast said.' Because God's promise had come to David, 'therefore hath Thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto Thee.' There is no presumption in taking God at His word. True prayer catches up the promises that have fallen from heaven, and sends them back again, as feathers to the arrows of its petitions. Nor does the promise make the prayer needless. We know that 'if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us'; and we

know that we shall not receive the promised blessings, which are according to His will, unless we do ask. Let us seek to stretch our desires to the width of God's promises, and to confine our wishes within their bounds.

### DAVID AND JONATHAN'S SON

'And David said, is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may shew him kindness for Jonathan's sake? 2. And there was of the house of Saul a servant whose name was Ziba. And when they had called him unto David, the king said unto him, Art thou Ziba? And he said, Thy servant is he. 3. And the king said, Is there not yet any of the house of Saul, that I may shew the kindness of God unto him? And Ziba said unto the king, Jonathan hath yet a son, which is lame on his feet. 4. And the king said unto him, Where is he? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he is in the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, in Lo-debar. 5. Then king David sent, and fetched him out of the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, from Lo-debar., 6. Now when Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, was come unto David, he fell on his face, and did reverence. And David said, Mephibosheth. And he answered, Behold thy servant! 7. And David said unto him. Fear not; for I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father: and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually. 8. And he bowed himself, and said, What is thy servant, that thou shouldst look upon such a dead dog as I am? 9. Then the king called to Ziba, Saul's servant, and said unto him, I have given unto thy master's son all that pertained to Saul and to all his house. 10. Thou therefore, and thy sons, and thy servants, shall till the land for him, and thou shalt bring in the fruits, that thy master's son may have food to eat: but Mephibosheth thy master's son shall eat bread alway at my table. Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. 11. Then said Ziba unto the king, According to all that my lord the king hath commanded his servant, so shall thy servant do. As for Mephibosheth, said the king, he shall eat at my table, as one of the king's sons. 12. And Mephibosheth had a young son, whose name was Micha: and all that dwelt in the house of Ziba were servants unto Mephibosheth. 13. So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem: for he did eat continually at the king's table; and was lame on both his feet.'—[2 SAMUEL ix. 1-13](#).

This charming idyl of faithful love to a dead friend and generous kindness comes in amid stories of battle like a green oasis in a wilderness of wild rocks and sand. The natural sweetness and chivalry of David's disposition, which fascinated all who had to do with him, comes beautifully out in it, and it may well stand as an object lesson of the great Christian duty of practical mercifulness.

I. So regarded, the narrative brings out first the motives of true kindness. Saul and three of his four sons had fallen on the fatal field of Gilboa; the fourth, the weak Ishbosheth, had been murdered after his abortive attempt at setting up a rival kingdom had come to nothing. There were only left Saul's daughters and some sons by a concubine. So low had the proud house sunk, while David was consolidating his kingdom, and gaining victory wherever he went.

But neither his own prosperity, nor the absence of any trace of Saul's legitimate male descendants, made him forget his ancient oath to Jonathan. Years had not weakened his

love, his sufferings at Saul's hands had not embittered it. His elevation had not lifted him too high to see the old days of lowliness, and the dear memory of the self-forgetting friend whose love had once been an honour to the shepherd lad. Jonathan's name had been written on his heart when it was impressionable, and the lettering was as if 'graven on the rock for ever.' A heart so faithful to its old love needed no prompting either from men or circumstances. Hence the inquiry after 'any that is left of the house of Saul' was occasioned by nothing external, but came welling up from the depth of the king's own soul.

That is the highest type of kindness which is spontaneous and self-motived. It is well to be easily moved to beneficence either by the sight of need or by the appeals of others, but it is best to kindle our own fire, and be our own impulse to gracious thoughts and acts. We may humbly say that human mercy then shows likest God's, when, in such imitation as is possible, it springs in us, as His does in Him, from the depths of our own being. He loves and is kind because He is God. He is His own motive and law. So, in our measure, should we aim at becoming.

But David's remarkable language in his questions to Ziba goes still deeper in unfolding his motives. For he speaks of showing 'the kindness of God' to any remaining of Saul's house. Now that expression is no mere synonym for kindness exceeding great, but it unfolds what was at once David's deepest motive and his bright ideal. No doubt, it may include a reminiscence of the sacred obligation of the oath to Jonathan, but it hallows David's purposed 'mercy' as the echo of God's to him, and so anticipates the Christian teaching, 'Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful.' We must receive mercy from Him before our hearts are softened, so as to give it to others, just as the wire must be charged from the electric source before it can communicate the tingle and the light.

The best basis for the beneficent service of man is experience of the mercy of God. Philanthropy has no roots unless it is planted in religion. That is a lesson which this age needs. And the other side of the thought is as true and needful; namely, that our 'religion' is not 'pure and undefiled' unless it manifests itself in the service of man. How serene and lofty, then, the ideal! How impossible ever to be too forgiving or too beneficent! 'As your heavenly Father is,'—that is our pattern. We have not shown our brother all the kindness which we owe him unless we have shown him 'the kindness of God.'

II. The progress of the story brings out next the characteristics of David's kindness, and these may be patterns for us. Ziba does not seem to be very communicative, and appears a rather unwilling witness, who needs to have the truth extracted bit by bit. He evidently had nothing to do with Mephibosheth, and was quite content that he should be left obscurely stowed away across Jordan in the house of the rich Machir (*2 Sam. xvii. 27-29*). Lo-debar was near Mahanaim, on the eastern side of the river, where Ishbosheth's short-lived kingdom had been planted, and probably the population there still clung to Saul's solitary representative. There he lived so privately that none of David's people knew whether he was alive or

dead. Perhaps the savage practice of Eastern monarchs, who are wont to get rid of rivals by killing them, led the cripple son of Jonathan to 'lie low,' and Ziba's reticence may have been loyalty to him. It is noteworthy that Ziba is not said to have been sent to bring him, though that would have been natural.

At any rate, Mephibosheth came, apparently dreading whether his summons to court was not his death-warrant. But he is quickly reassured. David again recalls the dear memory of Jonathan, which was, no doubt, stirred to deeper tenderness by the sight of his helpless son; but he swiftly passes to practical arrangements, full of common-sense and grasp of the case. The restoration of Saul's landed estate implies that it was in David's power. It had probably been 'forfeited to the crown,' as we in England say, or perhaps had been 'squatted on' by people who had no right to it. David, at any rate, will see that it reverts to its owner.

But what is a lame man to do with it? and will it be wise to let a representative of the former dynasty loose in the territory of Benjamin, where Saul's memory was still cherished? Apparently, David's disposition of affairs was prompted partly by consideration for Mephibosheth, partly by affection for Jonathan, and partly by policy. So Ziba, who had not been present, is sent for, and installed as overseer of the estate, to work it for his new master's benefit, while the owner is to remain at Jerusalem in David's establishment. It was prudent to keep Mephibosheth at hand. The best way to weaken a pretender's claims was to make a pensioner of him, and the best way to hinder his doing mischief was to keep him in sight.

But we need not suppose that this was David's only motive. He gratified his heart by retaining the poor young man beside himself, and, no doubt, sought to win his confidence and love. The recipient of his kindness receives it in characteristic Eastern fashion, with exaggerated words of self-depreciation, which sound almost too humble to be quite sincere. A little gratitude is better than whining professions of un worthiness.

And how did Ziba like his task? The singular remark that he had 'fifteen sons and twenty servants' perhaps suggests that he was a person of some importance; and the subsequent one that 'all in his house were servants to Mephibosheth' may imply that neither they nor he quite liked their being handed over thus cavalierly.

But, however that may be, we may note that common-sense and practical sagacity should guide our mercifulness. Kindly impulses are good, but they need cool heads to direct them, or they do more harm than good. It is useless to set lame men to work an estate, even if they get a gift of it. And it is wise not to put untried ones in positions where they may plot against their benefactor. Mercifulness does not mean rash trust in its objects. They will often have to be watched very closely to keep them from going wrong. How many most charitable impulses have been so unwisely worked out that they have injured their objects and disappointed their subjects! We may note, too, in David's kindness, that it was prompt to make sacrifice, if, as is probable, he had become owner of the estate. The pattern of all mercy, who

is God, has not loved us with a love which cost Him nothing. Sacrifice is the life-blood of service.

III. The subsequent history of Mephibosheth and Ziba is somewhat enigmatical. Usually the former is supposed to have been slandered by the latter, and to have been truly attached to David. But it is at least questionable whether Ziba was such a villain, and Mephibosheth such an injured innocent, as is supposed. This, at least, is plain, that Ziba demonstrated attachment to David at the time when self-love would have kept him silent. It took some courage to come with gifts to a discrowned king (2 Sam. xvi. 1-4); and his allegation about his master has at least this support, that the latter did not come with the rest of David's court to share his fortunes, and that the dream that he might fish to advantage in troubled waters is extremely likely to have occurred to him. Nor does it appear clear that, if Ziba's motive was to get hold of the estate, his adherence to David would have seemed, at that moment, the best way of effecting it.

If we look at the sequel (xix. 24-30) Mephibosheth's excuse for not joining David seems almost as lame as himself. He says that Ziba 'deceived him,' and did not bring him the ass for riding on, and therefore he could not come. Was there only one ass available in Jerusalem? and, when all David's *entourage* were streaming out to Olivet after him, could not he easily have got there too if he had wished? His demonstration of mourning looks very like a blind, and his language to David has a disagreeable ring of untruthfulness, in its extreme professions of humility and loyalty. 'Me thinks the *cripple* doth protest too much. David evidently did not feel sure about him, and stopped his voluble utterances somewhat brusquely: 'Why speakest thou any more of thy matters?' That is as much as to say, 'Hold your tongue.' And the final disposition of the property, while it gives Mephibosheth the benefit of the doubt, yet looks as if there was a considerable doubt in the king's mind.

We may take up the same somewhat doubting position. If he requited David's kindness thus unworthily, is it not the too common experience that one way of making enemies is to load with benefits? But no cynical wisdom of that sort should interfere with our showing mercy; and if we are to take 'the kindness of God' for our pattern, we must let our sunshine and rain fall, as His do, on 'the unthankful and the evil.'



### **'MORE THAN CONQUERORS THROUGH HIM'**

'And the children of Ammon came out, and put the battle in array at the entering in of the gate: and the Syrians of Zoba, and of Rehob, and Ish-tob, and Maacah, were by themselves in the field. 9. When Joab saw that the front of the battle was against him before and behind, he chose of all the choice men of Israel, and put them in array against the Syrians: 10. And the rest of the people he delivered into the hand of Abishai his brother, that he might put them in array against the children of Ammon. 11. And he said, if the Syrians be too strong for me, then thou shalt help me: but if the children of Ammon be too strong for thee, then I will come and help thee. 12. Be of good courage, and let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God: and the Lord do that which seemeth Him good. 13. And Joab drew nigh, and the people that were with him, unto the battle against the Syrians: and they fled before him. 14. And when the children of Ammon saw that the Syrians were fled, then fled they also before Abishai, and entered into the city. So Joab returned from the children of Ammon, and came to Jerusalem. 15. And when the Syrians saw that they were smitten before Israel, they gathered themselves together. 16. And Hadarezer sent, and brought out the Syrians that were beyond the river: and they came to Helam: and Shobach the captain of the host of Hadarezer went before them. 17. And when it was told David, he gathered all Israel together, and passed over Jordan, and came to Helam. And the Syrians set themselves in array against David, and fought with him. 18. And the Syrians fled before Israel; and David slew the men of seven hundred chariots of the Syrians, and forty thousand horsemen, and smote Shobach the captain of their host, who died there. 19. And when all the kings that were servants to Hadarezer saw that they were smitten before Israel, they made peace with Israel, and served them. So the Syrians feared to help the children of Ammon any more.'—[2 SAMUEL x. 8-19](#).

David's growing power would naturally be regarded by neighbouring states as a menace. Success provokes envy, and in this selfish world strength usually encroaches on weakness, and weakness dreads strength. So it was quite according to the way of the world that David's friendly embassy to the king of Ammon should be suspected of covering hostile intentions. Those who have no kindness in their own hearts are slow to believe in kindness in others. 'What does he want to get by it?' is the question put by cynical 'shrewd men,' when they see a good man doing a gracious, self-forgetting act.

But the Ammonite courtiers need not have rejected David's overtures so insolently as by shaving half his ambassadors' beards and docking their robes. The insult meant war to the knife. Probably it was deliberately intended as a declaration of hostilities, as it was immediately followed by the preparation of a formidable coalition against Israel. Possibly, indeed, the coalition preceded and occasioned the rejection of David's conciliatory message. But, in any case, the Ammonite king summoned his Syrian allies from a number of small states of which we barely know the names, the chief of which was Zobah.

That state had apparently started into prominence under its king Hadar-ezer, as he is called in this chapter, which is obviously a clerical error for Hadad-ezer, as in [2 Samuel viii. 3](#), etc. The name Hadad occurs again in Ben-hadad, and belonged to a Syrian god; so that the king of Zobah's name, meaning 'Hadad [is] help,' may be taken as the banner flaunted in the face of the army of Israel, and as making the war a struggle of the false against the true God.

The war with the same enemies narrated in [2 Samuel viii. 3-13](#) is now generally supposed to be the same as that recorded in the latter part of this passage. It certainly seems more probable that there has been some dislocation of the text, than that so crushing a defeat as that retold in chapter viii. should have been followed by a revival of the same coalition within a short time. If, however, there was such a revival, it may remind us of the conditions of all warfare for God and goodness, either in our own lives or in the world. Sins and vicious institutions, once defeated, have a terrible power of swift recovery. The thorns cut down sprout fast again. Let no man say, 'I have extirpated that sin from my nature,' for, if he does, it will surprise him when he is lulled in false security. Hadad-ezer is not so easily got rid of. He does not know when he is beaten.

David took the bull by the horns, and did not wait to be attacked. It was good policy to carry the war into the enemies' country, as it generally is. God's soldiers have to be aggressive, and there is no better way of losing what they have won than by being contented with it. We must advance if we are not to retrograde. From I Chronicles we learn that the Ammonites had begun the campaign by besieging Medeba, a trans-Jordanic Israelitish city. The answer of Joab was to lay siege to Rabbath, the capital of Ammon, an almost impregnable fastness, perched on a cliff, and surrounded on all sides but one by steep ravines.

Apparently his bold strategy led to the abandonment of the attack on Medeba, and to the hurried march of its besiegers to relieve Rabbath. Probably the Syrian allies had been before Medeba, and suddenly appeared in Joab's rear. Their advance led the besieged to attempt a sortie, so that Joab was between two fires. It was a difficult position. Whichever foe he attacked, his retreat was cut off, and another enemy was ready to hurl itself on his rear. There was no time for manoeuvring, and nothing for it but to face both assailants. So, without hesitation he made his dispositions. The new-comers, the Syrians, were evidently the more formidable, and Joab picked the best men to deal with them under his own command, while his brother Abishai was to give account of the Ammonites, who were pouring out of Rabbath. There is sometimes advantage in being 'Mr. Facing-both-ways.' We are often surrounded by allied evils or sins; for all our vices are kindred, and help each other, and all public or social iniquities are in league against the army of righteousness. We have to be many-sided in our attacks on what is wrong, as well as in our development of what is right.

Danger woke the best in Joab, Fierce and truculent as he often was, he had a hero's mettle in him, and in that dark hour he flamed like a pillar of light. His ringing words to his

brother as they parted, not knowing if they would ever meet again, are like a clarion call. They extract encouragement out of the separation of forces, which might have depressed, and cheerily pledge the two divisions to mutual help. What was to happen, Joab, if the Syrians were too strong for thee, and the Ammonites for Abishai? That very possible contingency is not contemplated in his words. Rash confidence is unwise, but God's soldiers have a right to go into battle not anticipating utter defeat. Such expectation is apt to fulfil itself, and, on the other hand, to believe that we shall conquer goes a long way towards making us conquerors.

Does not Joab's pledge of mutual help carry in it a lesson applicable to all the divisions of God's great army? In the presence of the coalition of evil, is not the separation of the friends of good, madness? When bad men unite, should not good men hold together? The defeat or victory of one is the defeat or victory of all. We serve under the same banner, and, instead of shutting up our sympathies within the narrow limits of our own regiment, and even having a certain satisfaction at the difficulties into which another has got, we should feel that, if 'one member suffer, all the members suffer with it,' and should be ready to help all our fellow-soldiers who need help. Self-preservation as well as comradeship, and, above all, loyalty to Him for whom we fight, should lead to that; for, if Abishai is crushed, Joab will be in sorer peril.

His other word is equally pregnant. 'Be of good courage' is an exhortation always in season for Christ's soldiers, for, whatever are their foes, 'He that is with them is more than they that are with' their enemies. One man with Christ to back him may always be sure of victory. Calculations of probabilities and of resources may often yield occasion for despondency if we calculate only what appears to sense, but if we bring Christ into the calculation we shall be of good cheer. 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?'

We may note, too, the stimulating motive drawn from the thought of what Israel's army fought for,—'Our people, and the cities of our God.' Patriotism and devotion coalesced, and, like two contiguous flames in some duplex lamp, each made the other burn the brighter. So we may feel that we have the highest good of 'our people,' our brethren, in view, and that, in helping them and warring against evil, we are fighting for what belongs to God.

High courage, the effort to do their very best, and not to spare blood or life in the fight, blended nobly in Joab and his brother with recognition of God's supreme determination of the event. Nothing can stand before men who live and fight in such a temper as that. The early conquests of Mohammedanism were secured by just such a blending of courage and submission. These were vulgar and poor, compared with the victories that would attend a Church which was animated by these principles in the higher form in which Christianity presents them.

The account of the victory is remarkable. It is surely not by accident that no word is said about fighting. Note that it was as Joab 'drew nigh unto the battle' that the Syrians fled

as if in sudden panic, and infected the Ammonites with their terror. We hear nothing of men slain, or of any actual crossing of swords. Contrast [verse 18](#), which tells of a real fight. It is, perhaps, not pressing omissions too far to suggest that the narrative favours the supposition of a bloodless victory. The dangers that often appal Christ's servants have a way of often disappearing when they are marched boldly up to. Like ghosts, they vanish when accosted.

So ended one campaign. But Hadad-ezer, the soul of the coalition, was not crushed, and the latter part of the passage tells of his renewed attempt. Partial defeat stirs up our foes to stronger struggles. The league was extended to include Syrian states farther east, and a still more formidable expedition was fitted out to attack this dangerous upstart king of Israel, who was casting his shadow so far. Such is always the case. We are never in more danger of fresh assailants than when we have won some victory over evil in ourselves or around us. David repeated his former tactics. Not waiting to be attacked, and to have the soil of Israel profaned and wasted by enemies, he crossed Jordan to meet the would-be invader, and, when he met him, struck hard, and crushed him and his host, slew the commander, and dispersed the thunder-cloud. The coalition broke down. Hadad-ezer's tributaries were glad to shake off his yoke and transfer their allegiance to David.

'Nothing succeeds like success.' The alliances between worldly men banded against God's soldiers are held together by self-interest, and, when that can be best secured by deserting a man when he is down, away go all the allies, tumbling over each other in their haste to be the first to desert and bring feigned submission to the conqueror. The jackals leave the sick lion. The Syrians had had enough of helping Ammon, and Rabbath might fall without their lifting a finger. So hollow are the world's coalitions against God and His anointed!

### THOU ART THE MAN

‘And David said to Nathan, As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die; because he did this thing, and because he had no pity. And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.’—2 SAMUEL xii. 5-7.

Nathan’s apologue, so tenderly beautiful, takes the poet-king on the most susceptible side of his character. All his history shows him as a man of wonderfully sweet, chivalrous, generous, swiftly compassionate nature. And so, when he hears the story of a mean, heartless selfishness, all that is best in him kindles into a generous indignation, and flames out into instinctive condemnation. ‘The man that did this thing shall die because he had no pity.’

And then, on to that hot fervour of righteous wrath, comes this dash of cold water, ‘And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.’ Like some keen spear-point, sharpened almost to invisibility, this short sentence (two words in the original) driven by a strong hand, goes right through the armour to the very heart. What a collapse there would be in the king when the pointed forefinger of the prophet emphasised and drove home the application!

I. This dramatic scene before us may be taken as suggesting first that we are all strangely blind to our own faults.

If a man’s own sin is held up before him a little disguised, he says, ‘How ugly it is!’ And if only for a moment he can be persuaded that it is not his own conduct but some other sinner’s that he is judging, the instinctive condemnation comes. We have two sets of names for vices: one set which rather mitigates and excuses them, and another set which puts them in their real hideousness. We keep the palliative set for home consumption, and liberally distribute the plain-spoken, ugly set amongst the vices and faults of our friends. The same thing which I call in myself prudence I call in you meanness. The same thing which you call in yourselves generous living, you call in your friend filthy sensualism. That which, to the doer of it, is only righteous indignation, to the onlooker is passionate anger. That which, in the practiser of it, is no more than a due regard for the interests of his own family and himself in the future, is, to the envious lookers-on, shabbiness and meanness in money matters. That which, to the liar, is only prudent diplomatic reticence, to the listener is falsehood. That which, in the man that judges his own conduct, is but ‘a choleric word,’ is, in his friend, when he judges him, ‘flat blasphemy.’

And so we go all round the circle, and condemn our own vices, when we see them in other people. So the king who had never thought, when he stole away Uriah’s one ewe lamb, and did him to death by traitorous commands, setting him in the front of the battle, that he was wanting in compassion, blazes up at once, and righteously sentences the other ‘man’ to death, ‘because he had no pity.’ He had never thought of himself or of his crime as cruel, as mean, as selfish, as heartless. But when he sees a partially disguised picture of it he knows it for the devil’s child that it is.

‘O wad some Power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,’

and so it would, to see ourselves as we see others. We judge our brother and ourselves by two different standards.

And that is only one phase of a more general principle, one case that comes under a yet wider law, viz. that we are all blind, strangely blind, to our own faults. Why that is so I do not need to spend time in inquiring, except for a distinctly practical purpose. Let me just remind you how a strong wish for a thing that seems desirable always tends to confuse to a man the plain distinction between right and wrong; and how passions once excited, or the animal lusts and desires once kindled in a man, go straight to their object without the smallest regard to whether that object is to be reached by the breach of all laws, human and divine, or not. Excite any passion, and the passion is but a blind propensity towards certain good, and takes no question or consideration of whether right or wrong is involved at all.

And further, habit familiarises with evil and diminishes our sense of it as evil. A man that has been for half a day in some ill-ventilated room does not notice the poisonous atmosphere; if you go into it you are half suffocated at first, and breathe more easily as you get used to it. A man can live amidst the foulest poison of evil; and, as the Styrian peasants get fat upon arsenic, his whole nature may seem to thrive by the poison that it absorbs. They tell us that the breed of fish that live in the lightless caverns in the bowels of some mountains, by long disuse have had their eyes atrophied out of them, and are blind because they have lived out of the light. And so men that live in the love of evil lose the capacity of discerning the evil, and ‘he that walketh in darkness’ becomes blind, blind to his sin, and blind to all the realities of life.

Then is it not true, too, that many of us systematically and of set purpose, continually avoid all questions as to the moral nature of our conduct? How many a man and woman who reads these words never sits down to think whether what they have been doing is right or wrong, because they have deep down in their consciences an uneasy suspicion as to what the answer would be. So, by reason of fostering passion, by reason of listening to wishes, by reason of the habit of wrongdoing, by reason of the systematic avoidance of all careful investigation of our character and of our conduct, we lose the power of fairly deciding upon the nature of our own acts.

Then self-love comes in, and still another thing tends to blind us. We are all ready to acquiesce in the general indictment, and so to shirk the particular application of it. That is what people do about all great moral principles that ought to affect conduct,—they admit them in words, as general truths applying to mankind, and then hide themselves in the crowd, and think that they escape the incidence and particular application of the truths. No

one of us would, I suppose, venture in plain words to stand up and say: 'I am an exception to your general confessions of sin,' and most of us would be ready to unite in the acknowledgment: 'We have all come short of the glory of God,' though in our consciences there has never stirred the faintest movement of self-condemnation even whilst our lips have been uttering the confession. Do not shrink away in the crowd, my brother! Come out to the front, and stand by yourself as God sees you, isolated. Look at your own actions; never mind about other men's. Do not content yourselves with saying, 'We have sinned'; say, 'I have sinned against *Thee*.' God and you are as if alone in the universe. 'Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned.' There are no crowds in God's eyes; He deals with single souls. Every one of us,—thou, and thou, and thou,—must give account of himself to God.

II. In the next place, let me ask you to think how this story suggests that the true work of God's message is to tear down the veil and to show the ugly thing.

'Nathan said unto David, Thou art the man.' It needed a prophet to do that, with divine authority. Nothing less would suffice to get through the thick bosses of the buckler of self-conceit and ignorance which he had to penetrate. As God's messenger, he gathered up, as I said, into one sharp-pointed, keen-edged, steel-bright sentence, the very spirit of the whole ancient Law, which seeks to individualise the sinner, and to drive home to the conscience the consciousness of wrong-doing.

The remarks that I have been making, in the former part of this sermon, imperfect as they must necessarily be, may at least serve one or two purposes in reference to this part of my discourse.

It seems to me that if what I have been saying as to a man's blindness to his own true moral character be at all correct, there flows from that thought a strong presumption in favour of a divine revelation. We need another than our own voice to lay down the law of conduct, and to accuse and condemn the breaches of it. Conscience is not a wholly reliable guide, and is neither an impartial nor an all-knowing judge. Unconsciousness of evil is not innocence. It is not the purest of women who 'wipes her mouth and says, I have done no harm.' My conscience says to me, 'It is wrong to do wrong'; but when I say to my conscience, 'Yes, and pray what is wrong?' a large variety of answers is possible. A man may sophisticate his conscience, or bribe his conscience, or throttle his conscience, or sear his conscience. And so the man who is worst, who, therefore, ought to be most chastised by his conscience, has most immunity from it, and where, if it is to be of use, it ought to be most powerful, there it is weakest.

What then? Why this, then—a standard that varies is not a standard; we are left with a leaden rule. My conscience, your conscience, is like the standard measures which we at present possess, which by their very names—foot, handbreadth, nail, and the like, tell us that they were originally but the length of one man's limb. And so your measure of right and wrong, and another man's measure, though they may substantially correspond, yet

differ according to your differences of education, character, and a thousand other things. So that the individual man's standard needs to be rectified. You have to send all the weights and measures up to the Tower now and then, to get them stamped and certified. And, as I believe, this fluctuation of our moral judgments shows the need for a fixed pattern and firm unchangeable standard, external to our mutable selves. A light on deck which pitches with the pitching ship is no guide. It must flash from a white pillar founded on a rock and immovable amid the restless waves. Our need of such a standard raises a strong presumption that a good God will give us what we need, if He can. Such a standard He has given, as I believe, in the revelation of Himself which lies in this book, and culminates in the life and character of Jesus Christ our Lord. There, and by that, we can set our watches. There we can read the law of morality, and by our deflections from it we can measure the amount of our guilt.

But beyond that, the remarks which I have already made in the former part of my sermon may suggest to us, along with this utterance of the prophet's, that one indispensable characteristic and certain criterion of a true message and gospel from God is that it pierces the conscience and kindles the sense of sin. My dear brethren, there is a great deal of so-called Christian teaching, both from pulpits and books in this day, which, to my mind, is altogether defective by reason of its underestimate of the cardinal fact of sin, and its consequent failure to represent the fundamental characteristic of the gospel as being deliverance and redemption. I am quite sure that the root of nine-tenths of all the heresies that have ever afflicted the Christian Church, and of the weakness of so much popular Christianity, is none other than this failure adequately to recognise the universality and the gravity of the fact of transgression. If a word comes to you, calls itself God's message, and does not start with man's sin, nor put in the forefront of its utterances the way by which the dominion of that sin in your own heart can be broken, and the penalties of that sin in your present and future life can be swept away, it is condemned, *ipso facto*, as not a gospel from God, or fit for man. O my brother! it sounds harsh; but it is the truest kindness, when Nathan stands before the king, and with his flashing eye and stern, calm voice says, 'Thou art the man.' Was not that nobler, truer, tenderer, worthier of God, than if he had smoothed David down with soft speeches that would not have roused his conscience? Is it not the truest benevolence that keeps the surgeon's hand steady whilst his heart is touched by the pain that he inflicts, as he thrusts his gleaming instrument of tender cruelty into the poisonous sore? And are not God's mercy and love manifest for us in this, that He begins all His work on us with the grave, solemn indictment of each soul by itself, 'Thou art the man'?

'He showed me all the mercy,  
For He taught me all the sin.'



III. Lastly, let me say that God accuses us and condemns us one by one that He may save us one by one.

The meaning of Nathan's sharp sentence was speedily disclosed when the broken-down king exclaimed, 'I have sinned against the Lord,' and when, with laconic force as great as that which barbed the condemnation, the prophet stanchd the wound with the brief words, 'And the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin.' The intention of the accusation is the extension of the mercy and forgiveness. God, as the Apostle puts it, 'hath concluded all in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all.'

And now, mark, for the carrying out of that divine purpose in regard to us, and for our possession of the proffered mercy, the same individualising and isolating process is needful as was needful for the conviction of the sin. God desires to save the world, but God can only save men one at a time. There must be an individual access to Him for the reception of forgiveness, as there must be in regard to the conviction of sin, just as if He and I were the only two beings in the whole universe. There is no wholesale entrance into God's Church or into God's kingdom. God's mercy is not given to crowds, except as composed of individuals who have individually received it. There must be the personal act of faith; there must be my solitary coming to Him. As the old mystics used to define prayer, so I might define the whole process by which men are saved from their sins, 'the flight of the lonely soul to the lonely God.' My brother, it is not enough for you to say, 'We have sinned'; say, 'I have sinned.' It is not enough that from a gathered congregation there should go up the united litany, 'Lord, have mercy upon us! Christ, have mercy upon us! Lord, have mercy upon us!' You must make the prayer your own: 'Lord, have mercy upon *me*!' It is not enough that you should believe, as I suppose most of you fancy that you believe, that Christ has died for the sins of the whole world. That belief will give you no share in His forgiveness. You must come to closer grips with Him than that; and you must be able to say, 'Who loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*.' Let us have no running away into the crowd. Come out, and stand by yourselves, and for yourselves stretch out your own band, and take Christ for yourselves.

A man may die of starvation in a granary. You may be lost in the midst of this abundance which Christ has provided for you. And the difference between really possessing salvation and not possessing it, lies very largely in the difference between saying 'us' and 'me.' 'Thou art the man' in regard to the general accusation of sin; 'Thou art the man' in regard to the solemn law which proclaims that 'the soul that sinneth it shall die'; and, blessed be God, 'Thou art the man' in regard to the great promise that says, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' Christ gives you a blank cheque in His word: 'Whoso cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out.' Write thine own name in, and by thy personal faith in the Lamb of God that died for thee, thy sins shall pass away; and all the fulness of God shall be thy very own for ever. 'If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself, and if thou scornest, thou alone shall bear it.'

## DAVID AND NATHAN

‘And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin.’—2 SAMUEL xii. 13.

We ought to be very thankful that Scripture never conceals the faults of its noblest men. High among the highest of them stands the poet-king. Whoever, for nearly three thousand years, has wished to express the emotions of trust in God, longing after purity, aspiration, and rapture of devotion, has found that his words have been before him.

And this man sins; black, inexcusable, aggravated transgression. You know the shameful story; I need not tell it over again. The Bible gives it us in all its naked ugliness, and there are precious lessons to be got out of it; such, for instance, as that it is not innocence that makes men good. ‘*This is the man after God’s own heart!*’ people sneer. Yes! Not because saints have a peculiar morality, and atone for adultery and murder by making or singing psalms, but because, having fallen into foul sin, he learned to abhor it, and with many tears, with unconquerable resolution, with deepened trust in God, set his face once more to press toward the mark. That is a lesson worth learning.

And, again, David was not a hypocrite because he thus fell. All sin is inconsistent with devotion; but, thank God, we cannot say how much or how dark the sin must be which is incompatible with devotion, nor how much evil there may still lurk and linger in a heart of which the main set and aspiration are towards purity and God.

And, again, the worst transgressions are not the passionate outbursts contradictory of the main direction of a life which sometimes come; but the habitual, though they be far smaller, evils which are honey-combing the moral nature. White ants will pick a carcass clean sooner than a lion. And many a man who calls himself a Christian, and thinks himself one, is in far more danger, from little pieces of chronic meanness in his daily life, or sharp practice in his business, than ever David was in his blackest evil.

But the main lesson of all is that great and blessed one of the possibility of any evil and sin like this black one, being annihilated and caused to pass away through repentance and confession. It is to that aspect of our text that I turn, and ask you to look with me at the three things that come out of it: David’s penitence; David’s pardon consequent upon his penitence; and David’s punishment, notwithstanding his penitence and pardon.

I. First, then, the penitence.

What a divine simplicity there is in the words of our text: ‘David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord.’ That is all. In the original, two words are enough to revolutionise the man’s whole life, and to alter all his relations to the divine justice and the divine Friend. ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ Not an easy thing to say; and as the story shows us, a thing that David took a long time to mount up to.

Remember the narrative. A year has passed since his transgression. What sort of a year has it been? One of the Psalms tells us, ‘When I kept silence my bones waxed old through

my roaring all the day long; for day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my moisture was turned into the drought of summer.' There were long months of sullen silence, in which a clear apprehension and a torturing experience of divine disapprobation, like a serpent's fang, struck poison into his veins. His very physical frame seems to have suffered. His heart was as dry as the parched grass upon the steppes. That was what he got by his sin. A moment of turbid animal delight, and long days of agony; dumb suffering in which the sense of evil had not yet broken him down into a rain of sweet tears, but lay, like a burning consciousness, within his heart.

And then came the prophet with his parable, so tender, so ingenious, so powerful. And the quick flash of generous indignation, which showed how noble the man was after all, with which he responded to the picture, unknowing that it was a picture of his own dastardly conduct, led on to the solemn words in which Nathan tore away the veil; and with a threefold lever, if I may so say, overthrew the toppling structure of his impenitence.

First of all, and most chiefly, he seeks to win him to repentance by a picture of God's great love and goodness. 'I have done this and that and the other thing for thee. What hast thou done for Me?' Ah, that is the true beginning. You cannot frighten men into penitence, you may frighten them into remorse; and the remorse may or may not lead on to repentance. But bring to bear upon a man's heart the thought of the infinite and perfect love of God, and that is the solvent of all his obstinate impenitence, and melts him to cry, 'I have sinned.' And along with that element there is the other, the plain striking away of all disguises from the ugly fact of the sin. The prophet gives it its hideous name, and that is one element in the process which leads to true repentance. For so strange and subtle are the veils which we cast over our own evils, that it comes sometimes to us with a shock and a start when some word, that we know to connote wickedness of the deepest dye, is applied to them. David had very likely so sophisticated his conscience that, though he had been writhing under the sense that he was a wrongdoer, it came to him with a kind of ugly surprise when the naked words 'adultery' and 'murder' were pressed up against his consciousness.

And the third element that brought him to his senses, and to his knees, was the threatening of punishment, which is salutary when it follows these other two, the revelation of a divine love and the unveiling of the essential nature of my own act; but which without these is but 'the hangman's whip' to which only inferior natures will respond. And these three, the appeal to God's love, the revelation of his own sin, the solemn warning of its consequences—these three brought to bear upon David's heart, broke him down into a passion of penitence in which he has only the two words to say, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' That is all. That is enough.

And what is it? It is the recognition—which is essential to all real penitence—that I have not merely broken some impersonal law, or done something that hurts my fellows, but that I have broken the relations which I ought to sustain to a living, loving Person, who is God.

We commit crimes against society, we commit faults against one another, we commit sins against God, and the very notion of sin involves, as its correlative, the thought of the divine Lawgiver.

So, dear brethren, penitence goes deeper than a recognition of demerit and unworthiness. It is more than an acknowledgment of imperfection and breach of morality. It is something different altogether from the acknowledgment that I have committed a fault against my fellow. David had done Bathsheba and Uriah, and in them his whole kingdom, foul wrong, but, as he says in [Psalm li](#), ‘Against Thee, Thee *only*, have I *sinned*.’ His account with these is of a less grave character, but ‘against Thee I sinned.’

And in like manner, this penitence contains in it the recognition of transgression against a loving Friend and Father, which had been brought home to his mind by all the words of the rebuking prophet, who was a kind of incarnate conscience for him now. And it contains, still further, confession to God against whom he had sinned. The first impulse of a man when he dimly discerns how far he has departed from God’s law, is that which the old story represents was the first impulse of the first sinners—to hide himself in the trees of the garden. The second impulse is to go to Him against whom we have sinned, and who only therefore can deal with the sin in the way of forgiveness, and to pour it all out before Him. Once an Apostle, when he caught a partial glimpse of his own demerit and transgression, said to the Master with a natural impulse, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’ But Peter had a deeper sense of his own sin, and a happier knowledge of what Christ could do for his sin, when his brother Apostle whispering to him in the boat, ‘It is the Lord,’ the traitor Apostle cast himself into the shallow water and floundered through it anyhow, to get as close as he could to the Master’s feet.

Do not go away from God because you feel that you have sinned against Him. Where should you go but to your mother’s bosom, and hide your face there, if you have committed faults against her? Where should you go but to God if against Him you have transgressed? Look, my brother, at your own character and conduct; measure the deficiencies and imperfections, the transgressions and faults; ay! perhaps with some of you, the crimes against men and society and human laws; but see beneath all these a deeper thought; and stifle not the words that would come to your lips as a relief, like a surgeon’s lancet struck into some foul gathering, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’

II. And now, secondly, notice with me David’s pardon consequent upon his repentance.

Can there be anything more striking—I do not say dramatic, for the circumstances are far too serious for terms of art—can there be anything more in the nature of a gospel to us all than that brief dialogue? David said unto Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ And Nathan said unto David, ‘The Lord also hath put away thy sin.’

Immediate forgiveness, that is the first lesson that I would press upon you. Dear brethren, it is an experience which you may each repeat in your own history at this moment. It needs

but the confession in order that the forgiveness should come. At this end of the telephone whisper your confession, and before it has well passed your lips there comes back the voice sweet as that of angels, 'The Lord hath forgiven thy sin.' One word, one motion of a heart aware of, and hating, and desiring to escape from, its evil, brings with a rush the whole fulness of fatherly and forgiving love into any heart. And that one confession may be the turning-point of a man's life, and may obliterate all the sinful past, and may bring him into loving, reconciled, harmonious relations with the Almighty Judge.

Learn, too, not only the immediacy of the answer and the simplicity of the means, but learn how thorough and complete God's dealing with your sin may be. The original language of my text might be rendered, 'The Lord hath caused thy sin to pass away'; the thought being substantially that of some impediment or veil between man and Him which, with a touch of His hand, He dissolves as it were into vapour, and so leaves all the sky clear for His warmth and sunshine to pour down upon the heart. We do not need to enter upon theological language in talking about this great gift of forgiveness. It means substantially that howsoever you and I have piled up mountain upon mountain, Alp upon Alp, of our evils and transgressions, all pass away and become non-existent. Another word of the Old Testament expresses the same idea when it speaks about sin being 'covered.' Another word expresses the same idea when it speaks about God as 'casting' men's sins 'into the depths of the sea'—all meaning this one thing, that they no longer stand as barriers between the free flow of His love and our poor hearts. He takes away the sense of guilt, touches the wounded conscience, and there is healing in His hand. As, according to the old belief, the sovereign, by laying his hand upon sufferers from 'the King's evil' healed them and cleansed them, so the touch of His forgiving love takes away the sense of guilt and heals the spirit. He removes all the impediments between His love and us. His love can now come undisturbed. His deepest and solemnest judgments do not need to come; and no more does there stand frowning between us and Him the spectre of our past.

People tell us that forgiveness is impossible, 'that whatsoever a man soweth, that must he also reap'; that law is law, and that the consequences cannot be averted. That is all quite true if there is not a God. It is not true if there is; and if there is no God, there is no sin. So if there is a God, there is forgiveness.

Consequences, as I shall have to show you in a moment, may still remain, but pardon may be ours all the same. When you forgive your child, does it mean that you do not thrash it, or does it mean that you take it to your heart? And when God pardons, does it mean that He waives His laws, or does it mean that He lets us come into the whole warmth and sunshine of His love? Will you go there?

Forgiveness was to Jews a thing difficult to apprehend. It was hard for them to understand the harmony of it with the rigid retribution on which their whole system of religion reposed. But you and I have come further into the light than Nathan and David had. And I have to

preach a modification of the words of my text which is not a limitation of them, but the unveiling of their basis and the surest confirmation of them, when I say 'In Him'—Jesus Christ—'we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins.'

The New Testament teaches us that the Cross of Christ threw its power back upon former transgressions as well as forward upon future ones; and that in Him past ages, though they knew Him not, received remission. Christ is the Medium of the divine forgiveness; Christ's Cross is the ground of the divine pardon; Christ's sacrifice is the guarantee for us that the sin which He has borne He has borne away. 'By His stripes we are healed.' 'Wherefore, men and brethren, be it known unto you, that through this Man is preached unto *us* the forgiveness of *our* sins.'

III. Third and lastly, look at the punishment which follows—shall I say *notwithstanding* or *because of?*—the penitence and the pardon.

In David's life there came the immediate retribution in kind, which was signalled as such by the divine message—the death of the child 'who was conceived in sin and shapen in iniquity.' But beyond that, look at David's life after his great fall. There was no more brightness in it. His own sin and example of lust loosed the bonds of morality in his household, and his son followed his example and improved upon it. And from that came Absalom's murder of his brother, and from that Absalom's exile, and from that Absalom's rebellion, and from that Absalom's death, which nearly killed his poor old father. And for all the rest of his days his home was troubled, and his last years ended with the turmoil of a disputed succession before his eyes were closed, all traceable to this one foul crime.

Joab was the torment of David's later days, and Joab's power over him depended upon his having been the instrument of Uriah's murder; and so the master of the king, whose bidding he had done. Ahithophel was the brain of Absalom's conspiracy. His defection struck a sharp arrow into David's heart—'mine own familiar friend in whom I trusted.' He evidently hated the king with fierce hatred. He was Bathsheba's grandfather; and we are not going wrong, I think, in tracing his passionate hatred, and the peculiar form of insult which he counselled Absalom to adopt, to the sense of foul wrong which had been done to his house by David's crime.

And so all through his days this poor old king had to do what you and I have to do—to bear the temporal results of sin. 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.'

So 'of our pleasant vices the gods make whips to scourge us.' And it is in mercy that we have to drink as we have brewed, that we have to lie upon the beds that we have made; that in regard to outward consequences, and in regard to our own hearts and inward history, we are the architects of our own fortunes, and cannot escape the penalties of our sins and of our faults. Better to have it so than be cursed with impunity!

Some of you young men are sowing diseases in your bones that will either make you invalids or will kill you before your time. All of us are bearing about with us, in some measure and sense, the issues, which are the punishments, of our evil. Let us thank Him and take up the praise of the old psalm, 'Thou wast a God that forgivest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.' There is either merciful chastisement here, that we may be parted from our sins, or there is judgment hereafter.

O my brother! let me beseech you, do not commit the suicide of impenitence, but go to Christ, in whom all our sins are taken away, and lay your hands on the head of that great Sacrifice, and 'the Lord shall cause to pass the iniquity of your sin.'

## GOD'S BANISHED ONES

'God doth devise means, that His banished be not expelled from Him.'—2 SAMUEL xiv. 14.

David's good-for-nothing son Absalom had brought about the murder of one of his brothers, and had fled the country. His father weakly loved the brilliant blackguard, and would fain have had him back, but was restrained by a sense of kingly duty. Joab, the astute Commander-in-chief, a devoted friend of David, saw how the land lay, and formed a plan to give the king an excuse for doing what he wished to do. So he got hold of a person who is called 'a wise woman' from the country, dressed her as a mourner, and sent her with an ingeniously made-up story of how she was a widow with two sons, one of whom had killed the other, and of how the relatives insisted on their right of avenging blood, and demanded the surrender of the murderer; by which, as she pathetically said, 'the coal' that was left her would be 'quenched.' The king's sympathy was quickly roused—as was natural in so impulsive and poetic a nature—and he pledged his word, and finally his oath, that the offender should be safe.

So the woman has him in a trap, having induced him to waive justice and to absolve the guilty by an arbitrary act. Then she turns upon him with an application to his own case, and bids him free himself from the guilt of double measures and inconsistency by doing with his banished son the same thing—viz. abrogating law and bringing back the offender. In our text she urges still higher considerations—viz. those of God's way of treating criminals against His law, of whom she says that He spares their lives, and devises means—or, as the words might perhaps be rendered, 'plans plannings'—by which He may bring them back. She would imply that human power and sovereignty are then noblest and likest God's when they remit penalties and restore wanderers.

I do not further follow the story, which ends, as we all know, with Absalom's ill-omened return. But the wise woman's saying goes very deep, and, in its picturesque form, may help to bring out more vividly some truths—all-important ones—of which I wish to beg your very earnest consideration and acceptance.

I. Note, then, who are God's banished ones.

The woman's words are one of the few glimpses which we have of the condition of religious thought amongst the masses of Israel. Clearly she had laid to heart the teaching which declared the great, solemn, universal fact of sin and consequent separation from God. For the 'banished ones' of whom she speaks are no particular class of glaring criminals, but she includes within the designation the whole human race, or, at all events, the whole Israel to which she and David belonged. There may have been in her words—though that is very doubtful—a reference to the old story of Cain after the murder of his brother. For that narrative symbolises the consequences of all evil-doing and evil-loving, in that he was cast out from the presence of God, and went away into a 'land of wandering,' there to hide from the



face of the Father. On the one hand, it was banishment; on the other hand, it was flight. So had Absalom's departure been, and so is ours.

Strip away the metaphor, dear brethren, and it just comes to this thought, which I seek to lay upon the hearts of all my hearers now—you cannot be blessedly and peacefully near God, unless you are far away from sin. If you take two polished plates of metal, and lay them together, they will adhere. If you put half a dozen tiny grains of sand or dust between them, they will fall apart. So our sins have come between us and our God. They have not separated God from us, blessed be His name! for His love, and His care, and His desire to bless, His thought, and His knowledge, and His tenderness, all come to every soul of man. But they have rent us apart from Him, in so far as they make us unwilling to be near Him, incapable of receiving the truest nearness and blessedness of His presence, and sometimes desirous to hustle Him out of our thoughts, and, if we could, out of our world, rather than to expatiate in the calm sunlight of His presence.

That banishment is self-inflicted. God spurns away no man, but men spurn Him, and flee from Him. Many of us know what it is to pass whole days, and weeks, and years, as practical Atheists. God is not in all our thoughts.

And more than that, the miserable disgrace and solitude of a soul that is godless in the world is what many of us like. The Prodigal Son scraped all his goods together, and thought himself freed from a very unwelcome bondage, and a fine independent youth, when he went away into 'the far country.' It was not quite so pleasant when provisions and clothing fell short, and the swine's trough was the only table that was spread before him. But yet there are many of us, I fear, who are perfectly comfortable away from God, in so far as we can get away from Him, and who never are aware of the degradation that lies in a soul's having lowered itself to this, that it had rather not have God inconveniently near.

Away down in the luxurious islands of the Southern Sea you will find degraded Englishmen who have chosen rather to cast in their lot with savages than to have to strain and work and grow. These poor beach-combers of the Pacific, not happy in their degradation, but wallowing in it, are no exaggerated pictures of the condition, in reality, of thousands of us who dwell far from God, and far therefore from righteousness and peace.

II. Notice God's yearning over His banished ones.

The woman in our story hints at, or suggests, a parallel which, though inadequate, is deeply true. David was Absalom's father and Absalom's king; and the two relationships fought against each other in his heart. The king had to think of law and justice; the father cried out for his son. The young man's offence had neither altered his relationship nor affected the father's heart.

All that is true, far more deeply, blessedly true, in regard to our relation, the wandering exiles' relation, to God. For, whilst I believe that the highest form of sonship is only realised in the hearts of men who have been made partakers of a new life through Jesus Christ, I

believe, just as firmly and earnestly, that every man and woman on the face of the earth, by virtue of physical life derived from God, by virtue of a spiritual being, which, in a very real and deep sense, still bears the image of God, and by reason of His continued love and care over them, is a child of His. The banished son is still a son, and is '*His* banished one.' If there is love—wonderful as the thought is, and heart-melting as it ought to be—there must be loss when the child goes away. Human love would not have the same name as God's unless there were some analogy between the two. And though we walk in dark places, and had better acknowledge that the less we speak upon such profound subjects the less likely we are to err, yet it seems to me that the whole preciousness of the revelation of God in Scripture is imperilled unless we frankly recognise this—that His love is like ours, delights in being returned like ours, and is like ours in that it rejoices in presence and knows a sense of loss in absence. If you think that that is too bold a thing to say, remember who it was that taught us that the father fell on the neck of the returning prodigal, and kissed him; and that the rapture of his joy was the token and measure of the reality of his regret, and that it was the father to whom the prodigal son was 'lost.' Deep as is the mystery, let nothing, dear brethren, rob us of the plain fact that God's love moves all around the worst, the unworthiest, the most rebellious in the far-off land, and 'desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his iniquity and live.'

And it is you, *you*, whom He wants back; you whom He would fain rescue from your aversion to good and your carelessness of Him. It is you whom He seeks, according to the great saying of the Master, 'the Father seeketh' for worshippers in spirit and in truth.

III. Note the formidable obstacles to the restoration of the banished.

The words 'banished' and 'expelled' in our text are in the original the same; and the force of the whole would be better expressed if the same English word was employed as the equivalent of both. We should then see more clearly than the variation of rendering in our text enables us to see, that the being 'expelled' is no further stage which God devises means to prevent, but that what is meant is that He provides methods by which the banished should not be banished—that is, should be restored to Himself.

Now, note that the language of this 'wise woman,' unconsciously to herself, confesses that the parallel that she was trying to draw did not go on all fours; for what she was asking the king to do was simply, by an arbitrary act, to sweep aside law and to remit penalty. She instinctively feels that that is not what can be done by God, and so she says that He 'devises means' by which He can restore His banished.

That is to say, forgiveness and the obliteration of the consequences of a man's sin, and his restoration to the blessed nearness to God, which is life, are by no means such easy and simple matters as people sometimes suppose them to be. The whole drift of popular thinking to-day goes in the direction of a very superficial and easy gospel, which merely says, 'Oh, of course, of course God forgives! Is not God Love? Is not God our Father? What more do

you want than that?' Ah! you want a great deal more than that, my friends. Let me press upon you two or three plain considerations. There are formidable obstacles in the way of divine forgiveness.

If there are to be any pardon and restoration at all, they must be such as will leave untouched the sovereign majesty of God's law, and, untampered with, the eternal gulf between good and evil. That easygoing gospel which says, 'God will pardon, of course!' sounds very charitable and very catholic, but at bottom it is very cruel. For it shakes the very foundations on which the government of God must repose. God's law is the manifestation of God's character; and that is no flexible thing which can be bent about at the bidding of a weak good-nature. I believe that men are right in holding that certainly God must pardon, but I believe that they are fatally wrong in not recognising this—that the only kind of forgiveness which is possible for Him to bestow is one in which there shall be no tampering with the tremendous sanctions of His awful law; and no tendency to teach that it matters little whether a man is good or bad. The pardon, which many of us seem to think is quite sufficient, is a pardon that is nothing more noble than good-natured winking at transgression. And oh! if this be all that men have to lean on, they are leaning on a broken reed. The motto on the blue cover of the *Edinburgh Review*, for over a hundred years now, is true: 'The judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted.' David struck a fatal blow at the prestige of his own rule, when he weakly let his son off from penalty. And, if it were possible to imagine such a thing, God Himself would strike as fatal a blow at the justice and judgment which are the foundations of His throne, if His forgiveness was such as to be capable of being confounded with love which was too weakly indulgent to be righteous.

Further, if there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must be such as will turn away the heart of the pardoned man from his evil. The very story before us shows that it is not every kind of pardon which makes a man better. The scapegrace Absalom came back unsoftened, without one touch of gratitude to his father in his base heart, without the least gleam of a better nature dawning upon him, and went flaunting about the court until his viciousness culminated in his unnatural rebellion. That is to say, there is a forgiveness which nourishes the seeds of the crimes that it pardons. We have only to look into our own hearts, and we have only to look at the sort of people round us, to be very sure that, unless the forgiveness that is granted us from the heavens has in it an element which will avert our wills and desires from evil, the pardon will be very soon needed again, for the evil will very soon be done again.

If there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must come in such a fashion as that there shall be no doubt whatsoever of their reality and power. The vague kind of trust in a doubtful mercy, about which I have been speaking, may do all very well for people that have never probed the depths of their own hearts. Superficial notions of our sin, which so many of us have, are contented with superficial remedies for it. But let a man get a glimpse

of his own real self, and I think that he will wish for something a great deal more solid to grip hold of, than nebulous talk of the kind that I have been describing. If once we feel ourselves to be struggling in the black flood of that awful river, we shall want a firmer hold upon the bank than is given to us by some rootless tree or other. We must clutch something that will stand a pull, if we are to be drawn from the muddy waters.

People say to us, 'Oh, God will forgive, of course!' Does this world look like a place where forgiveness is such an easy thing? Is there anything more certain than that consequences are inevitable when deeds have been done, and 'that whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap' and whatsoever he brews that shall he also drink? And is it into a grim, stern world of retribution like this that people will come, with their smiling, sunny gospel of a matter-of-course forgiveness, upon very easy terms of a slight penitence?

Brethren, God has to 'devise means,' which is a strong way of saying, in analogy to the limitations of humanity, that He cannot, by an arbitrary act of His will, pardon a sinful man. His eternal nature forbids it. His established law forbids it. The fabric of His universe forbids it. The good of men forbids it. The problem is insoluble by human thought. The love of God is like some great river that pours its waters down its channel, and is stayed by a black dam across its course, along which it feels for any cranny through which it may pour itself. We could never save ourselves, but

'He that might the vengeance best have took,  
Found out the remedy.'

IV. And so the last word that I have to say is to note the triumphant, divine solution of these difficulties.

The work of Jesus Christ, and the work of Jesus Christ alone, meets all the requirements. It vindicates the majesty of law, it deepens the gulf between righteousness and sin. Where is there such a demonstration of the awful truth that 'the wages of sin is death' as on that Cross on which the Son of God died for us and for all 'His banished ones'? Where is there such a demonstration of the fixedness of the divine law as in that death to which the Son of God submitted Himself for us all? Where do we learn the hideousness of sin, the endless antagonism between God and it, and the fatal consequences of it, as we learn them in the sacrifice of our Lord and Saviour? Where do we find the misery and desolation of banishment from God so tragically uttered as in that cry which rent the darkness of eclipse, 'My God! My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?'

That work of Christ's is the only way by which it is made absolutely certain that sins forgiven shall be sins abhorred; and that a man once restored shall cleave to his Restorer as to his Life. That work is the only way by which a man can be absolutely certain that there is forgiveness, in spite of all the accusations of his own conscience; in spite of all the inexor-

able working out of penalties in the system of the world which seems to contradict the fond belief; in spite of all that a foreboding gaze tells, or ought to tell, of a judgment that is to follow.

Brethren, God has devised a means. None else could have done so. I beseech you, realise these facts that I have been trying to bring before you, and the considerations that I have based upon them, so far as they commend themselves to your hearts and consciences; and do not be content with acquiescing in them, but act upon them. We are all exiles from God, unless we have been 'brought nigh by the blood of Christ.' In Him, and in Him alone, can God restore His banished ones. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find a pardon which cleanses the heart, and ensures the removal of the sin which it forgives. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find, not a peradventure, not a subjective certainty, but an external fact which proclaims that verily there is forgiveness for us all. I pray you, dear friends, do not be content with that half-truth, which is ever the most dangerous lie, of divine pardon apart from Jesus Christ. Lay your sins upon His head, and your hand in the hand of the Elder Brother, who has come to the far-off land to seek us, and He will lead you back to the Father's house and the Father's heart, and you will be 'no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God.'

### **PARDONED SIN PUNISHED**

‘And It came to pass after this, that Absalom prepared him chariots and horses, and fifty men to run before him. 2. And Absalom rose up early, and stood beside the way of the gate: and it was so, that when any man that had a controversy came to the king for judgment, then Absalom called unto him, and said, Of what city art thou? And he said, Thy servant is of one of the tribes of Israel. 3. And Absalom said unto him. See, thy matters are good and right; but there is no man deputed of the king to hear thee. 4. Absalom said moreover, Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man which hath any suit or cause might come unto me, and I would do him justice! 5. And it was so, that when any man came nigh to him to do him obeisance, he put forth his hand, and took him, and kissed him. 6. And on this manner did Absalom to all Israel that came to the king for judgment: so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. 7. And it came to pass after forty years, that Absalom said unto the king, I pray thee, let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed unto the Lord, in Hebron. 8. For thy servant vowed a vow while I abode at Geshur in Syria, saying, If the Lord shall bring me again indeed to Jerusalem, then I will serve the Lord. 9. And the king said unto him, Go in peace. So he arose, and went to Hebron. 10. But Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, As soon as ye hear the sound of the trumpet, then ye shall say, Absalom reigneth in Hebron. 11. And with Absalom went two hundred men out of Jerusalem, that were called; and they went in their simplicity, and they knew not any thing. 12. And Absalom sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David’s counsellor, from his city, even from Giloh, while he offered sacrifices. And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Absalom.’—[2 SAMUEL xv. 1-12](#).

There was little brightness in David’s life after his great sin. Nathan had told him, even while announcing his forgiveness, that the sword should never depart from his house; and this revolt of Absalom’s may be directly traced to his father’s disgraceful crime. The solemn lesson that pardoned sin works out its consequences, so that ‘whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,’ is taught by it. The portion of the story with which we are concerned has two stages,—the slow hatching of the plot, and its final outburst.

I. [Verses 1 to 6](#) give us the preparation of the mine. It takes four years, during which Absalom plays all the tricks usual to aspirants for the most sweet voices of the multitude. He seems to have been but a poor creature; but it does not take much brain to do a great deal of mischief. He was vain, headstrong, with a dash of craft and a large amount of ambition. He had no love for his father, and no ballast of high principle, to say nothing of religion. He was a spoiled child grown to be a man, with a child’s petulance and unreason, but a man’s passions. He loved his unfortunate sister, but it was as much wounded honour as love which led him to the murder of his elder brother Amnon. That crime cleared his way to the throne; and David’s half-and-half treatment of him after it, neither sternly punishing

nor freely pardoning, set the son against the father, and left a sense of injury. So he became a rebel.

The story tells very vividly how he adopted the familiar tactics of pretenders. How old, and yet how modern, it reads! We who live in a country where everybody is an 'elector' of some sort, and candidates are plentiful, see the same things going on, in a little different dress, before our eyes. Absalom begins operations by dazzling people with ostentatious splendour. In better days Samuel had trudged on foot, driving a heifer before him, to anoint his father; and royalty had retained a noble simplicity in the hands of Saul and David. But 'plain living and high thinking' did not suit Absalom; and he had gauged the popular taste accurately enough in setting up his chariot with its fifty runners. That was a show something like a king, and, no doubt, much more approved than David's simplicity. But it was an evil omen to any one who looked below the surface. When luxury grows, devotion languishes. The senseless ostentation which creeps into the families of good men, and is sustained by their weak compliance with their spoiled children's wishes, does a world of harm. We in Lancashire have a proverb, 'Clogs, carriage, clogs,' which puts into three words the history of three generations, and is verified over and over again.

How well Absalom has learned the arts of the office-seeker! Along with his handsome equipage he shows admirable devotion to the interests of his 'constituents.' He is early at the gate, so great is his appetite for work; he is accessible to everybody; he flatters each with the assurance that his case is clear; he gently drops hints of sad negligence in high quarters, which he could so soon set right, if only he were in power; and he will not have the respectful salutation of inferiors, but grasps every hard hand, and kisses each tanned cheek, with an affectation of equality very soothing to the dupes. 'Electioneering' is much the same all the world over; and Absalom has a good many imitators nearer home.

There was, no doubt, truth in the charge he made against David of negligence in his judicial and other duties. Ever since his great sin, the king seems to have been stunned into inaction. The heavy sense of demerit had taken the buoyancy out of him, and, though forgiven, he could never regain the elastic energy of purer days. The psalms which possibly belong to this period show a singular passivity. If we suppose that he was much in the seclusion of his palace, a heavily-burdened and spirit-broken man, we can understand how his condition tempted his heartless, dashing son to grasp at the reins which seemed to be dropping from his slack hands, and how his passivity gave opportunity for Absalom's carrying on his schemes undisturbed, and a colour of reasonableness to his charges. For four years this went on unchecked, and apparently unsuspected by the king, who must have been much withdrawn from public life not to have taken alarm. Nothing takes the spring out of a man like the humiliating sense of sin. The whole tone of David's conduct throughout the revolt is, 'I deserve it all. Let them smite, for God hath bidden them.' To this resourceless, unresisting submission to his enemies, sin had brought the daring soldier. It is not old age

that has broken his courage and spirit, but the consciousness of his foul guilt, which weighs on him all the more heavily because he knows that it is pardoned.

II. The second part of our subject tells of the explosion of the long-prepared mine. It was necessary to hoist the flag of revolt elsewhere than in Jerusalem, and some skill is shown in choosing Hebron, which had been the capital before the capture of the Jebusite city, and in which there would be natural jealousy of the new metropolis. The pretext of the sacrifice at Hebron, in pursuance of a vow made by Absalom in his exile, was meant to touch David's heart in two ways,—by appealing to his devotional feelings, and by presenting a pathetic picture of his suffering and devout son vowing in the land where his father's wrath had driven him. It is not the first time that religion has been made the stalking-horse for criminal ambition, nor is it the last. Politicians are but too apt to use it as a cloak for their personal ends. Absalom talking about his vow is a spectacle that might have made the most unsuspecting sure that there was something in the wind. Such a use of religious observances shows more than anything else could do, the utter irreligion of the man who can make it. A son rebelling against his father is an ugly sight, but rebellion disguised as religion adds to the ugliness. David suspects nothing; or, if he does, is too broken to resist, and, perhaps glad at any sign of grace in his son, or pleased to gratify any of his wishes, sends him away with a benediction. What a parting,—the last, though neither knew it!

The plot had spread widely in four years, and messengers had been sent through all Israel to summon its adherents to Hebron. If David had been as popular as in his early days, it would have been impossible for such a widely spread conspiracy to have come so near a head without some faithful soul having been found to tell him of it. But obviously there was much smouldering discontent, arising, no doubt, from such causes as the pressure of taxation, the gloom that hung over the king, the partial paralysis of justice, the transference of the capital, the weight of wars, and, at lowest, the craving for something new. Few reigns or lives set in unclouded brightness. The western horizon is often filled with a bank of blackness. Strangely enough, Absalom invited two hundred men to accompany him, who were ignorant of the plot. That looks as if its strength was outside Jerusalem, as was natural. These innocents were sufficiently associated with Absalom to be asked to accompany him, and, no doubt, he expected to secure their complicity when he got them away. Unsuspecting people are the best tools of knaves. It is better not to be on friendly terms with Absalom, if we would be true to David. The last piece of preparation recorded is the summoning of Abithophel to come and be the brain of the plot. He had been David's wisest counsellor, and is probably the 'familiar friend, in whom I trusted,' whose defection the Psalmist mourns so bitterly, and whose treachery was a marvellous foreshadowing of the traitor who dipped in the dish with David's Lord. Note that he had already withdrawn from Jerusalem to his own city, from which he came at once to Hebron. Absalom could flatter and play the well-worn tricks of a pretender, but a subtler, cooler head was wanted now, and the treacherous son was



backed up by the traitor friend. 'And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Absalom.' What a tragical issue to the joyous loyalty of early days! What a strange madness must have laid hold on the nation to have led them to prefer such a piece of petulance and vanity to their hero-poet-king! What did it mean?

The answer is not far to seek, and it is the great lesson of this story. David's sin was truly repented and freely forgiven, but not left unpunished. God is too loving to shield men from the natural consequences, in the physical and social world, of their sins. The penitent drunkard's hand shakes, and his constitution is not renewed, though his spirit is. Only, punishment is changed into discipline, when the heart rests in the assurance of pardon, and is accepted as a token of a Father's love. In every way God made of the vice the whip to scourge the sinner, and David, like us all, had to drink as he had brewed, though he was forgiven the sin.

### A LOYAL VOW

‘And the king’s servants said unto the king, Behold, thy servants are ready to do whatsoever my lord the king shall appoint.’—2 SAMUEL xv. 15.

We stand here at the darkest hour of King David’s life. Bowed down by the consciousness of his past sin, and recognising in the rebellion of his favourite son the divine chastisement, his early courage and buoyant daring seem to have ebbed from him wholly. He is forsaken by the mass of his subjects, he is preparing to abandon Jerusalem, and to flee as an exile, as he says himself so pathetically, ‘whither I may.’ And at that moment of deepest depression there comes one little gleam of consolation and one piece of chivalrous devotion which brightens the whole story. His special retainers, apparently a bodyguard mostly of foreigners, rally round him. Mostly foreigners, I say, for these hard words ‘Cherethites and Pelethites’ most probably mean inhabitants of the island of Crete, and Philistines. And as to six hundred of them, at all events, there can be no doubt, for they are expressly said to be ‘men of Gath who followed after him.’ At all events, there was a little nucleus of men, not his own subjects, who determined to share his fate, whatever it was. And the words of my text are their words, ‘Behold, thy servants are ready to do whatsoever the king shall appoint.’ Or, as the word stands in the original, in an abrupt, half-finished sentence, even more pathetic, ‘According to all that my lord the king shall appoint, behold thy servants.’ These men were foreigners, not bound to render obedience to the king, but giving it because their hearts were touched. They were loyal amongst rebels, so many Abdiels, ‘among the faithless, faithful only’ these, and they avowed their determination to cleave to the sovereign of their choice at a time when his back was at the wall, and their determination to follow him meant only peril and privation. They were filled with a passionate personal attachment to the king, and that personal attachment was ready to manifest itself as a willing sacrifice, as such love always is ready.

Now surely in all this there is a lesson for us. The heroism of men towards a man, the uncalculating devotion and magnificent self-sacrifice of which the poorest human soul is capable when touched to fine issues by some heart-love, are surely not all meant to be lavished on fellow-creatures, who, alas! generally receive the most of them. But these rude Philistines and Gittites, Goliath’s fellow-townsmen, may preach to us Christians a lesson. Why should not we say as they said, ‘According to all that my Lord the King shall appoint, behold Thy servants’?

I. So then, first, our King’s will ought to be our will.

The obedience that is promised in these words is not the obedience of action only, but it is the bowing down of the heart. And for us Christian men there is neither peace nor nobleness in our lives, except in the measure in which the will of Jesus Christ and our wills are accurately conterminous and identical. Wheresoever the two coincide, there is strength for us; wheresoever they diverge, there are weakness and certain ruin. These two wills ought

to be like two of Euclid's triangles, or other geometric figures, the one laid upon the other, and each line and curve and angle accurately corresponding and coinciding, so that the two cover precisely the same ground.

Christ's will my will; that is religion. And you and I are Christians just in the measure in which that coincidence of wills is true about us, and not one hair's-breadth further, for all our professions. Wheresoever my will diverges from Christ, in that particular I am not His man; and 'Christian' simply means 'Christ's man.' I belong to Him when I think as He does, love as He does, will as He does, accept His commandment as the law of my life, His pattern as my example, His providence as sufficient and as good. Where we thus yield ourselves to Him, there we are strong, and so far, and only so far, have we a right to say that we are the King's servants at all.

This absolute submission we do render to one another when our hearts are touched; and the fact that men can and do give it—husbands to wives, wives to husbands, children to parents, friends to one another—the fact that there is the capacity for that giving of one's self away, lodged deep in our nature, tells us what we are meant to do with it. 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' Was it meant that we should thus live in slavish submission even to the dearest loved ones? Surely not; for that is the destruction of individuality. No, but it was meant that we should lay our wills down at Christ's feet and say, 'Not my will, but Thine,' and Thine mine because I have made it mine by love. Then there is rest, and then we have solved the secret of the world, and are what our Lord would have us to be. Oh! do not our relations to our dear ones, with all that infinite power of self-sacrifice that our love brings with it, rebuke the partial extent of our surrender to our Master? and may we not be ashamed when we contrast the joy that we feel in giving up to those that we love, and the reluctance with which, too often, we obey the Master's commandments, and the long years of repining and murmuring before we 'submit,' as we call it, which too often means accept His providences as inevitable, though not as welcome? To be 'ready to do whatsoever my Lord the King shall choose,' believing that His choice is wisdom and kindness for us, and His commandments a blessing and a gift, is the attitude and temper for us all. Is there any other attitude to Jesus Christ which corresponds to our relation to Him, to what He has done for us, to what we say that He is to us? He has the right to us, because He has given us Himself. He asks nothing from us but that of which He has already set us the example. 'He gave Himself for us, as the Apostle says with emphasis that is often unnoticed. 'He gave Himself for us' that He might '*purchase us for Himself.*' He who would possess another must impart Himself, and love, that yields a whole man to the loved one, only springs when the loved one mutually yields her whole heart. The King does not command from above, but He comes down amongst us, and He says, 'I gave Myself for thee; what givest thou to Me?' O brethren, let us answer with that brave, chivalrous old Gittite:—'As the Lord liveth, and

as my Lord the King liveth, surely in what place my Lord the King shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will Thy servant be.'

II. Then notice again, still sticking to our story, that this yielding up of will, if it is worth anything, will become the more intense and fervent when surrounded by rebels.

All Israel, with that poor feather-headed, vain Absalom, were on the one side, and David and these foreigners were on the other. Years of quiet uneventful life would never have brought out such magnificent heroism of devotion and self-surrender, as was crowded into that one moment of loyalty asserted in the face of triumphant rebels and traitors.

In like manner, the more Christ's reign is set at nought by the people about us, and the less they recognise the blessedness and the duty of submission to Him, the more strong and unmistakable should be the utterance of our loyalty. We should grasp His hand tighter by reason of the storms that may rage round about us. And if we dwell amongst those who, in any measure, deny or neglect His merciful dominion, let us see to it that we all the more hoist our colours at our doors, and stand by them when they are hoisted, that nobody may mistake under which King we serve.

You in your places of business, you young men in your warehouses, and all of us in our several spheres, have to come across many people who have no share in our loyalty and offer no allegiance to our King. That is the reason for intenser loyalty on our part. Never you mind what others say or do; do not take your orders from them. Better be with the handful that rally round David than with the crowds that run after Absalom! Better be amongst the few that are faithful than amongst the multitudes that depart! Dare to be singular, if it comes to that; and at all events remember that your relationship to your Master is a thing that concerns Him and you chiefly, and that you are not to take the pattern of your loyalty, nor the orders for your lives, from any lips but His own.

Hush all other voices that would command, and hush them that you may listen to Him. It is always difficult enough for Christian men to ascertain, in perplexed circumstances, the clear path of duty; but it is impossible if, along with His voice, we let the buzz of the crowd be audible in our ears. There is only one way by which we can hear what our 'Lord the King appoints,' and that is by making a great stillness in our souls, and neither letting our own yelping inclinations give tongue, nor the babble of men round us, and their notions of life and of what is right, have influence upon us, but waiting to hear what God the Lord, speaking in Christ the King, has to say to us. And, remember, the more rebels there are, the more need for us to be conspicuously loyal to our King.

III. Again, this complete yielding of ourselves in practical obedience and heart submission to command merits and providences is to be maintained, whatsoever it may lead to in the way of privation and difficulty.

It was no holiday vow, made upon some parade day, that these brave foreigners were bringing to their king now, but it meant 'we are ready to suffer, starve, fight, lose everything,

die if need be, to be true to thee.' And the very thought of the impending danger elevated the men's consciousness, and made heroes out of very common people. And perhaps that is the best effect of our difficulties and sorrows, that they strike fire sometimes (if they are rightly accepted and used) out of what seems to be only dead, lumpish matter, and many a Christian shoots up into a stature of greatness and nobleness in his sorrow, who was but a very commonplace creature when all things went well with him. That is the kind of obedience that Christ delights to accept, obedience that is ready for anything, and does not wait to make sure that there is no danger of forfeiting a whole skin and a quiet life, before it vows itself to service. Are we only to be 'fair-weather Christians,' or are we to be prepared for all the trials and sufferings that may befall us? A Christianity that does not bring any worldly penalties along with it is not worth much. Christians of Christ's pattern have generally to give up something for their Christianity. They give up nothing that it is not gain to lose, nothing that they are not better without, but they have to surrender much in which other people find great enjoyment, and which their weaker selves would delight in too. Are you ready, my brother, for that? 'Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.' The old days of heroism and martyrdom are done with, as far as we are concerned, whatever may lie in the future. But do we make willingly and gladly the surrenders and the self-abnegations that are demanded by our loyalty to our Master? Have we ever learned to say about any line of action that our poor, lower nature grasps at, and our higher, enlightened by communion with Jesus Christ, forbids: 'So did not I because of the fear of the Lord'? We can talk about following Christ's footsteps; do you think that if we had stood where these rude soldiers stood, or had anything as dark in prospect, as the price of our faithfulness to our King, as they had as the price of faithfulness to theirs, there would have rung from our lips the utterly sincere vow that sprang joyously from theirs: 'Behold Thy servants, ready to do whatever our Lord the King shall appoint'?

IV. A final thought, which travels beyond my text, is that such thorough-going obedience, irrespective of consequences, is the secret of all blessedness.

'Great peace have they which love Thy law': the peace of conscience; the peace of ceasing from that which is our worst enemy, self-will; the peace of self-surrender; the peace of feeling 'Tis His to command; 'tis mine to obey'; the peace of casting the whole settling of the campaign on the King's shoulders, and of finding our duty restricted to tramping along with cheery heart on the path that He has appointed. That is worth having. Oh! if we could cease from self and lay our wills down before Him, then we should be quiet. The tranquil heart is the heart which has the law of Christ within it, and the true delight of life belongs to those who truly say, 'I delight to do Thy will.' So yielding, so obeying, so submitting, so surrendering one's self, life becomes quiet, and strong, and sweet. And, if I might so turn the story that we have been considering, the faithful soldiers who have been true to the King when His throne was contested, will march with laurelled heads in His triumphant train when He

comes back after His final and complete victory, and reign with Him in the true City of Peace, where His will shall be perfectly done by loving hearts, and all His servants shall be kings.

### ITTAI OF GATH

‘And Ittai answered the king, and said, As the Lord liveth, and as my lord the king liveth, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be.’—2 SAMUEL xv. 21.

It was the darkest hour in David’s life. No more pathetic page is found in the Old Testament than that which tells the story of his flight before Absalom. He is crushed by the consciousness that his punishment is deserved—the bitter fruit of the sin that filled all his later life with darkness. His courage and his buoyancy have left him. He has no spirit to make a stand or strike a blow. If Shimei runs along the hillside abreast of him, shrieking curses as he goes, all he says is: ‘Let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him.’

So, heartbroken and spiritless, he leaves Jerusalem. And as soon as he has got clear of the city he calls a halt, in order that he may muster his followers and see on whom he may depend. Foremost among the little band come six hundred men from Gath—Philistines—from Goliath’s city. These men, singularly enough, the king had chosen as his bodyguard; perhaps he was not altogether sure of the loyalty of his own subjects, and possibly felt safer with foreign mercenaries, who could have no secret leanings to the deposed house of Saul. Be that as it may, the narrative tells us that these men had ‘come after him from Gath.’ He had been there twice in the old days, in his flight from Saul, and the second visit had extended over something more than a year. Probably during that period his personal attraction, and his reputation as a brilliant leader, had led these rough soldiers to attach themselves to his service, and to be ready to forsake home and kindred in order to fight beside him.

At all events here they are, ‘faithful among the faithless,’ as foreign soldiers surrounding a king often are—notably, for instance, the Swiss guard in the French Revolution. Their strong arms might have been of great use to David, but his generosity cannot think of involving them in his fall, and so he says to them: ‘I am not going to fight; I have no plan. I am going where I can. You go back and “worship the rising sun.” Absalom will take you and be glad of your help. And as for me, I thank you for your past loyalty. Mercy and peace be with you!’

It is a beautiful nature that in the depth of sorrow shrinks from dragging other people down with itself. Generosity breeds generosity, and this Philistine captain breaks out into a burst of passionate devotion, garnished, in soldier fashion, with an unnecessary oath or two, but ringing very sincere and meaning a great deal. As for himself and his men, they have chosen their side. Whoever goes, they stay. Whatever befalls, they stick by David; and if the worst come to the worst they can all die together, and their corpses lie in firm ranks round about their dead king. David’s heart is touched and warmed by their outspoken loyalty; he yields and accepts their service. Ittai and his noble six hundred tramp on, out of our sight,

and all their households behind them. Now what is there in all that, to make a sermon out of?

I. First, look at the picture of that Philistine soldier, as teaching us what grand passionate self-sacrifice may be evolved out of the roughest natures.

Analyse his words, and do you not hear, ringing in them, three things, which are the seed of all nobility and splendour in human character? First, a passionate personal attachment; then, that love issuing, as such love always does, in willing sacrifice that reckes not for a moment of personal consequences; that is ready to accept anything for itself if it can serve the object of its devotion, and will count life well expended if it is flung away in such a service. And we see, lastly, in these words a supreme restful delight in the presence of him whom the heart loves. For Ittai and his men, the one thing needful was to be beside him in whose eye they had lived, from whose presence they had caught inspiration; their trusted leader, before whom their souls bowed down. So then this vehement speech is the pure language of love.

Now these three things,—a passionate personal attachment, issuing in spontaneous heroism of self-abandonment, and in supreme satisfaction in the beloved presence,—may spring up in the rudest, roughest nature. A Philistine soldier was not a very likely man in whom to find refined and lofty emotion. He was hard by nature, hardened by his rough trade; and unconscious that he was doing anything at all heroic or great. Something had smitten this rock, and out of it there came the pure refreshing stream. And so I say to you, the weakest and the lowest, the roughest and the hardest, the most selfishly absorbed man and woman among us, has lying in him and her dormant capacities for flaming up into such a splendour of devotion and magnificence of heroic self-sacrifice as is represented in these words of my text. A mother will do it for her child, and never think that she has done anything extraordinary; husbands will do such things for wives; wives for husbands; friends and lovers for one another. All who know the sweetness and power of the bond of affection know that there is nothing more gladsome than to fling oneself away for the sake of those whom we love. And the capacity for such love and sacrifice lies in all of us. Prosaic, commonplace people as we are, with no great field on which to work out our heroisms; yet we have it in us to love and give ourselves away thus, if once the heart be stirred.

And lastly, this capacity which lies dormant in all of us, if once it is roused to action, will make a man blessed and dignified as nothing else will. The joy of unselfish love is the purest joy that man can taste; the joy of perfect self-sacrifice is the highest joy that humanity can possess, and they lie open for us all.

And wherever, in some humble measure, these emotions of which I have been speaking are realised, there you see weakness springing up into strength, and the ignoble into loftiness. Astronomers tell us that sometimes a star that has shone inconspicuous, and stood low down in their catalogues as of fifth or sixth magnitude, will all at once flame out, having



kindled and caught fire somehow, and will blaze in the heavens, outshining Jupiter and Venus. And so some poor, vulgar, narrow nature, touched by this Promethean fire of pure love that leads to perfect sacrifice, will 'flame in the forehead of the morning sky' an undying splendour, and a light for evermore.

Brethren, my appeal to you is a very plain and simple one, founded on these facts:—You all have that capacity in you, and you all are responsible for the use of it. What have you done with it? Is there any person or thing in this world that has ever been able to lift you up out of your miserable selves? Is there any magnet that has proved strong enough to raise you from the low levels along which your life creeps? Have you ever known the thrill of resolving to become the bondservant and the slave of some great cause not your own? Or are you, as so many of you are, like spiders living in the midst of your web, mainly intent upon what you can catch by it? You have these capacities slumbering in you. Have you ever set a light to that inert mass of enthusiasm that lies within you? Have you ever woke up the sleeper? Look at this rough soldier of my text, and learn from him the lesson that there is nothing that so ennobles and dignifies a commonplace nature as enthusiasm for a great cause, or self-sacrificing love for a worthy heart.

II. The second remark which I make is this:—These possibilities of love and sacrifice point plainly to God in Christ as their true object.

'Whose image and superscription hath it?' said Christ, looking at the Roman *denarius* that they brought and laid on His palm. If the Emperor's head is on it, why, then, he has a right to it as tribute. And then He went on to say, 'Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.' So there are things that have God's image and superscription stamped on them, and such are our hearts, our whole constitution and nature. As plainly as the penny had the head of Tiberius on it, and therefore proclaimed that he was Emperor where it was current, so plainly does every soul carry in the image of God the witness that He is its owner and that it should be rendered in tribute to Him.

And amongst all these marks of a divine possession and a divine destination printed upon human nature, it seems to me that none is plainer than this fact, that we can all of us thus give ourselves away in the abandonment of a profound and all-surrendering love. That capacity unmistakably proclaims that it is destined to be directed towards God and to find its rest in Him. As distinctly as some silver cup, with its owner's initials and arms engraved upon it, declares itself to be 'meet for the master's use,' so distinctly does your soul, by reason of this capacity, proclaim that it is meant to be turned to Him in whom alone all love can find its perfect satisfaction; for whom alone it is supremely blessed and great to lose life itself; and who only has authority over human spirits.

We are made with hearts that need to rest upon an absolute love; we are made with understandings that need to grasp a pure, a perfect, and, as I believe, paradoxical though it

may sound, a personal Truth. We are made with wills that crave for an absolute authoritative command, and we are made with a moral nature that needs a perfect holiness. And we need all that love, truth, authority, purity, to be gathered into one, for our misery is that, when we set out to look for treasures, we have to go into many lands and to many merchants, to buy many goodly pearls. But we need One of great price, in which all our wealth may be invested. We need that One to be an undying and perpetual possession. There is One to whom our love can ever cleave, and fear none of the sorrows or imperfections that make earthward-turned love a rose with many a thorn, One for whom it is pure gain to lose ourselves, One who is plainly the only worthy recipient of the whole love and self-surrender of the heart.

That One is God, revealed and brought near to us in Jesus Christ. In that great Saviour we have a love at once divine and human, we have the great transcendent instance of love leading to sacrifice. On that love and sacrifice for us Christ builds His claim on us for our hearts, and our all. Life alone can communicate life; it is only light that can diffuse light. It is only love that can kindle love; it is only sacrifice that can inspire sacrifice. And so He comes to us, and asks that we should just love Him back again as He has loved us. He first gives Himself utterly for and to us, and then asks us to give ourselves wholly to Him. He first yields up His own life, and then He says: 'He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.' The object, the true object, for all this depth of love which lies slumbering in our hearts, is God in Christ, the Christ that died for us.

III. And now, lastly, observe that the terrible misdirection of these capacities is the sin and the misery of the world.

I will not say that such emotions, even when expended on creatures, are ever wasted. For however unworthy may be the objects on which they are lavished, the man himself is the better and the higher for having cherished them. The mother, when she forgets self in her child, though her love and self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice may, in some respects, be called but an animal instinct, is elevated and ennobled by the exercise of them. The patriot and the thinker, the philanthropist, ay! even—although I take him to be the lowest in the scale—the soldier who, in some cause which he thinks to be a good one, and not merely in the tigerish madness of the battlefield, throws away his life—are lifted in the scale of being by their self-abnegation.

And so I am not going to say that when men love each other passionately and deeply, and sacrifice themselves for one another, or for some cause or purpose affecting only temporal matters, the precious elixir of love is wasted. God forbid! But I do say that all these objects, sweet and gracious as some of them are, ennobling and elevating as some of them are, if they are taken apart from God, are insufficient to fill your hearts: and that if they are slipped in between you and God, as they often are, then they bring sin and sorrow.

There is nothing more tragic in this world than the misdirection of man's capacity for love and sacrifice. It is like the old story in the Book of Daniel, which tells how the heathen monarch made a great feast, and when the wine began to inflame the guests, sent for the sacred vessels taken from the Temple of Jerusalem, that had been used for Jehovah's worship; and (as the narrative says, with a kind of shudder at the profanation), 'They brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the House of God, which was at Jerusalem, and the king and his princes, his wives and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine and praised the gods.' So this heart of mine, which, as I said, has the Master's initials and His arms engraven upon it, in token that it is His cup, I too often fill with the poisonous and intoxicating draught of earthly pleasure and earthly affections; and as I drink it, the madness goes through my veins, and I praise gods of my own making instead of Him whom alone I ought to love.

Ah, brethren! we should be our own rebukers in this matter, and the heroism of the world should put to shame the cowardice and the selfishness of the Church. Contrast the depth of your affection for your household with the tepidity of your love for your Saviour. Contrast the willingness with which you sacrifice yourself for some dear one with the grudgingness with which you yield yourselves to Him. Contrast the rest and the sense of satisfaction in the presence of those whom you love, and your desolation when they are absent, with the indifference whether you have Christ beside you or not. And remember that the measure of your power of loving is the measure of your obligation to love your Lord; and that if you are all frost to Him and all fervour to them, then in a very solemn sense 'a man's foes shall be they of his own household.' 'He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.'

And so let me gather all that I have been saying into the one earnest beseeching of you that you would bring that power of uncalculating love and self-sacrificing affection which is in you, and would fasten it where it ought to fix—on Christ who died on the cross for you. Such a love will bring blessedness to you. Such a love will ennoble and dignify your whole nature, and make you a far greater and fairer man or woman than you ever otherwise could be. Like some little bit of black carbon put into an electric current, my poor nature will flame into beauty and radiance when that spark touches it. So love Him and be at peace; give yourselves to Him and He will give you back yourselves, ennobled and transfigured by the surrender. Lay yourselves on His altar, and that altar will sanctify both the giver and the gift. If you can take this rough Philistine soldier's words in their spirit, and in a higher sense say, 'Whether I live I live unto the Lord, or whether I die I die unto the Lord; living or dying, I am the Lord's,' He will let you enlist in His army; and give you for your marching orders this command and this hope, 'If any man serve Me let him follow Me; and where I am there shall also My servant be.'

### THE WAIL OF A BROKEN HEART

‘Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and reared up for himself a pillar, which is in the king’s dale; for he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance; and he called the pillar after his own name: and it is called unto this day, Absalom’s Place. 19. Then said Ahimaaz the son of Zadok, Let me now run, and bear the king tidings, how that the Lord hath avenged him of his enemies. 20. And Joab said unto him. Thou shalt not bear tidings this day, but thou shalt bear tidings another day; but this day thou shalt bear no tidings, because the king’s son is dead. 21. Then said Joab to Cush, Go tell the king what thou hast seen. And Cush bowed himself unto Joab, and ran. 22 Then said Ahimaaz the son of Zadok yet again to Joab, But howsoever, let me, I pray thee, also run after Cush. And Joab said, Wherefore wilt thou run, my son, seeing that thou hast no tidings ready? 23. But howsoever, said he, let me run. And he said unto him, Run. Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain, and overran Cush. 24. And David sat between the two gates: and the watchman went up to the roof over the gate unto the wall, and lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold a man running alone. 25. And the watchman cried, and told the king. And the king said, If he be alone, there is tidings in his mouth. And he came apace, and drew near. 26. And the watchman saw another man running; and the watchman called unto the porter, and said, Behold another man running alone. And the king said, He also bringeth tidings. 27. And the watchman said, Me thinketh the running of the foremost is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok. And the king said, He is a good man, and cometh with good tidings. 28. And Ahimaaz called, and said unto the king, All is well. And he fell down to the earth upon his face before the king, and said, Blessed be the Lord thy God, which hath delivered up the men that lifted up their hand against my lord the king. 29. And the king said, Is the young man Absalom safe? And Ahimaaz answered, When Joab sent the king’s servant, and me thy servant, I saw a great tumult, but I knew not what it was. 30. And the king said unto him, Turn aside, and stand here. And he turned aside, and stood still. 31. And, behold, Cush came; and Cush said, Tidings, my lord the king: for the Lord hath avenged thee this day of all them that rose up against thee. 32. And the king said unto Cush, Is the young man Absalom safe? And Cush answered, The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is. 33. And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!’—[2 SAMUEL xviii. 18-33.](#)

The first verse of this passage and the one preceding it give a striking contrast between the actual and the designed burial-place of Absalom. The great pit among the sombre trees, where his bloody corpse was hastily flung, with three darts through his heart, and the rude cairn piled over it, were a very different grave from the ostentatious tomb ‘in the king’s dale,’ which he had built to keep his memory green. This was what all his restless intrigues and

unbridled passions and dazzling hopes had come to. He wanted to be remembered, and he got his wish; but what a remembrance! That gloomy pit preaches anew the vanity of 'vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself,' and tells us once more that

'Only the actions of the just  
Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.'

I. The first picture here shows a glimpse of the battlefield, and brings before us three men, each in different ways exhibiting how small a thing Absalom's death was to all but the heartbroken father, and each going his own road, heedless of what lay below the heap of stones. The world goes on all the same, though death is busy, and some heart-strings be cracked. The minute details which fill the most part of the story, lead up to, and throw into prominence, David's burst of agony at the close. The three men, Ahimaaz, Joab, and the Cushite (Ethiopian), are types of different kinds of self-engrossment, which is little touched by others' sorrows. The first, Ahimaaz, the young priest who had already done good service to David as a spy, is full of the joyous excitement of victory, and eager to run with what he thinks such good tidings. The word in [verse 19](#), 'bear tidings,' always implies good news; and the youthful warrior-priest cannot conceive that the death of the head of the revolt can darken to the king the joy of victory, He is truly loyal, but, in his youthful impetuosity and excitement, cannot sympathise with the desolate father, who sits expectant at Mahanaim. Right feeling and real affection often fail in sympathy, for want of putting oneself in another's place; and, with the best intentions, wound where they mean to cheer. A little imagination; guided by affection, would have taught Ahimaaz that the messenger who told David of Absalom's death would thrust a sharper spear into his heart than Joab had driven into Absalom's.

Joab is a very different type of indifference. He is too much accustomed to battle to be much flushed with victory, and has killed too many men to care much about killing another. He is cool enough to measure the full effect of the news on David; and though he clearly discerns the sorrow, has not one grain of participation in it. He has some liking for Ahimaaz, and so does not wish him to run, but dissuades him on the ground ([verse 22, Revised Version](#)) that he will win no reward. That is the true spirit of the mercenary, who cannot conceive of a man taking trouble unless he gets paid for it somehow, and will fight and kill, all in the way of business, without the least spark of enthusiasm for a cause. Hard stolidity and brutal carelessness shielded him from any 'womanish' tenderness. Absalom was dead, and he had killed him. It was a good thing, for it had put out the fire of revolt. No doubt David would be sorry, but that mattered little. Only it was better for the message to go by some one whose fate was of no consequence. So he picks out 'the Cushite,' probably an Ethiopian slave; and if David in his anguish should harm him, nobody will be hurt but a friendless stranger.

The Cushite gets his orders; and he too is, in another fashion, careless of their contents and effect. Without a word, he bows himself to Joab, and runs, as unconcerned as the paper of a letter that may break a heart. Ahimaaz still pleads to go, and, gaining leave, takes the road across the Jordan valley, which was probably easier, though longer; while the other messenger went by the hills, which was a shorter and rougher road.

II. The scene shifts to Mahanaim, where David had found refuge. He can scarcely have failed to take an omen from the name, which commemorated how another anxious heart had camped there, and been comforted, when it saw the vision of the encamping angels above its own feeble, undefended tents, and Jacob 'called the name of that place Mahanaim' (that is, 'Two Camps'). How the change of scene in the narrative helps its vividness, and makes us share in the strain of expectancy and the tension of watching the approaching messengers! The king, restless for news, has come out to the space between the outer and inner gates, and planted a lookout on the gate-house roof. The sharp eyes see a solitary figure making for the city, across the plain. David recognises that, since he is alone, he must be a messenger; and now the question is, What has he to tell? We see him coming nearer, and share the suspense. Then the second man appears; and clearly something more had happened, to require two. What was it? They run fast; but the moments are long till they arrive. The watchman recognises Ahimaaz by his style of running; and David wistfully tries to forecast his tidings from his character. It is a pathetic effort, and reveals how anxiously his heart was beating.

As soon as Ahimaaz is within earshot, though panting with running, no doubt, he shouts, with what breath is left, the one word, 'Peace!' and then, at David's feet, tells the victory, 'Blessed be the Lord thy God'; the triumph was Jehovah's gift, and in it He had shown Himself David's God, and vindicated His servant's trust. But Ahimaaz is more devout and thankful than David. The king has neither praise and thankfulness to God nor to man. He has no pleasure in the victory; no interest in the details of the fight; no thankfulness for a restored kingdom; no word of eulogium for his soldiers; nothing but devouring anxiety for his unworthy son. How chilling to Ahimaaz, all flushed with eagerness, and proud of victory, and panting with running, and hungry for some word of praise, it must have been, to get for sole answer the question about Absalom! He shrinks from telling the whole truth, which, indeed, the Cushite was officially despatched to tell; but his enigmatic story of a great tumult as he left the field, of which he did not know the meaning, was meant to prepare for the bitter news. So he is bid to stand aside, and no words more vouchsafed to him. A cool reception, unworthy of David! As Ahimaaz stood there, neglected, he would think that the politic Joab was right after all.

The Cushite must have been close behind him, for he comes up as soon as the brief conversation is over. A deeper anxiety must have waited his tidings; for he must have something more to tell than victory. His first words add nothing to Ahimaaz's information.

What, then, had he come for? David forebodes evil, and, with the monotony of a man absorbed in one anxiety, repeats verbatim his former question. Poor king! He more than half knew the answer, before it was given. The Cushite with some tenderness veils the fate of Absalom in the wish that all the king's enemies may be 'as that young man is.' But the veil was thin, and the attempt to console by reminding of the fact that the dead man was an enemy as well as a son, was swept away like a straw before the father's torrent of grief.

III. The sobs of a broken heart cannot be analysed; and this wail of almost inarticulate agony, with its infinitely pathetic reiteration, is too sacred for many words. Grief, even if passionate, is not forbidden by religion; and David's sensitive poet-nature felt all emotions keenly. We are meant to weep; else wherefore is there calamity? But there were elements in David's mourning which were not good. It blinded him to blessings and to duties. His son was dead; but his rebellion was dead with him, and that should have been more present to his mind. His soldiers had fought well, and his first task should have been to honour and to thank them. He had no right to sink the king in the father, and Joab's unfeeling remonstrance, which followed, was wise and true in substance, though rough almost to brutality in tone. Sorrow which sees none of the blue because of one cloud, however heavy and thunderous, is sinful. Sorrow which sits with folded hands, like the sisters of Lazarus, and lets duties drift, that it may indulge in the luxury of unrestrained tears, is sinful. There is no tone of 'It is the Lord! let Him do what seemeth Him good,' in this passionate plaint; and so there is no soothing for the grief. The one consolation lies in submission. Submissive tears wash the heart clean; rebellious ones blister it.

David's grief was the bitter fruit of his own sin. He had weakly indulged Absalom, and had probably spared the rod, in the boy's youth, as he certainly spared the sword when Absalom had murdered his brother. His own immorality had loosened the bonds of family purity, and made him ashamed to punish his children. He had let Absalom flaunt and swagger and live in luxury, and put no curb on him; and here was the end of his foolish softness. How many fathers and mothers are the destroyers of their children to-day in the very same fashion! That grave in the wood might teach parents how their fatal fondness may end. Children, too, may learn from David's grief what an unworthy son can do to stuff his father's pillow with thorns, and to break his heart at last.

But there is another side to this grief. It witnesses to the depth and self-sacrificing energy of a father's love. The dead son's faults are all forgotten and obliterated by death's 'effacing fingers.' The headstrong, thankless rebel is, in David's mind, a child again, and the happy old days of his innocence and love are all that remain in memory. The prodigal is still a son. The father's love is immortal, and cannot be turned away by any faults. The father is willing to die for the disobedient child. Such purity and depth of affection lives in human hearts. So self-forgetting and incapable of being provoked is an earthly father's love. May we not see in this disclosure of David's paternal love, stripping it of its faults and excesses, some

dim shadow of the greater love of God for His prodigals,—a love which cannot be dammed back or turned away by any sin, and which has found a way to fulfil David's impossible wish, in that it has given Jesus Christ to die for His rebellious children, and so made them sharers of His own kingdom?



## BARZILLAI

‘And Barzillai said unto the king, How long have I to live, that I should go up with the king unto Jerusalem? 35. I am this day fourscore years old: and can I discern between good and evil! can thy servant taste what I eat or what I drink? can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women? wherefore then should thy servant be yet a burden unto my lord the king? 36. Thy servant will go a little way over Jordan with the king: and why should the king recompense it me with such a reward? 37. Let thy servant, I pray thee, turn back again, that I may die in mine own city, and be buried by the grave of my father and of my mother. But behold thy servant Chimham; let him go over with my lord the king; and do to him what shall seem good unto thee.’—2 SAMUEL xix. 34-37.

### *To the Young.*

People often fancy that religion is only good to die by, and many exhortations are addressed to the young, founded on the possibility that an early death may be their lot. That, no doubt, is a very solemn consideration, but it is by no means the sole ground on which such an appeal may or should be rested. To some of you an early death is destined. To the larger number of you will be granted a life protracted to middle age, and to some of you silver hair will come, and you may see your children’s children. I wish to win you seriously to look forward to the life on earth that is before you, and to the end to which it is likely to come, if you be spared in the world long enough.

The little picture in these verses is a very beautiful one. David had been fleeing from his rebellious Absalom, and his adversity had winnowed his friends. He had crossed the Jordan to the hill-country beyond, and there, while he was lurking with his crown in peril, and a price on his head, and old friends dropping from him in their eagerness to worship the rising sun, this Barzillai with others brought him seasonable help (xvii. 23). When David returned victorious, Barzillai met him again. David offered to take him to Jerusalem and to set him in honour there, The old man answered in the words of our text.

Now I take them for the sake of the picture of old age which they give us. Look at them: the intellectual powers are dimmed, all taste for the pleasures and delights of sense is gone, ambition is dead, capacity for change is departed. What is left? This old man lives in the past and in the future; the early child-love of the father and mother who, eighty years ago, rejoiced over his cradle, remains fresh; he cannot ‘any more hear the voice of the singing men and women,’ but he can hear the tones, clear over all these years, of the dear ones whom he first learned to love. The furthest past is fresh and vivid, and his heart and memory are true to it. Also he looks forward familiarly and calmly to the very near end, and lives with the thought of death. He keeps house with it now. It is nearer to him than the world of living men. In memory is half of his being, and in hope is the other half. All his hopes are now simplified and reduced to *one*, a hope to die and be united again with the dear ones whom

he had so long remembered. And so he goes back to his city, and passes out of the record—an example of a green and good old age.

Now, young people, is not that picture one to touch your hearts? You think in your youthful flush of power and interest, that life will go on for ever as it has begun, and it is all but impossible to get you to look forward to what life must come to. I want you to learn from that picture of a calm, bright old age, a lesson or two of what life will certainly do to you, that I may found on these certainties the old, old appeal, 'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth'.

I. Life will gradually rob you of your interest in all earthly things.

Your time of life is full of ebullient feeling, and sees freshness, glory, and beauty everywhere. Even the least enthusiastic men are enthusiastic in their early days. You have physical strength, the keenness of unpalled senses, the delights of new powers, the blessedness of mere living. All this springs partly from physical causes, partly from the novelty of your position. Thank God! all young creatures are happy, and you among the rest.

Now, I do not ask you to restrain and mortify these things. But I do ask you to remember the end. It is as certain that joys will pall, it is as certain that subjects of interest will be exhausted, it is as certain that powers will decay, as that they now are what they are. All these grave, middle-aged, careful people round you were like you once. You, if you live, will be like them. The spring tints are natural, but they are transient; the blossoms are not always on the fruit-trees.

Think, then, of the End: to make you thankful; to stimulate you; but also to lead you to take for your object what will never pall. All created things go. Only the gospel provides you with a theme which never becomes stale, with objects which are inexhaustible.

Here is a lesson for—

(a) Thinkers: 'Knowledge, it shall vanish away.'

(b) Sensualists: 'Man delights me not, nor woman either.' How old was he who said that?

(c) Ambitious, self-advancing men.

Is it worth your while to devote yourself to transient aims?

Is it congruous with your dignity as immortal souls?

Is it innocent or guilty?

Is the gospel not a thing to live by as well as to die by?

II. Life will certainly rob you of the power to change.

Barzillai knew that David's court was no place for him; he had been bred on the mountains of Gilead, and his habits suited only a simple country life. The court might be better, but he could not fit into it. But there was his boy Chimham; take him, he was young enough to bend and mould.

Now this is true in a far loftier way. I need not dwell on the universality of this law, how it applies to all manner of men, but I use it now in reference only to the gospel and your relation to it. You will never again be so likely to become a Christian, if you let these early days pass.

You say, 'I will have my fling, sow my wild oats, will wait a little longer, and then'—and then what? You will find that it is infinitely harder to close with Christ than it would have been before.

While you delay, you are stiffening into the habit of rejection. Custom is one of our mightiest friends or foes.

While you delay, you are doing violence to conscience, and so weakening that to which the gospel appeals.

While you delay, you are becoming more familiar with the unreceived message and so weakening the power of the gospel.

While you delay, you are adding to the long list of your sins.

While you delay, youth is slipping from you.

Make a mark with a straw on the clay and it abides; hammer on the brick with iron and it only breaks. Youth is a brief season. It is the season for forming habit, for receiving impression, for building up character. 'The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold, therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing.' Your present time is seed time. God forbid that I should say that it is impossible, but I do say that it is hard, for 'a man to be born again when he is old.'

If you do become Christ's servant later in life, your whole condition will be different from what it would have been if you had begun when young to trust and love Him. Think of the difficulty of rooting out habits and memories. Think of the horrid familiarity with evil. Think of the painful contrition for wasted years, which must be theirs who are hired at the eleventh hour, after standing all the day idle.

Contrast the experience of him who can say, 'I Thy servant fear God from my youth,' who has been led by God's mercy from childhood in the narrow way, who by early faith in Christ has been kept in the slippery ways of youth.

Of the one we can but say, 'Is not this a brand plucked from the burning?' The other is 'innocent of much transgression.'

I have small hope of changing middle-aged and old men. To you I turn, you young men and women, you children, and to each of you I say, 'Wilt thou not from this time say, My Father, Thou art the guide of my youth?'

III. Life will certainly deepen your early impressions.

The old Barzillai dying looks back to his early days.

So I point the lesson: 'Keep thy heart with all diligence,' and let your early thoughts be bright and pure ones.

Remember that you will never find any love like a father's and mother's. Don't do what will load your memories in after days with sharp reproaches.

IV. Life will bring you nearer and nearer to the grave.

Hope after hope dies out, and there is nothing left but the hope to die. How beautiful the facing of it so as to become calmly familiar with it, making it an object of hope, with bright visions of reunion!

How can such an old age so bright and beautiful be secured? Surely the one answer is,—by faith in Jesus Christ.

Think of an old Christian resting, full of years, full of memories, full of hopes, to whom the stir of the present is nothing, who has come so near the place where the river falls into the great sea that the sounds on the banks are unheard. It is calm above the cataract, and though there be a shock when the stream plunges over the precipice, yet a rainbow spans the fall, and the river peacefully mingles with the shoreless, boundless ocean.

Dear young friends, 'what shall the end be'? It is for yourselves to settle. Oh, take Christ for your Lord! Then, though so far as regards the bodily life the 'youths shall faint and be weary,' as regards the true self the life may be one of growing maturity, and at last you may 'come to the grave as a shock of corn that is fully ripe.'

Trust, love, and serve Jesus, that thus calm, thus beautiful, may be your days here below, that if you die young you may die ripe enough for heaven, and that if God spares you to 'reverence and the silver hairs,' you may crown a holy life by a peaceful departure, and, sitting in the antechamber of death, may not grieve for the departure of youth and strength and buoyancy and activity, knowing that 'they also serve who only stand and wait,' and then may shake off the clog and hindrance of old age when you pass into the presence of God, and there, as being the latest-born of heaven, may more than renew your youth, and may enter on a life which weariness and decay never afflict, but with which immortal youth, with its prerogatives of endless hope, of keenest delight, of unwearying novelty, of boundless joy, abides for evermore.

### DAVID'S HYMN OF VICTORY

'For Thou hast girded me with strength to battle: them that, rose up against me hast Thou subdued under me. 41. Thou hast also given me the necks of mine enemies, that I might destroy them that hate me. 42. They looked, but there was none to save; even unto the Lord, but He answered them not. 43. Then did I beat them as small as the dust of the earth, I did stamp them as the mire of the street, and did spread them abroad. 44. Thou also hast delivered me from the strivings of my people, Thou hast kept me to be head of the heathen: a people which I knew not shall serve me. 45. Strangers shall submit themselves unto me: as soon as they hear, they shall be obedient unto me. 46. Strangers shall fade away, and they shall be afraid out of their close places. 47. The Lord liveth; and blessed be my rock; and exalted be the God of the rock of my salvation. 48. It is God that avengeth me, and that bringeth down the people under me, 49. And that bringeth me forth from mine enemies: Thou also hast lifted me up on high above them that rose up against me: Thou hast delivered me from the violent man. 50. Therefore I will give thanks unto Thee, O Lord, among the heathen, and I will sing praises unto Thy name. 51. He is the tower of salvation for His king; and sheweth mercy to His anointed, unto David, and to his seed for evermore.'—[2 SAMUEL xxii. 40-51](#).

The Davidic authorship of this great hymn has been admitted even by critics who are in general too slow to recognise it. One of these says that 'there is no Israelite king to whom the expressions in the psalm apply so closely as to David.' The favourite alternative theory that the speaker is the personified nation is hard to accept. The voice of individual trust and of personal experience sounds clear in the glowing words. Two editions of the hymn are preserved for us,—in [Psalm xviii](#). and 2 Samuel. Slight variations exist in the two copies, which may probably be merely accidental. Nothing important depends on them. The text begins with the closing words of a description of God's arming the singer for his victories, and goes on to paint the tumult of battle and the rout of the foe ([verses 40-43](#)); then follows triumphant expectation of future wider victories ([verses 44-46](#)); and that leads up to the closing burst of grateful praise ([verses 47-51](#)).

I. We are not to forget that what is described in verses 40-43 is a literal fight, with real swords against very real enemies. We may draw lessons of encouragement from it for our conflict with spiritual wickednesses, but we must not lose sight of the bloody combat with flesh and blood which the singer had waged. He felt that God had braced his armour on him, had given him the impenetrable 'shield' which he wore on his arm, and had strengthened his arms to bend the 'bow of steel.' We see him in swift pursuit, pressing hard on the flying foe, crushing them with his fierce charge, trampling them under foot. 'I did beat them small as the dust of the earth.' His blows fell like those of a great pestle, pulverising some substance in a mortar. 'I did stamp them as the mire of the streets,'—a vivid picture of trampling down the prostrate wretches, for which [Psalm xviii](#). gives the less picturesque variant, 'did cast

them out.' In their despair the fugitives shriek aloud for God's help, and the Psalmist has a stern joy in knowing their cries to be unheard.

Now, such delight in an enemy's despair and destruction, such gratification at the vanity of his prayers, are far away from being Christian sentiments, and the gulf is not wholly bridged by the consideration that David felt himself to be God's Anointed, and enmity to him to be, consequently, treason against God. His feelings were most natural and entirely consistent with the stage of revelation in which he lived. They were capable of being purified into that triumph in the victory of good and the ruin of evil without which there is no vigorous sympathy with Christ's conflict. They kindle, by their splendid energy and condensed rapidity, an answering glow even in readers so far away from the scene as we are. But still they do belong to a lower level of feeling, and result from a less full revelation than belongs to Christianity. The light of battle which blazes in them is not the fire which Jesus longed to kindle on earth.

But we may well take a pattern from the stern soldier's recognition that all his victory was due to God alone. The strength that he put forth was God's gift. It was God who subdued the insurgents, not David. The panic which made the foe take to flight was infused into them by God. No name but Jehovah's was to be carved on the trophy reared on the battlefield. The human victor was but the instrument of the divine Conqueror. Such lowly reference of all our power and success to Him will save us from overweening self-adulation, and is the surest way to retain the power which He gives, and which is lost most surely when we take the credit of it to ourselves.

II. The enemies thus far have been from among his own subjects, but in verses 44-46 a transition is made to victory over 'strangers'; that is, foreign nations. The triumph over 'the strivings of my people' heartens the singer to expect that he will be 'head of the nations.' The other version of the hymn ([Psalm xviii.](#)) reads simply '*the people.*'

The picture of hasty surrender 'as soon as they hear of me' is graphic. His very name conquers. 'The strangers shall submit themselves unto me' is literally 'shall lie,' or yield feigned obedience. They 'fade away' as if withered by the hot wind of the desert. 'They shall come limping' (as the word here used signifies), as if wounded in the fight, for which [Psalm xviii.](#) reads 'trembling.'

Now this vision of extended conquests, based as it is on past smaller victories, carries valuable lessons. David here lays hold of the great promises to his house of a wide dominion, and expects the beginnings of their fulfilment to himself. And he *did* extend his conquests beyond the territory of Israel. But we may take the hope as an instance in a particular direction of what should be the issue of all experience of God's mercies. 'To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.' Smaller victories will be followed by greater. Our reception of God's favouring help should widen our anticipations. Our gratitude to Him should

be 'a lively sense of favours to come.' Progressive victory should be the experience of every believer.

We may see, too, dimly apparent through the large hope of the Psalmist-King, the prophecy of the worldwide victories of his Son, in whom the great promises of a dominion 'from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth,' are fulfilled.

III. Verses 46-51 make a noble close to a noble hymn, in which the singer's strong wing never flags, nor the rush of thought and feeling ever slackens. In it, even more absolutely than in the rest of the psalm, his victory is all ascribed to Jehovah. He alone acts, David simply receives. To have learned by experience that 'He lives,' and is 'my Rock,' and to gather all the feelings excited by the retrospect of a long life into 'Blessed be my Rock,' is to have reaped and garnered the richest harvest which earth can yield. So at last sings the man whose early years had been full of struggles and privations. A morning of tempest has cleared into sunny evening calm, as it will with us all if the tempest blows us into our true shelter.

This psalm begins with a rapturous heaping together of the precious names of God, as the singer has had them revealed to him by experience. Foremost among these stands that one, 'my Rock,' which is caught up again in this closing burst of thanksgiving. That great Rock towers unchangeable above fleeting things. The river runs past its base, the woods nestling at its feet bud, and shed their pride of foliage, but it stands the same. David had many a time hid in 'the clefts of the rocks' in his years of wandering, and the figure is eloquent on his lips.

These closing strains gather together once more the main points of the previous verses, his deliverance from domestic foes, and his conquests over external enemies. These are wholly God's work. True thankfulness delights to repeat its acknowledgments. God does not weary of giving, we should not weary of praising the Giver and His gifts. We renew our enjoyment of our long-past mercies by reiterating our thankfulness for them. They do not die as long as gratitude keeps their remembrance green.

But the Psalmist's experience impels him to a vow (verse 50). He will give thanks to God among the nations. God's mercies bind, and, if rightly felt, will joyfully impel, the receiver to spread His name as far as his voice can reach. Love is sometimes silent, but gratitude must speak. The most unmusical voice is tuned to melody by God's great blessings received and appreciated, and they need never want a theme who can tell what the Lord has done for their souls. 'Then shall. . . the tongue of the dumb sing.' A dumb Christian is a monstrosity. We are 'the secretaries of His praise,' and have been saved ourselves that we may declare His goodness.

Verse 51 has been supposed by some to be a liturgical addition, on the ground that, if David were the author, he would not be likely to name himself thus. But there does not seem to be anything unnatural in his mentioning himself by name in such a connection, and the reference to his dynasty, based as it is on Nathan's promise, is most fitting. The last thought

about his mercies which the humble gratitude of the Psalmist utters is that they were not given to him for any good in himself, nor to be selfishly enjoyed, but that they were bestowed on him because of the place that he filled in the divine purposes, and belonged to 'his seed' as truly as to himself. So lowly had his prosperity made him. So truly had he sunk himself in his office, and in the great things that God meant to do through him and his house. We know better than David did what these were, and how the promise on which he rested his hopes of the duration of his house is fulfilled in his Son, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and who bears God's name to all the nations.



### THE DYING KING'S LAST VISION AND PSALM

'Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, 2. The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue. 3. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. 4. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain. 5. Although my house be not so with God; yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although He make it not to grow. 6. But the sons of Belial shall be all of them as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken with hands: 7. But the man that shall touch them must be fenced with iron and the staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in the same place.'—2 SAMUEL xxiii. 1-7.

It was fitting that 'the last words of David' should be a prophecy of the true King, whom his own failures and sins, no less than his consecration and victories, had taught him to expect. His dying eyes see on the horizon of the far-off future the form of Him who is to be a just and perfect Ruler, before the brightness of whose presence and the refreshing of whose influence, verdure and beauty shall clothe the world. As the shades gather round the dying monarch, the radiant glory to come brightens. He departs in peace, having seen the salvation from afar, and stretched out longing hands of greeting toward it. Then his harp is silent, as if the rapture which thrilled the trembling strings had snapped them.

1. We have first a prelude extending to the middle of [verse 3](#). In it there is first a fourfold designation of the personality of the Psalmist-prophet, and then a fourfold designation of the divine oracle spoken through him. The word rendered in [verse 1](#) 'saith' is really a noun, and usually employed with 'the Lord' following, as in the familiar phrase 'saith the Lord.' It is used, as here, with the genitive of the human recipient, in Balaam's prophecy, on which this is evidently modelled. It distinctly claims a divine source for the oracle following, and declares, at the outset, that these last words of David were really the faithful sayings of Jehovah. The human and divine elements are smelted together. Note the description of the human personality. First, the natural 'David the son of Jesse,' like 'Balaam the son of Beor' in the earlier oracle. The aged king looks back with adoring thankfulness to his early days and humble birth, as if he were saying, 'Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should proclaim the coming King.' Then follow three clauses descriptive of what 'the son of Jesse' had been made by the grace of God, in that he had been raised on high from his low condition of a shepherd boy, and anointed as ruler, not only by Samuel and the people, but by the God of their great ancestor, whose career had presented so many points of resemblance to his own, the God who still wrought among the nation which bore the patriarch's name, as He had wrought of old; and that, besides his royalty, he had been

taught to sing the sweet songs which already were the heritage of the nation. This last designation shows what David counted God's chief gift to him,—not his crown, but his harp. It further shows that he regarded his psalms as divinely inspired, and it proves that already they had become the property of the nation. This first verse heightens the importance of the subsequent oracle by dwelling on the claims of the recipient of the revelation to be heard and heeded.

Similarly, the fourfold designation of the divine source has the same purpose, and corresponds with the four clauses of [verse 1](#), 'The Spirit of the Lord spake in [or "into"] me.' That gives the Psalmist's consciousness that in his prophecy he was but the recipient of a message. It wonderfully describes the penetrating power of that inward voice which clearly came to him from without, and as clearly spoke to him within. Words could not more plainly declare the prophetic consciousness of the distinction between himself and the Voice which he heard in the depths of his spirit. It spoke in him before he spoke his lyric prophecy. 'His word was upon my tongue.' There we have the utterance succeeding the inward voice, and the guarantee that the Psalmist's word was a true transcript of the inward voice. 'The God of Israel said,' and therefore Israel is concerned in the divine word, which is not of private reference, but meant for all. 'The Rock of Israel spake,' and therefore Israel may trust the Word, which rests on His immutable faithfulness and eternal being.

II. The divine oracle thus solemnly introduced and guaranteed must be worthy of such a prelude. Abruptly, and in clauses without verbs, the picture of the righteous Ruler is divinely flashed before the seer's inward eye. The broken construction may perhaps indicate that he is describing what he beholds in vision. There is no need for any supplement such as 'There shall be,' which, however true in meaning, mars the vividness of the presentation of the Ruler to the prophet's sight. David sees him painted on the else blank wall of the future. When and where the realisation may be he knows not. What are the majestic outlines? A universal sovereign over collective humanity, righteous and God-fearing. In the same manner as he described the vision of the King, David goes on, as a man on some height telling what he saw to the people below, and paints the blessed issues of the King's coming.

It had been night before He came,—the night of ignorance, sorrow, and sin,—but His coming is like one of these glorious Eastern sunrises without a cloud, when everything laughs in the early beams, and, with tropical swiftness, the tender herbage bursts from the ground, as born from the dazzling brightness and the fertilising rain. So all things shall rejoice in the reign of the King, and humanity be productive, under His glad and quickening influences, of growths of beauty and fruitfulness impossible to it without these.

The abrupt form of the prophecy has led some interpreters to construe it as, 'When a king over men is righteous. . . then it is as a morning,' etc. But surely such a platitude is not worthy of being David's last word, nor did it need divine inspiration to disclose to him that a just king is a great blessing. The only worthy meaning is that which sees here, in words so

solemnly marked as a special revelation closing the life of David, 'the vision of the future and all the wonder that should be,' when a real Person should thus reign over men. The explanation that we have here simply the ideal of the collective Davidic monarchy is a lame attempt to escape from the recognition of prophecy properly so called. It is the work of poetry to paint ideals, of prophecy to foretell, with God's authority, their realisation. The picture here is too radiant to be realised in any mere human king, and, as a matter of fact, never was so in any of David's successors, or in the whole of them put together. It either swings *in vacuo*, a dream unrealised, or it is a distinct prophecy from God of the reign of the coming Messiah, of whom David and all his sons, as anointed kings, were living prophecies. 'The Messianic idea entered on a new stage of development with the monarchy, and that not as if the history stimulated men's imaginations, but that God used the history as a means of further revelation by His prophetic Spirit.

III. The difficult [verse 5](#), whether its first and last clauses be taken interrogatively or negatively, in its central part bases the assurance of the coming of the king on God's covenant (2 Samuel vii.), which is glorified as being everlasting, provided with all requisites for its realisation, and therefore 'sure,' or perhaps 'preserved,' as if guarded by God's inviolable sanctity and faithfulness. The fulfilment of the dying saint's hopes depends on God's truth. Whatever sense might say, or doubt whisper, he silences them by gazing on that great Word. So we all have to do. If we found our hopes and forecasts on it, we can go down to the grave calmly, though they be not fulfilled, sure that 'no good thing can fail us of all that He hath spoken.' Living or dying, faith and hope must stay themselves on God's word. Happy they whose closing eyes see the form of the King, and whose last thoughts are of God's faithful promise! Happy they whose forecasts of the future, nearer or more remote, are shaped by His word! Happy they who, in the triumphant energy of such a faith, can with dying lips proclaim that His promises overlap, and contain, all their salvation and all their desire!

If we read the first and last clauses negatively, with Revised Version and others, they, as it were, surround the kernel of clear-eyed faith, in the middle of the verse, with a husk, not of doubt, but of consciousness how far the present is from fulfilling the great promise. The poor dying king looks back on the scandals of his later reign, on his own sin, on his children's lust, rebellion, and tragic deaths, and feels how far from the ideal he and they have been. He sees little token of growth toward realisation of that promise; but yet in spite of a stained past and a wintry present, he holds fast his confidence. That is the true temper of faith, which calls things that are not as though they were, and is hindered by no sense of unworthiness nor by any discouragements born of sense, from grasping with full assurance the promise of God. But the consensus of the most careful expositors inclines to take both clauses as questions, and then the meaning would be, 'Does not my house stand in such a relation to God that the righteous king will spring from it? It is, in this view, a triumphant question, expressing the strongest assurance, and the next clause would then lay bare the

foundation of that relation of David's house as not its goodness, but God's covenant ('for He hath made'). Similarly the last clause would be a triumphant question of certainty, asserting in the strongest manner that God would cause that future salvation for the world, which was wrapped up in the coming of the king, and in which the dying man was sure that he should somehow have a share, dead though he were, to blossom and grow, though he had to die as in the winter, before the buds began to swell. The assurance of immortality, and of a share in all the blessings to come, bursts from the lips that are so soon to be silent.

IV. But the oracle cannot end with painting only blessings as flowing from the king's reign. If he is to rule in righteousness and the fear of the Lord, then he must fight against evil. If his coming causes the tender grass to spring, it will quicken ugly growths too. The former representation is only half the truth; and the threatening of destruction for the evil is as much a part of the divine oracle as the other. Strictly, it is 'wickedness'—the abstract quality rather than the concrete persons who embody it—which is spoken of. May we recall the old distinction that God loves the sinner while He hates the sin? The picture is vivid. The wicked—and all the enemies of this King are wicked, in the prophet's view—are like some of these thorn-brakes, that cannot be laid hold of, even to root them out, but need to be attacked with sharp pruning-hooks on long shafts, or burned where they grow. There is a destructive side to the coming of the King, shadowed in every prophecy of him, and brought emphatically to prominence in his own descriptions of his reign and its final issues. It is a poor kindness to suppress that side of the truth. Thorns as well as tender grass spring up in the quickening beams; and the best commentary on the solemn words which close David's closing song is the saying of the King himself: 'In the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them.'

## THE ROYAL JUBILEE<sup>1</sup>

‘ . . . He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. 4. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth, by clear shining after rain.’—2 SAMUEL xxiii. 3, 4.

One of the Psalms ascribed to David sounds like the resolves of a new monarch on his accession. In it the Psalmist draws the ideal of a king, and says such things as, ‘I will behave myself wisely, in a perfect way. I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes. I hate the work of them that turn aside. Mine eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me.’ That psalm we may regard as the first words of the king when, after long, weary years, the promise of Samuel’s anointing was fulfilled, and he sat on the throne.

My text comes from what purports to be the last words of the same king.

He looks back, and again the ideal of a monarch rises before him. The psalm, for it is a psalm, though it is not in the Psalter, is compressed to the verge of obscurity; and there may be many questions raised about its translation and its bearing. These do not need to occupy us now, but the words which I have selected for my text may, perhaps, best be represented to an English reader in some such sentence as this—‘If (or when) one rules over men justly, ruling in the fear of God, then it shall be as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds.’ With such a monarch all the interests of his people will prosper. His reign will be like the radiant dawn of a cloudless day, and his land like the spring pastures when the fresh, green grass is wooed out of the baked earth by the combined influence of rain and sunshine. David’s little kingdom was surrounded by giant empires, in which brute force, wielded by despotic will, ground men down, or squandered their lives recklessly. But the King of Israel had learned, partly by the experience of his own reign, and partly by divine inspiration, that such rulers are not true types of a monarch after God’s own heart. This ideal king is neither a warrior nor a despot. Two qualities mark him, Justice and Godliness. Pharaoh and his like, oppressors, were as the lightning which blasts and scorches. The true king was to be as the sunshine that vitalises and gladdens. ‘He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass, and as showers that water the earth.’

We do not need to ask the question here, though it might be very relevant on another occasion, whether this portraiture is a mere ideal, floating *in vacuo*, or whether it is a direct prophecy of that expected Messianic king who was to realise the divine ideal of sovereignty. At all events we know that, in its highest and deepest significance, the picture of my text has lived and breathed human breath, in Jesus Christ, who both in His character and in His influence on the world, fulfilled the ideal that floated before the eyes of the aged king.

I do not need to follow the course of thought in this psalm any farther. You will have anticipated my motive for selecting this text now. It seems to me to gather up, in vivid and

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1 Preached on the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee.

picturesque form, the thoughts and feelings which to-day are thrilling through an Empire, to which the most extended dominion of these warrior kings of old was but a speck. On such an occasion as this I need not make any apology, I am sure, for diverging from the ordinary topics of pulpit address, and associating ourselves with the many millions who to-day are giving thanks for Queen Victoria.

My text suggests two lines along which the course of our thoughts may run. The one is the personal character of this ideal monarch; the other is its effects on his subjects.

I. Now, with regard to the former, the pulpit is, in my judgment, not the place either for the discussion of current events or the pronouncing of personal eulogiums. But I shall not be wandering beyond my legitimate province, if I venture to try to gather into a few words the reasons, in the character and public life of our Queen, for the thankfulness of this day. Our text brings out, as I have said, two great qualities as those on which a throne is to be established, Justice and Godliness. Now, the ancient type of monarch was the fountain of justice, in a very direct sense; inasmuch as it was his office, not only to pronounce sentence on criminals, but to give decisions on disputed questions of right. These functions have long ceased to be exercised by our monarchs, but there is still room for both of those qualities—the Justice which holds an even balance between parties and strifes, the Righteousness which has supreme regard to the primary duties that press alike upon prince and pauper, and the Godliness which, as I believe, is the root from which all righteousness, as between man and man, and as between prince and subject, must ever flow. Morality is the garb of religion; religion is the root of morality. He, and only he, will hold an even balance and discharge his obligations to man, whose life is rooted in, and his acts under the continual influence of, the fear of God which has in it no torment, but is the parent of all things good.

We shall not be flatterers if we thankfully recognise in our Sovereign Lady the presence of both these qualities. I have spoken of the first inaugural words of the King of Israel, and the resolutions that he made. It is recorded that when, to the child of eleven years of age, the announcement was made that she stood near in the line of succession to the throne, the tremulous young lips answered, 'It is a great responsibility; but I will be good.' And all round the world to-day her subjects attest that the aged monarch has kept the little maiden's vow. Contrast that life with the lives of the other women who have sat on the throne of England. Think of the brilliant Queen, whose glories our greatest poets were not ashamed to sing, with the Tudor masterfulness in her, and not a little of the Tudor grossness and passion, and remember the blots that stained her glories. Think of her sister, the morbidly melancholy tool of priests, who goes down the ages branded with an epithet only too sadly earned. Think of another woman that ruled over England in name, the weak instrument of base intrigues. And then turn to this life which we are looking upon to-day. Think of the nameless scandals, the hideous immorality of the reigns that preceded hers, and you will not wonder that every decent man and every modest woman was thankful that, with the young girl, there came a

breath of purer air into the foul atmosphere. I am old enough to remember hearing, as a boy, the talk of my elders as to the probabilities of insurrection if, instead of our Queen, there had come to the throne the brother of her two predecessors. The hopes of those early days have been more than fulfilled.

It is not for us to determine the religious character of others, and that is too sacred a region for us to enter; but this we may say, that in all these sixty years of diversified trial, there has been no act known to us outsiders inconsistent with the highest motive, the fear of the Lord; and some of us who have worshipped in the humble Highland church where she has bowed have felt that on the throne of Britain sat a Christian.

Nor need we forget how, from that root of fear of God, there has come that wondrous patience and faithfulness to duty, the form of 'Justice' which is possible for a constitutional monarch. We have little notion of how pressing and numerous and continual the royal duties must necessarily be. They have been discharged, even when the blow that struck all sunshine out of life left an irrepressible shrinking from pageantry and pomp. Joys come; joys go. Duties abide, and they have been done.

Nor can we forget, either, how the very difficult position of a constitutional monarch, with the semblance of power and the reality of narrow restrictions, has been filled. Our Sovereign has never set herself against the will of the people, expressed by its legitimate representatives, even when that will may have imposed upon her the sanction of changes which she did not approve. And that is much to say. We have seen young despots whose self-will has threatened to wreck a nation's prosperity.

Nor can we forget how all the immense influence of position and personality has been thrown on the side of purity and righteousness. Even we outsiders know how, more than once or twice, she has steadfastly set her face against the admission to her presence of men and women of evil repute, and has in effect repeated David's proclamation against vice and immorality at his accession: 'He that worketh wickedness shall not dwell within my house.'

Nor must we forget, either, the simplicity, the beauty, the tenderness of her wedded and family life, her love of rural quiet, and of wholesome communion with Nature, and her eagerness to take her people into her confidence, as set forth in the book which, whatever its literary merits, speaks of her earnest appreciation of Nature and her wish for the sympathy of her subjects.

Then came the bolt from the blue, that sudden crash that wrecked the happiness of a life. Many of us, I have no doubt, remember that dreary December Sunday morning when, while the nation was standing in expectation of another calamity from across the Atlantic, there flashed through the land the news of the Prince's death; thrilling all hearts, and bringing all nearer to her, the lonely widow, than they had ever been in her days of radiant happiness. How pathetically, silently, nobly, devoutly, that sorrow has been borne, it is not for us to speak. She has become one of the great company of sad and lonely hearts, and in

her sadness has shown an eager desire to send messages of sympathy to all whom she could reach, who were in like darkness and sorrow.

Brethren, I have ventured to diverge so far from the ordinary run of pulpit ministrations because I feel that to-day all of us, whatever may be our political or ecclesiastical relationships and proclivities, are one in thanking God for the monarch whose life has been without a stain, and her reign without a blot.

II. Now let me say a word as to the other line of thought which my text suggests, the effect of such a reign on the condition of the subject.

Now, of course, in the narrowly limited domain of that strange creation, a constitutional monarchy, there is far less opportunity for the Sovereign's direct influence on the Subject than there was in the ancient kingdoms of which David was thinking in his psalm. The marvellous progress of Britain during these sixty years is due, not to our Sovereign, but to a multitude of strenuous workers and earnest thinkers in a hundred different departments, as well as to the evolution of the gifts that come down to us from our ancient inheritance of freedom. But we shall much mistake if, for that reason, we set aside the monarch's character and influence as of no account in the progress

A supposition, which is a violent one, may be made which will set this matter in clearer light. Suppose that during these sixty years we had had a king on the throne of England like some of the kings we have had. The sentiment of loyalty is not now of such a character as that it will survive a vicious sovereign. If we had had such a monarch as I have hinted at, the loyalty of the good would for all these years have been suffering a severe strain, and the forces that make for evil would have been disastrously strengthened. Dangers escaped are unnoticed, but one twelvemonth of the reign of a profligate would shake the foundations of the monarchy, and would open the floodgates of vice; and we should then know how much the nation owed to the Queen whose life was pure, and who cast all her influence on the side of 'things that are lovely and of good report.'

Take another supposition. Suppose that during these years of wonderful transition, when the whole aspect of English politics and society has been transformed, we had had a king like George III., who set his opinion against the nation's will constitutionally expressed. Then no man knows with what storm and tumult, with what strife and injury, the inevitable transition would have been effected. Be sure of this, that the wise self-effacement of our Sovereign during these critical years of change is largely the reason why they have been years of peace, in which the new has mingled itself with the old without revolution or disturbance. It is due to her in a very large degree that

'Freedom broadens slowly down  
From precedent to precedent.'



I need not dilate on the changed Britain that she looks out upon and rules to-day. I need not speak—there will be many voices to do that, in not altogether agreeable notes, for there will be a dash of too much self-complacency in them—about progress in material wealth, colonial expansion, the increase of education, the gentler manners, the new life that has been breathed over art and literature, the achievements in science and philosophy, the drawing together of classes, the bridging over of the great gulf between rich and poor by some incipient and tentative attempts at sympathy and brotherhood.

Nor need I dwell upon the ecclesiastical signs of the times, in which, mingled as they are, there is at least this one great good, that never since the early days have so large a proportion of Christian men been ‘seeking after the things that make for peace,’ and realising the oneness of all believers who hold the Headship of Christ.

All this review falls more properly into other hands than mine. Only I would put in a caution—do not let us mingle self-conceit with our congratulations; and, above all, do not let us ‘rest and be thankful.’ There is much to be done yet. Listening ears can catch on every side vague sounds that tell of unrest and of the stirrings into wakefulness of

‘The spirit of the years to come,  
Yearning to mix itself with life.’

I seem to hear all around me the rushing in the dark of a mighty current that is bearing down upon us. Great social questions are rapidly coming to the front—the questions of distribution of wealth, abolition of privilege, the relations of labour and capital, and many others are clamant to be dealt with at least, if not solved. There is much to be done before Jesus Christ is throned as King of England. War has to be frowned down; the brotherhood of man has to be realised, temperance has to be much more largely practised than it is.

I need not go over the catalogue of *desiderata*, of *agenda*—things that have to be done—in the near future. Only this I would say—Christian men and women are the last people who should be ready to ‘rest and be thankful,’ for the principles of the Gospel that we profess, which have never been applied to the life of nations as they ought to be, will solve the questions which make the despair of so many in this generation. We shall best express our thankfulness for these past sixty years by each of us taking our part in the great movement which, in the inevitable drift of things to democracy, is going to ‘cast the kingdom old into another mould,’ and which will, I pray, make our people more of what John Milton long ago called them, ‘God’s Englishmen.’ We have taught the nations many things. Our Parliament is called the Mother of Parliaments. Ours is

‘The land where, girt with friends or foes,  
A man may say the thing he will.’

It has taught the nations a tempered freedom, and that a monarchy may be a true republic. May we rise to the height of our privileges and responsibilities, and teach our subject peoples, not only mechanics, science, law, free trade, but a loftier morality, and the name of Him by whom kings reign and princes decree justice!

We, members of the free Churches of England, come seldom under the notice of royalty, and have little acquaintance with courts, but we yield to none in our recognition of the virtues and in our sympathy with the sorrows of the Sovereign Lady, the good woman, who rules these lands, and we all heartily thank God for her to-day, and pray that for long years still to come the familiar letters V.R. may stand, as they have stood to two generations, as the symbol of womanly purity and of the faithful discharge of queenly duty.

### **A LIBATION TO JEHOVAH**

‘And David longed, and said, Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Beth-lehem, which is by the gate! 16. And the three mighty men brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Beth-lehem, that was by the gate, and took it and brought it to David: nevertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the Lord. 17. And he said, Be it far from me, O Lord, that I should do this; is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives? therefore he would not drink it. These things did these three mighty men.’—2 SAMUEL xxiii. 15-17.

David’s fortunes were at a low ebb. He was in hiding in his cave of Adullam, and a Philistine garrison held Bethlehem, his native place. He was little different from an outlaw at the head of a band of ‘broken men,’ but there were depths of chivalry and poetry in his heart. Sweltering in his cave in the fierce heat of harvest, he thought of his native Bethlehem; he remembered the old days when he had watered his flock at the well by its gate, or mingled with the people of the little town, in their evening assemblies round it. The memories of boyhood rose up radiant before him, and as he was immersed in the past, the grim present, the perils that threatened his life, the savage, gaunt rocks without a trace of greenness that girded him, the privations to which he was exposed, were all forgotten, and he longed for one more draught of the water that tasted so cool and sweet to memory. Three of his ‘mighty men,’ bound to him by loyal devotion and unselfish love, were ready to die to win for their chief a momentary gratification. So they slipped away from Adullam, ‘brake through the host of the Philistines,’ and brought back the longed-for draught. David’s reception of the dearly-bought, sparkling gift was due to a noble impulse. The water seemed to him to be dyed with blood, and to be not water so much as ‘lives of men.’ It had become too precious to be used to satisfy his longing. It would be base self-indulgence to drink what had been won by such self-forgetting devotion. God only had the right to receive what men had risked their lives to obtain, and therefore he ‘poured it out unto the Lord.’

The story gleams out of the fierce narratives in which it is embedded, like a flower blooming on some grim cliff. May we not learn lessons from it?

#### I. David’s longing.

David, a fugitive in the cave, haunted by the ‘nostalgia’ that made Bethlehem seem so fair and dear, may stand for us as an example of the longings and thirsts that sometimes force themselves into consciousness in every soul. Below the bustle and strife of daily life, occupied as it must be with material and often ignoble things, below the hardness into which the world has compressed men’s surface nature, there lies a yearning for the cool water that rises hard by the gate of our native home. True, it is with many of us overlaid for the most part by coarser desires, and may be as unlike our usual dominant longings and aims, as David’s tender outbreak of sentiment was to the prevailing tenor of his life, in those days when he was an outlaw and a freebooter. But the longing, though often stifled, is not wholly

quenched. It is misinterpreted by the man who is conscious of it, and far too often he tries to slake the thirst by fiery and drugged liquors which but make it more intense. Happy are they who know what it is that their parched palates crave, and have learned, while yet the knowledge avails, to say, 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God!' 'Blessed are they who thirst after' the water of the well of Bethlehem, 'for they shall be filled!'

II. The three heroes' devotion.

These three rough soldiers, lawless and fierce as they were, had been so mastered by their chief that they were ready to dare anything to pleasure him. Who would have looked for such delicacy of feeling and such enthusiastic self-surrender in such men?

They stand as grand instances of the height of devotion of which the rudest nature is capable, when once its love and loyalty to the Beloved are evoked.

How such deeds ennoble the lowest types of character, and make us think better of men, and more sadly of the contrast between their habitual characteristics and the possibilities that lie slumbering in their ignoble lives! There are sparks in the hard cold flint, if only they could be struck out. There is water in the rock, if only the right hand, armed with the wonder-working rod, smites it.

Let us not judge men too harshly by what they do and are, but let us try to bring their sleeping possibilities into conscious exercise.

Let us remember that love and self-sacrifice, which is the very outcome and natural voice of love, ennoble the most degraded.

But these heroic three may suggest to us a sadder thought. They were ready to die for David; would they have been as ready to die for God? These noble emotions of love, leading to glad flinging away of life to pleasure the beloved, are freely given to men, but too often withheld from God, We lavish on our beloveds or on our chosen leaders, a devotion that ought to shame us, when contrasted with the scantiness of our grudging devotion and self-surrender to Him. If we loved God a tenth part as ardently as we love our wives or husbands or parents or children, and were willing to do and bear as much for Him as we are willing to bear for them, how different our lives would be! We can love utterly, enthusiastically, self-forget-tingly, absorbed in the beloved, and counting all surrender of self to, and the sacrifice of life itself for, him or her a delight. Many of us do love men so. Do we love God so?

But these heroic three may suggest another thought. Their self-sacrificing love was illustrious; but there is a nobler, more wonderful, more soul-subduing instance of such love. They broke through the ranks of the Philistines to bring David a draught from the well of Bethlehem. Jesus has broken through the ranks of our enemies to bring us the water of which 'if a man drink, he shall live for ever.' If we would see the highest example of self-sacrificing love, we must turn to look, not on the instances of it that shine through the ages on the page of history, and make men thrill as they gaze, and think better of the human

nature that can do such things, but on the Christ hanging on the Cross because He loved those who did not love Him, and giving His life a ransom for sinners.

III. David's reception of the water.

The chivalrous devotion of the three touched an answering chord in their chivalrous chief. His heart filled at the thought of what they had risked, and revolted from employing what had been thus won for no higher use than to gratify a piece of sentiment in himself. The sparkling water was too sacred to be taken for any baser use than as a libation to Jehovah. And who can doubt that the three were more fully repaid for their devotion, as David poured it out unto the Lord, than if he had drunk it eagerly up? His feeling and his act indicate beautiful delicacy of instinct, and swiftness of perception of how to requite the devotion of the three.

We may separate into its two parts the generous impulse which sprang as one whole in David's breast. There was the shrinking from using the water to slake his thirst merely, and there was the resolve to pour it out as a libation to God. Both parts of that whole may yield us profitable thoughts.

To risk their lives for the water was noble in the three; to have quaffed it as if it had been drawn like any other water from a well, would have been ignoble in David. There are things that it may be noble to give and ignoble to accept. There are sacrifices which we are not entitled to allow others to make for our sakes. Gratifications which can only be procured at the hazard of men's lives are too dearly bought.

Would not a civilisation, that draws much of its comforts and appliances from 'sweated industries,' and is languidly amused by seeing men and women performers peril their lives nightly, and lose them too, for its gratification, be the better for copying David's recoil from drinking 'the blood of men that went in jeopardy of their lives'? Is there not 'blood' on many a woman's ball-dress, on many an article of luxury, on many an amusement?

There are sacrifices which we have no right to accept from others. The three had no right to risk life for such a purpose, and David would have been selfish if he had drunk the water. Do not such thoughts lead us by contrast to Him who has done what none other can do? 'None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give his life a ransom for him'; but Jesus can and Jesus does, and what it would be impossible, and wrong if it were possible, for one man to do for another, He has done for us all, and what it would be base for a man to accept from another if that other could give it, it is blessed and the beginning of all nobleness of character for us to accept from Him. David would not drink because the cup seemed to him to be red with blood. Jesus offers to us a cup, not of cold water only but of 'water and blood,' and bids us drink of it and remember Him.

The generous devotion of the three kindled answering emotions in David's breast. It would be a churlish soul that was not warmed into some faint replica of such self-sacrifice, and most of us would be ashamed of ourselves if we were unmoved by such love. But does

the supreme example of it affect us as much as the lesser examples of it do? How many of us stand before it like the peaks of the Alps that front full south, and lift an unmelted breastplate of snow to the midday sun! How many of us have lived all our lives in presence of Jesus' infinite love and self-surrender for us each, and never have felt one transient touch of answering love!

The other part of David's impulse was to offer to God what was too precious for his own use. That is the fitting destination of our most precious and prized possessions. And whatever is thus offered becomes more precious by being offered. The altar sanctifies and enhances the worth of the gift. What we give to God is more our own than if we had kept it to ourselves, and develops richer capacities of ministering to our delight. It is so with our greatest surrender, the surrender of ourselves. When we give ourselves to Jesus, He renders us back to ourselves, far better worth having than before. We are never so much our own as when we are wholly Christ's. And the same thing is true as to all our riches of mind, heart, or worldly wealth. If we wish to taste their most delicate and refined sweetness, let us give them to Jesus, and the touch of His hand, as He accepts them and gives them back to us, will leave a lingering fragrance that nothing else can impart. Was not the water from the well of Bethlehem sweeter to David as he poured it out unto the Lord than if he had greedily gulped it down?

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**THE FIRST BOOK OF KINGS**

## DAVID APPOINTING SOLOMON

‘Then king David answered and said, Call me Bath-sheba. And she came into the king’s presence, and stood before the king. 29. And the king swore, and said, As the Lord liveth, that hath redeemed my soul out of all distress, 30. Even as I swore unto thee by the Lord God of Israel, saying, Assuredly Solomon thy son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne in my stead; even so will I certainly do this day. 31. Then Bath-sheba bowed with her face to the earth, and did reverence to the king, and said, Let my lord king David live for ever. 32. And king David said, Call me Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada. And they came before the king. 33. The king also said unto them, Take with you the servants of your lord, and cause Solomon my son to ride upon mine own mule, and bring him down to Gihon: 34. And let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him there king over Israel: and blow ye with the trumpet, and say, God save king Solomon. 35. Then ye shall come up after him, that he may come and sit upon my throne; for he shall be king in my stead: and I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and over Judah. 36. And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada answered the king, and said, Amen; the Lord God of my lord the king say so too. 37. As the Lord hath been with my lord the king, even so be he with Solomon, and make his throne greater than the throne of my lord king David. 38. So Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites, and the Pelethites, went down, and caused Solomon to ride upon king David’s mule, and brought him to Gihon. 39. And Zadok the priest took an horn of oil out of the tabernacle, and anointed Solomon. And they blew the trumpet; and all the people said, God save king Solomon.’—1 KINGS i. 28-39.

The earlier part of this chapter must be taken into account in order to get the right view of this incident. David’s eldest surviving son, Adonijah, had claimed the succession, and gathered his partisans to a feast. Nathan, alarmed at the prospect of such a successor, had arranged with Bathsheba that she should go to David and ask his public confirmation of his promise to her that Solomon should succeed him, and that then Nathan should seek an audience while she was with the king, and, as independently, should prefer the same request.

The plan was carried out, and here we see its results. The old king was roused to a flash of his ancient vigour, confirmed his oath to Bathsheba, and promptly cut the ground from under Adonijah’s feet by sending for the three who had remained true to him—Nathan, Benaiah, and Zadok—and despatching them without a moment’s delay to proclaim Solomon king, and then to bring him up to the palace and enthrone him. The swift execution of these decisive orders, and the burst of popular acclamation which welcomed Solomon’s accession, shattered the nascent conspiracy, and its supporters scattered in haste, to preserve their lives. The story may be best dealt with, for our purpose, by taking this brief summary and trying to draw lessons from it.



I. It points anew the truth that 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' As Absalom, so Adonijah, had been spoiled by David's over-indulgence (verse 6), and having never had his wishes checked, was now letting his unbridled wishes hurry him into rebellion. Nor was that fault of David's the only one which brought about the miserable squabbles round his deathbed, as to who should wear the crown which had not yet fallen from his head. Eastern monarchies are familiar with struggles for the crown between the sons of different mothers when their father dies. David had indulged in a multitude of wives, and his last days were darkened by the resulting intrigues of his sons. No doubt, too, Solomon was disliked by his brethren as the child of Bathsheba, and the shame of David's crime was an obstacle in his younger son's way. Thus, as ever, his evil deeds came home to roost, and the poisonous seed which he had sown grew up and waved, a bitter harvest, which he had to reap. Repentance and forgiveness did not neutralise the natural consequences of his sin. Nor will they do so for us. God often leaves them to be experienced, that the experience may make us hate the sins the more.

II. The sad defection to Adonijah of such tried friends as Joab and Abiathar has its lesson. The reason for Joab's treachery is plain. He had been steadily drifting away from David for years. His fierce temper could not brook the king's displeasure on account of his murders of Abner and Amasa, and his slaying of Absalom had made the breach irreparable. No doubt, David had made him feel that he loved and trusted him no longer; and his old comrade in many a fight, Benaiah, had stepped into the place which he had once filled. Professional rivalry had darkened into bitter hate. Joab commanded the native-born Israelites; Benaiah, the 'Cherethites and Pelethites,' who are now generally regarded as foreign mercenaries. They were David's bodyguard, and were probably as heartily hated by Joab and the other Israelite soldiers as they were trusted by David. So there were reasons enough for Joab's abetting an insurrection which would again make him the foremost soldier. He wanted to be indispensable, and would prop the throne as long as its occupant looked only to him as its defender. Besides, he probably felt that he would have little chance of winning distinction in a kingdom which was to be a peaceful one.

Abiathar's motives are unexplained, but if we notice that he had been obliged to acquiesce in the irregular arrangement of putting the high-priest's office into commission, we can understand that he bore no goodwill to Zadok, his colleague, or to David for making the latter so. Self was at the bottom of these two renegades' action. The fair fellowship, which had been made the closer because of dangers and privations faced together, crumbled away before the disintegrating influences of petty personal jealousies. When once self-regard gets in, it is like the trickle of water in the cracks of a rock, which freezes in winter and splits the hardest stone. No common action for a great cause is possible without the suppression of sidelong looks towards private advantage. Joab and Abiathar tarnished a life's devotion and broke sacred bonds, because they thought of themselves rather than of God's will. Surely

they must have had some pangs as they sat at Adonijah's feast, when they thought of the decrepit old king lying in his chamber up on Zion, and remembered what he and they had come through together.

III. We may note the pathetic picture of decaying old age which is seen in David. He was not very old in years, being about seventy, but he was a worn-out man. His early hardships had told on him, and now he lay in the inner chamber, the shadow of himself. His love for Bathsheba had died down, as would appear both from her demeanour before him, and from her ignorance of his intentions as to his successor. She was little or nothing to him now. He seems to have been torpidly unaware of what was going on. The noise of Adonijah's revels had not disturbed his quiet. He had not even taken the trouble to designate his successor, though 'the eyes of all Israel were upon him that he should tell who was to sit on his throne after him' (v. 20). Such neglect was criminal in the circumstances, and brings out forcibly the weary indifference which had crept over him. Contrast that picture with the early days of swift energy and eager interest in all things. Is this half-comatose old man the David who flashed like a meteor and struck swift as a thunderbolt but a few years before? Yes, and a like collapse of power befalls us all, if life is prolonged. Those who most need the lesson will be least touched by it; but let not the young glory in their strength, for it soon fades away; and let them give the vigour of their early days to God, that, when the years come in which they shall say, 'I have no pleasure in them,' they may be able, like David, to look back over a long life and say, with him, that the Lord 'hath redeemed my soul out of all adversity.'

IV. We note the flash of fire which blazed up in the dying embers of David's life. The old lion could be roused yet, and could strike when roused. It took much to shake him out of his torpor. Nathan's plan of bringing the double influence of Bathsheba and himself to bear was successful beyond what he had hoped. All that they desired was a formal declaration of Solomon as successor. They knew that the king's name was still dear enough to all Israel to ensure that his wish would settle the succession; and they would have been content to have left the actual entrance of Solomon on office till after David's death, so sure were they that his word was still a spell. But the old king, shaking off his languor, as a lion does the drops from his mane, goes beyond their wishes, and strikes one decisive blow as with a great paw, and no second is needed. Without a moment's delay, he sends for the trusty three, and bids them act on the instant. So down to Gihon goes the procession, with the youthful prince seated on his father's mule, in token of his accession, the trusty bodyguard round him with Benaiah at their head, and the great prophet Nathan, side by side with the high-priest Zadok, representing the divine sanction of the solemn act.

It would take stronger men than the spoiled Adonijah and his revellers to upset anything which that determined company resolved to do. The lad is anointed with the holy oil which Zadok as high-priest had the right to bring forth from the temporary sanctuary. That signified

and effected the communication from above of qualifications for the kingly office, and indicated divine appointment. Then out blared the trumpets, and the glad people shouted 'God save the king!' What thoughts filled the young heart of Solomon as he stood silent there his vision in Gibeon may partly tell. But the distant roar of acclaim reached Adonijah and his gang as they sat at their too hasty banquet.

They had begun at the wrong end. The feast should have closed, not inaugurated, the dash for the crown. They who feast when they should fight are likely to end their mirth with sorrow. David's one stroke was enough. They were as sure as Nathan and Bathsheba had been that the declaration of his wish would carry all Israel with it, and so they saw that the game was up, and there was a rush for dear life. The empty banqueting-hall proclaimed the collapse of a rebellion which had no brains to guide it, and no reason to justify it. Let us learn that, though 'the race is not always to the swift,' promptitude of action, when we are sure of God's will, is usually a condition of success. Life is too short, and the work to be done too pressing and great, to allow of dawdling. 'I made haste, and delayed not, but made haste to keep Thy commandments.' Let us learn, too, from Adonijah's fiasco, to see the end of a thing before we commit ourselves to it, and to have the work done first before we think of the feast.

Nathan and Bathsheba and David all believed that God had willed Solomon's succeeding to the throne. No doubt, the reason for their belief was the divine word to David through Nathan ([2 Samuel vii. 12](#)), which designated a son not yet born as his successor, and therefore excluded Adonijah as well as Absalom. But, while they believed this, they did not therefore let Adonijah work his will, and leave God to carry out His purposes. Their belief animated their action. They knew what God willed, and therefore they worked strenuously to effect that will. We may bewilder our brains with speculations about the relation between God's sovereignty and man's freedom, but, when it comes to practical work, we have to put out the best and most that is in us to prevent God's will from being thwarted by rebellious men, and to ensure its being carried into effect through our efforts, 'for we are God's fellow-workers.'

### **A YOUNG MAN'S WISE CHOICE OF WISDOM**

'In Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, Ask what I shall give thee. 6. And Solomon said, Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before Thee in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with Thee; and Thou hast kept for him this great kindness, that Thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. 7. And now, O Lord my God, Thou hast made Thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in. 8. And Thy servant is in the midst of Thy people which Thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. 9. Give therefore Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this Thy so great a people? 10. And the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. 11. And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; 12. Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. 13. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days. 14. And if thou wilt walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days. 15. And Solomon awoke; and, behold, It was a dream. And he came to Jerusalem, and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings, and offered peace offerings, and made a feast to all his servants.'—[1 KINGS iii. 5-15](#).

The new king was apparently some nineteen or twenty years old on his accession. He stepped at once out of seclusion and idleness to bear the whole weight of the kingdom. The glories of David's reign, his brother Adonijah's pretensions to the crown, the smouldering hostility of Saul's old partisans, made his position difficult and his throne unsteady. No doubt, 'the weight of too much dignity' pressed on the youth, and this dream found a point of origin in his waking thoughts. God does not thus reveal Himself to men who seek Him not; and the offer in the vision is but the repetition of what Solomon felt in many a waking moment of meditation that God was saying to him, and the choice he makes in it is the choice that he had already made. He who seeks wisdom first is already wise.

I. Note the wide possibilities opened by the divine offer. Our narrative brings that gracious offer into connection with Solomon's lavish sacrifice before the Tabernacle at Gibeon. 'God loveth a cheerful giver' and because these thousand burnt offerings meant devotion and thankfulness, therefore He who lets no man be the poorer for what he gives to Him, and is honoured most, not by our givings to, but by our takings from Him, comes in the quiet night, and puts the key of all His treasures into the young king's hands. In a very real

sense this divine voice is but the putting into words of the fact as to every young life. The all but boundless possibilities before every young man and woman give solemnity to their position, which they too often do not recognise till youth is past. The future lies blank before them, ready to receive what they choose to write on its page. Once written, it is indelible. They are still free from the limitations of habit and associations. They have still the capacity and the opportunity of choice. There are limits, of course, but still it is scarcely exaggeration to say that a man may become almost anything he likes, if he strongly wills it when young, and sticks to his resolve. When the liquid iron flows from the blast furnace, it may be run into any mould; but it soon cools and hardens, and obstinately keeps its shape, in spite of hammers.

If young men and women could but see the possibilities of their youth, and the issues that hang on early choice, as clearly as they will see them some day, there would be fewer wasted mornings of life and fewer gloomy sunsets. But the misery is that so many do not choose at all, but just let things slide, and allow themselves to be moulded by whatever influence happens to be strongest. For one man who goes wrong by deliberate choice, with open eyes, there are twenty who simply drift. Unfortunately, there is more evil than good in the world; and if a lad takes his colour from his surroundings, the chances are terribly against his coming to anything high, noble, or pure. This world is no place for a man who cannot say 'No.' If we are like the weeds in a stream, and let it decide which way we shall point, we shall be sure to point downwards. It would do much to secure the choice of the Good, if there were a clear recognition by all young persons of the fact that they have the choice to make, and are really making it unconsciously. If they could be brought, like Solomon, to put their ruling wish into plain words, many who are not ashamed to yield to unworthy desires would be ashamed to speak them out baldly. Let each ask himself, 'Suppose that I had to say out what I want most, dare I avow before my own conscience, to say nothing of God, what it is?

Looked at from a somewhat different point of view, God's offer to Solomon presupposes God's knowledge and approval of his wishes. He does not give blank cheques to those whom He cannot trust to fill them up rightly. When James and John tried to commit Jesus to a blind promise 'that Thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall ask of Thee,' their answer was a question as to what they wished. 'Delight thyself also in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.' God loves us too well to let us have *carte blanche* unless our wills run parallel with His. He is a foolish and cruel father who promises compliance with all his child's unknown wishes. Not such is our Father's loving discipline. It is to those who 'abide in Christ,' and have Him abiding in them, moulding their longings and prayers, that the great promise is sealed: 'Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.'

II. Note next the wise choice of wisdom. 'Had not Solomon been wise before, he had not known the worth of wisdom. The dunghill cocks of this world cannot know the price

of this pearl; those that have it know that all other excellencies are but trash and rubbish unto it.' Solomon's prayer shows the temper with which he entered on his reign. There is no exultation; his serious and clear-eyed spirit sees in rule a heavy task. He contrasts his inexperienced rawness with the 'truth and righteousness' and veteran maturity of his great predecessor, and trembles to think that he, a mere lad, sits on David's throne. But he pleads with God that He has made him king, and implies that therefore God is bound to fit him for his office. That is the boldness permitted to faith,—to remind God of His own past acts, which pledge Him to give what He has put us into circumstances to need. With beautiful humility, Solomon dwells on his youth and inexperience, and on the vastness of the charge laid on him. All these considerations are the motives for his choice of a gift, and also pleads with God to grant his request.

He asks for the practical wisdom needed for ruling in these old days, when the king was judge as well as ruler and captain. Was this the highest gift that he could have asked or received? Surely the deep longings of his father for communion with God were yet better. No doubt the 'wisdom' of the Book of Proverbs is religion and morality as well as true thinking, but the 'understanding heart to judge Thy people' which Solomon asked and received is narrower and more secular in its meaning. There is no sign in his biography that he ever had the deep inward devotion of his father. After the poet-psalmist came the prosaic and keen-sighted shrewd man of affairs. The one breathed his ardent soul into psalms, which feed devotion to-day; the other crystallised his discernment in 'three thousand proverbs,' and, though his 'songs were one thousand and five' they touched a lower range, both of poetry and religious feeling, than his father's, as may be expressed by calling them 'songs,' not 'psalms.'

But though the request is not the highest, it may well be taken as a pattern by the young. Note the view of his position from which it rises. To Solomon dignity meant duty; and his crown was not a toy, but a task. The responsibilities, not the enjoyments, of his station were uppermost in his mind. That is the only right view to take. Youth is meant to be enthusiastic, and to feed its aspirations on noble ideals, and if, instead of that, it does as too many do, especially in countries where wealth abounds, namely, regards life as a garden of delights, or sometimes as a sty where young men may wallow in 'pleasures,' then farewell to all hopes of high achievements or of an honourable career. Youthful ideals will fade fast enough; but alas for the life which had none to begin with! Note the sense of insufficiency for his task. Youth is prone to be over-confident, and to think that it can do better than its fathers, who were as confident in their time. There is a false humility which flattens the spirit and keeps from plain duty; and there is a true lowliness which feels that the task must be attempted, though the heart may shrink, and which impels to prayer for fitness not its own. He who tells God his consciousness of impotence, and asks Him to supply His strength to its weakness

and His wisdom to its inexperience, will never shirk work because it is too great, nor ever fail to find power according to his need.

III. Note God's answer. Solomon gets his wish, and much which he had not asked besides. The divine answer is in two parts. First, the reasons for the large gift; and second, the details of the gift. His not wishing material good was the very reason why he obtained it. That is not always so; for often enough a man whose whole nature is sharpened to one point, in the intensity of his desire to make money, will succeed. But what then? He will be none the better, but the poorer, for his wealth. But this is always true,—that the people who do not make worldly good their first object are the people who can be most safely trusted with it, and who get most enjoyment out of it. Whether in the precise form of the gift to Solomon or not, outward good does attend a life which sets duty before pleasure, and desires most to be able to do it. All earthly good is exalted by being put second, and degraded as well as corrupted by being put first. The water lapped up in the palm, as the soldier marches, is sweeter than the abundant draughts swilled down by self-indulgence. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, . . . and all these things shall be added unto you.'

Note the largeness of the gift. When God is pleased with a man's prayers, He gives more than was asked, and so teaches us to be ashamed of the smallness of our expectations, and widens our desires by His overlapping bestowments. First, He gives the wisdom asked. Dependence on God, rising from the sense of our own ignorance, has a wonderful power of bringing illumination, even as to small matters of practical duty. Solomon asked it, to guide him in his judicial decisions; and the first case to which it was applied, when received, was a miserable quarrel between two disreputable women. A devout heart, purged from self-conceit, is often gifted with a piercing wisdom before which the crafty shrewdness of the world is abashed. We cannot be 'wise as serpents' unless we are 'harmless as doves.' The world may think such 'wisdom' folly, but she will be 'justified of her children.' Is the saying of James's Epistle a reminiscence of Solomon's dream, 'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, . . . and it shall be given him'?

Then follows the grant of the unasked goods,—riches, honour, and length of days. Surely we hear an echo of these promises in that magnificent description of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs: 'Length of days is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour' These and similar gifts may or may not follow our choice of divine wisdom as our truest good. If we have really chosen it, we shall regard them as make-weights, to be thankfully received and rightly used, but not as indispensable. If we pursue wisdom for the sake of getting these, we shall lose both it and them. If we have set our desires most earnestly on the most worthy things, which are God's love and a character hallowed by His grace, we shall be rich indeed, whether what the world calls wealth be ours or no; and our days will be long enough if in them we have been prepared for the fuller wisdom and undying life of heaven.

Solomon realised his youthful aspirations. The only way to be sure of getting what we wish, is to wish what God desires to give,—even Himself,—and to ask it of Him. Solomon, like many a young man, outgrew his early ‘dream.’ Was he happier or wiser when he was a worn-out voluptuary, smiling with cynical scorn at his young self, or when, with generous enthusiasm, he felt the solemnity of life and the awfulness of duty, and asked God to help his insufficiency? Was not the dream truer and more real than the waking hours of profligacy and unreal ‘enjoyment’?



### THE GREAT GAIN OF GODLINESS

‘And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, all the days of Solomon. 26. And Solomon had forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen. 27. And those officers provided victual for king Solomon, and for all that came unto king Solomon’s table, every man in his month: they lacked nothing. 28. Barley also and straw for the horses and dromedaries brought they unto the place where the officers were, every man according to his charge. 29. And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore. 30. And Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. 31. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about. 32. And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five. 33. And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl and of creeping things, and of fishes. 34. And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom.’—1 [KINGS iv. 25-34](#).

The glories of Solomon’s reign kindle the writer of this Book of Kings to patriotic enthusiasm, all the more touching if, as is probable, he wrote during Israel’s exile. The fair vision of the past would make the sad present still sadder. But it is not patriotism only which guides his pen; he recognises that Solomon’s glory was the result of Solomon’s religion, and by portraying it he would teach the eternal truth that godliness hath ‘promise of the life that now is’ as well as ‘of that which is to come.’ The passage brings out three characteristics of Solomon’s reign and character: the peace enjoyed by Israel during his time, his wealth, and his wisdom.

I. That beautiful phrase for a time of secure enjoyment of modest, material good in a simple state of agricultural society, ‘dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree’ occurs frequently in the Old Testament, and breathes the very essence of a calm life of rural felicity and restful enjoyment of wholesome joys. How different from the feverish ideal predominant in our great cities to-day! Which is the nobler and the more likely to yield abiding content and to be the ally of high and serious thought—this antique picture of leisurely, unambitious lives, or the scramble for wealth which destroys repose, and is so busy getting that it has no time either rightly to enjoy, or nobly to expend, its wealth? Those who have their country’s truest prosperity at heart may well sigh for the return of the vanished ideal of Solomon’s days; and those who would make the most of themselves must in some measure seek to conform their own lives to it.

But another view may be taken of this picture of national prosperity. Remember the time at which it was painted,—a time when the prosperity of a nation was thought to consist

in conquest, and when the arts of peace were despised. How far beyond his era was the king who set his highest glory in securing for his people tranquil lives on their fertile homesteads, and condemned the vulgar glory of the conqueror! How far beyond his era was the writer who felt that the fairest page in his book was not that which told of battles and triumphs, but that which portrayed a peaceful reign, when swords were turned into ploughshares! The world has not yet learned that the highest function of government is to promote individual prosperity. The vulgar, wicked notion of 'glory' bewitches the nations still. A Europe, armed to the teeth and staggering under the weight of its weapons, has need to go to school to this old Hebrew ideal. 'They didn't know everything down in Judee,' but they knew that peace has nobler victories than war has. The people who see nothing in the world's history but natural evolution have a hard nut to crack in accounting for the singular fact that the Jew somehow or other had got hold of a truth to which the most advanced nations to-day have scarcely grown up.

II. The wealth of Solomon is illustrated by his large equipment of chariots and horsemen. The older habits of the nation had not favoured the use of either, and their employment by Solomon was a sign of growing luxury, which had the seeds of evil in it. But the novelty was characteristic of the change coming over Israel in his day, and of its closer intercourse with other nations. The number of forty thousand for the stalls of the horses is an evident clerical error, which is corrected in the parallel passage in [2 Chronicles ix. 25](#) to the more probable number of four thousand. A well-organised staff looked after provisioning the cavalry and chariot horses wherever they were quartered. This one instance of Solomon's resources should be connected with the other details of these. The intention of all is, not only to magnify his wealth, but to bring out the fulfilment of the promise made to him as part of the reward of his prayer for wisdom, that he should have the inferior good which he had not asked, 'both riches and honour.'

The principle which the writer of this book would confirm and exemplify is, that to the man who seeks first the kingdom of God and His righteousness all these things shall be added. Now the whole order of supernatural providences in the Old Testament was directed to making material prosperity depend on obedience to God. And we cannot assert that the New Testament order has the same purpose in view. 'Prosperity was the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New.' But even in Old Testament times outward prosperity did not always follow godliness, and the problem which has tortured all generations had already been raised, as the Book of Job and Psalm lxxiii show.

Undoubtedly, religion does contribute to prosperity. The natural tendency of the course of life which Christianity enjoins is to lead to moderate, modest success in a worldly point of view. Not many millionaires owe their millions to the practice of Christian virtues, but many a man owes his elevation from poverty to modest competence to the character and

habits which his religion has stamped on him. People who get converted in the slums soon get out of the slums.

But, whether Christianity helps a man to worldly success or not, it helps him to get all the good out of the world that the world can give. It may, or may not, give dainties, but it will make brown bread sweet. It may, or may not, give wealth, but it will make the 'little that a righteous man hath better than the riches of many wicked.' They who know no higher good than earth can yield know not the highest good of earth; they who put worldly prosperity and treasure second find them far more precious and sweet than when they ranked them as first.

III. But the crown of Solomon's gifts was his wisdom. And his elevation of intellectual and moral endowments above material good is as remarkable as his similar elevation of peace above warlike fame, and suggests the same questions as to the source of ideas so far ahead of what was then the world's point of view. Observe that Solomon's 'wisdom' in all its departments is traced to God its giver. Observe, too, that expression 'largeness of heart,' by which is meant, not width of quick sympathy or generosity, but what we should call comprehensive intellect. The 'heart' is the centre of the personal being, from which thoughts as well as affections flow, and the phrase here points to thoughts rather than to affections.

Solomon, then, was a many-sided student, and his 'genius' showed itself in very various forms. He lived before the days of specialists. The region of knowledge was so limited that a man could be master in many departments. Nowadays the mass has become so unmanageable that, to know one subject thoroughly, we have to be ignorant of many, like the scholar who had given his life to the study of the Greek noun, and, dying, lamented that he had not confined himself to the dative case! Practical wisdom, which had its field in doing justice between his subjects; shrewd observation of life, with wit to discern resemblances and to put wisdom into homely, short sayings; poetic sensibility and the gift of melodious speech; and, added to these manifold endowments, interest in, and rudimentary knowledge of, natural history and botany, make the points specified as Solomon's wisdom.

'A man so various that he seemed to be  
Not one, but all mankind's epitome,'—

the first and greatest of the few students or philosophers who have sat on thrones.

But the main thing to notice is that in Solomon we see exemplified the normal relation between religion and intellectual power and learning. Judge, artist, scientist, and all other thinkers and students, draw their power from God, and should use it for Him. And, on the other hand, Solomon's example is a rebuke to those narrow-minded Christians who look askance at men of learning, letters, or science, as well as to those still more narrow-minded

men of intellectual ability who think that science and religion must be sworn foes. If our religion is what it should be, it will widen our understanding all round.

‘Let knowledge grow from more to more, But more of reverence in us dwell.’

### **GREAT PREPARATIONS FOR A GREAT WORK**

‘And Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants unto Solomon; for he had heard that they had anointed him king in the room of his father: for Hiram was ever a lover of David. 2. And Solomon sent to Hiram, saying, 3. Thou knowest how that David my father could not build an house unto the name of the Lord his God for the wars which were about him on every side, until the Lord put them under the soles of his feet. 4. But now the Lord my God hath given me rest on every side, so that there is neither adversary nor evil occurrent. 6. And, behold, I purpose to build an house unto the name of the Lord my God, as the Lord spake unto David my father, saying, Thy son, whom I will set upon thy throne in thy room, he shall build an house unto My name. 6. Now therefore command thou that they hew me cedar trees out of Lebanon; and my servants shall be with thy servants: and unto thee will I give hire for thy servants according to all that thou shalt appoint: for thou knowest that there is not among us any that can skill to hew timber like unto the Sidonians. 7. And. it came to pass, when Hiram heard the words of Solomon, that he rejoiced greatly, and said, Blessed be the Lord this day, which hath given unto David a wise son over this great people. 8. And Hiram sent to Solomon, saying, I have considered the things which thou sentest to me for: and I will do all thy desire concerning timber of cedar, and concerning timber of fir. 9. My servants shall bring them down from Lebanon unto the sea: and I will convey them by sea in floats unto the place that thou shalt appoint me, and will cause them to be discharged there, and thou shalt receive them: and thou shalt accomplish my desire, in giving food for my household. 10. So Hiram gave Solomon cedar trees, and fir trees, according to all his desire. 11. And Solomon gave Hiram twenty thousand measures of wheat, for food to his household, and twenty measures of pure oil: thus gave Solomon to Hiram year by year. 12. And the Lord gave Solomon wisdom, as He promised him: and there was peace between Hiram and Solomon; and they two made a league together.’—[1 KINGS v. 1-12](#).

The building of the Temple was begun in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign ([1 Kings vi. 1](#)). The preparations for so great a work must have taken much time, so that the arrangement with Hiram recorded in this passage was probably made very early in the reign. That probability is strengthened if we suppose, as we must do, that the embassy from Hiram mentioned in verse 1 was sent to congratulate Solomon on his accession. If so, the latter’s proposal to get timber and stones from the Lebanon would be made at the very commencement of the reign. Three years would not be more than enough to get the material ready and transported. Great designs need long preparation. Raw haste wastes time; deliberation is as needful before beginning as rapid action is when we have begun.

I. [Verses 3-5](#) set forth very forcibly the motives which impelled the young king to the work, and may suggest to us the motives which should urge us to diligence in building a better temple than he reared. He begins by reference to his father’s foiled wish, and to the reason why David could not build the house. Not only was it inappropriate that a warlike

king should build it, but it was impossible that, whilst his thoughts were occupied and his resources taxed by war, he should devote himself to such a work. In Assyria and Egypt the great warrior kings are the great temple-builders, but a divine decorum forbade it to be so in Israel.

Solomon next thankfully describes his own happier circumstances. Observe his designation of Jehovah in [verse 4](#) as 'my God,' and compare with [verse 3](#), where He is called David's God. The son had inherited the divine protection and the father's sense of personal relation to Jehovah. That is a better legacy than a throne. Well had it been for Solomon if he had held by the faith of his first days of royalty! Such a sense of a personal bond of love protecting on the one hand, and love trusting and obeying on the other, is the spring of all true service of God, whether it is busied in temple-building or in anything else.

We note also the grateful recognition of benefits received, and the tracing of peace and outward prosperity to God's care. There was not a cloud in the sky. The horizon was clear all round, and it was 'the Lord my God,' who had made this ease for Solomon. We are often more ready to recognise God's hand in sorrows than in joys. When He smites, we try to say 'It is the Lord!' Do we try to say it when all things are smooth and bright?

The effect of blessings should be thankfulness, and the proof of thankfulness is service. So Solomon did not take prosperity as an inducement to selfish luxurious repose, but heard in it God's call to a great task. If all the rich men and all the leisurely women who call themselves Christians would do likewise, there would be plenty of workers and of resources for Christ's service, which now sorely lacks both. How many of such 'lay up treasure for themselves, and are not rich toward God'! How many fritter away their leisure in vanities, having time for any amusement or folly, but none for Christian service!

The man whom Jesus called 'Thou fool!' not the wise king, is the pattern for a sad number of professing Christians. 'Thou hast much goods laid up for many years.' What then? 'I purpose to build an house for the name of the Lord'? By no means. 'I will build greater barns, and that will give me something to do, and then I will take mine ease.'

We note, too, that Solomon was impelled to his great work by the knowledge that God had appointed him to do it. The divine word concerning himself, spoken to his father, sounded in his ears, and gave him no rest till he had set about obeying it ([v. 5](#)). The motives of the great temple-builders of old, as they themselves expound them in hieroglyphics and cuneiform, were largely ostentation and the wish to outdo predecessors; but Solomon was moved by thankfulness and by obedience to his father's will, and still more, to God's destination of him. If we would look at our positions and blessings as he looked at his in the fair dawning of his reign, we should find abundant indications of God's will regarding our work.

Solomon uses a remarkable expression as to the purpose of the Temple. It is to be 'an house for the *name* of the Lord.' That is not the same as 'for the Lord.' Pagan temples might be intended by their builders for the actual residence of the god, but Solomon knew that

the heaven of heavens could not contain Him, much less this house which he was about to build. We are fairly entitled, then, to lay stress on that phrase, 'the Name.' It means the whole self-revelation of God, or, rather, the character of God as made known by that self-revelation.

The Temple was, then, to be the place in which the God who fills earth and heaven was to manifest Himself, and where His servants were to behold and reverence Him as manifested. The Shechinah was the symbol, and in one aspect was a part, of that self-revelation. However, in common speech the Temple was spoken of as the house of Jehovah. The same thought which is expressed in Solomon's fuller phrase underlay the expression,—*He dwelt* 'not in temples made with hands' but His *name* was set there, and the structure was reared, not so much for Him as that worshippers might there meet Him.

II. The rest of the passage deals with Solomon's request to Hiram, and the preparation of the material for the Temple. Solomon's first care was to secure timber and stone. His own dominions can never have been well wooded, and there are many indications that the great central knot of mountainous land, which included the greater part of his kingdom, was comparatively treeless. He therefore proposed to Hiram to supply timber from the great woods on Lebanon, which have now nearly died out, and offered liberal payment.

The parallel account in 2 Chronicles makes Solomon offer specified quantities of provisions for Hiram's workmen, and makes Hiram accept the terms. Verse 11 of this chapter says that the provisions named there were for the Tyrian king's 'household.' This may possibly mean the workmen, who would be regarded as Hiram's slaves, but, more probably, 'household' means 'court,' and Solomon had not only to feed the army of workmen, but to supply as much again for the great establishment which Hiram kept up. The little slip of seacoast, with the mountain rising sharply behind, which made Hiram's kingdom, could not grow enough for his people's wants. His country was 'nourished' by Palestine, long centuries after this time ([Acts xii. 20](#)), and the same was the case in Solomon's period. In [verse 11](#), the quantity of oil is impossibly small as compared with that of wheat. 2 Chronicles reads 'twenty thousand' instead of 'twenty,' and the Septuagint inserts 'thousand' in [verse 11](#), which is probably correct.

With all his Oriental politeness and probably real wish to oblige a powerful neighbour, Hiram was too true a Phoenician not to drive a good bargain. He was king of 'a nation of shopkeepers,' and was quite worthy of the position. 'Nothing for nothing' seems to have been his motto, even with friends. He would love Solomon, and send him flowery congratulations, and talk as if all he had was his ally's, but when it came to settling terms he knew what his cedars were worth, and meant to have their value.

There are a good many people who get mixed up with religious work, and talk as if it were very near their hearts, who have as sharp an eye to their own advantage as he had. The man who serves God because he gets paid for it, does not serve Him. The Temple may be

built of the timber and stones that he has supplied, but he sold them, and did not give them, therefore he has no part in the building.

How different the uncalculating lavishness of Solomon! He knows no better use for treasures than to expend them on God's service, and 'all for love, and nothing for reward.' That is the true temper for Christian work. He to whom Christ has given Himself should give himself to Christ; and he who has given himself should and will keep back nothing, nor seek for cheap ways of serving the Lord, He who gives all, be it two mites, or a fishing-boat and some torn nets, or great wealth like that which Solomon found in his father's treasuries and devoted to building the Temple, gives much; and he who gives less than he can gives little.

Solomon's work was, after all, outward work, and fitter for that early age than the imitation of it would be now. The days for building temples and cathedrals are past. The universal religion hallows not Gerizim nor Jerusalem, but every place where souls seek God. The spiritual religion asks for no shrines reared by men's hands; for Jesus Christ is the true Temple, where God's name is set, and where men may behold the manifested Jehovah, and meet with Him. But we have work to do for Christ, and a temple to build in our own souls, and a stone or two to lay in the great Temple which is being built up through the ages. Well for us if we use our resources and our leisure, for such ends with the same promptitude, thankful surrender, and sense of fulfilling God's purpose, as animated the young king of Israel!



## BUILDING IN SILENCE

‘. . . There was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of Iron heard In the house, while it was in building.’—1 KINGS vi. 7.

The Temple was built in silence. It ‘rose like an exhalation.’

‘No hammer fell, no ponderous axes rung, Like some tall palm the mystic fabric sprung.’

Perhaps it was merely for convenience of transport and to save time that the stones were dressed in the quarries, but more probably the silence was due to an instinct of reverence. We may fairly use it as suggesting two thoughts.

I. How God’s house is mostly built in silence. ‘The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation.’

(1) In reference to its advance in the world. Destructive work is noisy, constructive work is silent. God was in ‘the still small voice,’ not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. Christ’s own career, how silent it was! Drums are loud and empty. The spread of the kingdom was unnoticed by the world’s great ones—Caesars, philosophers, patricians, and it silently grew underground. Hence may flow—

(a) An encouragement to those whose work is inconspicuous.

(b) A lesson not to mistake noise and notoriety for spiritual progress.

(c) Guidance as to our expectations of the advance of Christ’s kingdom. It will transform society by slow, often unnoticed, degrees, by radical change of individuals’ habits. The elevation of humanity will be slow, like the imperceptible rise of the Norwegian coast. Sudden changes are short-lived changes. ‘Lightly come, lightly go.’ What matures slowly will last long.

(2) In reference to its growth in our souls.

Silence is needed for that. There must be much still communion and quiet reflection. The advance in the Christian life is variously likened to a battle, since there are antagonists and struggle is needed to overcome; and to vegetable or corporeal growth, which the mysterious indwelling life works without effort and almost without consciousness, but it is also likened to the erection of a building, in which there is continuity, and each successive course of masonry is the foundation for that above it. That work of building is work that must be done in silence. If we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, we must silently drink in the sunshine and dew, and so prosperously pass from blade to ear, and thence to full corn in the ear.

Surely nothing is more needed in these days of noisy advertisement, and measurement of the importance of things by the noise that they can make, than this lesson of the place of silence in Christian progress, both for individuals and for the Christian Church as a whole.

II. How God’s house is built of prepared stones.

That is true, in one view of the matter, in regard to the Church on earth, for there must be the individual act of repentance and faith before a soul is fit to be built into the fabric of the Church.

There is providential training of men for their tasks before these are given to them.

But the highest application of the symbol which we venture to find in our text is to the relation between the earthly and the heavenly life.

This world is the quarry where the stones are dressed for the Temple in the heavens.

(a) Life is the chipping and hewing. The unnecessary pieces are struck off with heavy mallet and sharp chisel. Pain and sorrow are thus explained, if not wholly, yet sufficiently to bring about submission and trust.

(b) The Builder has His plan clearly before Him, and works accurately to realise it. He perfectly knows what He means to build, and every stroke of the dressing-tool is accurately directed. There are no mistakes made in His quarrying.

(c) We may be sure that the prepared stones will be brought to the Temple site and built into it. There lie gigantic half-hewn pillars in abandoned quarries in Syria and Egypt. But no one will ever say of the divine Temple-Builder: He began to build and was not able to finish. It remains a problem how the old builders managed to transport these huge stones from the quarries to the site, but we may be sure that the Architect of the 'house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens,' knows how to bring every stone that has been prepared here, to the place prepared for it, and for which it has been prepared. We may repose on the Apostle's assurance that 'He that has begun a good work in you will perform it,' or rather on the more sure word of Jesus Himself, 'He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God.'

### THE KING 'BLESSING' HIS PEOPLE

'And it was so, that when Solomon had made an end of praying all this prayer and supplication unto the Lord, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread up to heaven. 55. And he stood, and blessed all the congregation of Israel with a loud voice, saying, 56. Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto His people Israel, according to all that He promised: there hath not failed one word of all His good promise, which He promised by the hand of Moses His servant. 57. The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers: let Him not leave us, nor forsake us: 58. That He may incline our hearts unto Him, to walk in all His ways, and to keep His commandments, and His statutes, and His judgments, which He commanded our fathers. 59. And let these my words, wherewith I have made supplication before the Lord, be nigh unto the Lord our God day and night, that He maintain the cause of His servant, and the cause of His people Israel at all times, as the matter shall require: 60. That all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God, and that there is none else. 61. Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord our God, to walk in His statutes, and to keep His commandments, as at this day. 62. And the king, and all Israel with him, offered sacrifice before the Lord. 63. And Solomon offered a sacrifice of peace-offerings, which he offered unto the Lord, two and twenty thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the children of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord.'—1 KINGS viii. 54-63.

The great ceremonial of dedicating the Temple was threefold. The first stage was setting the ark in its place, which was the essence of the whole thing. God's presence was the true dedication, and that was manifested by the bright cloud that filled the sanctuary as soon as the ark was placed there. The second stage was the lofty and spiritual prayer, saturated with the language and tone of Deuteronomy, and breathing the purest conceptions of the character and nature of God, and all aglow with trust in Him. Then followed, thirdly, this 'Blessing of the Congregation.' The prayer had been uttered by the kneeling king. Now he stands up, and, with ringing tones that reach to the outskirts of the crowd, he gathers the spirit of his prayer into two petitions, preceded by praise for national blessings, and followed by exhortation to national obedience. A huge sacrifice of unexampled magnitude closes the whole.

I. Note the thankful retrospect of the nation's past (verse 56).

Solomon 'blessed the congregation' when, in their name, he lifted up his voice to bless the Lord, prayed that God would incline their hearts to keep His law, and would maintain their cause, and exhorted them to keep their hearts perfect with Him. We bless each other when we ask God to bless, and when we draw each other nearer Him. Standing there in the new Temple, with a united nation gathered before him, the cloud filling the house, and peace resting on all his land to its farthest border, the king looks back on the long road from Sinai and the desert, and sums up the whole history in one sentence. The end has vindicated

the methods. There had been many a dark time when enemies had oppressed, and many a hard-fought field had been stained with Israel's blood; but all had tended to this calm hour, when Israel's multitudes were gathered in worship, and their unguarded homes were safe. There had been many heroes in the long line.

'Time would fail' him 'to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah; of David and Samuel . . . who . . . turned to flight armies of aliens.' One name alone is worthy to be named,—the name of the true Deliverer and Monarch. It is the Lord who 'hath given rest unto His people.' We look on the past most wisely when we see in it all the working of one mighty Hand, and pass beyond the great names of history or the dear names which have made the light of our homes, to the ever-living God, who works through changing instruments; and 'the help that is done on earth, He doeth it Himself.' We read the past most truly when we see in all its vicissitudes God's unchanging faithfulness, and recognise that the foes and sorrows which often pressed sore upon us were no breach of His faithful promises, but either His loving chastisement for our faithlessness, or His loving discipline meant to perfect our characters. We read the past best from the vantage-ground of the Temple. From its height we understand the lie of the land. Communion with God explains much which is else inexplicable. Solomon's judgment of Israel's checkered history will be our judgment of our own when we stand in the higher courts of the heavenly home, and look from that height upon all the way by which the Lord our God hath led us. In the meantime, it is often a trial for faith to repeat these words; but the blessing that comes from believing them true is worth the effort to stifle our tears in order to say them.

II. Note the prayer for obedient hearts (verses 57, 58). The proper subject-matter of this petition is 'that He may incline our hearts to walk in His ways,' and God's presence is invoked as a means thereto. The deepest desire of a truly religious soul is for the felt nearness of God. That goes before all other blessings, and contains them all. Nothing is so needful or so sweet as that The presence of God is the absence of evil, the evil both of pain and of sin, as surely as the rising sun is the routing of night's black hosts. 'The best of all is, God is with us.' The prayer again looks back to the past, and asks that the ancient experiences may be renewed. The generations of those who trust in God are knit together, and the wonders of old time are capable of repetition to-day. Faith can say with deeper meaning than the Preacher, 'That which hath been is that which shall be.' However varying may be the forms, the fact of a divine presence and help according to need is invariable, and they that have gone before have not exhausted the fountain, which will fill the vessel of the latest comer as it did that of the first. How beautifully the abiding God and the fleeting series of 'our fathers' is contrasted! A moment of triumph, when some work, like that of building the Temple, which has for ages been looked forward to, and into which the sacrifices and aspirations of a long line of dead toilers are built, brings strongly before all thoughtful men the continuity of a nation or a Church, and the transiency of its individual members. It should suggest the

abiding God yet more strongly than it does the passing fathers. The mercy remains the same, while the receivers change. The sunshine and the tree are the same, though the leaves which glisten and grow in the light have but one summer to live.

But Solomon desires that God may be with him and his people for one specific purpose. Is it to bring outward prosperity, or to extend their territory, or to give them victory? As in his choice in his dream, so now, he asks, not for these things, but for an inward influence on heart and will. What he wants most for himself and them is moral conformity to God's will. All must be right if that be right. The prayer implies that, without God's help, the heart will wander from the paths of duty. The weakness of human nature, and the consequent necessity for God's grace in order to obedience, were as deeply felt by the devout men of the Old Testament as by Apostles. They are felt by every man who has honestly tried to measure the sweep and inwardness of God's law, and to realise it in life. We need go but a very short way on the road to discover that temptations to diverge lie so thick on either side, and that our feet grow weary so soon, that we shall make but little progress without help from above.

The synonyms for the law are worthy of notice. Why are there so many of these in the Old Testament? For the same reason that there are so many for 'money' in English,—because those who made the language thought so much about the thing, and delighted in it so much. As 'commandments,' it was solemnly imposed by rightful authority, and obedience was obligatory. The word rendered 'statutes' means something engraved, or written, and recalls the tables inscribed by God's finger. 'Judgments' are the divine decisions or sentences as to what is right, and therefore the infallible clue to the else bewildering labyrinth. To obey these commandments, to read that solemn writing, and to accept these decisions as our guides, is man's perfection and blessedness; and for that God's felt presence is indispensable.

III. Note the prayer for God's defence (verses 59, 60). The proper subject-matter of this petition is that God would maintain the cause of king and nation; and it is preceded by a petition that, to that end, the preceding prayer may be answered, and is followed by the desire that thereby the knowledge of God may fill the earth. The prayer for outward blessings comes after the prayer for inward heart-obedience. Is not that the right order? Our prayers need to be prayed for, and a true desire is not contented with one utterance. To ask that what we have asked may be given is no vain repetition, nor a sign of weak faith, or undue anxiety. How bold the figure in asking that the prayer may lie before God day and night, like some suppliant at the foot of His throne!

Note the grand aim of God's help of Israel,—the universal diffusion of His name among all the peoples of the earth. Solomon understood the divine vocation of Israel, and had risen above desiring blessings only for his own or his subjects' sake. Later ages fell from that elevation of feeling, and hugged their special privileges without a thought of the obligations which they involved. God's choice of Israel was not meant for the exclusion of the Gentiles,

but as the means of transmitting the knowledge of God to them. The one nation was chosen that God's grace might fructify through it to all. The fire was gathered into a hearth, that the whole house might be warmed. But selfishness marred the divine plan, and Israel became a nonconductor, and the privileges selfishly kept became corrupt; as the miser's corn stored in his barns in famine breeds weevils. Christians need no more solemn lesson of what comes from selfishly hoarding spiritual blessings than the fate of Israel. God hath shined into our hearts, that we may give to others who sit in the dark the light which we possess; and if we fail to do so, the light will darken within us.

IV. The blessing ends with one brief, all-comprehensive charge to the people, which seems based, by its 'therefore,' on the preceding thought of Jehovah as the only God. The only attitude corresponding to His sole and supreme Majesty is the entire devotion of heart, which leads to thoroughgoing obedience to His commandments. The word rendered 'perfect' literally means 'entire' or 'sound,' and here expresses the complete devotion of the whole nature. Solomon meant that it should be complete, in contradistinction to any sidelong glances to idolatry. The principle underlying that 'therefore' is that, God being what He is, our only God and refuge, the only adequate hope and object of our nature, we should give our whole selves to Him. We, too, are tempted to bring Him divided hearts, and to carry some of our love and trust as offerings at other shrines. But if there be 'one God, and none other but He,' then to serve Him with all our heart and strength and mind is the dictate of common sense, and the only service which He can accept, or which can bring to our else distracted natures peace and satisfaction. His voice to us is, 'My son, give Me thy whole heart.' Our answer to Him should ever be that prayer, 'Lord, . . . unite my heart to fear Thy name.' A divided heart is misery. Partial trust is distrust. 'Love me all in all, or not at all,' is the requirement of all deep, human love; and shall God ask less than men and women ask from and give to one another?

### **'THE MATTER OF A DAY IN ITS DAY'**

'At all times, as the matter shall require.'—1 KINGS viii. 59.

I have ventured to diverge from my usual custom, and take this fragment of a text because, in the forcible language of the original, it carries some very important lessons. The margin of our Bible gives the literal reading of the Hebrew; the sense, but not the vigorous idiom, of which is conveyed in the paraphrase in our version. 'At all times, as the matter shall require,' is, literally, 'the thing of a day in its day'; and that is the only limitation which this prayer of Solomon places upon the petition that God would maintain the cause of His servants and of His people Israel. The kingly suppliant got a glimpse of very great, though very familiar, truths, and at that hour of spiritual illumination, the very high-water mark of his relations to God—for I suppose he was never half as good a man afterwards—he gave utterance to the great thought that God's mercies come to us day by day, according to the exigencies of the moment.

Now, I think that in the words 'the matter of a day in its day' we may see both a principle in reference to God's gifts and a precept in reference to our actions. Let us look at these two things.

I. A principle in reference to God's gifts.

Of course, obviously—and I need not say more than a word about that—we find it so in regard to the outward blessings that are poured into our lives. We are taught, if the translation of the New Testament is correct, to ask, 'Give us this day our daily bread,' and to let to-morrow alone. Life comes to us pulsation by pulsation, breath by breath, by reason of the continual operation, in the material world, of the present God's present giving. He does not start us, at the beginning of our days, with a fund of physical vitality upon which we thereafter draw, but moment by moment He opens His hand, and lets life and breath and all things flow out to us moment by moment, for no creature would live for an instant except for the present working of a present God. If we only realised how the slow pulsation of the minutes is due to the touch of His finger on the pendulum, and how everything that we have, and the existence of us who have it, are results of the continuous welling out from the fountain of life, of ripple after ripple of the waters, everything would be more sacred, and more solemn, and fuller of God than, alas! it is.

But the true region in which we may best find illustrations of this principle in reference to God's gifts is the region of the spiritual and moral bestowments which He in His love pours upon us. He does not flood us with them: He filters them drop by drop, for great and good reasons. I only mention three various forms of this one great thought.

God gives us gifts adapted to the moment. 'The matter of a day,' the thing fitted for the instant, comes. In deepest reality, all is one gift, for in truth what God gives to us is Himself; or, if you like to put it so, His grace. That little word 'grace' is like a small window that opens out on to a great landscape, for it gathers up into one encyclopaedical expression the whole

infinite variety of beneficences and bestowments which come showering down upon us. That one gift is, as the Apostle puts it in one of his eloquent epithets, 'the *manifold* grace of God,' which word in the original is even more rich and picturesque, because it means the 'many-variegated' grace—like some rich piece of embroidery glowing with all manner of dyes and gold. So the one gift comes to us manifold, rich in its adaptation to, and its exquisite fitness for, the needs of the moment. The Rabbis had a tradition that the manna in the wilderness tasted to every man just what each man needed or wished most. It is as though in some imperial city on a day of rejoicing, one found a fountain in the market-place pouring out, according to the wish of the people, various costly wines and refreshing drinks, God's gift comes to us with like variety—the 'matter of a day in its day.'

God never gives us the wrong medicine. In whatever variety of circumstances we stand, that one infinitely simple and yet infinitely complex gift contains what we specially want at the moment. Am I struggling? He extends a hand to steady me. Am I fighting? He is my 'sword and shield, my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.' Am I anxious? He comes into my heart, and brings with Him a great peace, and all waves cease to toss and smooth themselves into a level plain. Am I glad? He comes to heighten the gladness by some touch of holier joy. Am I perplexed in mind? If I look to Him, 'His coming shall be as the morning,' and illumination will be granted. Am I treading a lonely path? There is One by my side who will neither change, nor fail, nor die. Whatever any man needs, at the moment that he needs it, that one great Gift will supply 'the matter of a day in its day.'

God gives punctually. Many of us may have sometimes sent Christmas presents to India or Australia some weeks before. Some will arrive in time and some will be too late. God's gifts never reach us before the day, and they never come after the day. 'The Lord shall help her, and that right early,' said the grand psalm. What the Psalmist was thinking about was, I suppose, that miraculous intervention when the army of Sennacherib was smitten in a night. Timid and faithless souls in Jerusalem, as they looked over the walls and saw the encircling lines of the fierce foes drawing closer and closer round the doomed city, must have said, 'Our Lord delayeth His coming,' and could not stand the test of their faith and patience, involved in God's apparent indifference to the need of His people. To-morrow the assault is to be delivered. To-night

'The Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,  
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed';

and the would-be assailants, when that to-morrow dawned, were lying stiff and stark in their tents. God's help comes, not too soon, lest we should not know the blessedness of trusting in the dark; and not too late, lest we should know the misery of trusting in vain.



Peter is lying in prison. Herod intends, after the Passover, to bring him out to the people. The scaffolding is ready. The first watch of the night passes, and the second. If once it is fairly light, escape is impossible. But in the grey dawn the angel touches the sleeper. He wakes while his guards sleep. There is no need for hurry. He who has God for his Deliverer has no occasion to 'go out with haste.' So, with strange and majestic leisureliness, the escaping prisoner is bid to put on his shoes and gird himself. No doubt, he cast many a scrutinising glance at the four sleeping legionaries whom a heedless movement might have wakened. When all is ready, he is led forth through all the wards, each being a separate peril, and all made safe to him. The first gate opens, and the second gate opens, and the iron gate that leads into the city opens, and quietly he and the angel go down the street. It is light enough for him to see his way to the house where the brethren are assembled. He gets safe behind Mary's door before it is light enough for the gaolers to discover his absence, and for the pursuers to be started in their search. The Lord did help him, and that right early—'the matter of a day in its day.'

We shall find, if we leave our times in His hand, that the old simple faith has still a talismanic power to quiet us. His time is best, so be patient, and be trustful in your patience.

Again, God gives gifts enough, and not more than enough. He serves out our rations for spirit as for body, as they do on shipboard, where the sailors have to take their pots and plates to the galley every day and for each meal, and get enough to help them over the moment's hunger. The manna fell morning by morning. 'He that gathered much had nothing over, he that gathered little had no lack.' So all the variety of our changeful conditions, besides its purpose of disciplining ourselves and of making character, has also the purpose of affording a theatre for the display, if I may use such cold language—or rather let me say affording an opportunity for the bestowment—of the infinitely varied, exquisitely adapted, punctual, and sufficient grace of God.

II. But now, secondly, a word about the text as containing a precept for our action.

Let me put what I have to say in three plain sentences.

First, take short views of the future. Of course, we have to look ahead, and in reference to many things to take prudent forecasts, but how many of us there are who weaken ourselves and spoil to-day by being 'over-exquisite to cast the fashion of uncertain evils'! It is a great piece of practical philosophy, and I am sure that it has much to do with our getting the best out of the present moment, that we should either take very short or very long views of the future. Either

'Let the unknown to-morrow  
Bring with it what it may,'

or look beyond the last of the days into the unseen light of an unsetting sun. If I must anticipate, let me anticipate the ultimate, the changeless, the certain; and let me not condemn my faculty of picturing that which is to come, to look along the low ranges of earthly life, and torture myself by imagining all the possibilities of evil of which my condition admits, as being turned into certainties to-morrow. Take 'the matter of a day *in its day*.' 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' Let us make the minute what it ought to be, then God will make the whole what it ought to be.

Again I say, let us fill each day with discharged duties. If you and I do not do the matter of the day in its day, the chances are that no to-morrow will afford an opportunity of doing it. So there will come upon us all, if we are unfaithful to this portioning out of tasks to times, that burden of an irrevocable past, and of the omitted duties that will stand reproving and condemning before us, whensoever we turn our eyes to them. 'It might have been, and it is not'; does a sadder speech than that fall from human lips? Brethren, the day, though it is short, is elastic; and no one knows how much of discharged service and accomplished work and fulfilled responsibilities can be crammed into its hours, until he has earnestly tried to fill each moment with the task which belongs to the moment. 'The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing.' If our day is not filled full of work, some to-morrow will be filled full, in retrospect, of thorns and stings. Life is short; 'the night cometh when no man can work.' 'I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day.'

Lastly, I would say, keep open a continual communion with God, that day by day you may get what day by day you need. There are hosts of people who call themselves, and, in some kind of surface way, are, Christian people, who seem to think that they get all that they need of the grace of God in a lump, at the beginning of their Christian career, and who are living upon past communications and the memory of these, and are forgetting that they can no more live and be nourished upon past gifts of God's grace than upon the dinner that they ate this day last year. We must hang continually upon Him, if we are continually to receive from His hand. No past blessing will avail for present use.

Dear friends, the purpose of this principle, which I have been trying to illustrate in God's way of dealing with us, is that we shall be content to be continually dependent, and consciously as well as continually dependent, upon Him. In the measure in which we keep our hearts open for the perpetual influx of His grace, in that measure shall we be ready for each day as it comes; for its trials and its joys, for its possibilities and its duties.

This, too, must be remembered—that the days bolted together make months; and the months, years; and the years, life; and that life as a whole is 'a day'; and that there is a 'matter' of that day which can only be done in its day. Oh that none of us may be the subjects of that sad wail from a Saviour's heart and a Saviour's lips, which lamented, 'If thou hadst known,

at least, in this thy day, the things that belong to thy peace; but now—the night has come, and the darkness of the night, and—‘they are hid from thine eyes!’

## PROMISES AND THREATENINGS

‘And it came to pass, when Solomon had finished the building of the house of the Lord, and the king’s house, and all Solomon’s desire which he was pleased to do. 2. That the Lord appeared to Solomon the second time, as He had appeared unto him at Gibeon. 3. And the Lord said unto him, I have heard thy prayer and thy supplication, that thou hast made before Me: I have hallowed this house, which thou hast built, to put My name there for ever; and Mine eyes and Mine heart shall be there perpetually, 4. And if thou wilt walk before Me, as David thy father walked, in integrity of heart, and in uprightness, to do according to all that I have commanded thee, and wilt keep My statutes and My judgments: 5. Then I will establish the throne of thy kingdom upon Israel for ever, as I promised to David thy father, saying, There shall not fail thee a man upon the throne of Israel. 6. But if ye shall at all turn from following Me, ye or your children, and will not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods, and worship them: 7. Then will I cut off Israel out of the land which I have given them; and this house which I have hallowed for My name, will I cast out of My sight; and Israel shall be a proverb and a byword among all people: 8. And at this house, which is high, every one that passeth by it shall be astonished, and shall hiss; and they shall say, Why hath the Lord done thus unto this land, and to this house? 9. And they shall answer, Because they forsook the Lord their God, who brought forth their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and have taken hold upon other gods, and have worshipped them, and served them: therefore hath the Lord brought upon them all this evil.’—1 KINGS ix. 1-9.

The successful end of a great work is often the beginning of a great reaction. When the tension is slackened, the whole nature of the worker is relaxed, and the temptation to slothful self-indulgence is strong. God knows our frame, and mercifully times His manifestations to the moments of special need. So, when Solomon had finished his great task, ‘the Lord appeared the second time, as He had appeared at Gibeon.’ There had been no manifest token of approval during all the years of building the Temple, for none was needed; but now there was danger that the finished work might be followed by languor and indifference, and therefore once more God spoke words of stimulus, both promises and warnings.

A solemn alternative is set before the king, both parts of which are fitted to rouse his energy and inspire him to faithful obedience. The same alternatives are presented to each of us. In [verses 3-5](#) God promises blessed results from clinging to Him and keeping His statutes; in [verses 6-9](#) He mercifully threatens the tragic issues of departure. In applying these to ourselves we must remember that outward prosperity was attached to a devout life more closely in Israel than it is now. But, though the form of the blessings dependent on doing God’s will alters, the reality remains unaltered.

I. The promises to Solomon are preceded by the assurance that his prayer had been heard. The answer corresponds very beautifully to the petitions. God has ‘put His name’ in

the Temple, as the descent of the Glory to rest between the cherubim visibly showed, and thus has fulfilled Solomon's petition; but the answer surpasses the prayer in that the presence of 'the Name' is promised 'for ever.' Similarly, in [Psalm cxxxii.](#), the answer to the petition 'Arise into Thy rest' transcends the petition which it answers, and adds the same promise of perpetuity, 'This is My rest for *ever*.' Again, Solomon had prayed, 'that Thine eyes may be open towards this house,' and God answers with the expanded promise that not His eyes only, but His heart shall be there perpetually. He is 'able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think,' and He delights to surprise us with over-answers to our prayers. We cannot widen our desires so far but that His gifts will stretch beyond them on every side.

But the promise of perpetual dwelling in the Temple is conditional, as appears in the latter part of God's answer, though no condition is stated at first. The promises to Solomon individually are all contingent. The all-important 'if' at the beginning of verse 4 governs the whole. The divine eulogium on David, which introduces these promises, suggests how mercifully God regards the imperfect lives of His servants. That merciful interpretation of conduct is removed by a whole universe from palliation of sin. It affords no ground for our thinking little of our inconsistencies. David's crime was sternly rebuked and sorely punished, but still his life, in its main drift and outline, could be presented as a pattern, as being marked by integrity of heart and uprightness. The moon shines like a disc of silver, though its surface is pitted with extinct volcanoes.

We may note, too, the pregnant description in outline of the elements of a devout life, as here enjoined on Solomon. The first requisite is to walk before God; that is, to nourish a continual consciousness of His presence, and to regulate all actions and thoughts under the thrilling and purifying sense of being 'ever in the great Taskmaster's eye.' Only we are not to think of Him as only a Taskmaster, but as a loving Friend and Helper. A child is happy in its little work or play when it knows that its father is looking on with sympathy. The sense of God's eye being on us should 'make a sunshine in a shady place,' should lighten labour and sweeten care. It is at the root of practical obedience, as its place in this sequence shows; for there follow it, in verse 4, 'integrity of heart and uprightness,' on which again follow obedience to all God's commandments.

First must come the clear recognition of God's relation to us. That recognition will influence our relation to Him, bending hearts to love and wills to submit, and the whole inward being to cleave to Him. Thence, and only thence, will issue in the life the streams of practical obedience. It is vain to seek to produce righteous deeds unless our hearts are right, and it is as vain to labour at making our hearts right unless thoughts of what God is to us have purified them. Morality is rooted in religion. On the other hand, no knowledge of the truth about God is worth anything unless it touches the hidden man of the heart, and then passes

outward to mould conduct. 'Faith without works is dead.' Correct theology and glowing emotions lack their consummation if they do not impel to holy and God-pleasing living.

The reward promised in verse 5 is for Solomon alone. His throne is to be 'established for ever.' The duration intended by that expression is therefore not absolutely unlimited, but equivalent to 'during thy lifetime.' Solomon could only affect himself by his obedience. The continuance of the kingdom after him depended on his successors. His possession of the throne during his life was the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise to David referred to in verse 5, but it was only the beginning, and, like all God's promises, it was contingent on obedience. We receive no outward kingdom if we are servants of God; but, in deepest truth, the righteous man is a king, 'lord of himself, though not of lands.' All creatures serve the soul that serves God, and all Christ's brethren share in His royalty.

II. The second part of this divine utterance is addressed to the whole nation, as is marked by the 'ye' there compared with the 'thou' in verse 4, and it lays down for succeeding generations the conditions on which the new Temple, that stood glittering in the bright Eastern sunshine, should retain its pristine beauty. While the address to Solomon incited to obedience by painting its blessed consequences, that to the nation reaches the same end by the opposite path of darkly portraying the ruin that would be caused by departure from God. God draws by holding out a hand full of good things, and He no less lovingly drives by stretching out a hand armed with lightnings.

A plain declaration of the evils that dog disobedience is as loving as a bright vision of the good that attends on submission. The sternest threatenings of Scripture are spoken that they may never need to be executed. There is no more foolish misconception of Christianity than that which calls it harsh because it reveals that 'the wages of sin is death.' Note that the threatenings come second, not first. God's heart is averse to smite. To lavish blessing is His delight, and judgment is 'His work, His strange work,' forced on Him by sin.

The special sin against which Israel was warned was that to which it was specially prone and tempted by its circumstances. When all the nations 'worshipped stocks and stones,' it was hard to 'keep thy faith so pure' as to have no share in the universal bewitchment. So the whole history of the people is one of lapses into idolatry and of chastisements leading to temporary amendment, until the long, sharp lesson of the Captivity eradicated the disposition to be as the nations around. No doubt, idolatry in its crudest forms is outgrown now in Western lands, but sense still craves material embodiment of the unseen, and still feels the pressure of the material and palpable. Hence the earthward direction of so many lives. Asthmatical patients often breathe more easily in the slums of a city than in pure mountain air, and sense-bound men find difficulty in respiration on the heights of a religion which minimises the appeal to sense.

The penalty attached to departure from God was the loss of the land. Israel kept it on a tenure like that of some of our English nobility, who hold their estates on condition of

doing some service to the sovereign. Of course, that connection between serving God and national prosperity involved continual supernatural intervention, and cannot be applied entirely to national prosperity now; but it still remains true that moral and religious corruption saps the foundations of a people's well-being, and, when carried far enough, destroys a people's existence. The solemn threat of becoming 'a proverb and a byword' among all peoples is quoted, apparently from [Deuteronomy xxviii. 37](#), and has been only too terribly fulfilled for weary centuries.

The promise in verse 3, that God's eyes and heart should be perpetually on the Temple, has now the condition attached that Israel should cleave to the Lord. Otherwise it will be cast out of His sight, and be a mark for scorn and wonder. The vivid representation of a dialogue between passers-by is quoted from [Deuteronomy xxix. 24-26](#), where it is spoken in reference to the nation. It carries the solemn thought that God's name is made known among the heathen by the punishment of His unfaithful people, not less really, and sometimes more strikingly, than by the blessings bestowed on the obedient. If we will not magnify Him by joyous service, by rewarding which, with good He can magnify Himself, He will magnify Himself on us by retribution, the more severe as our blessings have been the greater. The lightning-scathed tree, standing white in the forest, witnesses to the power of the flash, as its leafy sisters in their green beauty proclaim the energy of the sunshine. Israel has, perhaps, been a more convincing witness for God, in its homeless centuries, than ever it was when at rest in the good land. 'If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee.'

### **A ROYAL SEEKER AFTER WISDOM**

‘And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to prove him with hard questions. 2. And she came to Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bare spices, and very much gold, and precious stones: and when she was come to Solomon, she communed with him of all that was in her heart. 3. And Solomon told her all her questions: there was not any thing hid from the king, which he told her not. 4. And when the queen of Sheba had seen all Solomon’s wisdom, and the house that he had built, 5. And the meat of his table, and the sitting of his servants, and the attendance of his ministers, and their apparel, and his cupbearers, and his ascent by which he went up unto the house of the Lord; there was no more spirit in her. 6. And she said to the king, It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thy acts and of thy wisdom. 7. Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and mine eyes had seen it: and, behold, the half was not told me: thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard. 8. Happy are thy men, happy are these thy servants, which stand continually before thee, and that hear thy wisdom. 9. Blessed be the Lord thy God, which delighteth in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel: because the Lord loved Israel for ever, therefore made He thee king, to do judgment and justice. 10. And she gave the king an hundred and twenty talents of gold, and of spices very great store, and precious stones: there came no more such abundance of spices as these which the queen of Sheba gave to king Solomon. 11. And the navy also of Hiram, that brought gold from Ophir, brought in from Ophir great plenty of almug trees, and precious stones. 12. And the king made of the almug trees pillars for the house of the Lord, and for the king’s house, harps also and psalteries for singers: there came no such almug trees, nor were seen unto this day. 13. And king Solomon gave unto the queen of Sheba all her desire, whatsoever she asked, besides that which Solomon gave her of his royal bounty. So she turned and went to her own country, she and her servants.’—[1 KINGS x. 1-13.](#)

We feel the breath of a new era in the accounts of Solomon’s reign. One most striking peculiarity is the friendly intercourse with the nations around. The horizon has widened, and, instead of wars with Philistines and Ammon, we have alliances with Egypt, Tyre, and, in the present passage, with Sheba, a district of Southern Arabia. The expansion was fruitful of both good and evil. It brought new ideas and much wealth; but it brought, too, luxury and idolatry. Still Israel was meant to be ‘a light to lighten the Gentiles,’ and in this picturesque story of the wisdom-seeking queen, we have the true relation of Israel to the nations in its purest form. The details of the narrative. Interesting as they are, need not occupy us long.

The queen had heard the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, by which seems to be meant his reputation of being gifted with deep knowledge of the divine character as revealed to him. The questions which occupy earnest souls in all lands and ages were



stirring in the heart of this woman-chief. The only way, in these old days, to learn the wisdom of the wise, was to go to them. So the streets of Jerusalem saw the strange sight of the long train which had come toiling up from Arabia, laden with its characteristic produce, gold and spices and precious stones, in the enumeration of which is reflected the wonder of the beholders at the unaccustomed procession. But better than all her wealth was the eager woman's thirst for truth. Surely it is a very unworthy and unlikely explanation of her 'hard questions' and purpose to suppose that she came only for a duel of wit,—to pose Solomon with half-playful riddles. The journey was too toilsome, the gifts too large, the accent of conviction in her subsequent words too grave, for that. She was a seeker after truth, and probably after God, and had known the torture of the eternal questions which rise in the mind, and, once having risen, leave no rest till they are answered.

So she came, though half incredulous, hoping to find some solution to what 'was in her heart,' and as thirsty for the answer as her country's sands for water. Only they who have known the pain of carrying such questions, like a fire in their bones, can know the joy which she felt when she found one to whom she could speak them. It is something of a drop to pass from Solomon's wisdom to the list of the splendours of his household, and the effect which these produced on the queen; but the whole account of Solomon's reign is marked by the same naive blending of wisdom and material wealth. In those days, outward prosperity was the sign of divine favour. But even in those days they knew that wisdom was 'better than rubies.' The two elements were both at their height in Solomon's reign, and the lower of them finally got uppermost, and wrecked him. Plain living and high thinking are better than 'wisdom,' which lets itself down to make much of 'the meat of the table,' and a retinue of servants in fine clothes. How many of us would listen much more respectfully to wisdom, if it lived in a palace, than in 'dens and caves of the earth'? The queen's words in verses 6 to 9 are graceful with a woman's tact, and full of feeling. She confesses that she had come half-doubting, even though she risked the journey, and fervently avows how far fame had been unlike itself in this instance, and had diminished, and not magnified. Then she envies the servants who wait on him, because they are so near the fountain, and finally breaks into praise of Solomon's God, whose love to Israel was shown in giving it such a king. One does not know whether praise of God or compliments to Solomon were most in her mind. The words scarcely sound as if she had become a worshipper of God. He is to her but 'thy God.' But we may believe that she carried away some seed which grew up. Then, with munificent interchange of gifts, she and her train glide out of the story, and we lose them in the dark. The account of the wealth brought by Hiram's ships comes singularly in, breaking the narrative of the queen. Its insertion seems to indicate some connection between the fleet and her, and to suggest that Sheba and Ophir were near each other (which would put Ethiopia, where some have located it, out of court), and that she heard of Solomon through it.

The whole incident may be regarded as an illustration of the spirit that should mark all seekers after truth, whether earthly or heavenly. This queen had to win a victory over national prejudices, over the disabilities of her sex, over the temptations of her station, to travel far, and face dangers, and to incur great cost. It was surely no mere playful errand on which she was bent. She was smitten with the sacred impulse to 'follow knowledge like a sinking star.' Seldom, indeed, have rulers made progresses from their dominions for such an end, and seldom have two of them met to confer on such subjects. We shall not rightly measure the relative importance of things unless we resolutely set ourselves to look at them with eyes purged from the illusions of sense, and cleared to see how much better than wealth and all outward good is the possession of truth. All sacrifices made to win it are richly repaid, and wise investments. Even in regard to lower kinds of truth, to win them is worth the effort of a life; and, in regard to the highest kind, which is the personal Truth, he is the wise man who counts all earthly good but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of it. This queen points the path by which all pilgrims of the truth must travel. It is not to be won without effort, without conquest of prejudices, repression of weakness, sacrifices of delights, and long effort. There must be humility, which will gladly learn, if there is ever to be its possession.

'Nor can the man that moulds in idle cell  
Unto her happy mansion attain.'

But in our days, the easier the attainment, the less the appreciation. The queen of Sheba had no books, and she travelled far to get wisdom. We are flooded with all appliances, and many of us would not cross the road to get Solomon's wisdom, but would do much to be invited to feast at his table, or to secure some of the queen's camels' load.

This story brings out the true ideal of Israel's relation to the nations. Solomon is the embodiment of his people. His reign is marked by largely increased and amicable relations with his neighbours. These were not all wholesome, and ultimately led to much mischief. But, while the purely commercial connection with Tyre was defective, in that there was no attempt to bring Hiram and the men who worked for the Temple to any knowledge of the God of the Temple, and the relation with Egypt was more unsatisfactory still, in that it meant only the importation of corrupting luxuries and the marriage with an Egyptian princess, an idolatress, this relation with the queen of Sheba was the true one. Solomon did in it what Israel was meant to do for the world. He attracted a seeker from afar, and imparted to her the wisdom that God had given him. He answered the torturing questions and won the confidence of this woman who was groping in the dark, till he led her by the hand to the light. A bond of friendship knit them together, and mutual gifts cemented their amity.

All this is but the putting into concrete form of God's purpose in choosing Israel for His own. It was not meant to retain or to enclose, but to diffuse, the light. The world can

only get blessing by one man or people getting it first. As well charge the builder of the lighthouse with partiality because he puts the bright lamps in that narrow room, as find fault with the divine method of making the earth know His name. The lighthouse is reared that the beams may stream out over the tossing, nightly sea. So God appointed to His people of old their task. So He has appointed the same task to His Church to-day. We ought to attract seekers from afar, to win their frank speech when they come, to be able to answer their anxious questions, and to bind them to ourselves in grateful bonds. In these days there are multitudes harassed by the modern forms of the same old, ever-pressing riddles which burdened this ancient queen's heart; and that Church but ill discharges its office which repels rather than draws the seekers, or has no word of illumination for them if they come.

But the highest use to be made of the story is that which Christ made of it. It stands as a perpetual witness against those who are too blind to see the beauty, or too careless to be drawn to listen to the wisdom, of a present Christ. The sacrifices which men can make for lower objects are the most powerful rebukes of their unwillingness to make sacrifices for the highest, just as their capacity of love and trust is of their not loving and trusting Him. The same energy and effort which this queen put forth to reach Solomon, and which men eagerly put forth for some temporal good, would suffice to bring them to the feet of the great Teacher. Her longing for wisdom, her discernment of the person who could give it, and her toilsome journey, rebuke men's indifference to Christ's gifts, their failure to recognise His sweetness and power to make blessed, and their laziness and self-indulgence, which will not take a hundredth part of the pains to secure heaven which they cheerfully expend, and that often in vain, to secure earth. Will the 'Queen of the south' stand alone as witness in that day, or will there not be many out of other lands, who, like her, stretched out their hands to the dimly descried but yearned-for light, and came nearer to it, though they seemed far off, than many who lived in its full blaze and never cared for it? Will it be only Christ's contemporaries who will be condemned by heathen seekers after God, or will there be many of ourselves, convicted of stolid indifference to the Christ who has been beside us all our lives, and has prayed us 'with much entreaty' and in vain, to 'receive the gift'?

They who find their way to Him, and tell Him all that is in their hearts, will have all their questions solved. We have not far to go; for 'a greater than Solomon is here.' If we betake ourselves to Him, and learn of Him, we too shall find that 'the half was not told us'; for Christ possessed is sweeter than all expectation, however high-pitched it may be, and to win Him is the only gain in which there is no disappointment, either at first or at last. We may all have the blessedness of His servants, 'which stand continually before' Him, and not only 'hear' but receive into their spirits His 'wisdom.'

## THE FALL OF SOLOMON

'For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. 5. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. 6. And Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, and went not fully after the Lord, as did David his father. 7. Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. 8. And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods. 9. And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the Lord God of Israel, which had appeared unto him twice, 10. And had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods: but he kept not that which the Lord commanded. 11. Wherefore the Lord said unto Solomon, Forasmuch as this is done of thee, and thou hast not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant. 12. Notwithstanding in thy days I will not do it for David thy father's sake: but I will rend it out of the hand of thy son. 13. Howbeit I will not rend away all the kingdom; but will give one tribe to thy son for David My servant's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake which I have chosen.'—1 KINGS xi. 4-13.

Scripture never blinks the defects of its heroes. Its portraits do not smooth out wrinkles, but, with absolute fidelity, give all faults. That pitiless truthfulness is no small proof of its inspiration. If these historical books were simply fragments of national records, owning no higher source than patriotism, they would never have blurted out the errors and sins of David and Solomon as they do. Where else are there national histories of which the very central idea is the laying bare of national sins and chastisements? or where else are there legends of the people's heroes which tell their sins without apology or reticence? The difference in tone augurs a different origin. The Old Testament histories are not written to tell Israel's glories, or even, we may say, to recount its history, but to tell God's dealings with Israel,—a very different theme, and one which finds its material equally in the glories and in the miseries, which respectively follow its obedience and disobedience. So Solomon's fall is told in the same frank way as his wisdom and wealth; for what is of importance is not Solomon so much as God's dealings with Solomon, when his heart was turned away. We are told that the narrative of Solomon's reign is an ideal picture. Strange idealising which leaves the ideal king wallowing in a sty of sensuality and an apostate from Jehovah!

Here we are simply told of the two things,—his sin, and the divine judgment which it drew after it.

I. Verses 4-8 tell the black story of Solomon's apostasy. What was its extent? Did he himself take part in idolatrous worship, or simply, with the foolish fondness of an old sensualist, let these foreign women have their shrines? The darker supposition seems correct.

The expression that he ‘went after other gods’ is commonly used to mean actual idolatry; and his wives could scarcely have been said to have ‘turned away his heart,’ if all that he did was to wink at, or even to facilitate, their worship. But, on the other hand, he does not seem to have abandoned Jehovah’s worship. The charge against him is that ‘his heart was not perfect,’ or wholly devoted to the Lord, or, as verse 6 puts it, that he ‘went not fully’ after the Lord. His was a case of halting between two opinions, or rather, of trying to hold both at once. He wanted to be a worshipper of Jehovah and of these idols also.

Was his apostasy final? Yes, so far as we can gather from the narrative. Not only is there no statement of his repentance, but the silence with which he receives the divine announcement of retribution is suspicious; and the prophecy of Ahijah to Jeroboam, which obviously comes later in time than the threatenings of the text, treats the idolatry as still existing (verse 33). Further, we learn from [2 Kings xxiii. 13](#) that the shrines which he built stood till Josiah’s time. If Solomon had ever abandoned his idolatry, he would not have left them standing. So we seem to have in him a case of a fall which knew no recovery, an eclipse which did not pass. The Book of Ecclesiastes, if of his composition, would somewhat lighten the darkness of such an end; but his authorship of it is now all but universally given up.

So there, on Olivet’s southern ridge, right opposite the Temple, stood the three altars, and there the king worshipped; and, if he did, he would have a crowd of imitators. The lessons of such a fall are many. First, it teaches the destructive effect of yielding to sensual indulgence. Solomon’s unbridled and monstrous polygamy sapped his manhood and his principle, darkened his clear spirit, blinded his keen eye, and turned a youth of noble aspiration and a manhood of noble accomplishment into an old age without dignity, reverence, or calm. All his wisdom was worth little if it could not keep him master of himself. A young man who lets his passions run away with him is less to be condemned than an old sensualist. God means that reason should govern impulses and desires, and that conscience should govern all and be governed by His will. The vessel is sure to be wrecked when the officers are sent below and the mutineers get hold of the helm.

Second, it warns us that till the very end of life a fall is possible. This ship went down when the voyage was nearly over. In sight of port it struck, and that not for want of beacons. What pathetic warning lies in that phrase, ‘when Solomon was old’! After so many years of high aims, so many temptations overcome, with such habits of wisdom and kingly nobility, after such prayers and visions, he fell; and, if *he* fell, who can be sure of standing? No length of life spent in holy thoughts and service secures us against the possibility of disastrous fall. Only one thing does,—‘Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe!’ John Bunyan saw a door opening down to hell hard by the gates of the Celestial City. When a man that has been had in reputation for wisdom and honour shames the record of his life by a great splash of mud on the white page, near its end, he seldom returns. An old apostate is usually finally an apostate.

Third, may we not venture to see a warning here against marriages in which there is not unity in the deepest things, and a common faith? 'When you run in double harness, take a good look at the other horse.' If a young Christian man or woman enters on such a union with one who is not a Christian, it is a great deal more probable that, in the end, there will be two unbelievers than that there will be two Christians.

We have nothing to do with pronouncing on Solomon's final condition, But he stands on the page of this history, a sad, enigmatical figure, a warning to all young people to take heed that the attrition of the world does not rub off the bloom of early religion, or make them cynically ashamed of the unselfishness of their early desires. There is no sadder sight than an old man whose youthful enthusiasm for goodness and belief in the super-excellency of wisdom have withered, leaving him a hard worldling or a gross sensualist. Better the early days, when he was obscure and poor, and believed in wisdom and in the God of wisdom, than the late ones, when worldly success has spoiled him!

II. Verses 9-13 give the divine retribution announced. The immediate connection of sin and punishment is the teaching intended by this close juxtaposition of these two halves of our narrative. However long the chastisement may be in bursting, the divine resolve to send it is instantaneously consequent on the crime. The chain that binds departure from God with loss of blessing may be of many or few links, but it is riveted on when the evil is done. How gravely, as with the voice of an indictment drawn in heaven, the aggravations of Solomon's crime are set out, in that he had sinned against 'the Lord' who had appeared to him twice (once in his youthful vision, and once after the completion of the Temple), 'and had commanded him concerning' the very sin that he had done. Sin is made more heinous by the abundance of God's favours and the plainness of His commands. If we would remember God's appearances to us and for us, and meditate on His revealed will, we should be more impregnable to the assaults of temptation.

We do not learn *how* the Lord said this to Solomon. Possibly it was by the same prophet who afterwards announced to Jeroboam his destiny; but, however announced, it seems to have been received in sullen silence, and to have wrought no softening nor change. Like all God's threatenings, it was spoken that it might not be inflicted. Solomon was threatened before the prophet spoke to Jeroboam; and if Solomon had repented, Jeroboam would never have been spoken to. But he is too far gone to be stopped, though he has God's own word for it that he is ruining his kingdom by his sin. We have as clear declarations of worse results from ours; but they do not stop some of us. How strange it is that men will put out their hands to grasp their sins, even though they have to stretch across the smoke of the pit for them!

Note how forbearance delays and diminishes retribution. The separation of the kingdom is deferred, and one tribe is left to the Davidic house; probably Judah is meant, and Benjamin is omitted as being small. Observe, too, how we have a double instance of the law of God's

providence which visits the father's deeds on the children. The consequences of David's goodness fall on Solomon, and the consequences of Solomon's evil fall on Rehoboam. Stated in the language of the secular historian, that is to say that the consequences of great national virtues or crimes are seldom reaped by the generation that sowed the seed and did the deed, but take time to mature and work themselves out. Stated in the language of Scripture, it is, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' The separation of the kingdom was not brought about by miracle, but came in the natural course of things. A people ground down by heavy taxation and forced labour, to keep up the luxury of a court containing all that disgusting crowd of wives and concubines, was ripe for revolt, and when the sceptre fell into the hands of a headstrong fool, and there was a capable leader on the other side, discontent soon became rebellion, and rebellion soon became triumphant. It all flowed as naturally as possible from the same fountain as the idolatry of which it was the punishment; and so it teaches once more the great truth that 'the world's history is the world's judgment,' and that the so-called 'natural consequences' of our deeds are, even here and now, God's retribution for our deeds.

What a lesson as to God's great patience is here! What a solemn glimpse into man's power to counterwork God's purpose! So soon after its establishment did the house of David prove unworthy, and the experiment fail. Yet that long-suffering purpose is not turned aside, but persistently and patiently goes on its way, altering its methods, but keeping its end unaltered, bending even sin to minister to its design, pitying and warning the sinner ere it strikes the blow that the sinner has made needful.

Behind the figure of Solomon we see another. The wisest of men fell shamefully, captured by coarse lust, and apparently steeled against all remonstrances from Heaven. 'A greater than Solomon is here.' The faults of the human kings of Israel prophesy of the true King, who is to be the substance of which they were but faint shadows, and whose manhood was stained by no flaw, nor His kingdom ever rent from His pure hands. Solomon was wise, but Christ is 'Wisdom.' Solomon built a Temple, but also altars to false gods overtopping it across the valley; and his Temple was burned with fire. But Christ is the true Temple as well as Priest and Sacrifice. Solomon was by name 'the peaceful,' and his land had outward rest, darkened at the last by war and rebellion. But Christ is the Prince of Peace, and of His dominion there shall be no end. Solomon is the great example of the sad truth that the loftiest and wisest share in the universal sinfulness. Christ is the one flawless Man, who makes those who take Him for their King wise and peaceful, prosperous, and in due time sinless, like Himself.

### THE NEW GARMENT RENT

‘And Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, an Ephrathite of Zereda, Solomon’s servant, whose mother’s name was Zeruah, a widow woman, even he lifted up his hand against the king. 27. And this was the cause that he lifted up his hand against the king: Solomon built Millo, and repaired the breaches of the city of David his father. 28. And the man Jeroboam was a mighty man of valour: and Solomon seeing the young man that he was industrious, he made him ruler over all the charge of the house of Joseph. 29. And it came to pass at that time when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, that the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him in the way; and he had clad himself with a new garment; and they two were alone in the field: 30. And Ahijah caught the new garment that was on him, and rent it in twelve pieces: 31. And he said to Jeroboam, Take thee ten pieces: for thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to thee: 32. (But he shall have one tribe for My servant David’s sake, and for Jerusalem’s sake, the city which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel:) 33. Because that they have forsaken Me, and have worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Milcom the god of the children of Ammon, and have not walked in My ways, to do that which is right in Mine eyes, and to keep My statutes and My judgments, as did David his father. 34. Howbeit I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand: but I will make him prince all the days of his life for David My servant’s sake, whom I chose because he kept My commandments and My statutes: 35. But I will take the kingdom out of his son’s hand, and will give it unto thee, even ten tribes. 36. And unto his son will I give one tribe, that David My servant may have a light alway before Me in Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen Me to put My name there. 37. And I will take thee, and thou shalt reign according to all that thy soul desireth, and shalt be king over Israel. 38. And it shall be, if thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in My ways, and do that is right in My sight, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as David My servant did; that I will be with thee, and build thee a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee. 39. And I will for this afflict the seed of David, but not for ever. 40. Solomon sought therefore to kill Jeroboam. And Jeroboam arose, and fled into Egypt, unto Shishak king of Egypt, and was in Egypt until the death of Solomon. 41. And the rest of the acts of Solomon, and all that he did, and his wisdom, are they not written in the book of the acts of Solomon? 42. And the time that Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel was forty years. 43. And Solomon slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David his father: and Rehoboam his son reigned in his stead.’—[1 KINGS xi. 26-43](#).

Solomon falls into the background in the last part of the story of his reign, and his enemies are more prominent than himself. So long as he walked with God, he was of importance for the historian; but as soon as he forsook God, and was consequently forsaken of His wisdom, he becomes as insignificant as an empty vessel which has once held sweet perfume,



or a piece of carbon through which the electric current has ceased to flow. The sunbeam has left that peak, and shines on other summits. Never was there a sadder eclipse.

We are here told first how the instrument for shattering Solomon's kingdom was shaped by himself. It is the old story of a young man of mark, attracting the eyes of the king, being promoted to offices of trust, which at once stir ambition, and give prominence and influence which seem to afford a possibility of gratifying it. The passion for building, so common in Eastern kings, and the cause of so much misery to their subjects, had grown on Solomon; and as his later days were harassed by war, and he had lost the safe defence of God's arm, Jerusalem had to be enclosed by a wall. His father had been able to leave a 'breach' because the Lord was a wall round him and his city; and if Solomon had kept in his paths, he would have had no need to add to the fortifications. The preservation of ancestral piety is for nations and individuals a surer protection than the improvement of ancestral outward defences. Jeroboam made himself conspicuous by his energy (for that rather than 'valour' must be the meaning of the word), and so got promotion. It was natural, but at the same time dangerous, to put him in command of the forced labour of his own tribe, as the narrative shows us was done; for 'the house of Joseph' is the tribe of Ephraim, to which, according to the correct translation of verse 26, he belonged. In such an office he would be thrown among his kinsmen, and would at once gain influence and learn to sympathise with their discontent, or, at any rate, to know where the sore places were, if he ever wanted to inflame them. One can easily fancy the grumblings of the Ephraimites dragged up to Jerusalem to the hated labour, which Samuel had predicted (1 Samuel viii. 16), and how facile it would be for the officer in charge to fan discontent or to win friends by judicious indulgence. How long this went on we do not know, but the fire had smouldered for some time under the unconscious king's very eyes, when it was fanned into a flame by Ahijah's breath.

That is the second stage in the story,—the spark on the tinder. We have heard nothing of prophets during Solomon's reign; but now this man from Shiloh, the ancient seat of the Tabernacle, meets the ambitious young officer in some solitary spot, with the message which answered to his secret thoughts and made his heart beat fast. The symbolic action preceding the spoken word, as usual, supplied the text, of which the word was the explanation and expansion. How pathetic is the newness of the garment! Unworn, strong, and fresh, it yet is rent in pieces. So the kingdom is so recent, with such possibilities of duration, and yet it must be shattered! Thus quickly has the experiment broken down! It is little more than a century since Saul's anointing, little more than seventy years since the choice of David, and already the fabric, which had such fair promise of perpetuity, is ready to vanish away. If we may say so, that 'new garment' represents the divine disappointment and sorrow over the swift corruption of the kingdom. It was probably merely some loose square of cloth which Ahijah tore, with violence proportioned to its newness, into twelve pieces, ten of which he thrust into the astonished Jeroboam's hands. The commentary followed.

Ahijah's prophecy is substantially the same as the previous threatenings to Solomon, which had done no good. Their incipient fulfilment in the wars with Edom and Syria had been equally futile; and therefore God, who never strikes without warning, and never warns without striking if men do not heed, now drops the message into ears that were only too ready to hear. The seed fell on prepared soil, and Jeroboam's half-formed plans would be consolidated and fixed. The scene is like that in which the witches foretell to Macbeth his dignity. Slumbering ambitions are stirred, and a half-inclined will is finally determined by the glimpse into the future. How easily men are persuaded that God speaks, and how willing they are to obey, when their inclinations jump with Heaven's commandments! The prophet's message makes the separation of the kingdoms a direct divine act, and yet it was the breaking up of a divine institution. God's dealings have to be shaped according to facts, and He changes His methods, and lets the feebleness of His creatures and their sins mould His august procedure. The divine Potter, like mere human artisans, has His spoiled pieces of work, and, with infinite resource and patience as infinite, re-shapes the clay into other forms. The separation of the kingdoms was a divine act, and yet it is treated often in the later books as a crime and rebellion. God works out His purposes through men's deeds, and their motives determine whether their acts are sins or obedience. A man may be a rebel while he is doing the will of God, if what he does be done at the bidding of his own selfishness. The separation of the kingdoms was God's doing, but it was brought about by the free action of men obeying most secular impulses of political discontent, and led by a cunning, self-seeking schemer.

Note that the prophecy is in three parts. First, verses 31-33 announce the punishment, with the reservation of a dwindled dominion to the Davidic house, for the sake of their great ancestor and of God's choice of Jerusalem, and solemnly charge on the people the idolatry which the king had introduced. The second part (verses 34-36) postpones the execution of the sentence till after Solomon's death, and assigns the same two reasons for this further forbearance. The third part (verses 37-39) promises Jeroboam the kingdom, and lays down the conditions on which the favours promised to David and his house may be his. The whole closes with the assurance that the affliction of the seed of David is not to be for ever.

The punishment was heavy; for the disruption of the kingdom meant the wreck of all the prosperity of Solomon's earlier days, the hopeless weakness of the divided tribes as against the formidable powers that pressed in on them from north and south, frequent intestine wars, bitter hatred instead of amity. Yet there was another side to it; for the very failure of the human kings made the Messianic hope the more bright, like a light glowing in the deepening darkness, and tumult and oppression might teach those whom prosperity and peace had only corrupted. The great lesson for us is the ruin which follows on departure from God. We do not see national sins followed with equal plainness or swiftness by national judgments; but the history of Israel is meant to show on a large scale what is always true, in

the long run, both for nations and for individuals, that 'it is an evil thing and a bitter' to depart from the living God.

Mark, too, that the judgment is wrought out by perfectly natural causes. The separation follows old lines of cleavage. The strength of David's kingdom lay in the south; and Ephraim was too powerful a tribe and too proud of its ancient glories, to acquiesce cheerfully in the pre-eminence of Judah. The oppression of forced labour and heavy taxation was put forward as the reason for the revolt, and, no doubt, was the reason for the readiness with which the ten tribes rallied to Jeroboam's flag. There are two ways of writing history. You can either leave God out, or trace all to Him. The former way calls itself 'scientific' and 'positive.' The latter is the Bible way. Perhaps, if modern history were written on the same principles as the Books of Kings, the divine hand would be as plainly visible,—only it requires an inspired historian to do it. The way of bringing about the judgment for departing from God has changed, but the judgment remains the same to-day as when Ahijah rent his garment.

Between verses 39 and 40 we must suppose an attempt at armed rebellion by Jeroboam. That is implied by the expression that he 'lifted his hand against the king' (verses 26, 27). That attempt must have been put down by Solomon. And that it should have been made shows how little Jeroboam was influenced by religious motives. The prophet's words had set him all afire with ambitious hopes, and he paid no heed to the distinct assurance that Solomon was to be 'prince all the days of his life.' He stretched out a rash, self-willed hand to snatch the promised crown, and broke God's commandment even while he pretended to be keeping it. How different David's conduct in like circumstances! He took no steps to bring about the fulfilment of Samuel's promise at his anointing, but patiently waited for God to do as He had said, in His own time, and meantime continued his lowly work. God's time is the best time; and he who greedily grasps at a premature fulfilment of promised good will have to pay for it by defeat and exile from the modest good that he had.

Jeroboam's flight to Egypt brings that ill-omened name on the page for the first time since the Exodus. It has given occasion to an extraordinary addition to the Septuagint, professing to tell his adventures there,—how he was high in Shishak's favour, and married a princess. That is apparently pure legend; but his residence there was important, as the beginning of Egypt's interference in Israel's affairs. It is an old trick of aggressive nations to side with a pretender to the throne of a country which they covet, and benevolently to strengthen him that he may weaken it. No doubt it was as Jeroboam's ally that Shishak invaded Judah in the fifth year of Rehoboam, and plundered the Temple and the palace. It was a bad beginning for a king of Israel to be a pensioner of Egypt.

The narrative closes with the sad, reticent formula which ends each reign, and in Solomon's case hides so much that is tragic and dark. This was all that could be said about the end of a career that had begun so nobly. If more had been said, the record would have been sadder; and so the pitying narrative casts the veil of the stereotyped summary over the

miserable story. There are many instances in history of lives of genius and enthusiasm, of high promise and partial accomplishment, marred and flung away, but none which present the great tragedy of wasted gifts, and blossoms never fruited, in a sharper, more striking form than the life of the wise king of Israel, who 'in his latter days' was 'a fool.' The goodliest vessel may be shipwrecked in sight of port. Solomon was not an old man, as we count age, when he died; for he reigned forty years, and was somewhere about twenty when he became king. But it was 'when he was old' that he fell, and that through passion which should have been well under control long before. The sun went down in a thick bank of clouds, which rose from undrained marshes in his soul, and stretched high up in the western horizon. His career, in its glory and its shame, preaches the great lesson which the Book of Ecclesiastes puts into his mouth as 'the conclusion of the whole matter': 'Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.'

## HOW TO SPLIT A KINGDOM

‘And Rehoboam went to Shechem: for all Israel were come to Shechem to make him king. 2. And it came to pass, when Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who was yet in Egypt, heard of it (for he was fled from the presence of king Solomon, and Jeroboam dwelt in Egypt); 3. That they sent and called him. And Jeroboam and all the congregation of Israel came, and spake unto Rehoboam, saying, 4. Thy father made our yoke grievous: now therefore make thou the grievous service of thy father, and his heavy yoke which he put upon us, lighter, and we will serve thee. 6. And he said unto them, Depart yet for three days, then come again to me. And the people departed. 6. And king Rehoboam consulted with the old men, that stood before Solomon his father while he yet lived, and said, How do ye advise that I may answer this people? 7. And they spake unto him, saying, If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day, and wilt serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be thy servants for ever. 8. But he forsook the counsel of the old men, which they had given him, and consulted with the young men that were grown up with him, and which stood before him: 9. And he said unto them, What counsel give ye that we may answer this people, who have spoken to me, saying, Make the yoke which thy father did put upon us lighter? 10. And the young men that were grown up with him spake unto him, saying, Thus shalt thou speak unto this people that spake unto thee, saying, Thy father made our yoke heavy, but make thou it lighter unto us; thus shalt thou say unto them, My little finger shall be thicker than my father’s loins. 11. And now whereas my father did lade you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke: my father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions. 12. So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king had appointed, saying, ‘Come to me again the third day. 13. And the king answered the people roughly, and forsook the old men’s counsel that they gave him; 14. And spake to them after the counsel of the young men, saying, My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke: my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions. 15. Wherefore the king hearkened not unto the people; for the cause was from the Lord, that He might perform His saying, which the Lord spake by Ahijah the Shilonite unto Jeroboam the son of Nebat. 16. So when all Israel saw that the king hearkened not unto them, the people answered the king, saying, What portion have we in David? neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse: to your tents, O Israel: now see to thine own house, David. So Israel departed unto their tents. 17. But as for the children of Israel which dwelt in the cities of Judah, Rehoboam reigned over them.’—1 KINGS xii. 1-17.

The separation of the kingdom of Solomon into two weak and hostile states is, in one aspect, a wretched story of folly and selfishness wrecking a nation, and, in another, a solemn instance of divine retribution working its designs by men’s sins. The greater part of this account deals with it in the former aspect, and shows the despicable motives of the men in whose hands was the nation’s fate; but one sentence (verse 15) draws back the curtain for

a moment, and shows us the true cause. There is something very striking in that one flash, which reveals the enthroned God, working through the ignoble strife which makes up the rest of the story. This double aspect of the disruption of the kingdom is the main truth about it which the narrative impresses on us.

As to the mere details of the incident, as a political revolution, they are in four stages. First come the terms of allegiance offered to the new king. Rehoboam goes to Shechem, because 'Israel was gone' there. The choice of the place is suspicious; for it was in the tribe of Ephraim, and had been for a time the centre of national life; and its selection at once indicated discontent with the preponderance of Jerusalem, and a wish to assert the importance of the central tribes. No doubt, the choice of the latter city for the capital had caused heart-burning, even during David's time.

Adopting the reading of the Revised Version, we see another suspicious sign in the recall of Jeroboam, and his selection as spokesman; for he had been in rebellion against Solomon ([1 Kings xi. 26](#)), and therefore an exile. Probably he had now been the instigator of the discontent of which he became the mouthpiece; and, in any case, his appearance as the leader was all but a declaration of war. His former occupation as superintendent of the forced labour exacted from his own tribe taught him where the shoe pinched, and the weight of the yoke would not be lessened in his representations.

No doubt, the luxury and splendour of Solomon's brilliant reign had an under side of oppression, even though forced labour was not exacted from Israelites ([1 Kings ix. 22](#)); but probably the severity was exaggerated in these complaints, which were plainly the pretext for a revolt of which tribal jealousy was the main cause, and Jeroboam's ambition the spark that set light to the train. Certainly there was ignoring of the benefits of the peaceful reign, which had brought security and commerce. But there was enough truth in the complaint to make it plausible and effective for catching the people. Had they a right to suspend their allegiance on compliance with their terms?

Israel was neither a despotism, nor simply a constitutional monarchy. God appointed the kings, and had ordained the Davidic house to the throne; and therefore this making terms was, in effect, asserting independence of God's will. Jeroboam was scheming for a crown. The people were shaking off their submission to God. It is very doubtful if concession would have conciliated them. There is nothing elevated, not to say religious, in their motives or acts.

Then comes Rehoboam on the scene. The one sensible thing that he did was to take three days to think. Whether or no his little finger was thicker than his father's loins, his head was not half so wise. Ecclesiastes, speaking in Solomon's name, reckons it a great evil that he must leave his labour to his successor; 'and who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?' Certainly Rehoboam had little 'wisdom' either of the higher or lower kind. It was the lower kind which the old counsellors of his father gave him,—that wisdom which

is mere cunning directed to selfish ends, and careless of honour or truth. 'Flatter them to-day, speak them fair, promise what you do not mean to keep, and then, when you are firm in the saddle, let them feel bit and spur.' That was all these grey-headed men had learned. If that was what passed for 'wisdom' in Solomon's later days, we need not wonder at revolt.

To act on such motives is bad enough, but to put them into plain words, and offer them as the rule of a king's conduct, is a depth of cynical contempt for truth and kingly honour that indicates only too clearly how rotten the state of Israel was. Have we never seen candidates for Parliament and the like on one side of the water, and for Congress, Senate, or Presidency on the other, who have gone to school to the old men at Shechem? The prizes of politicians are often still won by this stale device. The young counsellors differ only in the means of gaining the object. Neither set has the least glimmer of the responsibility of the office, nor ever thinks that God has any say in choosing the king. Naked, undisguised selfishness animates both; only, as becomes their several ages, the one set recommends crawling and the other bluster. Think of Saul hiding among the staff, David going back to his sheep after he was anointed, Solomon praying for wisdom to guide this people, and measure the depth of descent to this ignoble scramble for the sweets of royalty!

According to [I Kings xiv. 21](#), Rehoboam was forty-one at this time, so his contemporaries could not have been very young. But possibly the number in the present text is an error for twenty-one, which would agree better with the tone of the reference to age here, and with the rash counsel. Note the recurrence, both in Rehoboam's question in verse 9 and in the young advisers' answer in verse 10, of the obnoxious speech of the people. That may be accidental, but it sounds as if both he and they were keeping their anger warm by repeating the offensive complaint.

The Revised Version reads, 'My little finger is thicker,' etc., and so makes the sentence not a threat, but the foundation of the following threat in an arrogant and empty assertion of greater power. The fool always thinks himself wiser than the wise dead; the 'living dog' fancies that his yelp is louder than the roar of 'the dead lion.' What can be done with a Rehoboam who brags that he is better than Solomon?

The threat which follows is inconceivably foolish; and all the more so because it probably did not represent any definite intention, and certainly was backed by no force adequate to carry it out. Passion and offended dignity are the worst guides for conduct. Threats are always mistakes. A sieve of oats, not a whip, attracts a horse to the halter. If Rehoboam had wished to split the kingdom, he could have found no better wedge than this blustering promise of tyranny.

Next in this miserable story of imbecility and arrogance comes the answer to the assembly. Shechem had seen many an eventful hour, but never one heavier with important issues than that on which the united Israel met for the last time, and there, in the rich valley with Ebal and Gerizim towering above them, heard the fateful answer of this braggart. A

dozen rash words brought about four hundred years of strife, weakness, and final destruction. And neither the foolish speaker nor any man in that crowd dreamed of the unnumbered evils to flow from that hour. Since issues are so far beyond our sight, how careful it becomes us to be of motives! Angry counsels are always blunders. No nation can prosper when moderate complaints are met by threats, and 'spirited conduct,' asserting dignity, is a sign of weakness, not of strength. For nations and individuals that is true.

Here the historian draws back the curtain. On earth stand the insolent king and the now mutinous people, each driving at their ends, and neither free of sin in their selfishness. A stormy scene of passion, without thought of God, rages below, and above sits the Lord, working His great purpose by men's sin. That divine control does not in the least affect the freedom or the guilt of the actors. Rehoboam's disregard of the people's terms was 'a thing brought about of the Lord,' but it was Rehoboam's sin none the less. That which, looked at from the mere human side, is the sinful result of the free play of wrong motives, is, when regarded from the divine side, the determinate counsel of God. The greatest crime in the world's history was at the same time the accomplishment of God's most merciful purpose. Calvary is the highest example of the truth, which embraces all lesser instances of the wrath of man, which He makes to praise Him and effect His deep designs.

Again, the rending of the kingdom was the punishment of sin, especially Solomon's sin of idolatry, which was closely connected with the extravagant expenditure that occasioned the separation. So the so-called natural consequences of transgression constitute its temporal punishment in part, and behind all these our eyes should be clear-sighted enough to behold the operative will of God. This one piercing beam of light, cast on that scene of insolence and rebellion, lights up all history, and gives the principle on which it must be interpreted, if it is not to be misread.

Again, the punishment of sin, whether that of a community or of a single person, is sin. The separation was sin, on both sides; it led to much more. It was the consequence of previous departure. So ever the worst result of any sin is that it opens the door, like a thief who has crept in through a window, to a band of brethren.

Lastly, we have the fierce rejoinder to the empty boast of Rehoboam, and the definitive disruption of the nation. Jeroboam must have fanned the flame skilfully, or it would not have burst out so quickly. There is no hesitation, nor any regret. The ominous cry, which had been heard before, in Sheba's abortive revolt, answers Rehoboam with instantaneous and full-throated defiance. Rancorous tribal hatred is audible in it. Long pent up jealousy and dislike of the dynasty of David has got breath at last: 'To your tents, O Israel! now see to thine own house, David!'

That roar from a thousand voices meant a good deal more than the cowed king's vain threats did. The angry men who raised it, and were the tools of a crafty conspirator, the frightened courtiers and king who heard it, were alike in their entire oblivion of their true



Lord and Monarch. 'God was not in all their thoughts.' An enterprise begun in disregard of Him is fated to failure. The only sure foundations of a nation are the fear of the Lord and obedience to His will. If politics have not a religious basis, the Lord will blow upon them, and they will be as stubble.

## POLITICAL RELIGION

‘Then Jeroboam built Shechera in mount Ephraim, and dwelt therein; and went out from thence, and built Penuel. 26. And Jeroboam said in his heart, Now shall the kingdom return to the house of David: 27. If this people go up to do sacrifice in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then shall the heart of this people turn again unto their lord, even unto Rehoboam king of Judah, and they shall kill me, and go again to Rehoboam king of Judah. 28. Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 29. And he set the one in Beth-el, and the other put he in [Dan. 30.](#) And this thing became a sin: for the people went to worship before the one, even unto [Dan. 31.](#) And he made an house of high places, and made priests of the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi. 32. And Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like unto the feast that is in Judah; and he offered upon the altar. So did he in Beth-el, sacrificing unto the calves that he had made: and he placed in Beth-el the priests of the high places which he had made. 33. So he offered upon the altar which he had made in Beth-el the fifteenth day of the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised of his own heart; and ordained a feast unto the children of Israel: and he offered upon the altar, and burnt incense.’—[1 KINGS xii. 25-33.](#)

The details of this section need no long elucidation; for the one fact which it records, namely, the establishment of the calf worship in Israel, is the main point to consider. As for details, we need touch them lightly. The ‘building’ of Shechem and Penuel is probably to be understood as ‘fortifying’; for, in regard to the former town, we know from the preceding section that it *was* a town before the disruption, and the same is probably true of the latter. Two fortresses, one in the heart of his kingdom, one on the eastern border, where attack might be expected, were Jeroboam’s first care.

In estimating his conduct, the fact must be remembered that Ahijah had promised him God’s protection and the establishment of his kingdom in his family, on the sole condition of obedience. If he had believed the prophet, something else than building strongholds would have been his prime aim. But he evidently thought that promises were all very well, but thick walls were better. The two things recorded of him are quite of a piece; and the writer seems, by putting them thus side by side, to wish us to note their identity of motive and similarity in character.

The establishment of the calf worship was entirely due, according to this historian, to dread that religious unity would heal the schism of political duality, and that Jeroboam’s kingdom and life would be sacrificed to the magnetism which would draw the revolted northern tribes back to render allegiance, where they went up to worship. The calculation was reasonable: but why, in estimating chances, did Jeroboam leave out God’s promise? That should have kept him at ease. The calves and the castles were signs of fear and of slight

regard to the prophet's word. No doubt, when it suited him, he could vindicate rebellion on the plea of obeying God. The plea would have sounded more genuine if he had shown that he trusted God.

The calves were probably suggested by his Egyptian experiences, where he had seen sacred bulls worshipped living, and mummied dead. But the remembrance of Aaron and the golden calf was evidently present to him, as the almost verbal quotation of Aaron's words shows. If so, the whole transaction is still more accentuated as a revolt against the ritual of the central sanctuary. 'The much-calumniated Aaron is our example. He was mastered by his brother, but he was right, and we go back to the old original worship of our fathers.'

Jeroboam was among the first to employ the expedient, so often resorted to since, of white-washing old-world criminals, in order to provide an ancestry for modern heresies. The calves seem to have been doubled simply as a matter of convenience. When once the principle of saving trouble comes in, in religion, it generally plays a great part. If it were too much to go to Jerusalem, it would soon be too much to go to Bethel, and so Dan must be provided for the north. The calves were symbols of Jehovah, not of other gods, as must be carefully noted. The making of them implied all that followed; for a god must have shrine and priesthood and sacrifice and festivals. The Levites refusing to serve, and probably losing their inheritance, fled to Judah, and a new priesthood was made 'from among all the people' (Rev. Ver.), The Feast of Tabernacles was retained but its date shifted forward a month, perhaps because the harvest, which it closed, was later in the north, but evidently with the design of, as it were, underscoring the religious separation.

The latter part of this passage should perhaps be attached more closely to the next chapter, and understood as describing the one instance of Jeroboam's sacrificing which was so grimly interrupted by the denunciation by the anonymous prophet from Judah. Such are the outlines of the facts. What are the lessons taught by them?

I. There is that one already mentioned,—the folly and sin of seeking to help God to fulfil His promises by our poor efforts at making their fulfilment sure to sense. No doubt many of His promises are contingent on our activity in material things; and no man has a right to expect that 'his bread shall be given him,' for instance, unless he contributes the 'sweat of his brow' towards it. But Jeroboam had had the conditions of safety and stability clearly laid down. They were, obedience after the pattern of David ([1 Kings xi. 38](#)). So there was no need for building Shechem and Penuel, nor for casting calves and serving them. The heavens will stand without our rearing brickwork pillars to hold them up. But it takes much faith to trust God's bare word, and we are all apt to feel safer if we have something for sense to grasp. On the open plain, God guards those who trust Him more securely than if they lay in cities 'fenced up to heaven. 'Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls. . . . For I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about.'

II. Another lesson taught here is the sin of degrading religion to be a mere instrument for securing personal ends. Jeroboam has had many followers among politicians, The average 'statesman' looks on all religions as equally true or untrue, and is ready to be polite to any of them, if he can carry his measures thereby. The long history of the relations of Church and State in the Old World has been little else than the State's hiring and muzzling the Church for its own advantage, and the protests of a faithful few against the degradation of State patronage and consequent control.

In England, Jeroboam and his calves used to be the favourite shocking example of the sin of schism, with which High Church orators were fond of pelting Nonconformists. The true lesson from him and them is precisely the opposite one; namely, the weakening of religion, when it is favoured and endowed by the civil power. The priests of Bethel, who were the creatures of Jeroboam, were not likely to be his or his successors rebukers. When Amos the prophet spoke bold words against a king, it was Amaziah the priest who gave the shameful counsel, 'O thou seer, flee into the land of Judah, and prophesy there; but prophesy no more at Bethel: for it is the king's sanctuary.' Is there no such thing known as a flaming profession of religion, because it is respectable, or opens the way to some good position? Does nobody pose in public, especially about election times, as a liberal supporter of Churches and a devout Church-member, with an eye mainly to votes? Do political parties think it a good thing to get the religious people to go for their ticket? Or, to take less base instances, is there not a whole school who estimate Christianity mainly as valuable as a social force, and, without any deep personal recognition of its loftier aspects, think it well that it should be generally accepted, especially by other people, as it makes them easier to govern, and cements the social fabric?

Christianity is something more than social cement. Jeroboam's policy was a great success, as policy. It both united his kingdom and definitively separated it from Judah. But it was a success purchased at the price of degrading religion into the lackey of a court. Samson went to sleep on Delilah's lap, and she cut off the clustering locks in which his strength lay.

III. The true nature of idolatry is brought out in the incident. Jeroboam did not draw Israel away to worship other gods. No charge of that sort is ever made against the calf worship. The images were meant, just as Aaron's, of which they were a reproduction, was meant, to be symbols of Jehovah. The true object of worship was worshipped in a false way. No matter though the image represented Him, its worship was idol worship. There is no ground in the narrative for the surmise of Stanley,—who in this, as usual, simply says ditto to Ewald,—that Jeroboam's motive was the desire to prevent Israel's adopting false gods, and that the calves were a compromise by which he hoped to stem the tide of apostasy to Baal worship. The single motive stated in the text is policy inspired by fear. Jeroboam did not care enough about the worship of Jehovah to mould his statecraft with the view of conserving it. If he had so cared, he could not have set up the calves. His doing so is uniformly regarded in

Scripture as idolatry pure and simple; and though it is clearly distinguished from the worship of false gods, it is none the less branded as rebellion against Jehovah.

A visible representation of Jehovah was as much an idol as a similar one of Baal would have been. It necessarily degraded the conception of Him. It brought sense into dangerous prominence as an aid to worship. The symbol might at first, and to the more devout, be a mere symbol, and transparent; but it would soon become opaque, and from symbol turn embodiment, and thence pass to being the very deity represented. It is a feat of abstraction impossible for the ordinary man, to worship before an idol, and not to worship the idol. The strange, awful fascination which idolatry exercised is perhaps gone now from the civilised world. But the lesson remains ever in season, that it is dangerous work to bring in sense as an ally of devotion, because outward things, which at first may be only symbols and helps, are almost certain to become something more.

IV. Jeroboam may stand, finally, as a type of the men who suppose themselves to be worshipping God when they are only following their own wills. All his ceremonial had this damning characteristic, that it was 'devised of his own heart'; and so it was himself that was enshrined in his new house of the high places, and himself to whom the sacrifices were offered. Absolute obedience to God's will, whatever perils may seem to attend it, is true worship. Wherever apparent devotion to Him is mingled with burning incense to our own net, the mixture ruins the devotion. 'Obedience is better than sacrifice.' Temptations to take our own way will often appear as the dictates of sound policy, and to neglect them as culpable carelessness. But such paltering with plain commandments is as ruinous as sinful, and is not to be atoned for by outward worship.

What did Jeroboam win by his intrusion of self-will into the region which ought to be sacred to perfect obedience? A troubled reign and the destruction of his house after one generation. One more thing he won; namely, that terrible epithet, which becomes almost a part of his name, 'Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin.' What a title to be branded on a man's forehead for ever! It is always a mistake to disobey God. Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. This only is the safe motto for churches and individuals, in all the details of worship and of life: 'Lo, I come to do Thy will, O Lord, and Thy law is within my heart.'

## THE RECORD OF TWO KINGS

'In the thirty and first year of Asa king of Judah began Omri to reign over Israel, twelve years: six years reigned he in Tirzah. 24. And he bought the hill Samaria of Shemer for two talents of silver, and built on the hill, and called the name of the city which he built, after the name of Shemer, owner of the hill, Samaria. 25. But Omri wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all that were before him. 26. For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin, to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger with their vanities. 27. Now the rest of the acts of Omri which he did, and his might that he shewed, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel? 28. So Omri slept with his fathers, and was buried in Samaria: and Ahab his son reigned in his stead. 29. And in the thirty and eighth year of Asa king of Judah began Ahab the son of Omri to reign over Israel: and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty and two years. 30. And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. 31. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethibaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. 32. And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. 33. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.'—1 KINGS xvi. 23-33.

Jeroboam's son and successor was killed by Baasha, Baasha's son and successor was killed by Zimri, who reigned for a week, and then burned the palace and died in the flames. A struggle for the throne followed between Omri, the commander-in-chief, and Tibni, 'Tibni died, and Omri reigned.' So, in fifty years, the kingdom that was to relieve Israel from oppression staggered through seas of blood, and four kings, or would-be kings, died by violence.

Omri's dynasty lasted about as long, namely, through the reigns of four kings, and was then swept away like the others, in blood and fire. The text gives a meagre outline of the reigns of himself and his son Ahab, of which perhaps the meagreness is the most significant feature. The only fact told of the father is that he built Samaria, and his whole reign is summed up in the damning sentence that he 'walked in the way of Jeroboam.' We learn from the Moabite stone that he waged successful war against that country, and that it was tributary to Israel for forty years. In [Micah vi. 16](#), mention is made of the statutes of Omri, as if he had given edicts for idolatry. The reign of Ahab is similarly summarised. His marriage with Jezebel, and the flood of Baal worship which that let loose over the land, are told with horror, in preparation for Elijah's appearance like a dark background that throws up a brilliant figure.

The lessons to be drawn from these severely condensed records, cut down to the bone, as it were, are plain. The first of them is, that when a life is over, the one thing which lasts, or is worth thinking about, is the man's relation to God and His will. Here are twelve years'

reign in the one case, and twenty-two in the other, all boiled down, so to speak, into half a dozen sentences, and estimated according to one standard only. What has become of all the eager strife, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears, that burned so fiercely for awhile? All died down into a handful of grey ashes. And what lies in them like a lump of solid metal that has been melted out of the huge heap of days and deeds that fed the fire? The man's relation to God. That abides; that is recorded; that determines everything else about him. Waving forests that once had sunshine pouring down on their green fronds are represented in a thin seam of coal. Our lives will all come down to this at last. How did he stand towards God and His will is the final question that will be asked about each of us, and the answer to it is the only thing that concerns the dead—or the living either. Men write voluminous biographies of each other. How little their judgments matter to the dead men! Praise or blame are equally indifferent to them. But what matters is, whether God will have to record of us what is recorded of these two wretched kings, or whether He will recognise that the main drift of our poor lives was to serve Him and do His will. He was a great scholar; he made a huge fortune; he rose to be a peer; she was a noted beauty, a leader of fashion, a queen of society—what will all such epitaphs be worth, if God's finger carves silently below them, 'He did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord'?

Another lesson from these two reigns is the certain widening of the smallest departure from God. Jeroboam professed to retain the worship of Jehovah, and to introduce only a small alteration in setting up a symbol of Him. He would vehemently have asserted that he was no idolater, and would have shuddered at the very notion of bowing down to the gods of the nations, but in less than fifty years a temple to the Sidonian Baal rose in Samaria, and his worship, with its foul sensuality, was corrupting all Israel. However acute the angle of departure, the line has only to be prolonged, and the distance between it and that from which it diverged will be the distance between heaven and hell, Let no one say: 'Thus far and no farther will I go.' There is no stopping at will on that course, any more than a man sliding down a steeply sloping sheet of smooth ice can pull himself up before he plunges over the edge into the abyss below. That is true as to all departures from God and His law, but it is eminently true as to every tampering with the spirituality of worship. Jeroboam's symbolism led straight to Ahab's unblushing pagan worship of the hideous Sidonian Baal. The craving for symbolical and sensuous accessories of worship, which is strong in most Churches in this aesthetic generation, is perilous. Material aids to worship there must be, so long as we are in the flesh, but the fewer and simpler they are the better, for they are aids which very swiftly become hindrances.

Another lesson from Ahab's reign is the need of detachment from entangling alliances, if we would keep ourselves right with God. It was Israel's calling to be separate from the nations. It was Israel's temptation either to mix with them, or to keep aloof from them in contempt and hatred. Ahab's marriage with Jezebel was, no doubt, thought by his father a

clever stroke of policy, assuring them of an ally. But it flooded the nation with the cruel and lustful cult of Baal, and that finally ruined Ahab and his house. God's servants can never mingle themselves with His enemies without harm, unless they mingle with them for the purpose of turning them into His servants. If we prefer the company of those who do not love Jesus, our love to Him must be faint, and will soon be fainter. If Ahab takes Jezebel for his wife, Ahab will soon take Jezebel's foul god for his god.



### **A PROPHET'S STRANGE PROVIDERS**

‘And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word. 2. And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, 3. Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. 4. And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there. 5. So he went and did according unto the word of the Lord. for he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. 6. And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook. 7. And it came to pass after a while, that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land. 8. And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, 9. Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee. 10. So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks: and he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink. 11. And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand. 12. And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die. 13. And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. 14. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth. 15. And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. 16. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which He spake by Elijah.’—[1 KINGS xvii. 1-16](#).

The worst times need the best men. The reign of Ahab brought a great outburst of Baal worship, imported by his Phoenician wife, which threatened to sweep away every trace of the worship of Jehovah. The feeble king was absolutely ruled by the strongwilled Jezebel, and everything seemed rushing down to ruin. One man arrests the downward movement, and with no weapon but his word, and no support but his own dauntless courage, which was the child of his faith, works a revolution in Israel. ‘Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than’ Elijah the Tishbite. Bugged, stern, solitary, he has no commission to reveal new truth. He is not a ‘prophet,’ like later ones whose words were revelation.

Little is preserved of his sayings. His task was to reform and restore, not to advance; and his endowments of ‘spirit and power’ corresponded to his work. The striking peculiar-

ities of this heroic figure will appear as we go on with his history. For the present, we have to consider the three points of this narrative.

I. The Prophet and the King.—The startling suddenness of Elijah's leap into the arena, where he appears without preface or explanation, helps the impression of extraordinary force which his whole career makes. He crashes into the midst of Ahab's court like a thunderbolt. What did Jezebel think of this wild man from the other side of Jordan, with his long hair and his loose mantle, who thus fronted Ahab and her? Nothing is told us of his descent; it is even questionable whether the reading which calls him 'the Tishbite' is correct. We only know that he was of Gilead, and therefore used to a ruder, freer, simpler life than that in kings' palaces.

The natural conclusion from the narrative is that the prophet and the king had never met before; and, if so, the stern brevity of the threat is even more remarkable. In any case, the absence of explanation of reasons for the drought, or of credentials of Elijah, or of offers of mercy on condition of repentance, give a peculiarly grim aspect to the message, and make it a dangerous one to carry to such a hearer as Ahab, stirred up by Jezebel. When God commands us to speak, no thought of peril must make us dumb. If the 'word of the Lord' is to sound from our lips with power, it must first have absolute sway over ourselves. One man with God at his back, who fears nothing, can work marvels.

God's servant is men's master. The vision of God's Presence paled the splendour, and blunted the perils, of the court of Samaria. Ahab was but a poor puppet in the sight of eyes that 'saw the Lord sitting on His throne, high and lifted up.' So the very first words of Elijah lay bare the secret spring of his fiery energy and courage. 'Before whom I stand,'—that is the thought to put nerve, daring, and disregard of earth into a man.

James's comment on this incident assumes that the declaration to Ahab followed earnest prayer that it might not rain, and that the 'word' which should end the drought was also prayer. The truest lover of his country or of any men may sometimes have to wish for losses and sorrows. Elijah did not open and shut the heavens, but his prayer had power to move the Hand that 'openeth and no man shutteth.'

II. The Prophet and the Ravens.—One would like to know how Elijah made his escape from Ahab; but the whole story is marked by sudden appearances and disappearances. He flashes into sight and flames for a moment, and then is swallowed up in the dark again. The exact position of the brook Cherith is doubtful. It would seem most natural to look for it across Jordan, as safer and more familiar ground to Elijah than any of the tributaries on the western side. At all events, somewhere among the savage rocks in some wady with a trickle of water down it, and rank vegetation that would help to hide him, he lurked for an indefinite period, alone with God.

Why did he flee? Not only for safety, but that the period of the drought might be prolonged till it had done its work, and that the prophet might learn more lessons for his calling.

Good Obadiah would have made a place for the chief of the prophets in his caves; but the man who is to do work like Elijah's must live in solitude. Cherith was part of the training for Carmel. The flight thither was as much an act of obedient faith as was the appearance before the king. However the necessity of flight was impressed on the prophet, it *was* impressed on him as manifestly not his own plan, but God's command; and though the journey was a weary one, and the appointed place of refuge inhospitable, the command was unhesitatingly obeyed. He was not left to wonder how he was to be fed when he got there, but God gave him, what He seldom gives—a previous assurance of miraculous provision, which obviously met some unspoken thought. We do not usually know how we are to be fed in the solitude till we get there; but if our doubting hearts object, 'But, Lord, there is nothing at Cherith but a brook and some ravens,' He sometimes gives us assurance that these will be enough. Whether or no, the duty is the same,—to follow God's voice, whether it take us face to face with Ahab and Jezebel or into the wild gorge.

Note that the same words are employed about the ravens and the widow: 'I have commanded the . . . to feed thee.' God has ways of reaching the mysterious animal instinct and the mysterious human will, and each, in its own way, obeys. It is needless to try to pare down the miracle by saying that, of course, ravens would haunt the water-courses in drought, and that the food which they brought might be for their young, and so on. The daily regularity of the supply takes it out of the natural category, to say nothing of the remarkable breed which the ravens must have been of, if they brought their young ones' food within reach and let the prophet take it.

People take offence at the abundance of miracles in the lives of Elijah and Elisha, and assert that some of them, this among the rest, are for unworthily trivial occasions. But the grave crisis in Israel is to be taken into account, which involved the necessity for unusual manifestations of divine power, and very evident credentials for the prophets; and the preparation of Elijah for his tremendous struggle was, even to our eyes, surely an adequate end for miracle. How could he doubt that God had sent him and would care for him, with such memories as those of his winged purveyors? How could he doubt future words which should come to him, when he recalled how marvellously this one had been fulfilled? The silence of the ravine, the long days and nights of solitude, the punctual arrival of his food, would all tend to weld his faith into yet more close-knit strength. If we may so say, it was worth God's while to work miracles, to make Elijah. The highest end of creation is the production of God-fearing men. All things serve the soul that serves God.

III. The Prophet and the Widow.—The little stream that came down the wady dried up 'after a while'; and Elijah, no doubt, would wonder what was to be done next, as he saw it daily sending a thinner thread to Jordan. But he was not told till the channel was dry, and the pebbles in its bed bleaching in the sun. God makes us sometimes wait on beside a diminishing rivulet, and keeps us ignorant of the next step, till it is dry. Patience is an element in

strength. It was a far cry from Cherith to Zarephath, right across the kingdom of Ahab; and to run for refuge to a dependency of Zidon, Jezebel's country, looked like putting his head in the lion's mouth. But the same 'command' which the ravens had obeyed had smoothed his way.

So he girded up his loins, and left, no doubt reluctantly, the brook for a city. How his heart would bow in adoring thankfulness, when the first person he saw outside the little 'city' was 'the widow'! He knew her; did she know him? The natural interpretation of verse 9 is that, at the time when God spoke to Elijah, he had already 'commanded' the woman. But the despondent tone of her answer seems against that idea; and perhaps we are to suppose that, just as the ravens were commanded and knew not by whom, so this woman received the command, when she saw the travel-stained and gaunt stranger, through her womanly impulses of compassion, not knowing who moved them nor what she did when she sheltered the man whose life was, at that moment, the most important in the world. The motions of pity and charity are of God, and He commands us to help when He sets before us those who need help.

The whole incident was a lesson to the prophet. He might well have thought that God had sent him to a strange helper in this poor widow with her empty cupboard; and it must have taken some faith on his part to reassure her with his cheery 'Fear not!' The prediction of the undiminishing stores demanded as much faith from its speaker as from its hearer.

It was a lesson in faith for the woman too. Her use of the phrase 'the Lord thy God' may imply some inclination to the worship of Jehovah, and so there may have been a little glimmer of faith in her; but she was full of sorrow and despair, and yet willing to help the stranger with the 'little water in a vessel,' though the 'morsel of bread in thine hand' was beyond her power. Elijah's apparently selfish demand that his wants should be looked after first was a test of her faith. Sometimes self-denying duty is made clearly imperative on us, before we hear the promise which, believed, will make it easy. They who have ears to hear the command, and hearts to obey, even if it seem to strip them of all, will soon hear the assurance that secures abundance. The barrel would have been empty by nightfall, if the meal in it had been used for the woman and her son. The continuance of supply depended on her obedience, which, in its turn, depended on faith in the prophet as a messenger of God. 'There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth.' The use of earthly goods for God's service may not be rewarded with the increase of them; but, if the barrel is not kept full of meal, the heart will be kept full of peace, which is better. No sacrifice for God is ever thrown away. He remains in no man's debt.

The incident has a further bearing, as an instance of a divine benediction resting on heathendom. The synagogue at Nazareth pointed that lesson for us. Elijah and the widow both learned that the God of Israel is the God of all the earth, and that His prophets have a mission to every race. The woman rebuked, by her pity and self-denying benevolence, the

prejudices of Israel; the prophet foreshadowed, by his familiar abode with one won from idolatry to the worship of God, the universal aspect of the Jewish religion, and its destiny to overleap the narrow bounds of the nation. Charity and pity have no geographical limits. Much less can the love of God and the light of His revelation be bounded by any narrower circle than the circumference of the world.

### **ELIJAH STANDING BEFORE THE LORD**

‘And Elijah the Tishbite . . . said . . . As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand.’—**1 KINGS xvii. 1.**

This solemn and remarkable adjuration seems to have been habitual upon Elijah’s lips in the great crises of his life. We never find it used by any but himself, and his scholar and successor, Elisha. Both of them employ it under similar circumstances, as if unveiling the very secret of their lives, the reason for their strength, and for their undaunted bearing and bold fronting of all antagonism. We find four instances in their two lives of the use of the phrase. Elijah bursts abruptly on the stage and opens his mouth for the first time to Ahab, to proclaim the coming of that terrible and protracted drought; and he bases his prophecy on that great oath, ‘As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand.’ And again, when he is sent to confront Ahab once more at the close of the period, the same mighty word comes, ‘As the Lord of Hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself unto him this day.’ And then again, Elisha, when he is brought before the three confederate kings, who taunt, and threaten, and flatter, to try to draw smooth things from his lips, and get his sanction to their mad warfare, turns upon the poor creature that called himself the King of Israel with a superb contempt that stayed itself on that same great name and tells him, ‘As the Lord liveth before whom I stand, were it not that I had regard for the King of Judah, I would not look toward you or see you,’ And lastly, when the grateful Naaman seeks to change the whole character of Elisha’s miracle, and to turn it into the coarseness of a thing done for reward, once again the temptation is brushed aside with that solemn word, ‘As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none.’

So at every crisis where these prophets were brought full front with hostile power; where a tremendous message was laid upon their hearts and lips to utter; where natural strength would fail; where they were likely to be daunted or dazzled by temptations, by either the sweetness or the terrors of material things, these two great heroes of the Old Covenant, out of sight the strongest men in the old Jewish history, steady themselves by one thought,—God lives, and I am His servant.

For that phrase, ‘before whom I stand,’ obviously means chiefly ‘whom I serve.’ It is found, for instance, in Deuteronomy, where the priest’s office is thus defined: ‘The sons of Levi shall stand before the Lord to minister unto Him.’ And in the same way, it is used in the Queen of Sheba’s wondering exclamation to Solomon, ‘Blessed are thy servants, and blessed are the men that stand before thy face continually.’

So that the consciousness that they were servants of the living God was the very secret of the power of these men. This expression, which thus started to their lips in moments of strain and trial, lets us see into the very inmost heart of their strength. These two great lives, which fill so large a space in the records of the past, and will be remembered for ever, were braced and ennobled thus. The same grand thought is available to brace and ennoble our

little lives, that will soon be forgotten but by a loving heart or two, and yet may be as full of God and of God's service as those of any of the great of old. We too may use this secret of power, 'The Lord liveth, before whom I stand.'

What thoughts then, which may tend to lift and invigorate our days, are included in these words? The first is surely this—Life a constant vision of God's presence.

How distinct and abiding must the vision of God have been, which burned before the inward eye of the man that struck out that phrase! 'Wherever I am, whatever I do, I am before Him. To my purged eye, there is the Apocalypse of heaven, and I behold the great throne, and the solemn ranks of ministering spirits, my fellow-servants, hearkening to the voice of His word.' No excitement of work, no strain of effort, no distraction of circumstances, no glitter of gold, no dazzle of earthly brightness, dimmed that vision for these prophets. In some measure, it was with them as it shall be perfectly with all one day, 'His servants serve Him, and see His face,'—action not interrupting vision, nor vision weakening action. To preserve thus fresh and unimpaired, amidst strenuous work and many temptations, the clear consciousness of being 'ever in the great Taskmaster's eye,' needs resolute effort and much self-restraint. It is hard to set the Lord always before us; but it is possible, and in the measure in which we do it, we shall not be moved.

How nobly the steadfastness and superiority to all temptations which such a vision gives, are illustrated by the occasions, in these prophets' lives, in which this expression came to their lips! The servant of the Heavenly King speaks from his present intuition. As he speaks, he sees the throne in the heavens, and the Sovereign Ruler there, and the sight bears him up from quailing before the earthly monarchs whom he had to beard, and in connection with whom three out of the four instances of the use of the phrase occur. How small Ahab and his court must have looked to eyes that were full of the undazzling brightness of the true King of Israel, and the ordered ranks of *His* attendants! How little the greatness! How tawdry the pomp! How impotent the power, and how toothless the threats! The poor show of the earthly king paled before that awful vision, as a dim candle will show black against the sun. 'I stand before the living God, and thou, O Ahab! art but a shadow and a noise.' Just as we may have looked upon some mountain scene, where all the highest summits were wrapt in mist, and the lower hills looked mighty and majestic, until some puff of wind came and rolled up the curtain that had shrined and hidden the icy pinnacles and peaks that were higher up. And as that solemn white apocalypse rose and towered to the heavens, we forgot all about the green hills below, because our eyes beheld the mighty summits that live amongst the stars, and sparkle white through eternity.

My brethren, here is our defence against being led away by the gauds and shows of earth's vulgar attractions, or being terrified by the poor terrors of its enmity. Go with that talisman in your hand, 'The Lord liveth, before whom I stand,' and everything else dwindles down into nothingness, and you are a free man, master and lord of all things, because you

are God's servants, seeing all things aright, because you see them all in God, and God in them all.

Still further, we may say that this phrase is the utterance and expression of a consciousness that life was echoing with the voice of the divine command. Elijah stands before the Lord, not only feeling in his thrilling spirit that God is ever near him, but also that His word is ever coming forth to him, with imperative authority. That is the prophet's conception of life. Wherever he is, he hears a voice saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it.' Every place where he stands is as the very holy place of the oracles of the Most High, the spot in the innermost shrine where the voice of God is audible, All circumstances are the voice of God, commanding or restraining. He is evermore pursued, nay, rather upheld and guided, by an all-embracing law. That law is no mere utterance of cold impersonal duty,—a thought which may make men slaves, but never makes them good. But it is the voice of the living God, loving and beloved, whose tender care for His children modulates His tone, while He commands them for their good. He speaks because He loves; His law is life. The heart that hears Him speak is filled with music.

Ahab and Jehoram, and all the kings of the earth, may thunder and lighten, may threaten and flatter, may command and forbid, as they list. They and their words are nought to him whose trembling ears have heard, and whose obedient heart has received, a higher command, and to whom, 'across the storm,' comes the deeper voice of the one true Commander, whom alone it is a glory absolutely to obey, even 'the Lord, before whom I stand.' People talk about the consciousness of 'a mission.' The important point, on the settling of which depends the whole character of our lives, is—Who do you suppose gave you your 'mission'? Was it any *person* at all? or have you any consciousness that any will but your own has anything to say about your life? These prophets had found One whom it was worth while to obey, whatever came of it, and whoever stood in the way. May it be so with you and me, my friend! Let us try always to feel that in the commonest things we may hear the command of God; that the trifles of each day—trifles though they be—vibrate and sound with the reverberation of His great voice; that in all the outward circumstances of our lives, as in all the deep recesses of our hearts, we may trace the indications and rudiments of His will concerning us, which He has perfectly given us in that Gospel which is 'the law of liberty,' and in Him who is the Gospel and the perfect Law. Then quietly, without bluster or mock-heroics, or making a fuss about our independence, we can put all other commands and commanders in their right place, with the old words, 'With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you, or of man's judgment; He that judgeth me,' and He that commandeth me, 'is the Lord,' In answer to all the noise about us we can face round like Elijah, and say, 'As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand.' He is my 'Imperator,' the Autocrat and Commander of my life; and Him, and Him only, must I serve. What calmness, what dignity that would put into our lives! The never-ceasing boom of the great ocean, as it breaks on the beach, drowns all smaller sounds.



Those lives are noble and great in which that deep voice is ever dominant, sounding on through all lesser voices, and day and night filling the soul with command and awe.

Then, still further, we may take another view of these words. They are the utterance of a man to whom his life was not only bright with the radiance of a divine presence, and musical with the voice of a divine command, but was also, on his part, full of conscious obedience. No man could say such a thing of himself who did not feel that he was rendering a real, earnest, though imperfect obedience to God. So, though in one view the words express a very lowly sense of absolute submission before God, in another view they make a lofty claim for the utterer. He professes that he stands before the Lord, girt for His service, watching to be guided by His eye, and ready to run when He bids. It is the same lofty sense of communion and consecration, issuing in authority over others, which Elijah's true brother in later days, Paul the Apostle, put forth when he made known to his companions in shipwreck the will of 'the God, whose I am, and whom I serve.' We may well shrink from making that claim for ourselves, when we think of the poor, perfunctory service and partial consecration which our lives show. But let us rejoice that even we may venture to say, 'Truly I am Thy servant'; if only we, like the Psalmist, rest the confession on the perfectness of what He has done for us, rather than on the imperfection of what we have done for Him; and lay, as its foundation, 'Thou hast loosed my bonds.' Then, though we must ever feel how poor our service, and how unprofitable ourselves, how little we deserve the honour, and how impossible that we should ever earn the least mite of wages; yet we may, in all lowliness, think of ourselves as set free that we may serve, and lift our eyes, as the eyes of a servant turn towards his master, to 'the living Lord, before whom we stand.

Such a life is necessarily a happy life. The one misery of man is self-will, the one secret of blessedness is the conquest over our own wills. To yield them up to God is rest and peace. If we 'stand before God,' then that means that our wills are brought into harmony with His. And that means that the one poison drop is squeezed out of our lives, and that sweetness and joy are infused into them. For what disturbs us in this world is not 'trouble' but our opposition to trouble. The true source of all that frets and irritates, and wears away our lives, is not in external things, but in the resistance of our wills to the will of God expressed by external things. I suppose that we shall never here bring these wills of ours into perfect correspondence with His, any more than we shall ever, with our shaking hands and blunt pencils, draw a perfectly straight line. But if will and heart are brought even to a rude approach to parallelism with His, if we accept His voice when He takes away, and obey it when He commands, we shall be quiet and peaceful. We shall be strong and unwearied, freed from corroding cares and exhausting rebellions, which take far more out of a man than any work does. 'Thy word was found, and I did eat it.' When we thus take God's command into our spirits, and feed upon it with will and understanding, it becomes, as the Psalmist found it, the 'joy and rejoicing of our hearts.' Elijah-like, we shall 'go in the strength of that meat

many days.' The secret of power and of calm is—yield your will to the loving Lord, and stand ever before Him with, 'Here am I, send me!'

We may add one more remark to these various views of the significance of this expression, to which the last instance of its use may help us. Here it is: 'And Naaman said, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant. But he said, As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none.'

The thought, which made all Elisha's life bright with the light of God's presence, which filled his ear with the unremitting voice of a Divine Law, which swayed and bowed his will to joyful obedience, chilled and deadened his desires for all earthly rewards. 'I am not thy servant. I am God's servant. It is not your business to pay my wages. I cannot dishonour my Master by taking payment from thee for doing His work. I look for everything from Him, for nothing from thee.'

And is there not a broad general truth involved there, namely, that such a life as we have been describing will find its sole reward where it finds its inspiration and its law? The Master's approval is the servant's best wages. If we truly feel that 'the Lord *liveth*, before whom we stand, 'we shall want nothing else for our work but His smile, and we shall feel that the light of His face is all that we need. That thought should deaden our love for outward things. How little we need to care about any payment that the world can give for anything we do! If we feel, as we ought, that we are God's servants, that will lift us clear above the low aims and desires which meet us. How little we shall care for money, for men's praise, for getting on in the world! How the things that we fever our souls by pursuing, and fret our hearts when we lose, will cease to attract! How small and vulgar the 'prizes' of life, as people call them, will appear! 'The Lord liveth, before whom I stand,' should be enough for us, and instead of all these motives to action drawn from the rewards of this world, we ought to 'labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him.'

Not the fading leaves of the victor's wreath, laurel though they be, nor the corruptible things as silver and gold, whereof earth's diadems and rewards are fashioned, but the incorruptible crown that fadeth not away, which His hand will give, should fire our hope, and shine before our faith. Not Naaman's gifts but God's approval is Elisha's reward. Not the praise from lips that will perish, or the 'hollow wraith of dying fame,' but Christ's 'Well done! good and faithful servant,' should be a Christian's aim.

May we, brethren, possess the 'spirit and the power of Elias';—the spirit, in that we know ourselves to be the servants of the living God; and then we shall have some measure of his dauntless power and heroic unworldliness!

Still better, may we have the Spirit of Him who was '*the* Servant of the Lord,' diviner in His gentle meekness than the fiery prophet in his lonely strength! Make yours the mind that was in Christ, that you too may say, 'Lo, I come! in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, yea, Thy law is within my heart.'

**OBADIAH**  
*To the Young*

‘. . . I thy servant fear the Lord from my youth.’—1 KINGS xviii. 12.

This Obadiah is one of the obscurer figures in the Old Testament. We never hear of him again, for there is no reason to accept the Jewish tradition which alleges that he was Obadiah the prophet. And yet how distinctly he stands out from the canvas, though he is only sketched with a few bold outlines! He is the ‘governor over Ahab’s house,’ a kind of mayor of the palace, and probably the second man in the kingdom. But though thus high in that idolatrous and self-willed court, he has bravely kept true to the ancient faith. Neither Jezebel’s flatteries nor her frowns have moved him. But there, amid apostasy and idolatry he stands, probably all alone in the court, a worshipper of Jehovah. His name is his character, for it means ‘servant of Jehovah.’ It was not a light thing to be a worshipper of the God of Israel in Ahab’s court. The feminine rage of the fierce Sidonian woman, whom Ahab obeyed in most things, burned hot against the enemies of her father’s gods, and hotter, perhaps, against any one who thwarted her imperious will. Obadiah did both, in that audacious piece of benevolence when he sheltered the Lord’s prophets—one hundred of them—and saved them from her cruel search. The writer of the book very rightly marks this brave antagonism to the outburst of the queen’s wrath as a signal proof of a more than ordinary devotion to the worship and fear of Jehovah. His firmness and his religion did not prevent his retaining his place of honour and dignity. That says something for Ahab, and more perhaps for Obadiah.

Most of you believe that you ought to ‘fear the Lord’: but you are apt to put off, and so I wish to urge on you that you should give your hearts to Jesus Christ at once.

I. The blessedness of youthful religion.

(a) It guards from many temptations, and keeps a character innocent of much transgression.

Think of the dangers that lie thick in the streets of every great city, and of a lad coming up from a country home of godliness, where he was surrounded by a mother’s love and an atmosphere of purity, and launched into some lonely lodging, or some factory or warehouse with many tempters. Nothing will be such a help to resistance and victory as to be able to say, ‘So did not I because of the fear of the Lord.’

(b) It will save from remorse. Even if a man ‘sobers down’ after ‘sowing his wild oats,’ which is a very problematical ‘if,’ what bitter memories of wasted days, what polluting memories of filthy ones, will haunt him! And if he does not sober down, what then?

It is folly to begin life on a wrong tack, in regard to which the best that you can say is that you do not mean to continue it. If you do not, then the wise thing is to get at once on to the road on which you do mean to continue, and to save the weary work of retracing steps and the painful consciousness of having made a false start. Are you so sure that you

will wish, or that it will be possible, to face right about and get on to a new line? Fishermen catch lobsters and the like by means of baskets with one opening, the withes of which are so set that the entrance is easy, but that a ring of sharp points oppose all attempts at turning back and getting out. The world lays 'pots' of that sort, and many a young man and woman glides smoothly in, and finds it impossible to get out.

(c) It usually leads to a deeper and more peaceful and harmonious religion than is attained by those who have given the world the better part of their days, and have only the last fragment of them to give to God. Obadiah had feared God from his youth, and that had a good deal to do with his brave stand against Jezebel. It is a grand thing to enlist habit on the side of godliness.

#### II. The foes of youthful religion.

There are foes within . . . the strong self-reliance and bounding life proper to youth, without which at the opening of the flower, the bloom would be poor and the fruit little, . . . the power of appeals to the unjaded and physically strong senses, . . . the difficulty at such a stage of life of looking forward and soberly regarding the end.

There are foes without . . . the crowds of tempters of both sexes, men and women who take a devilish pleasure in polluting innocent minds, . . . the companions whose jeers are worse to face than a battery, . . . the inconsistencies of so-called Christians, the anti-Christian literature which is peculiarly fascinating to the young, with its brave show of breaking with mouldy tradition and enthroning reason and emancipating from rusty fetters.

#### III. The too probable alternative to youthful religion.

It is but too likely that, if a man does not 'fear the Lord' from 'his youth,' he will never fear Him. Thank God, there is no time nor condition of life in which the wicked man cannot 'forsake his way,' or 'the unrighteous man his thoughts,' and 'turn to the Lord' with the assurance that 'He will abundantly pardon.' But it is sadly too plain to observation, and to the experience of some of us, that obstacles grow with years, that habits and associations grip with increasing power, that in all things our natures become less flexible, the supple sapling becoming gnarled and tough, that a middle-aged or old man is more inextricably 'tied and bound by the cords of his sins,' than a young one is.

Sin lies to us by first saying, 'It is too soon to be religious,' and then it lies to us by saying, 'It is too late.'

The inclination diminishes.

The Gospel long heard and long put aside, loses power.

Contrast the beauty of a course of life, begun on the same lines as those on which it ends, and being like 'the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the meridian of the day,' with one which gave the greater part of its years to 'the world, the flesh, and the devil,' or at least to one's godless self, and the dregs of it only to God.

### THE TRIAL BY FIRE

‘And Elijah said unto the prophets of Baal, Choose yon one bullock for yourselves, and dress it first; for ye are many; and call on the name of your gods, but put no fire under. 26. And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made. 27. And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked. 28. And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them. 29. And it came to pass, when midday was passed, and they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded. 30. And Elijah said unto all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near unto him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down. 31. And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the Lord came, saying, Israel shall be thy name: 32. And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. 33. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood. 34. And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time. 35. And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water. 36. And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at Thy word. 37. Hear me, O Lord, hear me: that this people may know that Thou art the Lord God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again. 38. Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. 39. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, he is the God; the Lord, he is the God.’—[1 KINGS xviii. 25-39](#).

The place, the purpose, and the actors in this scene, make it among the grandest in history. A nation, with its king, has come together, at the bidding of one man, to settle no less a question than whom they shall worship. There, on the slope of Carmel, with the brassy heaven gleaming hard and dry above them, and the yellow, burnt-up plain of Jezreel at their feet, the expectant people stand. The assembly was a singular proof of Elijah’s ascendancy; for Ahab’s bluster had sunk, cowed in his presence, and he had meekly done the prophet’s bidding in summoning ‘all Israel’ and the eight hundred and fifty Baal and Asherah

prophets, for an unexplained purpose. The false priests would come unwillingly; but they came.

Then Elijah takes the command, and, though utterly alone, towers above the crowd in the courage of his undaunted confidence in his message. His words have the ring of authority as he rebukes indecision, and calls for a clear adhesion to Baal or Jehovah. If the people had answered, the trial by fire would have been needless. But their silence shows that they waver, and therefore he makes his proposal to them.

Note that the priests are not consulted, nor is Ahab. The former would have had some excuse for shirking the sharp issue; but the people's assent forced them to accept the ordeal,—reluctantly enough, no doubt.

I. The vain cries to a deaf God. It is strange that one of the parties to the test has power to determine its conditions, especially as Elijah's prophetic authority was one of the things in dispute; but it is a sign of the magnetic power which one bold man with absolute confidence in his own convictions exercises over men. The Baal prophets are given every advantage in priority of action. Error is best unmasked by being allowed free opportunity to do its best; for the more favourable the circumstances of trial, the more signal the defeat. God's servants must never be suspected of unfair tricks in their controversy with error. They can afford to let it try first. Notice the substitution of 'your god,' in the Revised Version, for 'your gods' in the Authorised Version. That is obviously right; for the only question was about one god,—namely, Baal.

So, in the early morning, with all the people gazing at them, the Baal priests or prophets begin their attempt. It was easy to prepare the sacrifice, and lay it on the altar,—though, no doubt, it was done sullenly, with foreboding of the coming exposure. The whole account of the wild invocations of the priests may suggest some of the characteristics of idolatry, and touch our hearts with pity, as well as with the sense of its absurdity, which animated Elijah's mockery.

Note, then, the vivid picture, in [verse 27](#), of the long hours of vain crying. On the one hand, we hear the wild chorus echoing among the rocks; on the other, we feel the dead silence in the heavens.

The monotonous and almost mechanical repetition of the invocation, prolonged till the syllables have no meaning to the yelling crowd, is characteristic of the frenzied excitement so common in idolatry. To call such howlings prayer, degrades the name. They are the very opposite of that sacred communion of a believing soul with the God whom it knows, trusts, and beseeches with submission. Neither knowledge nor trust is in these shrieks, which seek to propitiate the stern god by repeating his name as a kind of charm. Heathenism has no true prayer. Wild cries and passionate desires, flung upwards to an unloved god, are not prayer; and that solace and anchor of the troubled soul is wanting in all the dreary lands given up to idolatry.

The melancholy persistence of the unanswered cries may stand as a symbol of the tragic obstinacy with which their devotees cling to their vain gods,—a rebuke to us with a more enlightened faith. The silence, which was the only answer, is put in strong contrast with the continuous roar of the four hundred and fifty,—so long and loud the hoarse cries here, so unmoved the stillness in the careless heaven. That, too, is typical of heathenism, which is sad with unavailing cries and ignorant of answers to any. As the day wore on, and the voices grew hoarse, and hope declined, more violent bodily exercise was resorted to, and the shouting crowd danced (or, perhaps, as the margin says, ‘limped,’—a picturesque and contemptuous word for the grotesque contortions around the altar), as if that might bring the answer. That again is a feature common to all heathenism. No wonder that Elijah’s scorn broke forth vehemently at such a sight. Noon was the hour of the sun’s greatest power, and, since Baal was probably a solar deity, it was the hour when, if ever, he would spare one of his abundant fiery beams to light the pyre. So Elijah’s taunts came just when they were most biting, and none can say that they were undeserved. His fiery zeal and his naturally stern character broke out in the bitter irony with which he imagines a variety of undignified positions for Baal.

Sarcasm is not the highest weapon, and the ‘spirit of Elijah’ is not the spirit of Jesus; but the exposure of the absurdity of idolatry is legitimate, and even ridicule may have its place in pricking wind-distended bladders. A man throttling a serpent may be excused using anything that comes handy for the purpose. But, at the same time, the right attitude for us as Christians in the presence of that awful fact of idolatry, is neither contempt nor scientific curiosity, but pity deep as Christ’s, and earnest resolve to help our darkened brethren. The taunts stirred to fiercer excitement and more extravagant acts, as ridicule is wont to do, and therein proves itself an unreliable instrument of controversy. Laughing at a man generally makes him more obstinate. The priests answered Elijah by savagely gashing their half-naked bodies with knives and lances,—a ready way to make blood come, but not to bring fire. The frenzy became wilder as the day declined, and at last, covered with blood, hoarse with shouting, panting with their gymnastics, they ‘prophesied,’ having wrought themselves into that state of excitement in which incoherent rhapsodies burst from their lips. What a scene to call worship! That is what millions of men are ready to practise to-day. And all the while there is no voice, no answer, no care for them, in the pitiless sky. The very genius of idolatry is set before us in that tumultuous crowd on Carmel.

II. The sacrifice of faith and the answer by fire. We pass from a scene of wild commotion into an atmosphere of sacred calm in [verse 30](#). The contrast is striking. The fiery fervours of the day are past, and the sun is sinking behind the top of Carmel, and there is much to do before it sets. Elijah with his own hands, as would appear, repairs a ruined altar among the woods. Probably it had been erected for secret worship of Jehovah by some faithful amid the national apostasy, when access to Jerusalem was forbidden them, and had been destroyed

by Ahab in his crusade against Jehovah worshippers. The selection of the twelve stones was symbolical of the unbroken unity of the nation, and was Elijah's protest against the very existence of the Northern kingdom, and its assumption of the name of 'Israel' The writer explains what was meant, when he reminds us that Israel was the name given to Jacob, and therefore, as he would have us infer, was the common property of all his descendants. Judah was a part of Israel, and Israel should be an undivided whole, uniting in all its tribes in bringing offerings to Jehovah.

It was a daring thing to do before Ahab's face; but the weak king was, for the time, subjugated by the imperious will and courage of Elijah. The building of the altar, with its mute witness to God's purpose, would touch some hearts in the gazing, silent crowd. The next step was, of course, meant to make the miracle more conspicuous by drenching everything with water, probably brought, even in that drought, from the perennial fountain near at hand. Perhaps, too, the number of barrels was intended, again, as symbolical of the twelve tribes.

One can fancy the wonder and eagerness of the people, and the dark frowns of the baffled and exhausted Baal priests, as they gradually came out of their frenzy, and knew that they had lost their opportunity. The tranquil though earnest prayer of the prophet is in sharpest contrast with the meaningless bellowings to Baal. Note in it the solemn invocation. The great Name, which all listening to him had deposed from rule over them, is set in the front; and the ancestral worship, as well as the divine gifts and dealings with the patriarchs, is pleaded with God as the reason for His answer now. The name of 'Israel' instead of the more common 'Jacob,' has the same force as in [verse 31](#).

Note the substance of the petitions. The deepest desire of a truly devout soul is that God would make His name known. Zeal for God's honour and love for men who have gone astray from Him, conspire to make that the head and front of His true servant's prayers. It is God, not his own credit, about which Elijah thinks first. For himself, all that he desires is to be known as an obedient servant, and as not having done anything at the bidding of his own will or judgment, but in accordance with the all-commanding Voice.

Clearly we must suppose that in all the ordering of this sublime trial by fire, Elijah had been acting 'at Thy word,' even though we have no other record of the fact. He had no right to expect an answer unless he had been bidden to propose the test. God will honour the drafts which He bids us draw on Him; but to suspend our own or other people's faith in Him, on the issue of some experiment whether He will answer prayers, is not faith, but rash presumption, unless it is in obedience to a distinct command. Elijah had such a command, and therefore he could ask God to vindicate his action, and to prove that he was God's servant. His last petition is beautiful, both in its consciousness of power with God and recognition of his place as a prophet, and in its lowly subordination of all personal aims to the restoration of Israel to the true worship. He asks, with reiteration which is earnestness and



faith, and therefore the sharpest contrast to the mechanical repetition by Baal's priests, that God would hear him; but his sole object in that prayer is, not that his name may be exalted as a prophet, or that any good may come to him, but that the blinded eyes may be opened, and the hearts, that have been so sadly led astray, be brought back to the worship of their fathers' God.

The whole brief prayer, in its calm confidence; its adoring recognition of the name and past dealings of Jehovah as the ground of trust; its throbbing of earnest desire for the manifestation of His character before men; its consciousness of personal relation to God, which humbles rather than puffs up; its beseeching for an answer, and its closing petition, which comes round again to its first, that men may know God, and fasten their hearts on Him,—may well stand as a pattern of prayer for us.

The short prayer of faith does in a moment what all the long day of crying could not do. The language in which the answer is described emulates the rapidity of the swift tongues of fire which licked up sacrifice, altar, and water. They were the tokens of acceptance, reminding of the consuming of the first sacrifices in the Tabernacle, and, like them, inaugurating a new beginning of the worship of God. The burning of the altar, as well as of the sacrifice, expressed the acceptance of the people whom it, by its twelve stones, symbolised. And the people, on their part, were—for the time, at all events—swept away by the miracle, and by the force of the prophet's example and authority. Short-lived their faith may have been, as certainly it was superficial; but the fire had for the time melted their hearts, and set them flowing in the ancient channels of devotion. The faith that is founded on miracle may be deepened into something better; but unless it is, it speedily dies away. The faith that is due to the influence of some strong personality may lead on to an independent faith, based on personal experience; but, unless it does, it too will perish.

We may find a modern reproduction of the test of Carmel in the impotence of all other schemes and methods of social and spiritual reformation and the power of the Gospel. In it and its effects God answers by fire. Let the opposers, who are so glib in demonstrating the failure of Christianity, do the same with their enchantments, if they can.

### **ELIJAH'S WEAKNESS, AND ITS CUBE**

'And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. 2. Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to-morrow about this time. 3. And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. 4. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough: now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers. 5. And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then, an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. 6. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again. 7. And the angel of the Lord came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee. 8. And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God. 9. And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there, and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah? 10. And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left: and they seek my life, to take it away. 11. And He said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not In the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: 12. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. 13. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him and said, What doest then here, Elijah! 14. And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. 15. And the Lord said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria: 16. And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. 17. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay. 18. Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.'—1 **KINGS** xix. 1-18.

The miracle on Carmel cowed, if it did not convince, Ahab, so that he did not oppose the slaughter of the Baal prophets; but Jezebel was made of sterner stuff, and her passionate

idolatry was proof against even a sign from heaven. Obstinacy in error is often a rebuke to tremulous faith in God. She fiercely puts her back to the wall, and defies Elijah and his God. Her threat to the prophet has a certain audacity of frankness almost approaching generosity. She will give her victim fair play. This woman is 'magnificent in sin.' The Septuagint prefixes to her oath, 'As surely as thou art Elijah and I Jezebel,' which adds force to it. It also reads, by a very slight change in the Hebrew, in [verse 3](#), 'he was afraid,' for 'he saw,'—which is possibly right, as giving his motive for escape more distinctly.

I. We may note, first, the prophet's flight ([verses 3-8](#)). Beersheba, on the southern border of the kingdom of Judah, was eloquent of memories of the patriarchs, but though it was nearly a hundred miles from Jezreel, Jezebel's arm was long enough to reach the fugitive there, and therefore he plunged deeper into the dreary southern desert. He left behind him his servant, his 'young man,' as the original has it, whom Rabbinical tradition identified with the miraculously resuscitated son of the widow of Zarephath, and supposed to become afterwards the prophet Jonah. Thus alone but for the company of his own gloomy thoughts, and wearied with toilsome travel in the sun-smitten waste, he took shelter under the shadow of a solitary shrub (the Hebrew emphatically calls it 'one juniper,' or rather 'broom-plant'), and there the waves of depression went over him.

His complaint is not to be wondered at, though it was wrong. The very overstrain of the scene on Carmel brought reaction. The height of the crest of one wave measures the depth of the trough of the next, and no mortal spirit can keep itself at the sublime elevation reached by Elijah when alone he fronted and converted a nation. The supposed necessity for flight, coming so immediately after apparent victory, showed him how hollow the change in the people was. What had become of all the fervency of their shout, 'The Lord, He is the God!' if they could leave Jezebel the power to carry out her threat? Solitude and the awful desert increased his gloom. The strong man had become weak, and it was ebb-tide with him. His prayer was petulant, impatient, presumptuous. What right had he to settle what was 'enough'? If he really wished to die, he could have found death at Jezreel, and had no need to travel a hundred miles to seek a grave. He was weary of his work, and profoundly disappointed by what he hastily concluded was its failure, and in a fit of faithless despondency he forgot reverence, submission, and obedience.

If Elijah can become weak, and his courage die out, and his zeal become torpid apathy and cowardly wish to shuffle off responsibility and shirk work, who shall stand? The lessons of self-distrust, of the nearness to one another of the most opposite emotions in our weak natures, of the depth of gloom into which the boldest and brightest servant of God may fall as soon as he loses hold of God's hand, never had a more striking instance to point them than that mighty prophet, sitting huddled together in utter despondency below the solitary retem bush, praying his foolish prayer for death.

The meal to which an angel twice waked him was God's answer to his prayer, telling him both that his life was still needful and that God cared for him. Perhaps one of Elijah's reasons for taking to the desert was the thought that he might starve there, and so find death. At all events, God for the third time miraculously provides his food. The ravens, the widow of Zarephath, an angel, were his caterers; and, instead of taking away his life, God Himself sends the bread and water to preserve it. The revelation of a watchful, tender Providence often rebukes gloomy unbelief and shames us back to faith. We are not told whether the journey to Horeb was commanded, or, like the flight from Jezreel, was Elijah's own doing; but, in any case, he must have wandered in the desert, to have taken forty days to reach it.

II. The second stage is the vision at Horeb ([verses 9-14](#)). The history of Israel has never touched Horeb since Moses left it, and it is not without significance that we are once more on that sacred ground. The parallel between Moses and Elijah is very real. These two names stand out above all others in the history of the theocracy, the one as its founder, the other as its restorer; both distinguished by special revelations, both endowed with exceptional force of character and power of the Spirit; the one the lawgiver, the other the head of the prophetic order; both having something peculiar in their departure, and both standing together, in witness of their supremacy in the past, and of their inferiority in the future, by Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. The associations of the place are marked by the use of the definite article, which is missed in the Authorised Version,—‘the cave,’ that same cleft in the rock where Moses had stood. Note, too, that the word rendered ‘lodged’ is literally ‘passed the night,’ and that therefore we may suppose that the vision came to Elijah in the darkness.

That question, ‘What doest thou here?’ can scarcely be freed from a tone of rebuke; but, like Christ's to the travellers to Emmaus, and many another interrogation from God, it is also put in order to allow of the loaded heart's relieving itself by pouring out all its griefs. God's questions are the assurance of His listening ear and sympathising heart. This one is like a little key which opens a great sluice. Out gushes a full stream. His forty days' solitude have done little for him. A true answer would have been, ‘I was afraid of Jezebel.’ He takes credit for zeal, and seems to insinuate that he had been more zealous for God than God had been for Himself. He forgets the national acknowledgment of Jehovah at Carmel, and the hundred prophets protected by good Obadiah. Despondency has the knack of picking its facts. It is colour-blind, and can only see dark tints. He accuses his countrymen, as if he would stir up God to take vengeance.

How different this weak and sinful wail over his solitude from the heroic mention of it on Carmel, when it only nerved his courage I ([verse 22](#)). The divine manifestation which followed is evidently meant to recall that granted to Moses on the same spot. ‘The Lord passed by’ is all but verbally quoted from [Exodus xxxiv. 6](#), and the truth that had been proclaimed in words to Moses was enforced by symbol to Elijah. If the vision was in the night,

as [verse 9](#) suggests, it becomes still more impressive. The fierce wind that roared among the savage peaks, the shock that made the mountains reel, and the flashing flames that lighted up the wild landscape, were all phenomena of one kind, and at once expressed God's lordship over all destructive agencies of nature, and symbolised the more vehement and disturbing forms of energy, used by Him for the furtherance of His purposes in the field of history or of revelation. Elijah's ministry was of such a sort, and he had now to learn the limitations of his work, and the superiority of another type, represented by the 'sound of gentle stillness.'

It is the same lesson which Moses learned there, when he heard that the Lord is 'a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth.' It was exemplified in the gentle Elisha, the successor of Elijah. It reached far beyond the time then present, and was indeed a Messianic prophecy, declaring the inmost character of Him in whom 'the Lord is,' in an altogether special sense. Elijah as a prophet brought no new knowledge, and uttered no far-reaching predictions; but he received one of the deepest and clearest prophecies of the gentleness of God's highest Messenger, and on Horeb saw afar off what he saw fulfilled on the Mountain of Transfiguration. Nor is his vision exhausted by its Messianic reference. It contains an eternal truth for all God's servants. Storm, earthquake, and fire may be God's precursors, and needed sometimes to prepare His way; but gentleness is 'the habitation of His throne,' and they serve Him best, and are nearest Him whom they serve, who are meek in heart and gentle among enemies, 'as a nurse cherisheth her children.' Love is the victor, and the sharpest weapons of the Christian are love and lowliness.

The lesson was not at first grasped by Elijah, as his repetition of his complaint, word for word, with almost dogged obstinacy, shows. The best of us are slow to learn God's lessons, and a habit of faithless gloom is not soon overcome. It is much easier to get down into the pit than to struggle out of it.

III. The commission for further service, which closes the scene, is a further rebuke to the prophet. He is bidden to retrace his way and to take refuge in the desert lying to the south and east of Damascus, where he would be safe from Jezebel, and still not far from the scene of his activity. The instructions given to anoint a king of Syria and one of Israel were not fulfilled by Elijah, but by his successor; and we have to suppose that further commands were given to him on that subject. The third injunction, to anoint his successor, was obeyed at once on his journey, though Ahelmeholah, on Gilboa, was dangerously near Jezreel. The designation of these future instruments of God's purpose was at once a sign to Elijah that his own task was drawing to a close (having reached its climax on Carmel), and that God had great designs beyond him and his service. The true conception of our work is that we are only links in a chain, and that we can be done without. 'God removes the workers and carries on the work.' To anoint our successor is often a bitter pill; but self-importance needs

to be taken down, and it is blessed to lose ourselves in gazing into the future of God's work, when we are gone from the field.

Further, the commissions met Elijah's despondency in another way; for they assured him of the divine judgments on the house of Ahab, and of the use of the Syrian king as a rod to chastise Israel. He had thought God too slow in avenging His dishonoured name, and had been taught the might of gentleness; but now he also learns the certainty of punishment, while the enigmatical promise that Elisha should 'slay' those who escaped the swords of Hazael and Jehu dimly points to the merciful energy of that prophet's word, his only sword, which shall slay but to revive, and wound to heal. 'I have hewed them by the . . . words of my mouth.'

Finally, the revelation of the seven thousand—a round number, which expresses the sacredness as well as the numerousness of the elect, hidden ones—rebukes the hasty assumption of his being left alone, 'faithful among the faithless.' God has more servants than we know of. Let us beware of feeding either our self-righteousness or our narrowness or our faint-heartedness with the fancy that we have a monopoly of faithfulness, or are left alone to witness for God.

## PUTTING ON THE ARMOUR

‘And the king of Israel answered and said. Tell him. Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off.’—1 KINGS xx. 11.

*For the Young.*

Ahab, King of Israel, was but a poor creature, and, like most weak characters, he turned out a wicked one, because he found that there were more temptations to do wrong than inducements to do right. Like other weak people, too, he was torn asunder by the influence of stronger wills. On the one side he had a termagant of a wife, stirring him up to idolatry and all evil, and on the other side Elijah thundering and lightning at him; so the poor man was often reduced to perplexity. Once in his lifetime he did behave like a king, with some flash of dignity. My text comes from that incident. His next neighbour, and, consequently, his continual enemy, was the king of Damascus. He had made a raid across the border and was dictating terms so severe as to invite even Ahab to courageous opposition. His back was at the wall, and he mustered up courage to say ‘No!’ That provoked a bit of blustering bravado from the enemy, who sent back a message, ‘The gods do also unto me and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people that follow me.’ And then Ahab replied in the words of our text. They have a dash of contempt and sarcasm, all the more galling because of their unanswerable common-sense. ‘The time to crow and clap your wings is *after* you have fought. Samaria is not a heap of dust just yet. Threatened men live long.’ The battle began, and the bully was beaten; and for once Ahab tasted the sweets of success.

Now, I have nothing more to do with Ahab and the immediate application of his message, but I wish to apply it to my young friends, whom I have taken it upon me to ask now to listen to two or three homely words to them in this sermon.

You are beginning the fight; some of us old people are getting very near the end of it. And I would fain, if I could, see successors coming to take the places which we shall soon have to vacate. So my message to you, dear friends, young men and young women, is this, ‘Let not him that putteth on the harness boast himself as he that putteth it off.’

I. Now, look for a moment at the general view of life that is implied in this saying thus understood.

There is nothing that the bulk of people are more unwilling to do than steadily to think about what life as a whole, and in its deepest aspects, is. And that disinclination is strong, as I suppose, in the average young man or young woman. That comes, plainly enough, from the very blessings of your stage of life. Unworn health, a blessed inexperience of failures and limitations, the sense of undeveloped power within you, the natural buoyancy of early days, all tend to make you rather live by impulse than by reflection. And I should be the last man in the world to try to damp the noble, buoyant, beautiful enthusiasms with which Nature has provided that we should all begin our course. The world will do that soon enough; and there is no sadder sight than that of a bitter old man, who has outlived, and smiles sardon-

ically at, his youthful dreams. But I do wish to press upon you all this question, Have you ever tried to think to yourself, 'Now what, after all, is this life that is budding within me and dawning before me—what is it, in its deepest reality, and what am I to do with it?'

There are some of us to whom, so far as we have thought at all, life presents itself mainly as a shop, a place where we are to 'buy and sell, and get gain,' and use our evenings, after the day's work is over, for such recreation as suits us. And there are young men among my hearers who, with the flush of their physical manhood upon them, and perhaps away from the restraints of home, and living in gloomy town lodgings, with no one to look after them, are beginning to think that life after all is a kind of pigs' trough, with plenty of foul wash in it for whoso chooses to suck it up—a garden of not altogether pure delights, a place where a man may gratify the 'lusts of the flesh.'

But, dear brethren, whilst there are many other noble metaphors under which we can set forth the essential character of this mysterious, tremendous life of ours, I do not know that there is one that ought to appeal more to the slumbering heroism which lies in every human soul, and to the enthusiasms which, unless you in your youth cherish, you will in your manhood be beggared indeed, than that which this picture of my text suggests. After all, life is meant to be one long conflict. We are like the fellahin that one sometimes sees in Eastern lands, who cannot go out to plough in their fields, or reap their harvests, without a gun slung on their backs; for the condition under which we work in this world is that everything worth doing has to be done at the cost of opposition and antagonism, and that no noble service or building is possible without brave, continuous conflict. Even upon the lower levels of life that is so. No man learns a science or a trade without having to fight for it. But high above these lower levels, there is the one on which we all are called to walk, the high level of duty, and no man does what his conscience tells him, or refrains from that which his conscience sternly forbids, without having to fight for it. We are in the lists and compelled to draw the sword. And if we do not realise this, that all nobility all greatness, all wisdom, all success, even of the lowest and most vulpine kind, are won by conflict, we shall never do anything in the world worth doing. You are a soldier, whether you will or no, and life is a fight, whether you recognise the fact or not.

So, standing at the beginning, do not fancy that there is opening before you a scene of enjoyment, or that you are stepping into a world in which you can take your ease, and come out successfully at the other end. It is not so; and you will find that out before long. Better that you should settle it in your minds at first. When you were born you were enrolled on the roll-call of the regiment; and now you have to do a man's part in the battle.

II. Note the boastful temper which is sure to be beaten.

No doubt there is something inspiring in the spectacle of the young warrior standing there, chafing at the lists, eagerly pulling on his gauntlets, fitting on his helmet, and longing to be in the thick of the fight. No doubt, as I have already said, there is something in your



early days which makes such buoyant hopes and anticipations of success natural, and which gives you, as a great gift, that expectation of victory. I do not wish to shatter any of your enthusiasms or ideals, but I do wish to suggest a consideration or two that may calm and sober them.

So I ask, have you ever estimated, are you now estimating rightly, what it is that you have to fight for? To make yourselves pure, wise, strong, self-governing, Christlike men, such as God would have you to be. That is not a small thing for a man to set himself to do. You may go into the struggle for lower purposes, for bread and cheese, or wealth or fame, or love, or the like, with a comparatively light heart; but if there once has dawned upon a young soul the whole majestic sweep of possibilities in its opening life, then the battle assumes an aspect of solemnity and greatness that silences all boasting. Have you considered what it is that you have to fight for?

Have you considered the forces that are arrayed against you? 'What act is all its thought had been?' Hand and brain are never paired. There is always a gap between the conception and its realisation. The painter stands before his canvas, and, while others may see beauty in it, he only sees what a small fragment of the radiant vision that floated before his eye his hand has been able to preserve. The author looks on his book and thinks what a poor, wretched transcript of the thoughts that inspired his pen it is. There is ever this same disproportion between the conception and accomplishment. Therefore, all we old people feel, more or less, that our lives have been failures. We set out as you do, thinking that we were going to build a tower whose top should reach to heaven, and we are contented if, at the last, we have scrambled together some little wooden shanty in which we can live. We thought as you do; you will come to think as we do. So you had better begin now, and not go into the fight boasting, or you will come out of it conscious of being beaten.

Have you realised how different it is to dream things and to do them? In our dreams we are, as it were, working *in vacuo*. When we come to acts, the atmosphere offers resistance. It is easy to imagine ourselves victorious in circumstances where things are all going rightly and are bending according to our own desires, but when we come to the grim world, where there are things that resist and people are not plastic, it is a very different matter. You do not yet understand, as you will some day, the fatal limitations of power that hem us all round and the obstinate way that circumstances have of not falling in with our wishes. And you have not yet learned how completely and constantly failure accompanies success, like its shadow. The old Egyptians had no need to put a skeleton at their tables, nor the Romans to set a mocker behind the hero as he rode in triumph up to the Capitol. The world provides the skeleton at the banquet, and circumstances supply the mocker to add a dash of failure to all our triumphs.

Have you ever realised how certainly, into the brightest and most buoyant and successful lives, there will come crushing sorrows, blows as from an unseen hand in the dark, that fell

a man? O friend! when one thinks of the miseries and the misfortunes, the sorrows and the losses, the broken and bleeding hearts that began life buoyant, elastic, hopeful, perhaps boasting, like you, there ought to be a sobering tint cast over our brightest visions.

I suppose that our colleges are full of students who are going, to far outstrip their professors, that every life-school has a dozen lads who have just begun to handle brush and easel, and are going to put Raffaele in the shade. I suppose that every lawyer's office has a budding Lord Chancellor or two in it. And I suppose that that sharp criticism of us fumlbers in the field, and half-expressed thought, 'How much better I could do it!' belong to youth by virtue of its youth. It is a crude form of undeveloped power, but it wants a great deal of sobering down, and I am trying now to let out a little of the blood, and to bring you to a clear conception of the very limited success which is likely to attend you. All we old people, whose deficiencies and limitations you see so clearly, had the same dreams, impossible as it may appear to you, fifty years ago. We were going to be the men, and wisdom was going to die with us, and you see what we have made of it. You will not do much better.

Have you ever taken stock honestly of your own resources? 'What king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether with his ten thousand he can meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?' Boast if you like, but calculate first, and boast after that, if you can.

Your worst enemy is yourself. When you are counting your resources and saying, 'I have this, that, and the other thing,' do not forget to say, 'I have a part of me, that takes all the rest of me all its time to keep it down and prevent it from becoming master.' You have traitors in the fortress who are in communication with the enemy outside, and may go over to him openly in the very crisis of the fight. You have to take that fact into account, and it ought to suppress boasting whilst you are putting on the harness.

You are not old enough to remember, as some of us do, the delirious enthusiasm with which, in the last Franco-German war, the Emperor and the troops left Paris, and how, as the train steamed out of the station, shouts were raised, 'A. Berlin!' Ay! and they never got farther than Sedan, and there an Emperor and an army were captured. Go into the fight bragging, and you will come out of it beaten.

III. Note the confidence which is not boasting.

I can fancy some of you saying, "These gloomy views of yours will lead to nothing but absolute despair. You have been telling us that success is impossible; that we are bound to fight, and are sure to be beaten. What are we to do? Throw up the sponge, and say, "Very well! then I may as well have my fling, and give up all attempts to be any better than my passions and my senses would lead me to be.'" And if there is nothing more to be said about the fight than has been already said, that *is* the conclusion. 'Let us eat and drink,' not only 'for to-morrow we die,' but 'for to-day we are sure to be beaten.' But I have only been speaking about this self-distrust as preliminary to what is the main thing that I desire to

urge upon you now, and it is this: You do not need to be beaten. There is no room for boasting, but there is room for absolute confidence. You, young men and women, standing at the entrance of the amphitheatre where the gladiators fight, may dash into the arena with the most perfect confidence that you will come out with your shield preserved and your sword unbroken.

There is one way of doing it. 'Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.' That was not the boast of a man putting on the harness, but the calm utterance of the conquering Christ when He was putting it off. He has conquered that you may conquer. Remember how the Apostle, who has preserved for us that note of triumph at the end of Christ's life, has, like some musician with a favourite phrase, modulated and varied it in his letter written long after, when he says, 'This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.' My dear young friends, distrust yourselves utterly, and trust Jesus Christ absolutely, and give yourselves to Him, to be His servants and soldiers till your lives' end. Then you will not be beaten, for it is written of those who move in the light, wearing the victor's palm: 'These are they who overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of His testimony.' That blood secures our victory in a threefold fashion. By that great death of Jesus Christ all our past sins may be forgiven, and they no longer have power to tyrannise over us. In His sacrifice for us there are motives given to us for noble, grateful, Godlike living, stronger than all the temptations that can arise from our own hearts, or from the evils around us. And if we put our humble trust in Him, then that faith opens the door for the entrance into our hearts, in simple reality, of a share in His conquering life which will make us victorious over the world, the flesh, and the devil.

'This is the victory that overcometh the world,' and the youngest, feeblest Christian who lays his or her hand in Christ's strong hand, may look out upon all the embattled antagonisms that front them, and say, 'He will cover my head in the day of battle, and teach my hands to war and my fingers to fight.'

Dear young friends, people sometimes preach to you that you should be Christians, because life is uncertain and death is drawing near, and after death the judgment. I preach that too; but the gospel that I seek to press upon you now is not merely a thing to die by, but it is *the* thing to live by; and it is the only power by which we shall be sure of overcoming the armies of the aliens. This confidence in Christ will take away from you no shred of your natural, youthful, buoyant elasticity, but it will save you from much transgression and from bitter regrets.

One last word. There is possible a triumph which is not boasting, for him who puts *off* the harness. The war-worn soldier has little heart for boasting, but he may be able to say, 'I have not been beaten.' The best of us, when we come to the end, will have to recognise in retrospect failures, deficiencies, palterings with evil, yieldings to temptation, sins of many sorts, that will put all boasting out of our thoughts. But, whilst that is so, there is sometimes

granted to the man, who has been faithful in his adherence to Jesus Christ, a gleam of sunshine at eventime, which foretells Heaven's welcome and 'Well done!', before it is uttered. He was no self-righteous braggart, but a very rigid judge of himself, who, close by the headsman's block that ended his life, said: 'I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith.' 'Put on the whole armour of God,' and when the time comes to put it off, you will have a peaceful assurance as far removed from despair as it is from boasting. Distrust yourselves; do not underestimate your enemies; understand that life is warfare; trust utterly to Jesus Christ, and He will see to it that you are not conquered, will give you the calm confidence of which we have been speaking here, and a share hereafter in the throne which He promises to him that overcometh. If you will trust yourselves to Him, and take service in His army, you cannot be too certain of victory. If you fling yourself into the battle in your own strength, with however high a hope, and fight without the Captain for your ally, you cannot escape defeat.

### ROYAL MURDERERS

‘And it came to pass after these things, that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard, which was in Jezreel, hard by the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. 2. And Ahab spake unto Naboth, saying, Give me thy vineyard, that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto my house: and I will give thee for it a better vineyard than it; or, if it seem good to thee, I will give thee the worth of it in money. 3. And Naboth said to Ahab, The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee. 4. And Ahab came into his house heavy and displeased because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him: for he had said, I will not give thee the inheritance of my fathers. And he laid him down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread. 5. But Jezebel his wife came to him, and said unto him. Why is thy spirit so sad, that thou eatest no bread? 6. And he said unto her, Because I spake unto Naboth the Jezreelite, and said unto him, Give me thy vineyard for money: or else, if it please thee, I will give thee another vineyard for it: and he answered, I will not give thee my vineyard. 7. And Jezebel his wife said unto him, Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. 8. So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name, and sealed them with his seal, and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles that were in his city, dwelling with Naboth. 9. And she wrote in the letters, saying, Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people: 10. And set two men, sons of Belial, before him, to bear witness against him, saying, Thou didst blaspheme God and the king. And then carry him out, and stone him, that he may die. 11. And the men of his city, even the elders and the nobles who were the inhabitants in his city, did as Jezebel had sent unto them, and as it was written in the letters which she had sent unto them. 12. They proclaimed a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people. 13. And there came in two men, children of Belial, and sat before him: and the men of Belial witnessed against him, even against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, Naboth did blaspheme God and the king. Then they carried him forth out of the city, and stoned him with stones, that he died. 14. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, Naboth is stoned, and is dead. 15. And it came to pass, when Jezebel heard that Naboth was stoned, and was dead, that Jezebel said to Ahab, Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give thee for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead. 16. And it came to pass, when Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, that Ahab rose up to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.’—[1 KINGS xxi. 1-16](#).

There are three types of character in this story, all bad, but in different ways. Ahab is wicked and weak; Jezebel, wicked and strong; the elders of Jezreel, wicked and subservient. Amongst them they commit a great crime, which was the last drop in the full cup of the king’s sins, and brought down God’s judgment on him and his house.

I. We have to look at the weakly wicked Ahab. His wish for Naboth's vineyard was a mere selfish whim. He was willing to give more for it than it was worth. It suited his convenience for a kitchen-garden. In the true spirit of an Eastern despot, he expected everything to yield to his caprice, and did not think that a subject had any rights. What business has a poor man with sentiment? Naboth is to go, and a handful of silver will set all right. Samuel's warning of what a king would be and do was fulfilled. This highhanded interference with private rights was what Israel's revolt had led to. The sturdy Naboth was influenced not only by love for the bit of land which his fathers had cultivated for more years than Ahab had reigned days, but by obedience to the law of God; and he was not afraid to show himself a Jehovah worshipper, by his solemn appeal to 'the Lord,' as well as by the fact of his refusal. The brusque, flat refusal shows that some independence was left in the nation.

The weak rage and childish sulking of Ahab are very characteristic of a feeble and selfish nature, accustomed to be humoured and not thwarted. These fits of temper seem to have been common with him; for he was in one at the end of the preceding chapter, as he is now. The 'bed' on which he flung himself is probably the couch for reclining on at table, and, if so, the picture of his passion is still more vivid. Instead of partaking of the meal, he turns his face to the wall, and refuses food. 'No meat will down with him for want of a salad, because wanting Naboth's vineyard for a garden of herbs.' As he lies there, like a spoiled child, all because he could not get his own way, he may serve for an example of the misery of unbridled selfishness and unregulated desires. An acre or two of land was a small matter to get into such a state about, and there are few things that are worth a wise or a strong man's being so troubled. Hezekiah might 'turn his face to the wall' in the extremity of sickness and earnestness of prayer; but Ahab in doing it is only a poor, feeble creature who has weakly set his heart on what is not his, and weakly whimpers because he cannot have it.

To be thus at the mercy of our own ravenous desires, and so utterly miserable when they are thwarted, is unworthy of manhood, and is sure to bring many a bitter moment; for there are more disappointments than gratifications in store for such a one. We may learn from Ahab, too, the certainty that weakness will darken into wickedness. Such a mood as his always brings some Jezebel or other to suggest evil ways of succeeding. In this wicked world there are more temptations to sin than helps to virtue, and the weak man will soon fall into some of the abundant traps laid for him. Unless we have learned to say 'No' with much emphasis, because we are 'strong in the Lord,' we shall fall. 'This did not I because of the fear of the Lord.' To be weak is to be miserable, and any sin may come from it.

II. Jezebel is a type of a different sort of wickedness. She is wicked and strong. Notice how she takes the upper hand at once, in her abrupt question, not without a spice of scorn; and note how Ahab answers, bemoaning himself, putting in the forefront his fair proposal, and making Naboth's refusal ruder than it really had been, by suppressing its reason. Then out flashes the imperious will of this masterful princess, who had come from a land where

royalty was all-powerful, and who had no restraints of conscience. She darts a half-contemptuous question at Ahab, to stir him to action; for nothing moves a weak man so much as the fear of being thought weak. 'Dost thou govern?' implies, 'If thou dost, thou mayest trample on a subject.' It should mean, 'If thou dost, thou must jealously guard the subject's rights.' What a proud consciousness of her power speaks in that 'I will give thee the vineyard!' It is like Lady Macbeth's 'Give me the dagger!' No more is said. She can keep her own counsel, and Ahab suspects that some violence is to be used, which he had better not know. So, again, his weakness leads him astray. He does not wish to hear what he is willing should be done, if only he has not to do it. So feeble men hoodwink conscience by conniving at evils which they dare not perpetrate, and then enjoying their fruits, and saying, 'Thou canst not say I did it.'

Jezebel had Ahab's signet, the badge of authority, which she probably got from him for her unspoken purpose. Her letter to the elders of Jezreel speaks out, with cynical disregard of decency, the whole ugly conspiracy. It is direct, horribly plain, and imperative. There is a perfect nest of sins hissing and coiled together in it. Hypocrisy calling religion in to attest a lie, subornation of evidence, contempt for the poor tools who are to perjure themselves, consciousness that such work will only be done by worthless men, cool lying, ferocity, and murder,—these are a pretty company to crowd into half a dozen lines. Most detestable of all is the plain speaking which shows her hardened audacity and conscious defiance of all right. To name sin by its true name, and then to do it without a quiver, is a depth of evil reached by few men, and perhaps fewer women.

The plot gives a colour of legality, which is probably often unobserved by readers. Naboth was to be accused of treason: 'renouncing God and the king'; and that was, according to the law of Moses, a charge which, if proved, merited capital punishment. But it is Satan accusing sin for Jezebel, the Baal worshipper, who had done her best to root out the name of Jehovah, to accuse Naboth of departing from God. Much highhanded oppression must have gone before such outspoken contempt of justice; and, if Ahab represents the fatal connection of weakness and wickedness, Jezebel is an instance of the fatal audacity with which a strong character may come, by long indulgence in self-willed gratification of its own desires, to trample down all obstacles and go crashing through all laws, human and divine. The climax of sin is to see a deed to be sinful, and to do it all the same. Such a pre-eminence in evil is not reached at a bound, but it can be reached; and every indulgence in passion, and every gratifying of desire against which conscience protests, is a step toward it. Therefore, if we shrink from such a goal, let us turn away from the paths that lead to it. 'No mortal man is supremely foul all at once.' Therefore resist the beginnings of evil. Elijah was strong by natural temperament, and so was Jezebel. But the strength of the prophet was hallowed by obedience, and, like some great river, poured blessings where it flowed. Jezebel's strength was lawless, and foamed itself away in fury, like some devastating torrent that spreads ruin

whithersoever it bursts out. 'Be strong' is good advice, but it needs the supplement, 'Let all your deeds be done in charity,' and the foundation, 'Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.'

III. The last set of actors in this pitiful tragedy are the subserviently wicked elders. The narrative sets their slavish compliance in a strong light. It puts emphasis on the tie between them and Naboth, in that they 'dwelt in his city,' and so should have had neighbourly feeling. It lays stress on their cowardly motive and their complete execution of orders, both by reiterating that they acted 'as Jezebel had sent' and 'as it was written,' and by taking the letter clause by clause, in the narrative of the shameful parody of justice which they acted. It suggests both their eagerness to do her pleasure, and her impatient waiting, in her palace, by the message sent in hot haste as soon as the brave peasant proprietor was dead. 'It is ill sitting at Rome and striving with the Pope,' as the proverb has it. No doubt these cowards were afraid for their own necks, and were too near the royal tigress to venture disobedience. But their swift, unremonstrating, and complete obedience indicates the depth of degradation and corruption to which they and the nation had sunk, and the terror exercised by their upstart king and his Sidonian wife.

Cowardice is always contemptible, and wickedness is always odious; but when the two come together, and a man has no other reason for his sin than 'I was afraid,' each makes the other blacker. Israel had cast off the fear of the Lord, which would have preserved it from the ignoble terror of men, and the consequence was that it trembled before an angry, unscrupulous woman. It had revolted from Rehoboam and his foolish bluster about whips and scorpions, and the consequence was a worse slavery. If we fear God, we need have no other fear. The sun puts out a fire. If we rebel against Him, we do not become free, but fall under a heavy yoke. It is never prudent to do wrong. The worst consequences of resistance to powerful evil are easier to bear than those of compliance, though it may seem the safer. Better be lying dead beneath a heap of stones, like the sturdy Naboth, who could say 'No' to a king, than be one of his stoners, who killed their innocent neighbour to please Jezebel!

Her indecent triumph at the success of the plot, and her utter callousness, are expressed in her words to Ahab, in which the main point is the taking possession of the vineyard. The death of its owner is told with exultation, as being nothing but the sweeping aside of an obstacle. Ahab asks no questions as to how this opportune clearing away of hindrance came about. He knew, no doubt, well enough that there had been foul play; but that does not matter to him, and such a trifle as murder does not slacken his glad haste to get his new toy. There was other red on the vines than their clustering grapes, as he soon found out, when Elijah's grim figure, like an embodied conscience, met him there. Whoever reaches out to grasp a fancied good by breaking God's law, may get his good, but he will get more than he expected along with it,—even an accusing voice that prophesies evil. Elijah strides among



the leafy vines in the field bought by crime. Ahab meant to make it a garden of pot-herbs. 'Surely the bitter wormwood of divine revenge grew abundantly therein.'

## AHAB AND ELIJAH

‘And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy!.’—1 KINGS xxi. 20.

The keynote of Elijah’s character is force—the force of righteousness. The New Testament, you remember, speaks of the ‘power of Elias.’ The outward appearance of the man corresponds to his function and his character. Gaunt and sinewy, dwelling in the desert, feeding on locusts and wild honey, with a girdle of camel’s skin about his loins, he bursts into the history, amongst all that corrupt state of society, with the force of a hammer that God’s hand wields. The whole of his career is marked by this one thing,—the strength of a righteous man. And then, on the other hand, this Ahab;—the keynote of *his* character is the weakness of wickedness, and the wickedness of weakness. Think of him. Weakly longing—as idle and weak minds in lofty places always do—after something that belongs to somebody else; with all his gardens, coveting the one little herb-plot of the poor Naboth; weak and worse than womanly, turning his face to the wall and weeping when he cannot get it; weakly desiring to have it, and yet not knowing how to set about accomplishing his wish; and then—as is always the case, for there are always tempters everywhere for weak people—that beautiful fiend by his side, like the other queen in our great drama, ready to screw the feeble man that she is wedded to, to the sticking-place, and to dare anything to grasp that on which the heart was set. And so the deed is done: Naboth safe stoned out of the way; and Ahab goes down to take possession! The lesson of that is, my friend,—Weak dallying with forbidden desires is sure to end in wicked clutching at them. Young men, take care! You stand upon the beetling edge of a great precipice, when you look over, from your fancied security, at a wrong thing; and to strain too far, and to look too fixedly, leads to a perilous danger of toppling over and being lost! If you know that a thing cannot be won without transgression, do not tamper with hankerings for it. Keep away from the edge, and ‘*shut* your eyes from beholding vanity.’

But my business now is rather with the consequences of this apparently successful sin, than with what went before it. The king gets the crime done, shuffles it off himself on to the shoulders of his ready tools in the little village, goes down to get his toy, and gets it—but he gets Elijah along with it, which was more than he reckoned on. When, all full of impatience and hot haste to solace himself with his new possession, he rushes down to seize the vineyard, he finds there, standing at the gate, waiting for him—black-browed, motionless, grim, an incarnate conscience—the prophet whom he had not seen for years, the prophet that he had last seen on Carmel, bearding alone the servants of Baal, and executing on them the solemn judgment of death; and there leaps at once to his lip, ‘Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?’

I. I find here, in the first place, this broad principle: Pleasure won by sin is peace lost.

It does not need that there should be a rebuking prophet standing by to work out that law. God commits the execution of it to the natural operations of our own consciences and

our own spirits. Here is the fact in men's natures on which it partly depends: when sin is yet tempting us, it is loved; when sin is done, it is loathed. Action and reaction, as the mechanicians tell us, are equal and contrary. The more violent the blow with which we strike upon the forbidden pleasure, the further back the rebound after the stroke. When sin tempts—when there hangs glittering before a man the golden fruit which he knows that he ought not to touch—then, amidst the noise of passion or the sophistry of desire, conscience is silenced for a little while. No man sins without knowing that it is wrong, without knowing that in the long run it is a mistake; but at the instant, in the delirium of yielding, as in moments of high physical excitement, he is blind and deaf, deaf to the voice of reason, blind to the sight of consequences. Conscience and consequence are alike lost sight of. Like a mad bull, the man that is tempted lowers his head and shuts his eyes, and rushes right on. The moment that the sin is done, that moment the passion or desire which tempted to it is satiated, and ceases to exist for the time. It is gone as a motive. Like some savage beast, being fed full, it lies down to sleep. There is a vacuum left in the heart, the noise is stilled, and then—and then—conscience begins to speak. Or, to take another image, the passion, the desires, the impulses that lead us to do wrong things—they are like a crew that mutiny, and take for a moment the wheel from the steersman and the command from the captain, but then, having driven the ship on the rocks, the mutineers get intoxicated, and lie down and sleep. Passion fulfils itself, and expires. The desire is satisfied, and it turns into a loathing. The tempter draws us to him, and then unveils the horrid face that lies beneath the mask. When the deed is done and cannot be undone, then comes satiety; then comes the reaction of the fierce excitement, the hot blood begins to flow more slowly; then rises up in the heart conscience; then rises up in majesty in the soul reason; then flashes and flares before the eye the vivid picture of the consequences. His 'enemy' has found the sinner. He has got the vineyard—ay, but Elijah is there, and his dark and stern presence sucks all the brightness and the sunniness out of the landscape; and Naboth's blood stains the leaves of Naboth's garden! There is no sin which is not the purchase of pleasure at the price of peace.

Now, you will say that all that is true in regard to the grosser forms of transgression, but that it is not true in regard to the less vulgar and sensual kinds of crime. Of course it is most markedly observable with regard to the coarsest kind of sins; but it is as true, though perhaps not in the same degree—not in the same prominent, manifest way at any rate—in regard to every sin that a man does. There is never an evil thing which—knowing it to be evil—we commit, which does not rise up to testify against us. As surely as (in the words of our great philosopher poet) 'lust dwells hard by hate,' and as surely as to-night's debauch is followed by to-morrow's headache, so surely—each after its kind, and each in its own region—every sin lodges in the human heart the seed of a quick-springing punishment, yea, is its own punishment. When we come to grasp the sweet thing that we have been tempted to seize, there is a serpent that starts up amongst all the flowers. When the evil act is

done—opposite of the prophet’s roll—it is sweet in the lips, but oh! it is bitter afterwards. ‘At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder!’

Then, you may say again, ‘All that is very much exaggerated. That is not the sort of feeling which men that go on persistently doing wrong things, cherish. They live quietly and contentedly enough. “There are no bands in their death, and their strength is firm.”’ All that would be true if men’s consciences kept sensitive in the midst of men’s sins, but they do not; and so it cannot be that every transgression has thus its quick result in loss of peace. I grant you at once that it is quite possible for men to sin away the delicacy and susceptibility of their consciences. I dare say there are people here now who, after they have done a wrong thing, go on very quietly, with no knowledge of those agonies that I have been speaking about, with scarcely ever a prick of conscience for their sin. But what then? I did not say that all sin purchased pleasure by inflictions of agony; but I do say, that all sin purchases pleasure by loss of peace. The silence of a seared conscience is not peace. For peace you want something more than that a conscience shall be dumb. For peace you want something more than that you shall be able to live without the daily sense and sting of sin. You want not only the negative absence of pain, but the positive presence of a tranquillising guest in your heart—that conscience of yours testifying with you, blessing you in its witness, and shedding abroad rest and comfort. It is easy to kill a conscience—after a fashion at least. It is easy to stifle it. It is easy to come to that depth of wrongdoing that one gets used to it, and does it without caring. But oh! that cold vacuum, that dead absence in such a spirit of all healthy self-communing, that painful suspicion, ‘If I look into myself, and be quiet for a little while, and take stock of my own character, and see what I am, the balance will be on the wrong side,’—that is *not* peace. As the old historian says about the Roman armies that marched through a country, burning and destroying every living thing, ‘They make a solitude, and they call it peace.’ And so men do with their consciences. They stifle them, sear them, forcibly silence them, somehow or other; and then, when there is a dead stillness in the heart, broken by no voice of either approbation or blame, but doleful like the unnatural quiet of a deserted city, then they call that peace, and the man’s uncontrolled passions and unbridled desires dwell solitary in the fortress of his own spirit! You *may* almost attain to that. Do you think it is a goal to be set before you as an ideal of human nature? The loss of peace is certain—the presence of agony is most likely—from every act of sin.

And so, it is not only a *crime* that men commit when they do wrong, but it is a *blunder*. Sin is not only guilt, but it is a mistake. ‘The game is not worth the candle,’ according to the French proverb. The thing that you buy is not worth the price you pay for it. Sin is like a great forest-tree that we may sometimes see standing up green in its leafy beauty, and spreading a broad shadow over half a field; but when we get round on the other side, there is a great dark hollow in the very heart of it, and corruption is at work there. It is like the poison-tree in travellers’ stories, tempting weary men to rest beneath its thick foliage, and

insinuating death into the limbs that relax in the fatal coolness of its shade. It is like the apples of Sodom, fair to look upon, but turning to acrid ashes on the unwary lips. It is like the magician's rod that we read about in old books. There it lies; and if, tempted by its glitter, or fascinated by the power that it proffers you, you take it in your hand, the thing starts into a serpent with erected crest and sparkling eye, and plunges its quick barb into the hand that holds it, and sends poison through all the veins. Do not touch it, my brother! Every sin buys pleasure at the price of peace. Elijah is always waiting at the gate of the ill-gotten possession.

II. In the second place, Sin is blind to its true friends and its real foes.

'Hast thou found me, *O mine enemy*?' Elijah was the best friend that Ahab had in his kingdom. And that Jezebel there, the wife of his bosom, whom he loved and thanked for this new toy, she was the worst foe that hell could have sent him. Ay, and so it is always. The faithful rebuker, the merciful inflicter of pain, is the truest friend of the wrongdoer. The worst enemy of the sinful heart is the voice that either tempts it into sin, or lulls it into self-complacency. And this is one of the most certain workings of evil desires in our spirits, that they pervert for us all the relations of things, that they make us blind to all the moral truths of God's universe. Sin is blind as to itself, blind as to its own consequences, blind as to who are its friends and who are its foes, blind as to earth, blind as to another world, blind as to God. The man who walks in the 'vain show' of transgression, whose heart is set upon evil,—he fancies that ashes are bread, and stones gold (as in the old fairy story); and, on the other hand, he thinks that the true sweet is the bitter, and turns away from God's angels and God's prophets, with, 'Hast thou found me, *O mine enemy*?' That is the reason, my friend, of not a little of the infidelity that haunts this world—that sin, perverted and blinded, stumbles about in its darkness, and mistakes the face of the friend for the face of the foe. God sends you in mercy a conscience to prick and sting you that you may be kept right; and you think that *it* is your enemy. God sends in His mercy the discipline of life, pains and sorrows, to draw us away from the wrong, to make us believe that the right in this world and the next is life, and that holiness is happiness for evermore. And then, when, having done wrong, God's merciful messenger of a sharp sorrow finds us out, we say, 'Hast thou found me, *O mine enemy*?' and begin to wonder about the mysteries of Providence, and how it comes that there is evil in the creation of a good God. Why, physical evil is the best friend of the man that is subject to moral evil. Sorrow is the truest blessing to a sinner. The best thing that can befall any of us is that God shall not let us alone in any wrong course, without making us feel His rod, without hedging up our way with thorns, and sending us by His grace into a better one. There is no mystery in sorrow. There is a mystery in sin; but sorrow following on the back of sin is the true friend, and not the enemy, of the wrong-doing spirit.

And then, again, God sends us a gospel full of dark words about evil. It deals with that fact of sin, as no other system ever did. There is no book like the Bible for these two

things,—for the lofty notion that it has about what man may be and ought to be; and for the low notion that it has of what man is. It does not degrade human nature, because it tells us the truth about human nature as it is. Its darkest and bitterest sayings about transgression, they are veiled promises, my brother. It does not make the consequences of sin which it writes down. You and I make them for ourselves, and it tells us of them. Did the lighthouse make the rock that it stands on? Is it to be blamed for the shipwreck? If a man *will* go full tilt against the thing that he knows will ruin him, what is the right name for him who hedges it up with a prickly fence of thorns, and puts a great light above it, and writes below, ‘If thou comest here thou diest’? Is that the work of an enemy? And yet that is why people talk about the gloomy views of the gospel, about the narrow spirit of Christianity, about the harsh things that are here! The Bible did not make hell. The Bible did not make sin the parent of sorrow. The Bible did not make it certain that ‘every transgression and disobedience’ should reap its ‘just recompense of reward.’ We are the causes of their coming upon ourselves; and the Bible but proclaims the end to which the paths of sin must lead, and beseechingly calls to us all, ‘Turn ye, turn ye! why will ye die?’ And yet when it comes to you, how many of you turn away from it, and say, ‘It is mine enemy’! How many shrink from its merciful knife, that cuts into all the wounds of the festering spirit! How many of you feel as if ‘the truth that is in Jesus’ was a hard and bitter truth; when all the while its very heart’s blood is love, and the very secret of its message is the tenderest compassion, the most yearning sympathy, for every soul amongst us!

Ay, and more than that:—sin makes us fancy that God Himself is our enemy; and sin makes that thought of God that ought to be most blessed and most sweet to us, the terror of our souls. You have the power, my friend, by your own wrongdoing, of perverting the whole universe, and, worst of all, of distorting the image of the merciful Father, of the loving God. God loves. God is the Father. God watches over us. God will not let us alone when we transgress, God in His love has appointed that sin shall breed sorrow. But *we*—we do wrong; and then, for God’s Providence, and God’s Gospel, and God’s Son, and God Himself, there rises up in our hearts a hostile feeling, and we think that He is turned to be our enemy, and fights against us! But oh! He only fights against us that we may submit to, and love, Him. Will you, then, have it that God’s highest mercy should be your greatest sorrow, that your truest friend should be your worst foe? You can make the choice. To you God and His truth are like that ark of His covenant which to Dagon and the Philistines was a curse, but to the house of Obededom was a blessing. He and His gospel are to you like that pillar that was darkness and trouble to the hosts of the Egyptians, but light by night to His children. To you, my brother, the gospel may be either ‘the savour of life unto life, or the savour of death unto death!’ If He comes to you with rebuke, and meets you when you are at the very door of your sin, and busy with your transgression,—usher Him in, and thank Him, and bless Him for words of threatening, for merciful severity, for conviction of sin;—because conviction

of sin is the work of the Comforter; and all the threatenings and all the pains that follow and track, like swift hounds, the committer of evil, are sent by Him who loves too wisely not to punish transgression, and loves too well to punish without warning, and desires only when He punishes that we should turn from our evil way, and escape the condemnation. An enemy, or a friend,—which is God in His truth to you?

III. Lastly, the sin which mistakes the friendly appeal for an enemy, lays up for itself a terrible retribution. Elijah comes to Jezreel and prophesies the fall of Ahab. The next peal, the next flash, fulfil the prediction. There, where he did the wrong, he suffered. In Jezreel, Ahab died. In Jezreel, Jezebel died. That plain was the battlefield for the subsequent discomfiture of Israel. Over and over again there encamped upon it the hosts of the spoilers. Over and over again its soil ran red with the blood of the children of Israel; and at last, in the destruction of the kingdom, Naboth was avenged and God's word fulfilled. The threatened evil was foretold that it might lead the king to repentance, and that thus it might never need to be more than a threat. But, though Ahab was partially penitent, and partially listened to the prophet's voice, yet for all that, he went on in his evil way. Therefore the merciful threatening becomes a stern prophecy, and is fulfilled to the very letter.

So, when God's message comes to us, friends, if we listen not to it, and turn not to its gentle rebuke, Oh! then we gather up for ourselves an awful futurity of judgment, when threatening will darken into punishment, and the voice that rebuked will swell into the voice of final condemnation. When a man fancies that God's prophet is his enemy, and dreams that his finding him out is a calamity and a loss, that man may be certain that something worse will find him out some day. His sins will find him out, and that is worse than the prophet's coming. My friend, picture to yourself this—a human spirit shut up, with the companionship of its forgotten and dead transgressions. There is a resurrection of acts as well as of bodies. Think what it will be for a man to sit surrounded by that ghastly company, the ghosts of his own sins!—and as each forgotten fault and buried badness comes, silent and sheeted, into that awful society, and sits itself down there, think of him greeting each with the question, 'Thou too? What! are ye all here? Hast *thou* found me, O mine enemy?' and from each bloodless spectral lip there tolls out the answer, the knell of his life, 'I *have* found thee, because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord.' Ah, my friend! if that were all we had to say, it might well stiffen us into stony despair. Thank God—thank God! such an issue is not inevitable. Christ speaks to you. Christ is your *Friend*. He loves you, and He speaks to you now—speaks to you of your danger, but in order that you may never rush into it and be engulfed by it; speaks to you of your sin, but in order that you may say to Him, 'Take Thou it away, O merciful Lord'; speaks to you of justice, but in order that you may never sink beneath the weight of His stroke; speaks to you of love, in order that you may know, and fully know, the depth of His graciousness. When He says to

you, 'I love thee; love thou Me: I have died for thee; trust Me, live *by* Me, and live *for* Me,  
'will you not say to Him, 'My Friend, my Brother, my Lord, and my God'?



## UNPOSSESSED POSSESSIONS

‘And the king of Israel said unto his servants, Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, and we be still, and take it not out of the hand of the king of Syria?.’—1 KINGS xxii. 3.

This city of Ramoth in Gilead was an important fortified place on the eastern side of the Jordan, and had, many years before the date of our text, been captured by its northern neighbours in the kingdom of Syria. A treaty had subsequently been concluded and broken a war followed thereafter, in which Ben-hadad, King of Syria, had bound himself to restore all his conquests. He had not observed that article of peace, and the people of Israel had not been strong enough to enforce it until the date of our text; but then, backed up by a powerful alliance with Jehoshaphat of Judah, they determined to make a dash to get back what was theirs, but whilst theirs was also not theirs.

Now, I have nothing more to do with Ahab and Jehoshaphat, but I wish to turn the words of my text, and the thoughts that may come from them, into a direction profitable to ourselves. ‘Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours?’ and yet it had to be got out of the hands of the King of Syria.

I. What is ours and not ours.

Every Christian man has large tracts of unannexed territory, unattained possibilities, unenjoyed blessings, things that are his and yet not his. How much more of God you and I have a right to than we have the possession of! The ocean is ours, but only the little pailful that we carry away home to our own houses is of use to us. The whole of God is mine if I am Christ’s, and a dribble of God is all that comes into the lives of most of us.

How much inward peace is ours? It is meant that there should never pass across a Christian’s soul more than a ripple of agitation, which may indeed ruffle and curl the surface; but deep down there should be the tranquillity of the fathomless ocean, unbroken by any tempests, and yet not stagnant, because there is a vital current running through it, and every drop is being drawn upward to the surface and the sunlight. There may be a peace in our hearts deep as life; a tranquillity which may be superficially disturbed, but is never thoroughly, and down in its depths, broken. And yet, let some little petty annoyance come into our daily life, and what a pucker we are in! Then we forget all about the still depths in which we ought to be living; and fears and hopes and loves and ambitions disturb our souls, just as they do the spirits of the men that do not profess to have any holdfast in God. The peace of God is ours; but, ah! in how sad a sense it is true that the peace of God is *not* ours!

What ‘heights’—for Ramoth means ‘high places’—what heights of consecration there are which are ours according to the divine purpose and according to the fulness of God’s gift! It is meant, and it is possible, and well within the reach of every Christian soul, that he or she should live, day by day, in the continual and utter surrender of himself or herself to the will of God, and should say, ‘I do the little I can do, and leave the rest with Thee’; and should say again, ‘All is right that seems most wrong, If it be His sweet will.’ But instead of

this absolute submission and completeness and joyfulness of surrender of ourselves to Him, what do we find? Reluctance to obey, regret at providences, Self dominant or struggling hard against the partial domination of the will of God in our hearts. The mind which was in Jesus Christ, who was able to say, 'It is written of Me, lo! I come to do Thy will, O Lord!' is ours by virtue of our being Christians; but, alas! in practical realisation how sadly it is not ours!

What noble possibilities of service, what power in the world, are bestowed on Christ's people! 'All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth,' says He. 'And He breathed on them, and said, As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.' The divine gift to the Christian community, and to the individuals that compose it—for there are no gifts given to the community, but to the individuals that make it up—is of fulness of power for all their work. And yet look how, all through the ages, the Church has been beaten by the corruption of the world; and how to-day many of us are standing, either utterly careless and callous about the diseases that we have the medicine to cure, or in desperation looking about for other healing for the social and moral condition of the community than that which is granted to us in Jesus Christ. 'Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, and we be still, and take it not out of the hands of the King of Syria?'

There is ever so much in the world which belongs to our Master, and therefore belongs to us, and which the Church is bound to lay its hand upon and claim for its own and for its Lord's. For remember, brethren, that all the gifts at which I have been glancing—and I might have largely increased the catalogue—all these spiritual endowments of peace, and safety, and purity, and joy, of religious elevation, and consecration, and power for service, and the like—are ours by a threefold title and charter. God's purpose, which is nothing less for every one of us than that we should be 'filled with all the fulness of God,' and that He should 'supply all our need, according to His riches in glory,'—that is the first of the parchments on which our title depends. And the second title-deed is Christ's purchase; for the efficacy of His death and the power of His triumphant life have secured for all who trust Him the whole fulness of this divine gift. And the third of our claims and titles is the influence of that Holy Spirit whom Jesus Christ gives to every one of His children to dwell in him. There is in you, working in you, if you have any faith in that Lord, a power that is capable of making you perfectly pure, perfectly blessed, strong with an immortal strength, and glad with a 'joy that is unspeakable and full of glory.'

Oh! then, let us think of the awful contrast between what is ours and what we have. It is ours by the divine intention, by the divine gift in its fulness and all-sufficiency, and yet think of the poor, partial realisation of it that has passed into our experience. Be sure that you have what you have, and that you make your own what God has made yours.

II. Then, let me suggest, again, how our text hints for us, not only the difference between possession and realisation, but also our strange contentment in imperfect possession.

Ahab's remonstrances with his servants, which make the starting-point of my remarks, seem to suggest that there were two reasons for their acquiescence in the domination of a foreign power on a bit of their soil. They had not realised that Ramoth was theirs, and they were too lazy and cowardly to go and take it. Ignorance of the fulness of the gift, and slothful timidity in daring everything in the effort to make it ours, explain a great deal of the present condition of Christian people.

Is not that condition of passive acquiescence in their small present attainments, and of careless indifference to the great stretch of the unattained, the characteristic of the mass of professing Christians? They have got a foothold on a new continent, and their possession of it is like the world's drawing of the map of Africa when we were children, which had a settlement dotted here and there along the coast, and all the broad regions of the interior were blank. The settlers huddle together upon the fringe of barren sand by the salt water, and never dream of pressing forward into the heart of the land. And so, too, many of us are content with what we have got, a little bit of God, when we might have Him all; a settlement on the fringe and edge of the land, when we might traverse the whole length of it; and behold! it is all ours.

That unfamiliarity with the thought of unattained possibilities in the Christian life is a damning curse of thousands of people who call themselves Christians. They do not think, they never realise—and some of us are guilty in this respect—they never realise that it is possible for them to be all unlike what they are now, and that, instead of the miserable partial hallowing of their nature, and the poor, weak —I was going to say strength, but it is not worth calling strength, that they possess, they might be as the angels of God: 'the weakest as David,' and David as a very angel of heaven itself. Why is it, why is it, that there is this unfamiliarity?

And then, another reason for the woful disproportion between what we have and what we utilise is the love of ease, such as kept these Israelites from going up to Ramoth-Gilead. It was a long way off; there was a river to be forded; there were heights to be climbed; there were weary marches to be taken; there were hard knocks going in front of the walls of Ramoth before they got inside it; and on the whole it was more comfortable to sit at home, or look after their farms and their merchandise, than to embark on the quixotic attempt to win back a city that had not been theirs for ever so long, and that they had got on very well without.

And so it is with hosts of Christian people; we do not realise how much we have that we never get any good out of. And, in the second place, we had rather just stay where we are, and make the best of the world as it is, and the desires of our hearts go in another direction than for our increase in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. Ah, brethren! if we had a claim to some great property, or any other wealth that we really cared about, should we be so very indifferent as to asserting our rights? Should we not fight to the death, some of us, for the last inch of soil, for the last ounce of treasure, that belonged to us? When

you really value a thing, you secure the greatest possible amount of it; and there is very little margin between what you own and what you use.

And if there is such a tremendous difference between the breadth of the one and the narrowness of the other in our Christian life, there can be no reason for it except this, that we do not care enough about spiritual blessings and forces to make the effort that is needed to win and keep, and get the good of, all that is ours.

And is not that something like despising the birthright? Is it not a criminal thing for Christian people thus to neglect, and to put aside, and never to seek to obtain, all these great gifts of God? There they lie at our doors, and they are ours for the taking. Suppose a carrier brought you a whole waggon full of precious goods, and put them down at your door, and you were not at the trouble to open your doors, or to carry the goods into your cellars. That would not look as if you cared much either for the goods or for the giver. And I wonder how many of us are chargeable with that criminal despising of God's gifts, which is clearly the explanation of our letting them lie rotting, as it were, at our gates? We are starving paupers in the midst of plenty.

'My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory, by Christ Jesus,' says Paul. You have the right to them all. Draw cheques against the capital that is lodged in your name in that great bank.

III. And so, lastly, my text suggests the effort that is needed to make our own ours.

'We be still, and take it not out of the hands of the King of Syria.' Then these things that are ours, by God's gift, by Christ's purchase, by the Spirit's influence, will need our effort to secure them. And that is no contradiction, nor any paradox. God does exactly in the same way with regard to a great many of His natural gifts as He does with regard to His spiritual ones. He gives them to us, but we hold them on this tenure, that we put forth our best efforts to get and to keep them. His giving them does not set aside our taking. However much we tried we could not take them out of His hand if it were clenched. Open as His hand is, and stretched out to us as it is, the gifts that sparkle in it are not transferred to our hands unless we ourselves put forth an effort.

So let me say that one large part of the discipline by which men make their own their own is by familiarising themselves with the thought of the larger possibilities of unattained possessions which God has given them. That is true in everything. To recognise our present imperfection, and to see stretching before us glorious and immense possibilities, opening out into a vista where our eyesight fails us to travel to its end, is the very salt of life in every region. Artist, student, all of us 'are saved by hope,' in a very much wider sense than the Apostle meant by that great saying. And whosoever has once lost, or felt becoming dim, the vision before him of a possible better than his present best, in any region, is in that region condemned to grow no more. If we desire to have any kind of advancement, it is only possible

for us, when there gleams ever before us the untravelled road, and we see at the end of it unattained brightnesses and blessings.

And we Christian people have an endless prospect of that sort stretching before us. Oh, if we looked at it oftener, 'having respect unto the recompense of the reward,' we should find it easier to dash at any Ramoth-Gilead, and get it out of the hands of the strongest of the enemies that may bar our way to it. Let us familiarise ourselves with the thought of our present imperfection, and of our future completeness, and of the possibilities which may become actualities, even here and now; and let us not fitfully use what power we have, but make the best of what graces are ours, and enjoy and expatiate in the spiritual blessings of peace and rest which Christ has already given to us. 'To him that hath shall be given,' and the surest way to lose what we have is to neglect to increase it.

And, above all, let us keep nearer to our Master, and live more in fellowship with our Lord, and that will help us to deny ourselves to ungodliness and worldly lusts. It is the prevalence of these, and the absence of self-denial, that ruins most of the Christian lives that are ruined in this world. If a man wants to be what he is not, he must cease to be what he is.

Self-sacrifice, and the emptying of our hearts of trash and trifles, is the only way to get our hearts filled with God and with His blessing. Let us keep near Jesus Christ. If we have Him for ours we have peace, we have power, we have purity. 'He of God is made unto us' all in all, and every gift that may adorn humanity, and make our lives joyous and ourselves noble, is given to us in Jesus Christ. Let us put away from ourselves, then, this slothful indifference to our unattained possessions. 'Know ye that Ramoth is ours?' 'Let us be still' no longer. 'All things are yours, whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come: all are yours if ye are Christ's.'

### AHAB AND MICAIAH

‘And Jehoshaphat said, Is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides, that we might enquire of him? 8. And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, There is yet one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may enquire of the Lord: but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.’—1 KINGS xxii. 7, 8.

An ill-omened alliance had been struck up between Ahab of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah. The latter, who would have been much better in Jerusalem, had come down to Samaria to join in an assault on the kingdom of Damascus; but, like a great many other people, Jehoshaphat first made up his mind without asking God, and then thought that it might be well to get some kind of varnish of a religious sanction for his decision. So he proposes to Ahab to inquire of the Lord about this matter. One would have thought that that should have been done before, and not after, the determination was made. Ahab does not at all see the necessity for such a thing, but, to please his scrupulous ally, he sends for his priests. They came, four hundred of them, and of course they all played the tune that Ahab called for. It is not difficult to get prophets to pat a king on the back, and tell him, ‘Do what you like.’

But Jehoshaphat was not satisfied yet. Perhaps he thought that Ahab’s clergy were not exactly God’s prophets, but at all events he wanted an independent opinion; and so he asks if there is not in all Samaria a man that can be trusted to speak out. He gets for answer the name of this ‘Micaiah the son of Imlah.’ Ahab had had experience of him, and knew his man; and the very name leads him to an explosion of passion, which, like other explosions, lays bare some very ugly depths. ‘I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.’

That is a curious mood, is it not? that a man should know another to be a messenger of God, and therefore know that his words are true, and that if he asked his counsel he would be forbidden to do the thing that he is dead set on doing, and would be warned that to do it was destruction; and that still he should not ask the counsel, nor ever dream of dropping the purpose, but should burst out in a passion of puerile rage against the counsellor, and will have none of his reproofs. Very curious! But there are a great many of us that have something of the same mood in us, though we do not speak it out as plainly as Ahab did. It lurks more or less in us all, and it largely determines the attitude that some of us take to Christianity and to Christ. So I wish to say a word or two about it.

I. My text suggests the inevitable opposition between a message from God, and man’s evil.

No doubt, God is love; and just because He is, it is absolutely necessary that what comes from Him, and is the reflex and cast, so to speak, of His character, should be in stern and continual antagonism to that evil which is the worst foe of men, and is sure to lead to their death. It is because God is love, that ‘to the froward He shows Himself froward.’ and opposes that which, unopposed and yielded to, will ruin the man that does it. So this is one of the

characteristic marks of all true messages from God, that men who will not part with their evil call them 'stern,' 'rigid,' 'gloomy,' 'narrow' Yes, of course; because God must look upon godless lives with disapprobation, and must desire by all means to draw men away from that which is drawing them away *from* Him and to their death.

Now, I suppose I need not spend time in enumerating or describing the points in the attitude of Christianity towards the solemn fact of human sin, which correspond to Ahab's complaint that the prophet spake always 'not good concerning him, but evil.' The 'gospel' of Jesus Christ proves its name to be true, and that it *is* 'good news,' not only by its graciousness, its promises, its offers, and the rich blessings of eternal life with which its hands are full, but by its severity, as men call it. One characteristic of the gospel is the altogether unique place which the fact of sin fills in it. There is no other religion on the face of the earth that has so grasped and made prominent this thought: 'All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' There is none that has painted human nature as it is in such dark colours, because there is none that knows itself to be able to change human nature into such radiance of glory and purity. The gospel has, if I might so say, on its palette a far greater range of pigments than any other system. Its blacks are blacker; its whites are whiter; its golds are more lustrous than those of other painters of human nature as it is and as it may become. It is a mark of its divine origin that it unflinchingly looks facts in the face, and will not say smooth things about men as they are.

Side by side with that characteristic of the dark picture which it draws of us, as we are in ourselves, is its unhesitating restraint or condemnation of deep-seated desires and tendencies. It does not come to men with the smooth words on its lips, 'Do as thou wilt.' It does not seek for favour by relaxing bonds, but it rigidly builds up a wall on either side of a narrow path, and says, 'Walk within these limits and thou art safe. Go beyond them a hair's-breadth, and thou perishest.' It may suit Ahab's prophets to fling the reins on the neck of human nature; God's prophet says, 'Thou shalt not,' That is another of the tests of divine origin, that there shall be no base compliance with inclinations, but rigid condemnation of many of our deep desires.

Side by side with these two, there is a third characteristic that the Word, which is the outcome and expression of the divine love, is distinguished by its plain and stern declarations of the bitter consequences of evil-doing. I need not dwell upon these, brethren. They seem to me to be far too solemn to be spoken of by a man to men in other words than Scripture's. But I beseech you to remember that this, too, is the characteristic of Christ's message. So a man should feel, when he thinks of the dark and solemn things that the Old Testament partially, and the New Testament more clearly, utter as to the death which is the outcome of sin, that these are indeed the very voice of infinite love pleading with us all. Brother I do not so misapprehend facts as to think that the restraints and threatenings and dark pictures

which Christ and His servants have drawn are anything but the utterance of the purest affection.

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to look for a moment at the strange dislike which this attitude of Christianity kindles.

I have said that Ahab's mental condition was a very odd one. Strange as it is, it is, as I have already remarked, in some degree a very frequent one. There are in us all, as we see in many regions of life, the beginnings of the same kind of feeling. Here, for example, is a course that I am quite sure, if I pursue it, will land me in evil. Does the drunkard take a glass the less, because he knows that if he goes on he will have a drunkard's liver and die a miserable death? Does the gambler ever take away his hand from the pack of cards or the dice-box, because he knows that play means, in the long run, poverty and disgrace? When a man sets his will upon a certain course, he is like a bull that has started in its rage. Down goes the head, and, with eyes shut, he will charge a stone wall or an iron door, though he knows it will smash his skull. Men are very foolish animals; and there is no greater mark of their folly than the conspicuous and oft-repeated fact that the clearest vision of the consequences of a course of conduct is powerless to turn a man from it, when once his passions, or his will, or, worse still, his weakness, or, worst of all, his habits, have bound him to it.

Take another illustration. Do we not all know that honest friends have sometimes fallen out of favour, perhaps with ourselves, because they have persistently kept telling us what our consciences and common-sense knew to be true, that if we go on by that road we shall be suffocated in a bog? A man makes up his mind to a course of conduct. He has a shrewd suspicion that an honest friend will condemn him, and that the condemnation will be right. What does he do, therefore? He never consults his friend, but if by chance that friend should say what was expected of him, he gets angry with his adviser and doggedly goes his own road. I suppose we all know what it is to treat our consciences in the style in which Ahab treated Micaiah. We do not listen to them because we know what they will say before they have said it; and we call ourselves sensible people! Martin Luther once said, 'It is neither safe nor *wise* to do anything against conscience.' But Ahab put Micaiah in prison; and we shut up our consciences in a dungeon, and put a gag in their mouths, and a muffler over the gag, that we may hear them say no word, because we know that what we are doing, and we are doggedly determined to do, is wrong.

But the saddest illustration of this infatuation is to be found in the attitude that many men take in regard to Christianity. There is a great craving to-day, more perhaps than there has been in some other periods of the world's history, for a religion which shall adorn, but shall not restrain; for a religion which shall be toothless, and have no bite in it; for a religion that shall sanction anything that it pleases our sovereign mightiness to want to do. We should all like to have God's sanction for our actions. But there are a great many of us who will not take the only way to secure that—viz. to do the actions which He commands, and



to abstain from those which He forbids. Popular Christianity is a very easy-fitting garment; it is like an old shoe that you can slip off and on without any difficulty. But a religion which does not put up a strong barrier between you and many of your inclinations is not worth anything. The mark of a message from God is that it restrains and coerces and forbids and commands. And some of you do not like it because it does.

There is a great tendency in this day to cut out of the Old and New Testaments all the pages that say things like this, 'The soul that sinneth it shall die'; or things like this, 'This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light'; or things like this, 'Then shall the wicked go away into outer darkness.' Brethren, men being what they are, and God being what He is, there can be no divine message without a side of what the world calls threatening, or what Ahab called 'prophesying evil.' I beseech you, do not be carried away by the modern talk about Christianity being gloomy and dark, or fancy that we put a blot and an excrescence upon the pure religion of the Man of Nazareth, when we speak of the death that follows sin, and of the darkness into which unbelief carries a man.

III. Once more, let me say a word about the intense folly of such an attitude.

Ahab hated Micaiah. Why? Because Micaiah told him what would come to him as the fruit of his own actions. That was foolish. It is no less foolish for people to take up a position of dislike, and to turn away from the gospel of Jesus Christ because it speaks in like manner. I said that men are very foolish animals; there is surely nothing in all the annals of human stupidity more stupid than to be angry with the word that tells you the truth about what you are bringing down upon your heads. It is absurd, because Micaiah did not make the evil, but Ahab made it; and Micaiah's business was only to tell him what he was doing. It is absurd, because the only question to be asked is. Are the warnings true? are the threatenings representations of what really will come? are the prohibitions reasonable? And it is absurd, because, if these things are so—if it is true that the soul that sinneth dies, and will die; if it is true that you, who have heard of the name and the salvation of Jesus Christ over and over again, and have turned away from it, will, if you continue in that negligence and unbelief, reap bitter fruits here and hereafter therefrom—if these things are true, surely the man that tells you so, and the gospel that tells you so, deserve better treatment than Ahab's petulant hatred or your stolid indifference and neglect.

Would you think it wise for a sea-captain to try to take the clapper out of the bell that floats and tolls above a shoal on which his ship will be wrecked if it strikes? Would it be wise to put out the lighthouse lamps, and then think that you had abolished the reef? Does the signalman with his red flag make the danger of which he warns, and is it not like a baby to hate and to neglect the message that comes to you and says, 'Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die'?

IV. So, lastly, I notice the end of this foolish attitude.

Ahab was told in plain words by Micaiah, before the interview closed, that he would never come back again in peace. He ordered the bold prophet into prison, and rode away gaily, no doubt, to his campaign. Weak men are very often obstinate, because they are not strong enough to rise to the height of changing a purpose when reason condemns it. This weak man was always obstinate in the wrong place, as so many of us are. So away he went, down from Samaria, across the plain, down to the fords of the Jordan. But when he had crossed to the other side, and was coming near his objective point, the memories of Micaiah in prison at Samaria began to sit heavy on his soul.

So he tried to deceive divine judgment, and got up an ingenious scheme by which his ally was to go into the field in royal pomp, and he to slip into it disguised. A great many of us try to hoodwink God, and it does not answer. The man who 'drew the bow at a venture' had his hand guided by a higher Hand. Ahab was plated all over with iron and brass, but there is always a crevice through which God's arrow can find its way; and, where God's arrow finds its way, it kills. When the night fell, he was lying dead on his chariot floor, and the host was scattered, and Micaiah, the prisoner, was avenged; and his word had taken hold on the despiser of it.

So it always will be. So it will be with us, dear brethren, if we do not give heed to our ways and listen to the word which may be bitter in the mouth, but, eaten, turns sweet as honey. Nailing the index of the barometer to 'set fair' will not keep off the thunderstorm, and no negligence or dislike of divine threatenings will arrest the slow, solemn march, inevitable as destiny, of the consequences of our doings. Things will be as they will be. Believed or unbelieved, the avalanche will come.

Dear brethren, there is one way to get Micaiah on your side. Listen to him, and then he will speak good to you, and not what you foolishly call evil. Let God's word convince you of sin. Let it bring you to the Cross for pardon. Jesus Christ addresses each of us in the Apostle's words: 'Am I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?' The sternest threatenings in the Bible come from the lips of that infinite Love. If you will listen to Him, if you will yield yourselves to Him, if you will take Him for your Saviour and your Lord, if you will cast your confidence and anchor your love upon Him, if you will let Him restrain you, if you will consult Him about what He would have you do, if you will accept His prohibitions as well as His permissions, then His word and His act to you, here and hereafter, will be only good and not evil, all the days of your life.

Remember Ahab lying dead on the floor of his chariot in a pool of his own blood, and bethink yourselves of what despising the threatenings, and turning away from the rebukes and prohibitions of the divine word, come to. These threatenings are spoken that they may never need to be put in effect. If you give heed to them they will never be put in effect in regard to you, if you neglect them and 'will none of God's 'reproof,' they will come down on you like a mighty rock loosed from the mountain, and will grind you to powder.

**THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS**

## THE CHARIOT OF FIRE

‘And it came to pass, when the Lord would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. 2. And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Beth-el. And Elisha said unto him, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. 3. And the sons of the prophets that were at Beth-el came forth to Elisha and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to-day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. 4. And Elijah laid unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they came to Jericho. 5. And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and laid unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to-day? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. 6. And Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here: for the Lord hath sent me to Jordan. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And they two went on. 7. And fifty men of the eons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off: and they two stood by Jordan. 8. And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground. 9. And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. 10. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing; nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. 11. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.’—[2 KINGS ii. 1-11](#).

Elijah’s end is in keeping with his career. From his first abrupt appearance it had been fitly symbolised by the stormy wind and flaming fire which he heard and saw at Horeb, and now these were to be the vehicles which should sweep him into the heavens. He came like a whirlwind, he burned like a fire, and in fire and whirlwind he disappeared. The story is wonderful in pathos and simplicity. Surely never was such a miracle told so quietly. The actual ascension is narrated in a sentence. Its preliminaries take up the rest of this narrative.

I. This journey from Gilgal to the eastern side of Jordan is minutely described in its stages. Apparently this Gilgal is not the well-known place so called, which was down in the Jordan valley close to Jericho, else the road from it to Bethel could not have been called a going down ([v. 2](#)). It probably lay to the north of Bethel, which would then be between it and Jericho, where the Jordan was to be passed. Elijah was not sent on an aimless round of farewell visits, but by the direct road to his destination. Note that he and Elisha and the ‘sons of the prophets’ all know that he is near his end. How this came about we are not told, and need not speculate; but though all knew, none seems to have known that the others knew.

Elijah does not explain to Elisha why he wished him to stay behind, nor Elisha to Elijah why he was so resolved to keep by him. The knowledge and the silence would give peculiar solemnity and sweet bitterness to these last hours. How often a similar combination weighs on the hearts of a household, who all know that a dear one is soon to be taken away, and yet can only be silent about what is uppermost in their thoughts!

Why did Elijah wish Elisha to stay behind? Apparently to spare him the pain of seeing his master depart. With loving concealment, he tried to make Elisha suppose that his errand to Bethel and then to Jericho was but a common one, to be soon despatched. It was a little touch of tenderness in the strong, rough man. Note, too, the gradual disclosure to Elijah of the places to which he was to go. He is only bid to go to Bethel, and not till he gets there is he further sent on to Jericho, and, presumably, only when there is directed to cross Jordan. God does not show all the road at once, even if it lead to glory, but step by step, and a second stage only when we have obediently traversed the first. We get light as we go. Elisha's clinging to his master till the very last is but too intelligible to many of us who have gone through the same sorrow, and counted each moment of companionship with some dear one about to leave earth as priceless gain, to be treasured in the sacredest recesses of memory for evermore.

It has been thought that the object of the visits to Bethel and Jericho was to give parting directions to the schools of the prophets at each place; but that is read into the narrative, which gives no hint that Elijah had any communication with these. Rather the contrary is implied, both in the fact that the 'sons of the prophets' came to the travellers, not the travellers to them, and in their addressing Elisha, as if some awe of the master kept them from speaking to him. An Elijah marching to his chariot of fire was not a man for raw youths to approach lightly. Their question is met by Elisha with curtness and scant courtesy, which indicates that it was asked in no sympathetic spirit, but from mere love of telling bad news, and of vulgar excitement. Even the gentle Elisha is stirred to rebuke the gossiping chatterers, who intrude their curiosity into that sacred hour. There are abundance of such busy-bodies always ready to buzz about any bleeding heart, and sorrow has often to be stern in order to be unmolested.

II. The second stage is the passage of Jordan. The verbal repetition of the same dialogue at Jericho as at Bethel increases the impression of prolonged loving struggle between the two prophets. At last, they stand on the western bank of Jordan, at their feet the spot where the hurrying river had been stayed by the ark till the tribes had passed over, before them the mountains bordering Elijah's homeland of Gilead on the left, and away on the right the lone peak where Moses had died 'by the mouth of the Lord.' The soil was redolent of the miracles of the Mosaic age, and the dividing of the waters by Elijah is meant to bring the present into vital connection with that past, and to designate him as parallel with the former leader. Note the vigour with which he twists his characteristic mantle into a kind of rod,

and strikes the waters strongly. The repetition of the former miracle is a sign that the unexhausted Power which wrought it is with Elijah. The God of yesterday is the God of to-day, and nothing that was done in the past but will be repeated in essence, though not in form, in the present. 'As we have heard so have we seen.' The former miracle had been done for a nation; this is performed for two men. It teaches the preciousness of His individual servants in God's eyes. The former had been done through the ark; this, by the prophet's mantle. Power is lodged in the faithful messenger. God's strength dwells in those who love Him. The former miracle had been the close of the desert wanderings and the gateway to Canaan. Though Elijah's face is turned in the opposite direction, does not its repetition suggest that for him, too, the impending translation was to be the end of wilderness weariness and toil, and the entrance on rest?

III. Elisha's request is the next stage in the story. How far they two 'went on' is not told. The Bible does not foster the craving to know the exact situation where sacred things happened, the gratification of which might feed superstition, but could not increase reverence. Possibly they had drawn near the eastern hills, and were out of sight of the fifty curious gazers on the other bank. Elijah at last spoke the truth which both knew. How true to nature is that reticence kept up till the last moment, and then broken so tenderly!—'Ask what I shall do for thee, before.' Probably he did not mean any supernatural gift, but simply some parting token of love; for he is startled at the response of Elisha. A true disciple can desire nothing more than a portion of his master's spirit. 'It is enough for the disciple that he be as his Master.' They covet wisely and with a noble covetousness who most desire spiritual gifts to fit them for their vocation. It was an unworldly soul which asked but for such a legacy.

The 'double portion' does not mean twice as much as Elijah's portion had been, but twice as much as other 'sons of the prophets' would receive. Elisha reckoned himself Elijah's first-born spiritual son, and asked for the elder brother's share, because he had been designated as successor, and would require more than others for his work. The new sense of responsibility is coming on him, and teaching him his need. Well for us if higher positions make us lowlier, in the consciousness of our own unfitness without divine help! Elijah knows that his spirit was not his to give, and can only refer his successor to the Fountain from which he had drawn; for the sign which he gives is obviously not within his power to determine. If the Lord shows the ascending master to him who is left, He will give the servant his desire.

A portion of their 'spirit' is the very thing which teachers and prophets cannot give. They may give their systems or their methods, their favourite ideas or cut-and-dry maxims and principles, and so leave a race of pygmies who give themselves airs as being their disciples, but their spirit they cannot impart. Contrast with this limitation of power confessed by Elijah, His consciousness who breathed on eleven poor men, and said, 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost.' No man could say that without absurdity or blasphemy. The gift impossible to man is the

very characteristic gift of Jesus, who 'has power over the Spirit of holiness.' Must He not thereby be 'declared to be the Son of God'?

IV. The climax of this lesson is that stupendous scene of the translation. Note how the 'Behold' suggests the suddenness of the appearance of the fiery chariot, which came flaming between the two men eagerly talking, and drove them apart. The description of the departure, in its brevity and incompleteness, sounds like the report of the only eye-witness, who had the fiery chariot between him and Elijah, and was too bewildered to see precisely what happened. All he knew was the sudden appearance of the fiery equipage, and then that, suddenly, and apparently swiftly, a rushing mighty wind swept away chariot and prophet into the heavens. He saw it, as the next verse after this passage tells us, only long enough to break into one rapturous and yet lamenting cry, and then all vanished, and he stood alone with an apparently empty heaven above him, the whirlwind sunk to calm, and Elijah's mantle at his feet.

The teaching of the event is plain. As for the pre-Mosaic ages the translation of Enoch, and for the earlier Mosaic epoch the mysterious death of Moses, so for the prophetic period the carrying to heaven of Elijah, witnessed of a life beyond death, and of death as the wages of sin, which God could remit, if He willed, in the case of faithful service. Enoch and Elijah were led round the head of the valley on the heights, and reached the other side without having to go down into the cold waters flowing in the bottom; and though we cannot tread their path, the joy of their experience has not ceased to be a joy to us, if we walk with God. Death is still the coming of the chariot and horses of fire to bear the believer home. The same exclamation which fell from Elisha's lips, as he saw the chariot sweep up the sky, was spoken over him as he lay sick 'of the sickness whereof he should die.'

But the most instructive view of Elijah's translation is its parallel and contrast with Christ's Ascension. The one was by outward means; the other by inward energy. Storm and fire bore Elijah up into a region strange to him. Christ 'ascended up where He was before,' returning by the propriety of His nature to His eternal dwelling-place. The one is accomplished with significant disturbance, of whirlwind and flame; the other is gentle, like the life which it closed, and the last sight of Him was with extended hands of blessing. Each life closed in a manner corresponding to its character. The one was swift and sudden. The other was a slow, solemn motion, vividly described as being 'borne upwards' and as 'going into heaven.' The one bore a mortal into 'heaven.' In the other, the Son of God, our great High Priest, 'hath passed through the heavens,' and now, far above them all, He is 'Head over all things.'

## THE TRANSLATION OF ELIJAH AND THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST

‘And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.’—2 KINGS ii. 11.

‘And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.’—LUKE xxiv. 51.

These two events, the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of our Lord, have sometimes been put side by side in order to show that the latter narrative is nothing but a ‘variant’ of the former. See, it is said, the source of your New Testament story is only the old legend shaped anew by the wistful regrets of the early disciples. But to me it seems that the simple comparison of the two narratives is sufficient to bring out such fundamental difference in the ideas which they respectively embody as amount to opposition, and make any such theory of the origin of the latter absurdly improbable, I could wish no better foil for the history of the Ascension than the history of Elijah’s rapture. The comparison brings out contrasts at every step, and there is no readier way of throwing into strong relief the meaning and purpose of the former, than holding up beside it the story of the latter. The real parallel makes the divergences the more remarkable, for likeness sharpens our perception of unlikeness, and no contrast is so forcible as the contrast of things that correspond. I am much mistaken if we shall not find almost every truth of importance connected with our Lord’s Ascension emphasised for us by the comparison to which we now proceed.

I. The first point which may be mentioned is the contrast between the manner of Elijah’s translation, and that of our Lord’s Ascension.

It is perhaps not without significance that the place of the one event was on the uplands or in some of the rocky gorges beyond Jordan, and that of the other, the slopes of Olivet above Bethany. The lonely prophet, who had burst like a meteor on Israel from the solitudes of Gilead, whose fervour had ever and again been rekindled by return to the wilderness, whose whole career had isolated him from men, found the fitting place for that last wonder amidst the stern silence where he had so often sought asylum and inspiration. He was close to the scenes of mighty events in the past. There, on that overhanging peak, the lawgiver whose work he was continuing, and with whom he was to be so strangely associated on the Mount of Transfiguration, had made himself ready for his lonely grave. Here at his feet, the river had parted for the victorious march of Israel. Away down on his horizon the sunshine gleamed on the waters of the Dead Sea; and thus, on his native soil, surrounded by memorials of the Law which he laboured to restore, and of the victories which he would fain have brought back, and of the judgments which he saw again impending over Israel, the stern, solitary ascetic, the prophet of righteousness, whose single arm stayed the downward course of a nation, passed from his toil and his warfare.



What a different set of associations cluster round the place of Christ's Ascension—'Bethany,' or, as it is more particularly specified in the Acts, 'Olivet'! In the very heart of the land, close by and yet out of sight of the great city, in no wild solitude, but perhaps in some dimple of the hill, neither shunning nor courting spectators, with the quiet home where He had rested so often in the little village at their feet there, and Gethsemane a few furlongs off, in such scenes did the Christ 'whose delights were with the sons of men,' and His life lived in closest companionship with His brethren, choose the place whence He should 'ascend to their Father and His Father.' Nor perhaps was it without a meaning that the Mount which received the last print of His ascending footstep was that which a mysterious prophecy designated as destined to receive the first print of the footstep of the Lord coming at a future day to end the long warfare with evil.

But more important than the localities is the contrasted manner of the two ascents. The prophet's end was like the man. It was fitting that he should be swept up the skies in tempest and fire. The impetuosity of his nature, and the stormy energy of his career, had already been symbolised in the mighty and strong wind which rent the rocks, and in the fire that followed the earthquake; and similarly nothing could be more appropriate than that sudden rapture in storm and whirlwind, escorted by the flaming chivalry of heaven.

Nor is it only as appropriate to the character of the prophet and his work that this tempestuous translation is noteworthy. It also suggests very plainly that Elijah was lifted to the skies by power acting on him from without. He did not ascend; he was carried up; the earthly frame and the human nature had no power to rise. 'No man hath ascended into heaven.' The two men of whom the Old Testament speaks were alike in this, that 'God *took* them.' The tempest and the fiery chariot tell us how great was the exercise of divine power which bore the gross mortality thither, and how unfamiliar was the sphere into which it passed.

How full of the very spirit of Christ's whole life is the contrasted manner of His Ascension! The silent gentleness, which did not strive nor cry nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets, marks Him even in that hour of lofty and transcendent triumph. There is no outward sign to accompany His slow upward movement through the quiet air. No blaze of fiery chariots, nor agitation of tempest is needed to bear Him heavenwards. The outstretched hands drop the dew of His benediction on the little company, and so He floats upward, His own will and indwelling power the royal chariot which bears Him, and calmly 'leaves the world and goes unto the Father.' The slow, continuous movement of ascent is emphatically made prominent in the brief narratives, both by the phrase in Luke, 'He was carried up,' which expresses continuous leisurely motion, and by the picture in the Acts, of the disciples gazing into heaven 'as He went up,' in which latter word is brought out, not only the slowness of the movement, but its origin in His own will and its execution by His own power.

Nor is this absence of any vehicle or external agency destroyed by the fact that 'a cloud' received Him out of their sight, for its purpose was not to raise Him heavenward, but to hide Him from the gazers' eyes, that He might not seem to them to dwindle into distance, but that their last look and memory might be of His clearly discerned and loving face. Possibly, too, it may be intended to remind us of the cloud which guided Israel, the glory which dwelt between the cherubim, the cloud which overshadowed the Mount of Transfiguration, and to set forth a symbol of the Divine Presence welcoming to itself, His battle fought, the Son of His love.

Be that as it may, the manner of our Lord's Ascension by His own inherent power is brought into boldest relief when contrasted with Elijah's rapture, and is evidently the fitting expression, as it is the consequence, of His sole and singular divine nature. It accords with His own mode of reference to the Ascension, while He was on earth, which ever represents Him not as *being taken*, but as *going*: 'I leave the world and go to the Father.' 'I ascend to My Father and your Father.' The highest hope of the devoutest souls before Him had been, 'Thou wilt afterwards take me to glory.' The highest hope of devout souls since Him has been, 'We shall be caught up to meet the Lord.' But this Man ever speaks of Himself as able when He will, by His own power, to rise where no man hath ascended. His divine nature and pre-existence shine clearly forth, and as we stand gazing at Him blessing the world as He rises into the heavens, we know that we are looking on no mere mysterious elevation of a mortal to the skies, but are beholding the return of the Incarnate Lord, who willed to tarry among our earthly tabernacles for a time, to the glory where He was before, 'His own calm home, His habitation from eternity.'

II. Another striking point of contrast embraces the relation which these two events respectively bear to the life's work which had preceded them.

The falling mantle of Elijah has become a symbol known to all the world, for the transference of unfinished tasks and the appointment of successors to departed greatness. Elisha asked that he might have a double portion of his master's spirit, not meaning twice as much as his master had had, but the eldest son's share of the father's possessions, the double of the other children's portion. And, though his master had no power to bestow the gift, and had to reply as one who has nothing that he has not received, and cannot dispose of the grace that dwells in him, the prayer was answered, and the feebler nature of Elisha was fitted for the continuance of the work which Elijah left undone.

The mantle that passed from one to the other was the symbol of office and authority transferred; the functions were the same, whilst the holders had changed. The sons of the prophets bow before the new master; 'the spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha.'

So the world goes on. Man after man serves his generation by the will of God, and is gathered to his fathers; and a new arm grasps the mantle to smite Jordan, and a new voice speaks from his empty place, and men recognise the successor, and forget the predecessor.

We turn to Christ's Ascension, and there we meet with nothing analogous to this transference of office. No mantle falling from His shoulders lights on any of that group, none are hailed as His successors. What He has done bears and needs no repetition whilst time shall roll, whilst eternity shall last. His work is unique: 'the help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself.' His Ascension completed the witness of heaven, begun at His resurrection, that 'He has offered one sacrifice for sins, for ever.' He has left no unfinished work which another may perfect. He has done no work which another may do again for new generations. He has spoken all truth, and none may add to His words. He has fulfilled all righteousness, and none may better His pattern. He has borne all the world's sin, and no time can waste the power of that sacrifice, nor any man add to its absolute sufficiency. This King of men wears a crown to which there is no heir. This Priest has a priesthood which passes to no other. This 'Prophet' does 'live for ever,' The world sees all other guides and helpers pass away, and every man's work is caught up by other hands and carried on after he drops it, and the short memories and shorter gratitudes of men turn to the rising sun; but one Name remains undimmed by distance, and one work remains unapproached and unapproachable, and one Man remains whose office none other can hold, whose bow none but He can bend, whose mantle none can wear. Christ has ascended up on high and left a finished work for all men to trust, for no man to continue.

III. Whilst our Lord's Ascension is thus marked as the seal of a work in which He has no successor, it is also emphatically set forth, by contrast with Elijah's translation, as the transition to a continuous energy for and in the world.

Clearly the other narrative derives all its pathos from the thought that Elijah's work is done. His task is over, and nothing more is to be hoped for from him. But that same absence from the history of Christ's Ascension, of any hint of a successor, to which we have referred in the previous remarks, has an obvious bearing on His present relation to the world as well as on the completeness of His unique past work.

When Christ ascended up on high, He relinquished nothing of His activity for us, but only cast it into a new form, which in some sense is yet higher than that which it took on earth. His work for the world is in one aspect completed on the Cross, but in another it will never be completed until all the blessings which that Cross has lodged in the midst of humanity, have reached their widest possible diffusion and their highest possible development. Long ages ago He cried, 'It is finished,' but we may be far yet from the time when He shall say, 'It is done'; and for all the slow years between His own word gives us the law of His activity, 'My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.'

Christ's Ascension is no withdrawal of the Captain of our salvation from the field where we are left to fight, nor has He gone up to the mountain, leaving us alone to tug at the oar, and shiver in the cold night air. True, there may seem a strange contrast between the present condition of the Lord who 'was received up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of

God,' and that of the servants wandering through the world on *His* business; but the contrast is harmonised by the next words, 'the Lord also working with them.' Yes, He has gone up to sit at the right hand of God. That session at God's right hand to which the Ascension is chiefly of importance as the transition, means the repose of a perfected redemption, the communion of the Son with the Father, the exercise of all the omnipotence of God, the administration of the world's history. He has ascended that He might fill all things, that He might pour out His Spirit upon us, that the path to God may be trodden by our lame feet, that the whole resources of the divine nature may be wielded by the hands that were nailed to the Cross, that the mighty purpose of salvation may be fulfilled.

Elijah knew not whether his spirit could descend upon his follower. But Christ, though, as we have said, He left no legacy of falling mantle to any, left His Spirit to His people. What Elisha gained, Elijah lost. What Elisha desired, Elijah could not give nor guarantee. How firm and assured beside Elijah's dubious 'Thou hast asked a hard thing,' and his 'If thou see me, it shall be so,' is Christ's 'It is expedient for you that I go away. For if I go not away the Comforter will not come, but if I depart, I will send Him unto you.'

Manifold are the forms of that new and continuous activity of Christ into which He passed when He left the earth: and as we contrast these with the utter helplessness any longer to counsel, rebuke or save, to which death reduces those who love us best, and to which even his glorious rapture into the heavens brought the strong prophet of fire, we can take up, with a new depth of meaning, the ancient words that tell of Christ's exclusive prerogative of succouring and inspiring from within the veil: 'Thou hast ascended on high; Thou hast led captivity captive; Thou hast received gifts for men.'

IV. The Ascension of Christ is still further set forth, in its very circumstances, by contrast with Elijah's translation, as bearing on the hopes of humanity for the future.

The prophet is caught up to the glory and repose for himself alone, and the sole share which the gazing follower or the sons of the prophets straining their eyes there at Jericho, had in his triumph, was a deepened conviction of his prophetic mission, and perhaps some clearer faith in a future life. Their wonder and sorrow, Elisha's immediate exercise of his new power, the prophets' immediate transference of their allegiance to their new head, show that on both sides it was felt that they had no part in the event beyond that of awe-struck beholders. No light streamed from it on their own future. The path they had to tread was still the common road into the great darkness, as solitary and unknown as before. The chariot of fire parted their master from the common experience of humanity as from their fellowship, making him an exception to the sad rule of death, which frowned the grimmer and more inexorable by contrast with his radiant translation.

The very reverse is true of Christ's Ascension. In Him our nature is taken up to the throne of God. His Resurrection assures us that 'them which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him,' His passage to the heavens assures us that 'they who are alive and remain shall

be caught up together with them,' and that all of both companies shall with Him live and reign, sharing His dominion, and moulded to His image.

If we would know of what our manhood is capable, if we would rise to the height of the hopes which God means that we should cherish, if we would gain a living grasp of the power that fulfils them, we have to stand there, gazing on the piled cloud that sails slowly upwards, the pure floor for our Brother's feet. As we watch it rising with a motion which is rest, we have the right to think, 'Thither the Forerunner is for us entered.' We see there what man is meant for, what men who love Him attain. True, the world is still full of death and sorrow, man's dominion seems a futile dream and a hope that mocks, but 'we see Jesus,' ascended up on high, and in Him we too are 'made to sit together in heavenly places.' The Breaker is gone up before them. Their King shall pass before them, and the Lord at the head of them.'

There is yet another aspect in which our Lord's Ascension bears on our hopes for the future, namely, as connected with His coming again. In that respect, too, the contrast of Elijah's translation may serve to emphasise the truth. Prophecy, indeed, in its latest voice, spoke of sending Elijah the prophet before the coming of the day of the Lord, and Rabbinical legends delighted to tell how he had been carried to the Garden of Eden, whence he would come again, in Israel's sorest need. But the prophecy had no thought of a personal reappearance, and the dreams are only dreams such as we find in the legendary history of many nations. As Elisha recrossed the Jordan, he bore with him only a mantle and a memory, not a hope.

'Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.' How grand is the use in these mighty words of the name Jesus, the name that speaks of His true humanity, with all its weakness, limitations, and sorrow, with all its tenderness and brotherhood! The man who died and rose again, has gone up on high. He will so come as He has gone. 'So'—that is to say, personally, corporeally, visibly, on clouds, perhaps to that very spot, 'and His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives.' Thus Scripture teaches us ever to associate together the departure and the coming of the Lord, and always when we meditate on His Ascension to prepare a place for us, to think of His real presence with us through the ages, and of His coming again to receive us to Himself.

That parting on Olivet cannot be the end. Such a leave-taking is the prophecy of happy greetings and an inseparable reunion. The King has gone to receive a kingdom, and to return. Memory and hope coalesce, as we think of Him who is passed into the heavens, and the heart of the Church has to cherish at once the glad thought that its Head and helper has entered within the veil, and the still more joyous one, which lightens the days of separation and widowhood, that the Lord will come again.

So let us take our share in the 'great joy' with which the disciples returned to Jerusalem, left like sheep in the midst of wolves as they were, and 'let us set our affection on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.'

### ELIJAH'S TRANSLATION AND ELISHA'S DEATHBED

'And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof.'—2 KINGS ii. 12.

'...And Joash, the King of Israel, came down unto him, and wept over his face, and said. O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.'—2 KINGS xiii. 14.

The scenes and the speakers are strangely different in these two incidents. The one scene is that mysterious translation on the further bank of the Jordan, when a mortal was swept up to heaven in a fiery whirlwind, and the other is an ordinary sick chamber, where an old man was lying, with the life slowly ebbing out of him. The one speaker is the successor of the great prophet, on whom his spirit in a large measure fell; the other, an idolatrous king, young, headstrong, who had despised the latter prophet's teaching while he lived, but was now for the moment awed into something like seriousness and reverence by his death.

Now the remarkable thing is that this unworthy monarch should have come to the dying prophet, and should have strengthened and cheered him by the quotation of his own words, spoken so long ago, as if he would say to him, 'All that thou didst mean when thou didst stand there in rapturous adoration, watching the ascending Elijah, is as true about thee, lying dying here, of a common and lingering sickness. My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.' Seen or unseen, these were present. The reality was the same, though the appearances were so different.

I We have in the first case the chariot and horsemen seen.

To feel the force of the exclamation on the lips of Joash, we must try to make clear to ourselves what its original meaning was. What did Elisha intend when he stood beyond Jordan, and in wonder and awe exclaimed, 'The chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof?'

It does not seem to me that the interpretation of the words now in favour is at all satisfactory. It tells us that the expression is to be taken as in apposition with the exclamation 'My father, my father'; and that both the one phrase and the other mean—Elijah! Yet what a preposterous and strange metaphor it would be to call a man a chariot and pair, or a chariot and cavalry! It seems to me that the very statement of this explanation, in plain English, condemns it as untenable. It is surely less probable that Elisha in that exclamation was describing Elijah than that he was speaking of that wondrous chariot of fire and horses of fire that had come between him and his master, and that his exclamation was one of surprised adoration as he gazed with wide-opened eyes on the burning angel-hosts, and saw his master mysteriously able to bear that fire, ringed round by these flaming squadrons, possibly standing unscathed on the floor of the chariot, and swept with it and all the celestial pomp, by the whirlwind, into heaven.

But why should he say 'the chariot of *Israel*'? I think we take for granted too readily that 'Israel' here means the nation. You will remember that that name was not originally that of

the nation, but of its progenitor and founder, given to Jacob as the consequence and record of that mysterious wrestling by the brook. And I think we get a nobler signification for the words before us if, instead of applying the name to the nation, we apply it here to the individual. When Elijah and Elisha crossed Jordan they were not far from the spot where that name was given to Jacob, 'the supplanter,' whom discipline and communion with God had elevated into Israel. And they were near another of the sites consecrated by his history, the place where, just before the change of his name, the angels of God met him and 'he called the name of the place Mahanaim.' That means '*the two camps*,' the one, Jacob's defenceless company of women and children, the other, their celestial guards.

It seems reasonable to suppose that, in all probability, a reminiscence of that old story of the manifestation of the armed angels of God as the defenders and servants of His children broke from Elisha's lips. As he looks upon that strange appearance of the chariot and horses of fire that parted him and his friend, he sees once more 'the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof,' the reappearance of the shining armies whose presence had of old declared that 'the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.' And now the same hosts in their immortal youth, unweakened by the ages which have brought earthly warriors to dust and their swords to rust, are flaming and flashing there in the midday sun. What was their errand, and why did they appear? They came, as God's messengers, to bear His servant to His presence. They attested the commission and devotion of the prophet. Their agency was needful to lift a mortal to skies not native to him. Strange that a body of flesh should be able to endure that fiery splendour! Somewhere in the course of that upward movement must this man, who was caught up to meet the Lord in the air, have been 'changed.' His guards of honour were not only for tokens of his prophetic work, but for witnesses of the unseen world and in some sort pledges, suited to that stage of revelation, of life and immortality.

How striking is the contrast between the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of Christ! He who ascended up where He was before needed no whirlwind, nor chariot of fire, nor extraneous power to elevate Him to His home. Calmly, slowly, as borne upwards by indwelling affinity with heaven, He floated thither with outstretched hands of blessing. The servant angels did not need to surround Him, but, clad no longer in fiery armour, but 'in white apparel,' the emblem of purity and peace, they stood by the disciples and comforted them with hope. Elijah was carried to heaven. Christ went. The angels disappeared with the prophet and left Elisha to grieve alone. They lingered here after Christ had gone, and turned tears into rainbows flashing with the hues of hope.

II. We have in our second text the chariot and horsemen present though unseen.

We are now in a position to appreciate the meaning of Joash's repetition to Elisha of his own words, spoken under such different circumstances.



Elisha was by no means so great a prophet as Elijah. His work had not been so conspicuous, his character was not so strong, though perhaps more gentle. No such lofty and large influence had been granted to him as had been given to the fiery Tishbite to wield, nor did he leave his mark so deep upon the history of the times or upon the memory of succeeding generations. But such as it had been given him to be he had been. He was a continuer, not an originator. There had been a long period during which he appears to have lived in absolute retirement, exercising no prophetic functions. We never hear of him during the interval between the anointing of Jehu to the Israelitish monarchy and the time of his own death, and that period must have extended over nearly fifty years. After all these years of eclipse and seclusion he was lying dying somewhere in a corner, and the king, young but impressible, although, on the whole, not reliable nor good, came down to the prophet's home, and there, standing by the pallet of the dying man, repeated the words, so strangely reminiscent of a very different event—'My father, my father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!'

And what does that exclamation mean? Two things. One is this, that the angels of the Divine Presence are with us as truly, in life, when unseen as if seen. So far as we know, it was only to Elisha that the vision had been granted of that chariot of fire and horses of fire. We read that at Elijah's translation on the other side of Jordan, and consequently at no great distance off, there stood a company of the sons of the prophets from Jericho to see what would happen, but we do not read that they did see. On the contrary, they were inclined to believe that Elijah had been caught up and flung away somewhere on the mountains, and that it was worth while to organise search-parties to go after him. It was only Elisha that saw, and Elijah did not know whether he would see or not, for he said to him, 'If thou shalt see me when I am taken from thee, then' thy desire shall be granted.

The angels of God are visible to the eyes that are fit to see them; and those eyes can always see them. It does not matter whether in a miracle or in a common event—it does not matter whether on the stones by the banks of Jordan or in a close sick chamber, they are visible for those who, by pure hearts and holy desires, have had their vision purged from the intrusive vulgarities and dazzling brightnesses of this poor, petty present, and can therefore see beneath all the apparent the real that blazes behind it.

The scenes at Jordan and in the death-chamber are not the only times in Elisha's life when we read of these chariots and horses of fire. There was another incident in his career in which the same phrase occurs. Once his servant was terrified at the sight of a host compassing the little city where Elisha and he were, with horses and chariots, and came to his master with alarm and despair, crying, 'Alas! my master, how shall we do?' The prophet answered with superb calmness, 'Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them . . . Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.' They had always been there, though no one saw them.

They were there when no one but Elisha saw them. They were no more there when the young man saw them than they had been before. They did not cease to be there when the film came over his eyes again, and the common round took him back to the trivialities of daily life.

And so from the mouth of this not very devout king the prophet was reminded of his own ancient experiences, and invited to feel that, unseen or seen, the solemn forms stood 'bright-harnessed,' and strong, 'in order serviceable,' ranged about him for his defence and blessing.

And are they not round about us? If a man can but look into the realities of things, will he see only the work of men and of the forces of nature? Will there not be—far more visible as they are far more real than any of these—the forces of the Eternal Presence and ever operative Will of our Father in Heaven? We need not discuss the personality of angels. An angel is the embodiment of the will and energy of God, and we have that will and energy working for us, whether there are any angel persons about us or not. Scripture declares that there are, and that they serve us. We may be sure that if only we will honestly try to purge our eyes from the illusions and temptations of 'things seen and temporal,' the mountain or the sick chamber will be to us equally full of the angel forms of our defenders and companions.

Do we see them for ourselves; and, not less important, do we, like Elisha, lying there on his deathbed, help else blind men to see them, and make every one that comes beside us, even if he be as little impressible and as little devout as this king Joash was, recognise that in our chambers there sit, and round our lives there flutter and sing, sweet and strong angel wings and voices? Will anybody, looking at you, be constrained to feel that with and around you are the angels of God?

Still further, another cognate application of these great words is that one which is more directly suggested by their quotation by Joash. It does not matter in what way the end of life comes. The reality is the same to all devout men; though one be swept to heaven in a whirlwind, and another lady slowly away in old age, or 'fall sick of the sickness wherewith he should die.' Each is taken to God in a chariot of fire. The means are of little moment, the fact remains the same, however diverse may be the methods of its accomplishment. The road is the same, the companions the same, the impelling—I was going to say the locomotive—power, is the same, and the goal is the same.

Of Enoch we read, 'He was not, for God took him.' Of Elijah we read, 'He went up in a whirlwind to heaven.' Of Elisha we read, 'He died and they buried him.' And of all three—the two who were translated that they should not see death, and the one who died like the rest of us—it is equally true that 'God took' them, and that they were taken to Him. So for ourselves and for our dear ones we may look forward or backward, to deathbeds of weariness, of lingering sickness, of long pain and suffering, or of swift dissolution, and piercing beneath

the surface may see the blessed central reality and thankfully feel that Death, too, is God's angel, who' does His commandments, hearkening to the voice of God's word' when in his dark hearse he carries us hence.

### GENTLENESS SUCCEEDING STRENGTH

'He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; 14. And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the Lord God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over. 15. And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed themselves to the ground before him. 16. And they said unto him, Behold now, there be with thy servants fifty strong men; let them go, we pray thee, and seek thy master: lest peradventure the Spirit of the Lord hath taken him up, and cast him upon some mountain, or into some valley. And he said, Ye shall not send. 17. And when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, Send. They sent therefore fifty men; and they sought three days, but found him not. 18. And when they came again to him, (for he tarried at Jericho,) he said unto them, Did I not say unto you, Go not! 19. And the men of the city said unto Elisha, Behold, I pray thee, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord seeth: but the water is naught, and the ground barren. 20. And he said, Bring me a new cruse, and put salt therein. And they brought it to him. 21. And he went forth unto the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there, and said, Thus saith the Lord, I have healed these waters; there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land. 22. So the waters were healed unto this day, according to the saying of Elisha which he spake.'—[2 KINGS ii. 13-22](#).

The independent activity of Elisha begins with [verse 13](#). How short the gap between the two prophets, and how easily filled it is! Not the greatest are indispensable. God lays aside one tool, but only to take up another. He has inexhaustible stores. The work goes on, though the workers change, and there is little time for mere mourning, and none for idle sorrow. Elisha's first miracle is almost an experiment. The mantle which lay at his feet had been thrown over him by Elijah when he was called to his service, and it was now a token that office and power had devolved on him. His first steps tread closely in Elijah's track; as those of wise and humble men, called to higher work, will mostly do. The repetition of the miracle by the same means, and the invocation of the Lord as the 'God of Elijah,'—a new name, to be set by the side of 'the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob'—express the humility which seeks to shelter itself behind the example of its mighty predecessor. The form of the invocation as a question indicates that Elisha had not yet attained certainty as to his power, as not yet having proved it. 'Where is the Lord God of Elijah?' is not the question of unbelief, but neither is it the voice of full confidence, which asks no such question, because it knows Him to be with it. It is the cry, 'Oh that Thou mayest be here, even with unworthy me! and art Thou not here?' The faith was real, though young, and clouded with some film of doubt. But, being real, it was answered; and it was because of Elisha's trust, not Elijah's mantle, that the waters parted. God will listen to a man pleading that ancient deeds may be repeated

to-day, and, by answering the cry addressed to Him as the God of saints and martyrs of old, will embolden us to cry to Him as our very own God. We may learn from that first half-tentative miracle the spirit in which men should take up the work of those that are gone, the lowliness fitting for beginners, the wisdom of seeking to graft new work on the old stock, the encouragement from remembering the divine wonders through His servants in the past, and the true way to assure ourselves of our God-given power; namely, by attempting great things for Him, in dependence on His promise.

The miracle was wrought partly for Elisha, and partly for others who were to acknowledge his authority. These sons of the prophets, who stood on the eastern bank of Jordan, had probably not been witnesses of the translation, even if their position commanded a view of the spot. Purer eyes and more kindred spirits than theirs were needed for that.

But they saw Elisha returning alone, and the waters parting before him, and, no doubt, as he came nearer, would recognise what he bore in his hand—Elijah's well-known mantle. They hasten to recognise him as the head of the prophets, and their acknowledgment accurately expresses his place and work. Elijah's spirit rests on him, even though the two men and their careers are very different, and in some respects opposite. Elisha is distinctly secondary to Elijah. He is in no sense an originator, either of fresh revelations or of new impulses to obedience. He but carries on what Elijah had begun, inherits a work, and is Elijah's 'Timothy' and 'son in the faith.' The same Spirit was on him, though the form of his character and gifts was in strong contrast to the stormier genius of his mightier predecessor. Elisha had no such work as Elijah—no foot-to-foot and hand-to-hand duels with murderous kings or queens; no single-handed efforts to stop a nation from rushing down a steep place into the sea; no fiery energy; no bursts of despair. He moved among kings and courts as an honoured guest and trusted counsellor. He did not dwell apart, like Elijah, the strong son of the desert; but, born in the fertile valley of the Jordan, he lived a life 'kindly with his kind,' and his delights were with the sons of men. His miracles are mostly works of mercy and gentleness, relieving wants and sicknesses, drying tears and giving back dear ones to mourners. He is as complete a contrast to his stern, solitary, forceful predecessor, as the 'still small voice' was to the roar of the wind or the crackling hiss of the flames.

But, nevertheless, 'there are diversities of operations, but the same God.' It is well to remember that one type of excellence does not exhaust the possibilities of goodness, nor the resources of the inspiring Spirit. The comparative merits of strength and gentleness will always be variously estimated; but God's work needs them both, and both may join hands as serving the same Lord in diverse ways, which are all needed. We should seek to widen our discernment to the extent of the rich variety of forms of good and of service which God gives. Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy, Luther and Melancthon, are all His servants. Well is it when the strong can recognise the power of the gentle, and the gentle can discern

the tenderness of the strong, and when each is forward to say of the other, 'He worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do.'

The search after Elijah, insisted on by the sons of the prophets, is of importance only as showing their low thoughts and Elisha's gentle spirit. He is their head, but he holds the reins loosely. Fancy anybody 'urging' Elijah 'till he was ashamed!' The shame would very soon have mantled the cheek of the urger. But though, no doubt, Elisha would tell what had happened, these 'prophets' only think that Elijah has been miraculously borne somewhither, as he had been before, and seem to have no notion of what has really happened. How hard it is to heave heavy men up to any height of spiritual vision! How vulgar minds always take refuge in the most commonplace explanations that they can find of high truths! 'Gone up to heaven! Not he! He is lying, living or dead, in some gorge or on some hillside. Let us go and look for him!' There is nothing on which some people pride themselves more than upon being practical—which generally means prosaic, and often means blind to God's greatest deeds. To go scouring wady and mountain for a man who had been taken up into heaven was practical common sense indeed! But Elisha's gentleness is to be noted. He let them have their own way. Often that is the only plan for convincing people of their errors. And, when the fifty scouts come back empty-handed, all he says is a quiet 'Did I no say unto you, Go not?' 'The servant of the Lord must not strive,' but 'in meekness' instruct 'those that oppose themselves'; and the effectual instruction is often to let them take their own course.

The miracle of healing the waters is of the beneficent kind usual with Elisha, inaugurates his course with blessing, and typifies the healing power which God through him would exert on men. Jericho had been recently rebuilt in spite of the curse against its builders. The bitterness of the spring seems to have been part of the malediction; for men would not be so foolish as to rebuild a city which had only impure water to depend on. However that may be, the main lesson of the miracle, beyond its revelation of the spirit of gentle compassion in Elisha, is the symbolical one. The new cruse and the salt are emblems of the divine gift which cleanses the human heart. Salt is an emblem of purification, and its emblematic meaning prevails here over its natural properties; for the last thing to cure a brackish spring was to put salt into it. The very inadequacy, as well as inappropriateness, of the remedy, points the miraculous and symbolical character of the whole. A jar full of salt could do little to a gushing fountain. But it figured the cleansing power which God will bring to bear on us, if we will; and it taught the great truth that sin must be cleansed at the fountain-head in the heart, not half a mile down the stream, in the deeds. Put the salt in the spring, and the outflow will be sweet.

## WHEN THE OIL FLOWS

‘And it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said unto her son, Bring me yet a vessel. And he said unto her, There is not a vessel more. And the oil stayed.’—[2 KINGS iv. 6.](#)

The series of miracles ascribed to Elisha are very unlike most of the wonderful works of even the Old Testament, and still more unlike those of the New. For about a great many of them there seems to have been no special purpose, either doctrinal or otherwise, but simply the relief of trivial and transient distresses. This story, from which my text is taken, is one of that sort. One of the sons of the prophets had died in Shunem. He left a widow and two little children. The creditor, according to the Mosaic law, had the right, which he was about to put in practice, of taking the children to be bondmen. And so the penniless, helpless woman comes to Elisha, as a kind of deliverer-general from all sorts of distresses, and tells him her pitiful tale. He asks her what she wants him to do, and she has no counsel to give. Then the thing to do strikes *him*. He asks what she has in the house. It was a poor, bare hovel of a place. There was not anything in it save a pot of oil, which was all her property. He sends her to borrow vessels, of all sorts and sizes. He takes the pot of oil, and shuts the door. Then she sets the two boys fetching and carrying; and herself taking up the one possession that she has, in faith she pours; and dish after dish is filled, and still she pours; and they were all filled, and she kept on pouring. Then she said, ‘Bring some more’; and the boys answered, ‘There are not any more,’ so then the oil stopped.

There was no very special reason for all this. It is not at all like most Biblical miracles. I do not suppose it had any symbolical intention; but I venture to do a little gentle violence to the incident, and to see in the staying of the oil when no more vessels were brought to be filled, a lesson addressed to us all, and it is this: God keeps giving Himself as long as we bring that into which He can pour Himself. And when we stop bringing, He stops giving.

Now, if I may venture to be fanciful for once, let me tell you of three vessels that we have to bring if we would have the oil of the Divine Spirit poured into us.

### I. The vessel of desire.

God can give us a great many things that we do not wish, but He cannot give us His best gift, and that is Himself, unless we desire it. He never forces His company on any man, and if we do not wish for Him He cannot give us Himself, His Spirit, or the gifts of His Spirit. For instance, He cannot make a man wise if he does not wish to be instructed. He cannot make a man holy if he has no aspiration after holiness. He cannot save a man from his sins if the man holds on to his sin with both hands, like some shellfish with its claws when you try to drag it out of its cleft in the rock. He cannot give the oil unless we bring the vessels of our hearts opened by our desires.

If God could He would. ‘Ye have not because ye ask not.’ But we are never to forget that God is not led to begin His giving because we petition Him, but that the infinitude of His

stores, and the endless, changeless, unmotivated, perfect love of His heart, make self-communication—I was going to use a very strong word, and I do not know that it is too strong—necessary to the blessedness of the blessed God, and, long before we ever thought of Him, or sought anything from Him, there was pouring out from Him all the fulness of His love: just as we may conceive of the sunshine raying out before the orbs that were to circle round it had been completely shaped, but were still diffused and nebulous.

But, while God is always giving, our capacity to receive determines the degree of our individual possession of Him. Or, to put it in the plainest words—we have as much of God as we can take in; and the principal factor in settling how much we can take is—how much we wish. Measure the reality and intensity of desire, and you measure capacity. As the atmosphere rushes into every vacuum, or as the sea runs up into and fills every sinuosity of the shore, so wherever a heart opens, and the unbroken coast-line is indented, as it were, by desire, in rushes the tide of the divine gifts. You have God in the measure in which you desire Him.

Only remember that that desire which brings God must be more than a feeble, fleeting wish. Wishing is one thing; *willing* is quite another. Lazily wishing and strenuously desiring are two entirely different postures of mind; the former gets nothing and the latter gets everything, gets God, and with God all that God can bring.

But the wish must not only rise to intensity and earnestness, but it must be steadfast. Suppose these two little boys of the widow had held their vessels below the spout of the oil-pot with tremulous hands, while they looked away at something else, sometimes keeping the vessels right under, and sometimes shifting them on one side, it would have been slow work filling the unsteadily held vessels. So it is in regard to receiving God's best gift. Our desires must be unwavering. A cup held by a shaking hand will spill its contents, or will never receive them. 'Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.' The steadfast wish is the wish that is answered.

Is it not a strange indifference to our true good that we who have learned, as most of us have learned only too well, that in this world to wish is not to have, should turn away from the possibility that lies before us each, of passing from this disappointing world of vain longings into a region where we cannot wish anything that we do not get? There is only one thing about which it is true that, if you want, and as much as you want, you will have; and that thing is found when we turn away our wishes from the false, fleeting, and surface satisfactions of earth, and fasten them upon God, 'Who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we . . . think.' Wish for Him, and you have what you have wished. Wish for anything else, and you may have it or you may not, but depend upon it the fish is never half as big when it is out of the water as it felt to be when it was tugging at the hook.

II. Another vessel that we have to bring is the vessel of our expectancy.



Desire is one thing; confident anticipation that the desire will be fulfilled is quite another. And the two do not certainly go together anywhere except in this one region, and there they do go, linked arm in arm. For whatsoever, in the highest of all regions, we wish, we have the right without presumption to believe that we shall receive. Expectation, like desire, opens the heart.

There are some expectations, even in lower regions, that fulfil themselves. Doctors will tell you that a very large part of the curative power of their medicine depends upon the patient's anticipation of recovery. If a man expects to die when he takes to his bed, the chances are that he will die; and if a man expects to get better, Death will have a fight before it conquers him. There are hundreds of cases, in all departments of life, where he who sets himself to a task with assured persuasion that he is going to do such and such a thing will do it. 'Screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail,' said the heroine in the tragedy; and there is a great truth in her fierce encouragement.

All these illustrations fall far beneath the Christian aspect of the thought that what we expect from God we receive. That is only another way of putting 'According to thy faith be it unto thee.' It is exactly what Jesus Christ said when He promised, 'Whatsoever things ye ask when ye stand praying believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.'

I am afraid that a great many of us often have expectations fainter than desires; and that we should be very much surprised if the thing that we ask for, in the prayers that we so often repeat by rote, were granted to us. You will hear men praying for holiness, for clean hearts, for progress in the Christian life, for a hundred other such blessings. They do not expect that anything is going to come in consequence, and they would be mightily at a loss what to do with the gift if it did come. The absence of expectancy in our public petitions is to me one of the saddest features in the Christian life of this day. If you expect little, you will get little; and we do expect far less than we ought. We cannot raise our confident expectations too high; for 'He is able to do for us exceeding abundantly above all that we ask' as well as 'think.' The Apostle has set the limit of our expectations, in the same context, and here it is: 'That we may be filled with all the fulness of God.' There are two limits: one is the boundless illimitableness of God's perfection, and the possibilities of our possession of Him are not exhausted until we have reached that infinite completeness. But then, there is a practical, working limit for each of us; and that is—what do you desire? and what do you expect? God can give more than we can ask or think, but He cannot at the moment give more than we expect or desire.

True, the vessels that we bring to be filled with the oil are not like the vessels that the fatherless boys brought. These were of a definite capacity; and the little cup when it was filled was filled, and there was an end of it. But the vessels that we bring are elastic, and widen out. The more that is put into them the more they can hold, so that there is no bound to the capacity of a heart for the reception and inrush of God; and there will not be a bound

through all the ages of a growing possession of Him in eternity. But for to-day, desire and expectancy determine the measure of the gift.

III. Lastly, one more vessel that we have to bring is obedience.

'If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine.' *There* is one case of the general principle that wishes and anticipations are all right and well, but unless they are backed up and verified by conduct, even wishes and anticipations will not bring God's gift. For it is possible for a man who, in his better moments of devotion, has some desires after a loftier range of goodness and a completer conformity to God than he ordinarily has, to rise from his knees and rush into the world, and there live in some lust, or uncleanness, or vice, or indulgence, or absorption in the cares of this life, in such a way as that desires and anticipations shall vanish. If we fill our vessels full, before we take them to the source of supply, with all manner of baser liquids, there will be no room for the oil. We may contradict and stifle our desires by our conduct, and by it make our expectations perfectly impossible to be fulfilled. Are our daily doings of such a nature as that the Spirit of God, which is symbolised by the oil, can come into our hearts; or are we quenching and grieving Him so that He

'Can but listen at the gate  
And hear the household jar within'?

Desire, Expectancy, and Obedience—these three must never be separated if we are to receive the gift of Himself, which God delights and waits to give. All spiritual possessions and powers grow by use, even as exercised muscles are strengthened, and unused ones tend to be atrophied. It is possible, by neglect of God and of the gift given to us, to incur the stern sentence passed on the slothful servant—'Take it from him.' By disobedience and negligence we choke the channel through which God's gifts can flow to us. So, brethren, bring these three vessels, and you will not go away with them empty. 'Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.'

### **A MIRACLE NEEDING EFFORT**

‘So she went, and came unto the man of God to mount Carmel. And it came to pass, when the man of God saw her afar off, that he said to Gehazi his servant, Behold, yonder is that Shunammite: 26. Run now, I pray thee, to meet her, and say unto her, Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband! is it well with the child? And she answered, It is well. 27. And when she came to the man of God to the hill, she caught him by the feet: but Gehazi came near to thrust her away. And the man of God said, Let her alone; for her soul is vexed within her: and the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me. 28. Then she said, Did I desire a son of my lord! did I not say, Do not deceive me? 29. Then he said to Gehazi, Gird up thy loins, and take my staff in thine hand, and go thy way: if thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee, answer him not again: and lay my staff upon the face of the child. 30. And the mother of the child said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And he arose, and followed her. 31. And Gehazi passed on before them, and laid the staff upon the face of the child; but there was neither voice, nor hearing. Wherefore he went again to meet him, and told him, saying, The child is not awaked. 32. And when Elisha was come into the house, behold, the child was dead, and laid upon his bed. 33. He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the Lord. 34. And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands: and stretched himself upon the child: and the flesh of the child waxed warm. 35. Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him: and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. 36. And he called Gehazi, and said, Call this Shunammite. So he called her. And when she was come in unto him, he said, Take up thy son. 37. Then she went in, and fell at his feet, and bowed herself to the ground, and took up her son, and went out.’—[2 KINGS iv. 25-37](#).

The story of Elisha is almost entirely a record of his miracles, and the story of his miracles is almost entirely a record of deeds of beneficence. Exception has been taken to it on the ground of the strange accumulation of supernatural works, which have been said to make it like some mediaeval saint’s legend. But why should it not be true that, after Elijah had proclaimed the truth, his successor’s function was to enforce it chiefly by his acts, and to seek to draw Israel back to God by ‘the cords of love’ and the gentle compulsion of mercies? The careful consideration of the work of the two prophets makes the peculiarities of Elisha’s perfectly intelligible. This story of the great lady at Shunem, her joy over her only child and his piteous death ‘on her knees,’ is one of the tenderest and sweetest pages in the history. Late won and early lost, the poor boy lies pale and dead on Elisha’s bed at Shunem, while the mother hurries across the plain of Jezreel to Carmel,—a distance of some fifteen or sixteen miles,—where Elisha was then living, probably near the place of Elijah’s sacrifice. This passage begins with her approach.

I. Note first the meeting ([verses 25-28](#)). Somewhere on the slopes of Carmel, commanding a view of the plain stretching away in the blue distance eastward, sat the prophet. His eye was keen, though probably he was now old, and he recognised the lady at a distance, as she rode swiftly towards the mountain. He appears to have suspected that this unusual visit meant some calamity, and his gentle heart went out towards his hostess and friend. Gehazi could not get back sooner than she could come, but sympathy could not sit passive and watch her approach. So the instinctively despatched message beautifully witnesses the prophet's keen affection, and, as it were, the eager leap of his sympathy. So swift and ready to flash into act is the fellow-feeling of the Highest with the sorrows of us all; so should be the compassion of each with another. The higher in gifts or office in the kingdom a man is, the more is he bound to carry his sympathy in an outstretched hand. It is worth very little when it comes slowly. It is priceless when it runs to meet the mourner before she speaks.

The detailed question put into Gehazi's mouth describes the circle within which this woman's heart moved,—her husband, her child, herself. If these were well, nothing could be very ill; if ill, nothing could be well. But the message, which came so warm from Elisha's lips, had been cooled on the road, and sounded formal from Gehazi. It is hard for selfish indifference to carry tender words without freezing them. The bearer of sympathy must be sympathetic. As Gehazi spoiled Elisha's message, so we Christians too often do our Master's, and cool it down to our own temperature. The fact that Gehazi had done so is suggested by the curt answer, 'Peace!' It is often quoted as the language of resignation, but it seems much rather to be evasion of the question, and that because her sorrow shrank from unveiling itself to the questioner. Nothing makes grief dumb so surely as prying and yet indifferent intrusion. A tenderer hand than Gehazi's is needed to unlock the sad secret of that burdened breast.

It was perhaps partly pique at her silencing him, and partly mere unfeeling attention to 'propriety,' which made the servant wish to check the convulsive grasp of the feet, which the master allowed. Underlings are more careful of what they suppose to be their superior's dignity than he is. Much is permitted to love and sorrow, by a prophet, which would be repressed by smaller men. 'Her soul is bitter within her' pardons much, and only unfeeling critics will be punctilious in dealing with even the extravagances of grief. But Elisha had another reason than pity. He wished to know her pain, and therefore he let her cling to his feet; for only there would she find her tongue. Does there not shine through the figure of the gentle prophet the image of the gentler Christ, who will not have the poorest and foulest spurned from His feet, though it be 'a woman who was a sinner,' and lets us come as close to Him as we will, even to hide our faces on His breast, that we may pour out all our sorrows and sins to Him?

The limitations of the prophet's knowledge he frankly owns. How much better would it have been for the Church if its teachers had been more willing to copy his modesty, and said about a great many things, 'The Lord hath hid it from me'!

The mother's answer is indeed the cry of a 'bitter' heart. Its abrupt questions and its reticence as to the child's death are pathetically true to nature, and sound yet across all these centuries as if the bitter cry were for a grief of to-day. 'Did I desire a son?' She upbraids Elisha and Elisha's God for having forced on her an unasked blessing. 'Did I not say, Do not deceive me?' She did ([verse 16](#)); and she upbraids Elisha again for a worse deceit than she had meant then, by mocking her with a gift which was wrenched from her hands so suddenly and soon. How many a sad heart is to-day tempted to raise this cry of anguish! And how patient is Elisha with wild words, and how he discerns, beneath the apparent rough reproach, the misery which it implies and the petition which it veils! Elisha's Lord is no less tender in His judgment of our hasty, whirlwind words, when our hearts are sore; and if only we speak them to Him and cling to His feet, He translates them into the petitions which they mean, and is swift to answer the meaning and pass by the sound of our bitter cry.

II. We note the ineffectual experiment of the staff ([verses 29-31](#)). The supposition that Gehazi was sent in such haste with the hope that the touch of the staff might bring back life, is dismissed as 'impossible' by most commentators, who have therefore some difficulty in saying what he was sent for. Some of the Rabbis answered, 'To prevent putrefaction,' which would set in soon on that harvest day. Others say that the intention was to 'prevent more life escaping from him.' But 'dead' is not usually supposed to be an adjective admitting of comparison. Others find the reason in the wish to deliver Israel from the superstitious veneration of such things as the staff, by showing that it was powerless. But [verse 31](#) plainly implies that the result of Gehazi's attempt was not what had been expected. Why need there be any hesitation in taking the natural meaning, and supposing that Elisha sent his servant quickly, 'if peradventure' the touch of his staff might suffice, and followed in person, because he did not know whether it would. There is nothing unworthy of a prophet who had just confessed his ignorance in the supposition. His unobtrusive spirit delighted to hide its power behind material vehicles, as is seen in most of his miracles; and, if he remembered how he himself, in his early days, had parted the waters with his master's cloak, he might think it possible that his servant should work a miracle with his staff.

The Shunemite quotes his own words on that far-off day; and perhaps she was reminded of them by perceiving the analogy of the two incidents. But her clinging to Elisha shows her doubt of the success of the attempt; and she was right. Why did the staff fail? Perhaps because of its bearer. Gehazi always appears unfavourably, and Elisha's staff loses its power in such hands. The mightiest instruments are weak when selfishness and coldness wield them. An unworthy minister can make the Gospel itself impotent. It is an awful thing to carry 'the rod of Thy strength' and to hinder its exerting its energy. But possibly the non-success of the attempt was meant to teach Elisha and us that miracles of life-giving are not to be wrought so easily, but need the effort of the prophet himself. We cannot delegate the work of God,

and no sending of others will do instead of going ourselves. Such things are not achieved without much personal toil, pains, and self-sacrifice.

III. So we come to the last step, the communication of life ([verses 32-37](#)). It was noon when the child died. The mother's journey would take three or four hours, and the return at least as much. It would then be dark when the two reached her desolate home. She had laid the boy on Elisha's bed, as if even that brought her some comfort. It is difficult to say whether 'them twain' ([verse 33](#)) means him and the mother, or him and the child; but the expression of the next verse, 'went up,' suggests that the prayer with shut door was in the lower part of the house, and that the mother's cry was joined to the prophet's petitions. Such prayer is the true preparation for such a miracle. Beautiful consideration, born of sympathy, led him to shut out curious onlookers, and then to go up alone to the little chamber where that pale, tiny corpse lay. No eye but a mother's could have seen what followed without profanation; and a mother's heart would have been torn by hopes and fears if she had seen.

The actual miracle is remarkable for two peculiarities—the effort required and the slowness of the process. Of course, there is a profound and beautiful use to be made of the prophet's action in laying himself upon the dead child, mouth to mouth, and hand to hand, if we regard it as symbolic of that closeness of approach to our nature, dead in sins, which the Lord of life makes in His incarnation and in His continual drawing near. It is His own life which Jesus imparts, and it is imparted because He comes near and touches us. It is the warmth of His own heart which passes into those who live by derivation of life from Him. And Elisha may well stand as symbol of Jesus in this miracle. But besides that use of the narrative, which is no mere fanciful playing with it, we should also note the difference between the prophet and Christ in their miracles. Jesus raises the dead by His bare word. His expressed will is all-sufficient. Elisha prays, and then puts forth somewhat prolonged efforts, from which at first there is no effect, and which drain him of force, so that he is obliged to pause and leave the chamber, and gather himself together for a renewal of them. The ease of the one sets the difficulty of the other in a strong light. And the life which came back with a rush, in full stream, at Christ's bidding, comes only by degrees at Elisha's prayer and work. The one worker is the Lord of life, who speaks and it is done; the other is but the channel of power, and the appearance of effort and gradualness in result is owing to the narrowness of the channel, not to the inadequacy of the power.

In all Elisha's gentleness and lowliness there is yet a certain dignity as God's prophet; and it was not fitting that he should come from the scene of such a miracle with the glow of it upon him, to seek for the mother. So he summons her by Gehazi, and then, with beautiful delicacy, leaves her to go alone into the chamber. None are to see the transports of her joy, not even the author of it. How beautiful, too, are the quiet words, 'Take up thy son!' She has no words; but, for all answer, comes close to him (there is no 'in' in [verse 37](#)), and once again, but with what different feelings, clasps his feet. Not even Gehazi, or any

other stickler for propriety, has the heart to thrust her back this time. The story draws a curtain over that meeting in the prophet's chamber. Sad hearts who have vainly longed for such a moment, can fancy the rapture. But the day will come, not here, but in the upper chamber, when parted ones shall clasp each other again; and many a mourner shall hear Jesus say from the throne what He once said from the Cross, 'Woman, behold thy son; son, behold thy mother.'

## NAAMAN'S WRATH

'And Elisha sent a messenger unto Naaman, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. 11. But Naaman was wroth, and went away.'—2 KINGS v. 10, 11.

These two figures are significant of much beyond themselves. Elisha the prophet is the bearer of a divine cure. Naaman, the great Syrian noble, is stricken with the disease that throughout the Old Testament is treated as a parable of sin and death. He was the commander-in-chief of the army of Damascus, high in favour at Ben-hadad's court; his reputation and renown were on every tongue, *but* he was a leper. There is a 'but' in every fortune, as there is a 'but' in every character.

So he comes to the prophet's humble home in Samaria, and we find him waiting, a suppliant at the gate, with his cavalcade of attendants, and a present worth many thousands of pounds in our English money.

How does the prophet receive his distinguished visitor? In all the rest of his actions we find Elisha gentle, accessible, forgetful of his dignity. Here his conduct would be discourteous if there were not a reason for it. He is reserved, unsympathetic, keeps the great man at the staff-end, will not even come out to receive him as common courtesy might have suggested; sends him a curt message of direction, with not a word more than was necessary.

And then, naturally enough, the hot soldier begins to explode. His pride is touched; he has not been received with due deference. If the prophet would have come out and chanted incantations over him, and made mystical motions of his hands above the shining patches of his leprous skin, he could have believed in the cure. But there was nothing in the injunction given for his superstition to lay hold of. His patriotic susceptibilities are roused. If he is to be cleansed by bathing, are not the crystal streams of his own city, the glory of Damascus, better than the turbid and muddy Jordan that belongs to Israel? So he flounced away, and would have sacrificed his hope of cure to his passion if his servants had not brought him to common-sense by their cool remonstrance. He would have done any great thing which he had been set to do; he had already done a great thing in taking the long journey, and being ready to expend all that vast amount of treasure, and so surely there need be no difficulty in his complying, were it only as an experiment, with the very simple and easy terms which the prophet had enjoined.

Now, all these points may be so put as to suggest for us characteristics of that gospel which is God's cure for our leprosy. And the whole story shows us as in a glass what human nature would like the gospel to be, and how we sick men quarrel with our physic, and stumble at those very characteristics of the gospel which are its main glory and the secret of its power. My only purpose in this sermon is to bring out two or three of these as lying on the surface of the story before us.

I. First, then, God's cure puts us all on one level.



Naaman wished to be treated like a great man that happened to be a leper; Elisha treated him like a leper that happened to be a great man. 'I thought, he will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God.' The whole question about his treatment turns on this, Whether is the important thing his disease or his dignity? He thought it was his dignity, the prophet thought it was his disease. And so he served him as he would have served any one else that in similar circumstances, and for a like necessity, had come to him.

And now, if you will generalise that, it just comes to this—that Christianity brushes aside all the surface differences of men, and goes in its treatment of them straight to the central likenesses, the things which, in all mankind, are identical. There are the same wants, the same sorrows, the same necessity for the same cleansing beneath the queen's robes and the peer's ermine, the workman's jacket and the beggar's rags.

Whatever differences of culture, of station, of idiosyncrasy there may be, these are but surface and accidental. We are all alike in this, that we 'have sinned, and come short of the glory of God'; and our Great Physician, in His great remedy, insists upon treating us all as patients, and not as this, that, or the other, kind of patients. The cholera, when it lays hold of ladies and gentlemen, deals with them in precisely the same fashion that it does when it lays hold of waifs on the dunghill; and a wise doctor will treat the Prince of Wales just as he will treat the Prince of Wales's stable-boy. Christianity has nothing to say, in the first place, to the accidents that separate us one from the other, but insists on looking at us all as standing on the one level and partaking of the one characteristic. We may be wise or foolish, we may be learned or ignorant, we may be rich or poor, we may be high or low, we may be barbarian or civilised, but we are all sinners. The leprosy runs through us all, according to the diagnosis of Christianity, and our Elisha deals with Naaman as he deals with the poorest footboy in Naaman's cavalcade who is afflicted with the same disease.

Now that rubs against our self-importance; a great many of us would be quite willing to go to heaven, but we do not like to go in a common caravan. We want to have a compartment to ourselves, and to travel in a manner becoming our position. We are quite willing to be healed, but we would like to be healed with due deference. You are an educated man, a student; you do not like to take the same place as the most unlettered, and to feel that the common fact of sin puts you, in a very solemn respect, upon the level of these narrow foreheads and unlettered people. And so some of you turn away because Christianity, with such impartiality and persistency, insists upon the identity of the fact of sin in us all, and passes by the little diversities on which we plume ourselves, and which part us the one from the other. Dear brethren, I am sure that some of my audience have been kept away from the gospel by this humbling characteristic of it, that at the very beginning it insists on bringing us all into the one category; and I venture to ask you to ponder with yourselves this question, Is it not wise, is it not necessary that the physician should look only at the disease and think nothing of all the other facts of the patient's character or life? Surely, surely, it is a fact that

we are transgressors, and surely it is a fact that if we be transgressors that is the most important thing about us—far more important than all these diversities of which I have been speaking. They are skin-deep, this is the central truth, that we have souls which ought to stand in a living relation of glad obedience to our Father in heaven; and which, alas! do stand in an attitude often of sulky alienation, often of indifference, and not seldom of rebellion. If so, then it is both wise and kind to deal with that solemn fact first. In wisdom and in mercy Christianity deals with all men as sinners, needing chiefly to be healed of that disease. 'The Scripture hath concluded all under sin'—shut up the whole race as in a great chamber, that so cleansing and forgiveness might reach them all. They are gathered together as patients in a hospital are gathered, that their sickness may be medicined and their wounds dressed.

For this impartiality of the gospel, putting us all on one level, and its determination to deal with us all as sinners, is but the other side of, and the preparation for, that blessed universality of a sacrifice for all, and a gospel for the whole world. Do not quarrel with your physic because the Physician insists upon dealing with you as sick men.

II. Then take another of the thoughts that come out of the incident before us. God's cure puts the messengers of the cure well away in the background.

Naaman, heathen-like, wanted something sensuous for his confidence in the prophet's cure to lay hold upon. If the prophet would only have come out, and done like the sorcerers and magic-workers of whom he had had experience; if he would have come weaving mystical incantations, and calling upon the God whom he worshipped, but whom Naaman did not, and making passes with his hands over the leprous places—then there would have been something for his sense to build upon, and he would have been ready to believe in the prophet's power to cure. But that was the very thing which the prophet did not want him to believe in. Elisha desired to conceal himself, and to make God's power prominent. He wished to cure Naaman's soul of the leprosy of idolatry as well as to cure his body; and we see, in the sequel of the story, that the very simplicity of the means enjoined and the absence of any human agency, which at first staggered the sensuous nature and offended the pride of Naaman, at last led him to see and confess that there was no God in all the earth but in Israel. Therefore the prophet keeps in the background. His part is not to cure, but to bring God's cure. He is only a voice. He brings the sick man and God's prescription face to face, and there leaves him. Naaman would have liked to force him into the place of a magician, in whom miracle-working power resided. Elisha will only take the place of a herald who proclaims how God's power may be brought to heal. So men have always sought to turn the messengers of God's cure into miracle-workers. Making the ministers of God's word into priests who by external acts convey grace and forgiveness, is a superstition that has its roots deep in human nature. It is not that the priests have made themselves so much as that the people have made the priests. Here is an instance in a rude form of the tendency which has

been at work in all generations, and has been the corruption of Christianity from the beginning, and is doing mischief every day—the tendency to place one's confidence in a man who is supposed to be, in some mysterious manner, the bearer of a grace that will cure and cleanse. And the prophet's position in our story brings out very clearly the position which all Christian ministers hold. They are nothing but heralds, their personality disappears, they are merely a voice. All that they have to do is to bring men into contact with God's own word of command and promise, and then to vanish.

Christianity has no 'priests,' Christianity has no 'sacraments.' Christianity has no external rites which bring grace or help except in so far as by their aid the soul is brought into contact with the truth, and by meditation and faith is thus made capable of receiving more of Christ's Spirit. Our only commission is to bring to you God's message of how you may be healed. When we have said, 'Wash, and be clean,' as plainly, earnestly, and lovingly as we can, we have done all our appointed office. We are heralds, and nothing more. Our business is to preach, not to do rites, or minister sacraments. Our business is to preach, not to argue. We are neither priests nor professors, but preachers. We have to deliver the message given to us faithfully. We have to ring out the proclamation loudly. The virtue of a town crier is that he make people hear and understand. The virtue of a messenger is that he repeats precisely what he was told. And a Christian minister has to lift up his voice and not be afraid, to see to it that his speech be plain, and that it do not overlay the message with fripperies of ornament, or affectations, or personalities, and to plead earnestly and lovingly with men to come to the divine Healer. John Baptist's description of himself is true of them. With rare self-abnegation, he would only reply to the question, 'Who art thou?' with 'I am a voice.' His personality was nothing. His message was all. A musical string cannot be seen as it vibrates. So the man should be lost in his proclamation. We are heralds and nothing more, and the more we keep in the background and the less our hearers depend on us, the better. If you want priests who will 'call on the name of their God, and wave their hands over the place,' and convey grace and healing to you by anything that they do for or to you, you will have to go beyond the limits of New Testament Christianity to find them. So men quarrel with their medicine because their cure is purely a spiritual process, depending on spiritual forces, and sense cries out for sacred rites and persons to be the channels of God's healing.

III. And now, lastly, God's cure wants nothing from you but to take it.

Naaman's servants were quite right: 'My father! If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it?' Yes! Of course he would, and the greater the better. Men will stand, as Indian fakirs do, with their arms above their heads until they stiffen there. They will perch themselves upon pillars, like Simeon Stylites, for years, till the birds build their nests in their hair: they will measure all the distance from Cape Comorin to Juggernaut's temple with their bodies along the dusty road. They will give the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul. They will wear hair shirts and scourge themselves. They

will fast and deny themselves. They will build cathedrals and endow churches. They will do as many of you do, labour by fits and starts all through your lives at the endless task of making yourselves ready for heaven, and winning it by obedience and by righteousness. They will do all these things and do them gladly, rather than listen to the humbling message that says, 'You do not need to do anything—wash!' Is it your washing, or the water, that will clean you? Wash and be clean! Ah, my brother! Naaman's cleansing was only a test of his obedience, and a token that it was God who cleansed him. There was no power in Jordan's waters to take away the taint of leprosy. Our cleansing is in that blood of Jesus Christ that has the power to take away all sin, and to make the foulest amongst us pure and clean.

But the two commandments—that of the symbol in my text, that of the reality in the Christian gospel—are alike in this respect, that both the one and the other are a confession that the man himself has no part in his own cleansing. And so Naamans, in all generations, who were eager to do some great thing, have stumbled, and turned away from that gospel which says, 'It is finished!' 'Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us.' Dear brother, you can do nothing. You do not need to do anything. It is a hard pill for my pride to swallow, to be indebted to absolute mercy, which I have done nothing to bring, for all my hope, but it is a position that we have to take. Hard to take for all of us, very hard for you who have never looked in the face the solemn fact of your own sinfulness, and pondered upon the consequences of that; but most blessed if only you will open your eyes to see that the stern refusal to accept anything from us as working out our salvation is but the other side of the great truth that Christ's death is all-sufficient, and that in Him the foulest may be clean.

'Nothing in my hand I bring.'

If you bring anything you cannot grasp the Cross. Do not try to eke out Christ's work with yours; do not build upon penitence, or feelings, or faith, or anything, but build only upon this: 'When I had nothing to pay He frankly forgave me all.' And build upon this: 'Christ alone has died for me'; and Christ alone is all-sufficient. 'Wash and be clean'; accept and possess; believe and live!

### NAAMAN'S IMPERFECT FAITH

‘And he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came and stood before him: and he said, Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel: now therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant. 16. But he said, As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none. And he urged him to take it; but he refused. 17. And Naaman said, Shall there not then, I pray thee, be given to thy servant two mules' burden of earth? for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt-offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the Lord. 18. In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing. 19. And he said unto him, Go in peace. So he departed from him a little way. 20. But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, Behold, my master hath spared Naaman this Syrian, in not receiving at his hands that which he brought: but, as the Lord liveth, I will run after him, and take somewhat of him. 21. So Gehazi followed after Naaman: and when Naaman saw him running after him, he lighted down from the chariot to meet him, and said, Is all well? 22. And he said, All is well. My master hath sent me, saying, Behold, even now there be come to me from mount Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets: give them, I pray thee, a talent of silver, and two charges of garments. 23. And Naaman said, Be content, take two talents. And he urged him, and bound two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of garments and laid them upon two of his servants; and they bare them before him. 24. And when he came to the tower, he took them from their hand, and bestowed them in the house: and he let the men go, and they departed. 25. But he went in, and stood before his master. And Elisha said unto him, Whence comest thou, Gehazi? And he said, Thy servant went no whither. 26. And he said unto him, Went not mine heart with thee, when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee? Is it a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants? 27. The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever. And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow.’—2 KINGS v. 15-27.

Like the Samaritan leper healed by Jesus, Naaman came back to give glory to God. Samaria was quite out of his road to Damascus, but benefit melted his heart, and the pride, which had been indignant that the prophet did not come out to him, faded before thankfulness, which impelled him to go to the prophet. God's gifts should humble, and gratitude is not afraid to stoop. Elisha would not see Naaman before, for he needed to be taught; but he gladly welcomes him into his presence now, for he has learned his lesson. Sometimes the best way to attract is to repel, and the true servant of God consults not his own dignity, but others' good, whichever he does.

I. The first point is the offer and refusal of the gift. The benefited is liberal and the benefactor disinterested. Naaman was a convert to pure monotheism. His avowal is clear and full. But what a miserable conclusion he draws with that 'therefore!' He should have said, 'Therefore I come to trust under the shadow of His wings.' But he is not ready to give himself, and, like some of the rest of us, thinks to compound by giving money. When the outward giving of goods is token of inward surrender of self, it is accepted. When it is a substitute for that, it is rejected. No doubt, too, Naaman thought that Elisha was, like the sorcerers of heathenism, very accessible to gifts; and if he had come to believe in Elisha's God, he had yet to learn the loving-kindness of the God in whom he had come to believe. He had to learn next that 'the gift of God' was not 'purchased with money' and the prophet's acceptance of his present would have dimmed Elisha's own character, and that of his God, in the newly opened eyes of Naaman.

Elisha's answer begins with the solemn adjuration which we first hear from Elijah. In its use here, it not only declares the unalterable determination of Elisha, but reveals its grounds. To a man who feels ever the burning consciousness that he is in the presence of God, all earthly good dwindles into nothing. How should talents of silver and gold, and changes of raiment, have worth in eyes before which that awful, blessed vision flames? A candle shows black against the sun. If we walk all the day in the light of God's countenance, we shall not see much brightness to dazzle us in the pale and borrowed lights of earth. The vivid realisation of God in our daily lives is the true shield against the enticements of the world. Further, the consciousness of being God's servant, which is implied in the expression 'before whom I stand,' makes a man shrink from receiving wages from men. 'To his own Master he standeth or falleth,' and will be scrupulously careful that no taint of apparent self-seeking shall spoil his service, in the eyes of men or in the judgment of the 'great Taskmaster.' Elisha felt that the honour of his order, and, in some sense, of his God, in the eyes of this half-convert, depended on his own perfect and transparent disinterestedness. Therefore, although he made no scruple of taking the Shunemite's gifts, and probably lived on similar offerings, he steadfastly refused the enormous sum proffered by Naaman. 'The labourer is worthy of his hire,' but if accepting it is likely to make people think that he did his work for the sake of it, he must refuse it. A hireling is not a man who is paid for his work, but one who works for the sake of the pay. If once a professed servant of God falls under reasonable suspicion of doing that, his power for good is ended, as it should be.

II. The next point to notice is the alloy in the gold, or the imperfection of Naaman's new convictions. He had been cured of his leprosy at once, but the cure of his soul had to be more gradual. It is unreasonable to expect clear sight, with the power of rightly estimating magnitudes, from a man seeing for the first time. But though Naaman's shortcomings are very natural and excusable, they are plainly shortcomings. Note the two forms which they take,—superstition and selfish compromise. What good would a couple of loads of soil be,

and could he not have taken that from the roadside without leave? The connection between the two halves of [verse 17](#) makes his object plain. He wished the earth 'for' he would not sacrifice but to Jehovah. That is, he meant to use it as the foundation of an altar, as if only some of the very ground on which Jehovah had manifested Himself was sacred enough for such a purpose. He did not, indeed, think of 'the Lord' as a local deity of Israel, as his ample confession of faith in [verse 15](#) proves; but neither had he reached the point of feeling that the Being worshipped makes the altar sacred. No wonder that he did not unlearn in an hour his whole way of thinking of religion! The reliance on externals is too natural to us all, even with all our training in a better faith, to allow of our wondering at or severely blaming him. A sackful of earth from Palestine has been supposed to make a whole graveyard a 'Campo Santo'; and, no doubt, there are many good people in England who have carried home bottles of Jordan water for christenings. Does not the very name of 'the Holy Land' witness to the survival of Naaman's sentimental error?

The other tarnish on the clear mirror was of a graver kind. Notice that he does not ask Elisha's sanction to his intended compromise, but simply announces his intention, and hopes for forgiveness. It looks ill when a man, in the first fervour of adopting a new faith, is casting about for ways to reconcile it with the public profession of his old abandoned one. We should have thought better of Naaman's monotheism, if he had not coupled his avowal of it, where it was safe to be honest, with the announcement that he did not intend to stand by his avowal when it was risky. It would have required huge courage to have gone back to Damascus and denied Rimmon; and our censure must be lenient, but decided.

Naaman was the first preacher of a doctrine of compromise, which has found eminent defenders and practisers, in our own and other times. To separate the official from the man, and to allow the one to profess in public a creed which the other disavows in private, is rank immorality, whoever does or advocates it. The motive in this case was, perhaps, not so much cowardice as selfish unwillingness to forfeit position and favour at court. He wants to keep all the good things he has got; and he tries to blind his conscience by representing the small compliance of bowing as almost forced on him by the grasp of the bowing king, who leaned on his hand. But was it necessary that he should be the king's favourite? A deeper faith would have said, 'Perish court favour and everything that hinders me from making known whose I am.' But Naaman is an early example of the family of 'Facing-both-ways,' and of trying to 'make the best of both worlds.' But his sophistication of conscience will not do, and his own dissatisfaction with his excuse peeps out plainly in his petition that he may be forgiven. If his act needed forgiveness, it should not have been done, nor thus calmly announced. It is vain to ask forgiveness beforehand for known sin about to be committed.

Elisha is not asked for his sanction, and he neither gives nor refuses it. He dismissed Naaman with cold dignity, in the ordinary conventional form of leave-taking. His silence indicated at least the absence of hearty approval, and probably he was silent to Naaman

because, as he said about the Shunemite's trouble, the Lord had been silent to him, and he had no authoritative decision to give. Let us hope that Naaman's faith grew and stiffened before the time of trial came, and that he did not lie to God in the house of Rimmon. Let us take the warning that we are to publish on the housetops what we hear in the ear, and that, if in anything we should be punctiliously sincere, it is in the profession of our faith.

III. The last point is Gehazi's avarice, and what he got by it. How differently the same sight affected the man who lived near God and the one who lived by sense! Elisha had no desires stirred by the wealth in Naaman's train. Gehazi's mouth watered after it. Regulate desires and you rule conduct. The true regulation of desires is found in communion with God. Gehazi had a sordid soul, like Judas; and, like the traitor Apostle, he was untouched by contact with goodness and unworldliness. Perhaps the parallel might be carried farther, and both were moved with coarse contempt for their master's silly indifference to earthly good. That feeling speaks in Gehazi's soliloquy. He evidently thought the prophet a fool for having let 'this Syrian' off so easily. He was fair game, and he had brought the wealth on purpose to leave it. Profanity speaks in uttering a solemn oath on such an occasion. The putting side by side of 'the Lord liveth' and 'I will run after him' would be ludicrous if it were not horrible. How much profanity may live close beside a prophet, and learn nothing from him but a holy name to sully in an oath!

The after part of the story suggests that Naaman was out of sight of the city before he saw Gehazi coming after him. The cunning liar timed his arrival well. The courtesy of Naaman in lighting down from his chariot to receive the prophet's servant shows how real a change had been wrought upon him, even though there were imperfections in him. Gehazi's story is well hung together, and has plenty of 'local colour' to make it probable. Such glib ingenuity in lying augurs long practice in the art. If he had been content with a small fee, he needed only to have told the truth; but his story was required to put a fair face on the amount of his request. And in what an amiable light it sets Elisha! He would not take for himself, but he has nothing to give to the two imaginary scholars, who have come from some of the schools of the prophets in the hill-country of Ephraim, thirsting for instruction. How sweet the picture, and what a hard heart that could refuse the request! Truly said Paul, 'The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.' Any sin may come from it, and be done to gratify it. 'Honestly if you can, but get it,' was Gehazi's principle, as it is that of many a man in the Christian Churches of this day. Greed of gain is a sin that seldom keeps house alone. Naaman no doubt was glad to give, both because he was grateful, and because, like most people in high positions, he was galled by the sense of obligation to a man beneath him in rank. So back went Gehazi, with the two Syrian slaves carrying his baggage for him, and he chuckling at his lucky stroke, and pleasantly imagining how to spend his wealth.

'The tower' in [verse 24](#) is more correctly 'the hill,' and it was probably there where the little group would come in sight of Elisha's house. So Gehazi gets rid of the porters before



they could be seen or speak to any one, and manages his load for a little way himself, carefully hides it in the house, and, seeing the men safely off, appears obsequious and innocent before Elisha. The prophet's gift of supernatural knowledge was intermittent, as witness his ignorance of the Shunemite's sorrow; but Gehazi must have known its occasional action, and we can fancy that his heart sank at the ominous question, so curt in the original, and conveying so clearly the prophet's knowledge that he had been away from the house: 'Whence, Gehazi?' One lie needs another to cover it, and every sin is likely to beget a successor. So, with some tremor, but without hesitation, he tries to hide his tracks. Did not Elisha's eye pierce the wretched hypocrite as with a dart? and did not his voice ring like a judgment trumpet, as he confounded the silent sinner with the conviction that the prophet himself had been at the spot, though his body had remained in the house? So, at last, will men be reduced to stony dumbness, when they discover that an Eye which can see deeper than Elisha's has been gazing on all their secret sins. The question, 'Is this a time to receive?' etc., suggests the special reasons, in Naaman's new faith, for conspicuous disregard of wealth, in order that he might thereby learn the free love of Elisha's God and of Jehovah's servant, both of which had been tarnished by Gehazi's ill-omened greed. The long enumeration following on 'garments' includes, no doubt, the things that Gehazi had solaced his return with the thought of buying, and so adds another proof that his heart was turned inside out before the prophet.

His punishment is severe; but his sin was great. The leprosy was a fitting punishment, both because it had been Naaman's, from which obedient reliance on God had set him free, and because of its symbolical meaning, as the type of sin. Gehazi got his coveted money, but he got something else along with it, which he did not bargain for, and which took all the sweetness out of it. That is always the case. 'Ill-gotten gear never prospers'; and, if a man has set his heart on worldly good, he may succeed in amassing a fortune, but the leprosy will cleave to him, and his soul will be all crusted and foul with that living death. How many successful men, perhaps high in reputation in the Church as in the world, would stand 'lepers as white as snow,' if we had God's eyes to see them with!

## SIGHT AND BLINDNESS

‘Then the king of Syria warred against Israel, and took counsel with his servants, saying, In such and such a place shall be my camp. 9. And the man of God sent unto the king of Israel, saying, Beware that them pass not such a place; for thither the Syrians are come down. 10. And the king of Israel sent to the place which the man of God told him and warned him of, and saved himself there, not once nor twice. 11. Therefore the heart of the king of Syria was sore troubled for this thing; and he called his servants, and said unto them, Will ye not shew me which of us is for the king of Israel? 12. And one of his servants said, None, my Lord, O king: but Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber. 13. And he said, Go and spy where he is, that I may send and fetch him. And it was told him, saying, Behold, he is in Dothan. 14. Therefore sent he thither horses, and chariots, and a great host: and they came by night, and compassed the city about. 15. And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? 16. And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. 17. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. 18. And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed unto the Lord, and said, Smite this people, I pray Thee, with blindness. And He smote them with blindness according to the word of Elisha.’—[2 KINGS vi. 8-18](#).

The revelation of the angel guard around Elisha is the important part of this incident, but the preliminaries to it may yield some instruction. The first point to be noted is the friendly relations between the king and the prophet. The king was probably Joram, who had given up Baal worship, though still retaining the calves at Bethel and Dan (2 Kings iii 2). The whole tone of things is changed from the stormy days of Elijah. The prophet is frequently an inhabitant of the capital, and a trusted counsellor. No doubt much of this improvement was owing to Elijah’s undaunted denunciation, but much, too, was due to Elisha’s gentle persuasion. We are often tempted to do injustice to the sterner predecessors when we see how the gentler ways of their followers seem to accomplish more than theirs did. Unless winter storms had come first, spring sunshine would draw forth few flowers. All honour to the heroes who begin the fight, and do not see the victory.

The Syrian king’s way of warfare was not by a regular continued invasion, but by dashes across the border on undefended places; and time after time he found himself out in his calculations, and troops enough to beat him off massed where he meant to strike. No wonder that he suspected treachery. The prompt answer of his servants implies that Elisha’s intervention was well known by them, and measures the reputation in which he stood. Let no one suppose that thwarting Syria was an unworthy use of a supernatural gift. The preservation

of Israel and the revelation of God were worthy ends, and all that is accessory to a worthy end is worthy. It is foolish to call anything a trifle which serves a great purpose.

Joram had learned to obey the prophet, and his people and their enemies had learned that Elisha was a prophet. That was much. He had no great revelations of the deep things of God to give to his generation or to posterity, but he gave directions as to practical life which bore on the wellbeing of the state; and that office was not less divinely conferred. It is a good thing when God's servants are not afraid to make their voices heard in politics, and a safeguard for a nation when their counsels are taken. The quiet prophet was more to Israel than an army.

The 'great host' sent to capture Elisha shows the terror which he had inspired, and the importance attached to getting possession of him. It is, too, an odd instance of the inconsistency of godless men, in that it never occurs to the Syrian king that Elisha, who knew all his schemes, might know this one too, or that horses and chariots were of little use against a man who had Heaven to back him. Dothan lay on an isolated hill in a wide plain, and could easily be surrounded. A night-march offered the chance of a surprise, which seems to have been prevented by the unusually early rising of Elisha's servant, the young successor of Gehazi. Apparently he had gone out of the little city before he discovered the besiegers, and then rushed back in terror. Note the strongly contrasted pictures of the lad and his master,—the one representing the despair of sense, the other the confidence of faith. The lad's passionate exclamation was most natural, and fear darkening to bewildered helplessness is reasonable to men who only see the material and visible dangers and enemies that beset every life. The wonder is, not that we should sometimes be afraid, but that we should ever be free from fear, if we look only at visible facts. Worse foes ring us round than those whose armour glittered in the morning sunshine at Dothan, and we are as helpless to cope with them as that frightened youth was. Any man who calmly reflects on the possibilities and certainties of his life will find abundant reason for a sinking heart. So much that is dreadful and sad may come, and so much must come, that the boldest may well shrink, and the most resourceful cry 'Alas! how shall we do?' It is not courage, but blindness, which enables godless men to front life so unconcernedly.

How nobly the calmness of Elisha shows beside the lad's alarm! Probably both were now outside the city, as the immediately following verse speaks of the mountain as the scene. If so, Elisha had gone forth to meet the enemy, and that must have brought fresh terror to his servant. The quiet 'Fear not!' was of little use without the assurance of the next clause; for there is no more idle expenditure of breath than in telling a man not to be afraid, and doing nothing to remove the grounds of his fear. That is all that the world can do to comfort or hearten. 'Fear not?' the youth might well have said. 'It is all very easy to say that; but look there! How can I help being afraid?' There is only one way to help it, and that is to believe that 'they that be with us are more than they that be with them.' The true and only conqueror

of reasonable fear is still more reasonable trust. The two parts played by the servant and the prophet are united in the man who cleaves to Jesus Christ as his defence. He would not cling so close to Him but for the fear that tightens his grip. He would tremble far more but for that grip. He who says in his heart, 'What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee,' will presently get to saying, 'I will trust, and not be afraid.'

Note, further, the sight seen by opened eyes. Elisha did not pray that the heavenly guards might come; for they were there already. Nor does it appear that he saw them; for he did not need that heightened condition of spiritual perception which appears to be meant by the opening of the eyes. And what a sight the trembling young man saw! Where he had seen only barren rock or sparse vegetation, he saw that same fiery host that had attended Elijah in his translation, now enclosing the unarmed prophet and himself within a flaming ring. The manifestation, not the presence, of the angel guards was the miracle. It was a momentary unveiling of what always was, and would be after the curtain was drawn again. I suppose that no reverent reader of Scripture can doubt the existence of angelic beings, or their office to 'minister to the heirs of salvation.' To us, indeed, who know Him who is the 'Head of all principalities and powers,' the doctrine of angelic ministration is of less importance than that of Christ's divine help; but the latter truth does not supersede the former, though its brightness throws the other, about which we know so much less, into comparative shadow. But we may still learn from this transient disclosure of 'the things that are,' the permanent truth of the ever-active presence of divinely sent helps and guards, with all who trust in Him.

This manifestation has several features of resemblance to that given to Jacob, in his most defenceless hour, when he saw beside his unprotected camp of women and children 'God's host,' and, in a rapture of thankful wonder, named the place 'Mahanaim,'—'Two Camps.' The sight teaches us that God's messengers are ever near, and then most near when needed most. It tells us, too, that they come in the form needed. They are warriors when we are ringed about by foes, counsellors when we are perplexed, comforters when we mourn. Their shapes are as varied as our needs, and ever correspond to 'the present distress.' They come in power sufficient to conquer. There was force enough circling the prophet to have annihilated all the Syrians. True, they did not draw their celestial swords, but they were there, and their presence was enough for the triumphant faith of the guarded men. What living thing could come through that wall of fire?

Our eyes are blinded and we need to have them cleared, if not in the same manner as this lad's, yet in an analogous way. We look so constantly at the things seen that we have no sight for the unseen. Worldliness, sin, unbelief, sense and its trifles, time and its transitoriness, blind the eyes of our mind; and we need those of sense to be closed, that these may open. The truest vision is the vision of faith. It is certain, direct, and conclusive. The world says, 'Seeing is believing'; the gospel says, 'Believing is seeing.' If we would but live near to

Jesus Christ, pray to Him to touch our blind eyeballs, and turn away from the dazzling unrealities which sense brings, we should find Him 'the master-light of all our seeing,' and be sure of the eternal, invisible things, with an assurance superior to that given by the keenest sight in the brightest sunshine. When we are blind to earth, we see earth glorified by angel presences, and fear and despair and helplessness and sorrow flee away from our tranquil hearts. If, on the other hand, we fix our gaze on earth and its trifles, there will generally be more to alarm than to encourage, and we shall do well to be afraid, if we do not see, as in such a case we shall certainly not see, the fiery wall around us, behind which God keeps His people safe.

Note, finally, the blindness. Elisha's dealing with the advancing host of Syria can only be rightly estimated by looking beyond the limits of the text. His object was to carry the whole army into Samaria, that they might there be won by giving them bread to eat and water to drink, and so heaping coals of fire on their head. The prophet, who was in so many points a foreshadowing of the gospel type of excellence, was the first to show the right way to conquer. Nineteen centuries of so-called Christianity have not brought 'Christendom' to practise Elisha's recipe for finishing a war. It succeeded in his hands; for, after that feast and liberation of a captured army, 'the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel.' How could they, as long as the remembrance of that kindness lasted? Pity that the same sort of treatment were not tried to-day!

The blindness which fell on the Syrians does not seem to have been total loss of sight,—for, if so, they could not have followed Elisha to Samaria, nearly fifteen miles off,—but rather an ocular affection which prevented them from recognising what they saw. It was a supernatural impediment in any case, however far it extended. God did 'according to the word of Elisha,' a wonderful inversion of the ordinary formula. But that was because Elisha was doing according to the word of the Lord. The prayers which are 'according to His will' are the answered prayers.

They who see not the angels, see nothing clearly. There is a mist over every eye that beholds only the things of time, which prevents it from seeing these as they are, and from recognising a prophet when he is before them. If we would rightly estimate the objects of sense, we must discern, shining through them, the far loftier and greater things of eternity. That flaming background is needed to supply a scale by which to measure the others. The flat plain of Lombardy is most beautiful when its flatness is seen girdled by the giant Alps, where lies the purity of the snow which feeds the rivers that fertilise the levels below.

**'IMPOSSIBLE,—ONLY I SAW IT'**

“Then Elisha said, Hear ye the word of the Lord; Thus saith the Lord, Tomorrow about this time shall a measure of fine flour he sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, in the gate of Samaria. 2. Then a lord on whose hand the king leaned answered the man of God, and said, Behold, if the Lord would make windows in heaven, might this thing be? And he said, Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof. 3. And there were four leprous men at the entering in of the gate: and they said one to another, Why sit we here until we die? 4. If we say, We will enter into the city, then the famine is in the city, and we shall die there: and if we sit still here, we die also. Now therefore come, and let us fall unto the host of the Syrians: if they save us alive, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall but die. 5. And they rose up in the twilight, to go unto the camp of the Syrians: and when they were come to the uttermost part of the camp of Syria, behold, there was no man there. 6. For the Lord had made the host of the Syrians to hear a noise of chariots, and a noise of horses, even the noise of a great host: and they said one to another, Lo, the king of Israel hath hired against us the kings of the Hittites, and the kings of the Egyptians, to come upon us. 7. Wherefore they arose and fled in the twilight, and left their tents, and their horses, and their asses, even the camp as it was, and fled for their life. 8. And when these lepers came to the uttermost part of the camp, they went into one tent, and did eat and drink, and carried thence silver, and gold, and raiment, and went and hid it; and came again, and entered into another tent, and carried thence also, and went and hid it. 9. Then they said one to another, We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace: if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us: now therefore come, that we may go and tell the king's household. 10. So they came and called unto the porter of the city: and they told them, saying, We came to the camp of the Syrians, and, behold, there was no man there, neither voice of man, but horses tied, and asses tied, and the tents as they were. 11. And he called the porters; and they told it to the king's house within. 12. And the king arose in the night, and said unto his servants, I will now shew you what the Syrians have done to us. They know that we be hungry; therefore are they gone out of the camp to hide themselves in the field, saying, When they come out of the city, we shall catch them alive, and get into the city. 13. And one of his servants answered and said, Let some take, I pray thee, five of the horses that remain, which, are left in the city, (behold, they are as all the multitude of Israel that are left in it: behold, I say, they are even as all the multitude of the Israelites that are consumed:) and let us send and see. 14. They took therefore two chariot horses; and the king sent after the host of the Syrians, saying, Go and see. 15. And they went after them unto Jordan: and, lo, all the way was full of garments and vessels, which the Syrians had cast away in their haste. And the messengers returned, and told the king. 16. And the people went out, and spoiled the tents of the Syrians. So a measure of fine flour

was sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the Lord.'—2 KINGS vii. 1-16.

The keynote of this incident lies in the promise in the first verse. The whole story illustrates man's too frequent rejection of God's promise, and God's wonderful way of fulfilling it.

I. We note first the promise which common-sense finds incredible. It came from Elisha when all seemed desperate. The wonderfully vivid narrative in the previous chapter tells a pitiful tale of women boiling their children, of unclean food worth more than its weight in silver, of a king worked up to a pitch of frenzy and murderous designs, and renouncing his allegiance to Jehovah. Such faith as he had was strained to the breaking point, and his messenger was sent to tell the prophet that the king would not 'wait for the Lord any longer.' That was the moment chosen to speak the promise. It came, as God's helps, both of promise and act, so often come, at the very nick of time, when faith is ready to fail and human aid is vain. Before we had learned our hopeless state, they would come too soon for our good; after faith had wholly parted from its moorings, they would come too late.

Note the precision and confidence of the promise. The hour of the fulfilment, and the price of flour and the cheaper barley are stated. Man's promises are vague; God's are specific. Mark, too, the entire silence of the promise as to the mode of its fulfilment. Probably Elisha knew as little as any one, how it was going to be accomplished. The particularity and vagueness combined are remarkable. A hint as to how the thing was to be done would have made the belief in the fact so much easier. Yes, and just because it would have smoothed the road for worthless belief, it was not given, but the apparently impossible promise was left in nakedness, for any one who needed sense to animate his faith, to scoff at. Is not that emphatic assertion of the fact, and emphatic silence as to the 'how,' a frequent characteristic of God's promises? If ever we are kept in the dark as to the latter, it is for our good, and for the encouragement of our growth in utter dependence and perfect trust. It is not well for the trusting soul to ask too curiously about methods intervening between the promise in the present and its accomplishment in the future. It is better for peace and the simplicity of our trust, that we should be content to cling to the faithful word, and to 'believe. . . that it shall be even as it was told' us, without troubling ourselves about His way of effecting His purposes. Passengers are not admitted to the engine-room, nor allowed on the bridge. Let them leave all the working of the ship to the captain.

II. The noble who blurted out his incredulity had a great deal to say for himself from the common-sense and worldly point of view. But he need not have sneered, in the same breath, at old miracles and new. His sarcasm about 'windows in heaven' refers to the story of the flood; and perhaps there is a hint of allusion to the manna. He neither believed these ancient deeds, nor the promise for to-morrow. Why not? Simply because he—wise as he thought himself—could not see any way of bringing it about. There are many of us yet who

have the same modest opinion of our own acuteness, and go on the supposition that what we do not see is invisible, and what we cannot do, or imagine done, is impossible. Why should not the Lord ‘make windows in heaven’ if He please? Or, how does the pert objector know that that is the only way of fulfilling the promise? He will be taught that he has not quite exhausted all the possibilities open to Omnipotence, and that something much simpler than windows in heaven can do what is wanted. Unbelief which rejects God’s plain promises because it does not see how they can be fulfilled is common enough still, and is as unreasonable as it is impertinent. Elisha was as ignorant as this nobleman was, of the means, but his faith fixed its eyes on the faithful word, and trusted, while sense, self-conceit, and worldliness, a mole pretending to have an eagle’s eye, declared that to be impossible which it could not see the way to bring about, and thereby exposed only its own blind arrogance.

III. Elisha’s answer (v. 2) sounds like Elijah. The utmost gentleness is stirred to pronounce condemnation on self-confident unbelief, and a gentler gentleness than Elisha’s, even Christ’s, shrinks not from executing the sentence. Is not the sentence on this scoffing lord the very sentence pronounced ever on unbelief? In his case, it was fulfilled by the crowd that pressed, in their ravenous hunger, through the gate, and trod him down; but in ordinary cases, in our days, the natural operation of unbelief is to shut men out from the fruition, of which faith is the necessary and only condition. It is no avenging and arbitrarily imposed exclusion, but the necessary result of self-made disqualification, which brings on the unbeliever the doom, ‘Thou shalt not eat thereof.’ The blessings of the religious life on earth, and the glories of its perfection in heaven, are only enjoyable through faith. These are not so plainly visible to the unbelieving heart as the scene at the gate was to the nobleman; but, in some measure, even those who do not possess them do, in some lucid moments, see their worth. It is one sad part of the sad lives of godless men that they have their seasons of calm weather, when, in the clearer atmosphere, they catch glimpses of their true good, but that they yet do not behold it long and close enough to be smitten with the desire to possess it; and so the sight remains inoperative, or adds to their condemnation. Not to taste is the sadder fate, because there has been sight. To have eyes opened at last to our own folly, and to see the rich provision of God’s table, when it is too late, will be a chief pang of future retribution,—as it sometimes is of present god-lessness.

IV. Passing over for the present the account of the discovery by the four lepers, we may next note God’s way of fulfilling His promise. A panic would spread fast in an undisciplined army, and history supplies examples of the swift change into a mob under the influence of groundless terror. There is nothing wonderful in the helter-skelter rush for the Jordan, or in the road being littered with abandoned baggage. The divine intervention produced the impression which naturally brought the flight about, and the coincidence of the prophecy and the panic which fulfilled it stamp both as divinely originated. But if we looked on events as devoutly, and saw into their true character as deeply as the author of the Books of Kings



does, we should see that many a similar coincidence, which we trace no farther than to men or circumstances, was due to the same divine cause which made the Syrians to hear 'the noise of a great host.' Track the river of life to its source, and you come to God.

'The wicked fleeth when no man pursueth.' Imaginary terrors are apt to beset those who have no trust in God. If we fear Him, we need have no other fear; but if we have not Him for our anchorage, we shall be driven by gusts of passion and terror. The unseen possibilities of attack and defeat may well terrify a man who has not the unseen God to keep him calm.

Windows in heaven, then, were not needed, and the arrogance which said 'Impossible!' had not measured all the resources of God. A very wise scientist here in England proved that the Atlantic could not be crossed by a steamer, and the first steamer that did cross took out copies of his book. How foolish men's demonstrations of impossibility look beside God's deliverances! We have not gone through all the chambers of His storehouse, and 'His ways are far above, out of our sight.' Let us hold fast by the faith that His arm is strong to do whatever His lips are gracious to engage, nor let our inability to see where the river gets through the mountains ever make us doubt that it will reach the sunlit ocean.

V. We may throw together the remaining parts of the incident, as showing how the fulfilled promise was received. These four lepers had heard nothing of it, when despair made them venturesome. How reckless they were, and how they harp on the one gloomy word 'die'! The thought was familiar to them, and yet, lepers though they were, life was sweet, and a chance of prolonging it, even as slaves, was worth trying. They chose twilight, that they might be unobserved. We can see them creeping cautiously, with beating hearts, towards the camp, expecting every moment to be challenged, and possibly slain. How their caution would diminish and their wonder grow, as they passed from end to end, and found no one! There stood the horses and asses, left behind lest their footfalls should betray the flight, and every tent empty of men and full of spoil. The lepers seem to have gone right through the camp before they ventured to begin plundering; for the 'uttermost part' in [verse 5](#) and that in [verse 8](#) are naturally understood of its opposite extremities. Then, secure against surprise, they eat and drink as ravenously as men who had been starving so long would do. Twilight had deepened into darkness before hunger and greed were satisfied. Not till then did they awake to their duty; and even when they bethink themselves, it is fear of punishment, not care for a city full of hungry men, that moves them. But their tardy awaking to duty is couched in words which carry a great truth, especially to all who have tasted the Bread of Life. It is 'not well' to 'hold our peace' in 'a day of good tidings.' If we have good news, especially *the* good news, its possession obliges us to impart it. If we have tasted the graciousness of the Lord, we are bound to tell of the stores we have found. 'He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him.' 'Of how much sorer punishment. . . shall he be thought worthy,' who keeps to himself the food of the world?

Lepers were strange messengers of good, but the message graces the bringer, and they who tell good tidings are sure of a welcome. God does not choose great men for the heralds of His mercy, but the qualification is personal experience. These four could only say, 'We have seen and tasted,' but that was enough. The king's caution was very natural, and would have been quite blameless, if God's promise had not been spoken the day before. But that made the slowness to believe a sin. Feeling one's way over untried ice is prudent; but if we have previously been told that it will bear, it proves our distrust of him who told us. The despatch of the chariots to make a reconnaissance was needless trouble. But men are always apt to think that faith is but a shaky ground of certitude unless it be backed up by sense. When God gives us His word to trust to, we are wisest if we trust to it alone, and we may save ourselves the trouble of sending out scouts to see if it is really beginning to be fulfilled. Elisha had no need to wait the report of the charioteers before he believed in the fulfilment of the promise, which others had found incredible when spoken, and too good to be true even when fulfilled. Let us trust God, whether sense can attest the incipient accomplishment of His words or no.

## SILENT CHRISTIANS

‘Then they said one to another, We do not well; this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us; now therefore come, that we may go and tell the king’s household.’—2 KINGS vii. 9.

The city of Samaria was closely besieged, and suffering all the horrors of famine. Women were boiling and eating their children, and the most revolting garbage was worth its weight in silver. Four starving lepers, sitting by the gate, plucked up courage from the extremity of their distress, and looking in each other’s bloodshot eyes, whispered one to another, with their hoarse voices: ‘If we say we will enter into the city, then the famine is in the city, and we shall die there; and if we sit still here we die also. Now therefore come, and let us fall unto the host of the Syrians; if they save us alive we shall live; and if they kill us we shall but die.’ So in the twilight they stole away. As they come near the camp there is a strange silence; no guards, no stir. They creep to the first tent and find it empty; and then another, and another, and another, till at last it admits of no doubt that certainly the enemy has gone, leaving all his baggage behind him, So for awhile they feast and plunder—small blame to them! And then conscience wakes, and the same thought occurs to each of them: ‘This is not patriotic; this is scarcely human; it is a shame for us to be sitting here gorging ourselves whilst a city is starving within a stone’s-throw.’ So they say one to another in the words of my text.

Now these men’s consciousness of the obligation imposed upon them by the knowledge of glad news, their self-reproach for their silence, their conviction that retribution would fall on them if it continued, and their resolve therefore to clear themselves, may all be transferred to higher regions, and may fairly illustrate Christian responsibilities and duties.

I wish to say one or two very homely, plain things about Christian men’s obligation to speech, and the sin of their silence. My remarks will have no special reference to any particular forms of Christian activity, but if I succeed in impressing on any a deeper sense of duty in reference to declaring the Gospel than they possess, then all forms of it will be prosecuted with greater vigour and consecration.

I. I wish first to dwell for a moment on that—I was going to use a plain word and say—*hideous*; I will substitute a milder term, and say—*remarkable*, fact of Christian silence.

I take this congregation as a fair average representative of the ordinary habitudes of professing Christians of this generation. How many men and women there are sitting in these pews, who, if I asked them the question, would say that they were Christians? and what proportion of these, if I asked them the further question, ‘Did you ever tell anybody anything about Jesus Christ?’ would say, ‘No, never!’ I know this, that in regard to all the recognised and associated forms of Christian work which cluster round a Christian congregation, it is the same handful of people that do them all. It is just like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope, there are not many of them though you can shake them up into a great number of patterns, but they are always the very same bits. So I could go through pew after pew, if

it would not be very personal, and find men and women, one after another—rows of them—that, so far as any of the united work of a church goes, are absolutely idle. They are worthy kind of people, too, with some real religion in them; but yet, partly from shyness, partly from indolence, partly because (as they think) they have so much else to do, and for a number of other reasons that I do not need to dwell upon, they fall into the great army of idlers, and are just so much dead weight and surplusage, as far as the work of the Church is concerned.

Now I do not mean to say that, because professing Christian people do not work in any recognised forms of Christian service which are attached to a congregation, therefore they are not doing anything. God forbid! There are many of you, for instance, mothers of families, whose best service is to speak about Jesus Christ to your children, and to live according as you speak, and that is work enough for you. There are many more of us, who, for various legitimate reasons, are precluded from taking part in organised forms of Christian service. Do not so fatally misunderstand me as to suppose that I am merely beating a drum to get recruits for societies. What I want to impress upon every Christian person listening to me now is simply this, the anomaly of the fact, if it be a fact, that you are a *dumb* Christian. You can all speak, if you will; you all have people with whom your speech is weighty and powerful. There are doors open before each of you. Ask yourselves, have you gone in at the open doors? or is it true about you that you have never felt the obligation to make your Master known to others, or, at all events, have never felt it so strongly that it compelled you to obey? The strange fact of Christian silence is one that I emphasise to begin with.

II. Let me say a word next about the sin of this silence.

These four poor lepers had not had much kindness dealt out to them in their lives, and they might have been pardoned if in their moment of joy they had remained in the isolation to which they had been condemned by reason of their disease. But they think to themselves of the hollow eyes in Samaria there, and the hideous meals, that might stay hunger but brought no nourishment, and of the king with sackcloth beneath his royal robes, and, forgetting everything but their abundance and these people's empty stomachs, they say, '*Not thus must we do,*' as the Hebrew might be translated, 'this is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; and that is a sin. And if we continue dumb, then before morning some kind of punishment will come down upon us.'

Now, let me put what I have to say on this matter into two sentences.

First of all, I say that such silence is inhuman. You would all recognise that in the case of an actual, literal, instead of a metaphorical, famine. What would you say about a man who contented himself with sitting in his own back room, where nobody could see his abundance, and feasting to the full, whilst his fellow-citizens were dying of starvation? Why! you would say he was a brute. And if Christian people believed as thoroughly that men and women without 'the Bread of God which comes down from Heaven' were starving and dying

of hunger, as they believe that men without literal bread must die, there would not be so many dumb ones amongst them; and they would feel more distinctly than any of us feel now, the responsibility that is laid upon them, and the inhumanity of the sin.

Dear brethren! God has made this strange brotherhood of humanity in which we live, all intertwined and intertangled together, mainly in order that there may be scope for brotherly impartation to the needy, of the gifts that each possesses. And He has given to each of us something or other which, by the very terms of the gift and the purpose of the bestowment, we are bound to impart to others. The meaning of our being born into the brotherhood of humanity is that God's grace, in some shape or other, may fructify through us to all; and I say that the man who possesses any kind of gift, and, especially, God's highest gifts of wisdom and of knowledge, and most of all, the highest gift of spiritual knowledge and moral and religious truth, and keeps them to himself, in his idleness is sinfully active, and in his selfishness is inhuman and cruel. The very constitution of humanity says to us that 'we do not well,' if in the 'day of good tidings' of any sort 'we hold our peace.' The possession of mere physical or abstract truth does not turn its possessors into its apostles, but the possession of moral and spiritual truth does. We are, every one of us, responsible for all the eyes which we could have opened and which are still dark, and for every soul that gropes in ignorance, if we possess something that would enlighten its darkness.

But then, further, let me say that this sin of silence is in sheer contradiction of every principle of Christianity. Why has God given you His grace, do you suppose? For what purpose comes it that you are Christians? Were you converted that you might go by yourselves into a solitary heaven, do you think? Are you important enough to be an ultimate end of God's mercy? Or are you indeed an end, but only that in your turn you might be a means of transmitting? Does the electric influence terminate when it reaches you, or is it turned on to you that from you it may be passed to others? The very purpose of the existence of a Christian Church is counterworked and thwarted by dumb Christians. We Nonconformists can talk abundantly when ecclesiastical assumptions have to be fought against, about the priesthood of all believers. Very well, if that principle is a true one—and it is a true one—it has other applications than simply controversial, and is meant for other uses than simply that you should brandish it in the face of sacerdotal claims and priest-ridden churches. 'Ye are all priests,' that is to say, the meaning of the existence of a Christian Church is to raise up a cloud of witnesses, and make every lip vocal with the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. And you, dear brethren, you, the idlers of a church and congregation, are doing all that you can to thwart the divine purpose, and to destroy the very meaning of the existence of the church to which you belong.

And let me remind you, too, that such silence is clearly contrary to all Christian principle, inasmuch as one main purpose of the Gospel being given us is to shift our centre from ourselves, first to Christ, and then, if I may so say, to others. The very thing from which

Christianity is meant to deliver us is the very thing that these idle, silent believers are indulging in, namely, the possession of God's gifts for their own profit and enjoyment. What is the use of your saying that you are Christian people if, in your very religion, you are practising the very vice that Jesus Christ has come to destroy? Selfishness is the opposite, the formal contradiction, of Christianity, and in the measure in which your religion is self-regarding, it is no religion at all. You are doing your best to counterwork the very main purpose of the Gospel upon yourselves, when in silence you possess, or fancy that you possess, the gift of His love.

And then, still further, let me remind you that this absolutely un-Christian character of silence is manifested, if you consider that the end of the Gospel for each of us is to bring us into full and happy sympathy with Christ, and likeness to Him. And how is that purpose being effected in His professed 'followers,' if they know nothing of the experience of looking on the world with Christ's eyes, or of the thrill of pity caught from Him, and have no sympathy with, in the sense of any reflected experience of, the sense of obligation to help the helpless which nailed Him to the Cross? We say that we are followers of One who 'so loved the world' that He died for it; we say that we long to be transformed into His likeness, and yet we put away from ourselves the spirit that regards our brethren as He regarded us all; and never dream of copying, howsoever feebly in our lives and efforts, the pattern that was set before us in His death.

O dear brethren! 'if a man see his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion against him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?' And if a Christian looks upon a world without Christ, and has only a tepid sympathy and a faint realisation of the misery, and never does anything to lighten it by a grain, how can he pretend that he takes Jesus Christ for his Pattern and Example? Silence is manifestly a sin by reason of its inhumanity, and its contrariety to every principle of the Gospel.

III. Now, still further, let me point you to the retribution on silence.

These four men, no doubt, had some superstitious idea that mischief might come to them in the darkness. But they expressed a truth when they said, 'If we be silent, some evil'—or, as the word might be translated, 'some *punishment* will find us.' I desire to lay this on your hearts, dear brethren, that like all other selfish things, the silence of the Christian does him harm instead of good.

For instance, if you want to learn anything, set yourself to teach it. In trying to spread the name of Jesus Christ by your own personal effort, you will get a firmer hold of the truths that you attempt to impress upon others. I do not know any better cure for a great deal of unwholesome and superfluous speculation than to go into the slums and see what it is that tells there. That is a test of what is central and what is surface, in Christianity. I do not know any better discipline for a man whose religion is suffering from too much leisure and curiosity than to take a course of evangelistic work. He will find out then where the power is,

and a great many cobwebs will be blown away. Be sure of this, that convictions unspoken, like plants grown in a cellar, will get very white in the stems, and will bear no fruit. Be sure of this, that a religion which is dumb will very soon tend to lose its possession of the truth, and that if you carry that great gift hid away in your heart it will be like locking up some singing-bird in a box. When you come to open it, the bird will be dead. There are, I have no doubt, many whom I am now addressing whose religion has all but, if not entirely, ebbed away from them, mainly because they have all their days been dumb Christians. That is one part of the punishment.

And another part is that silence is avenged by the dying out of the sympathies which inspire speech. It is the punishment of the selfish man that he becomes more selfish. It is the punishment of the heart, which never expands in sympathy, that its walls shrivel and contract, until there is scarcely blood enough between them to be impelled through the veins. Feelings which it is joy and nobleness to possess are nurtured and strengthened by expression; and the silent Christian is punished by becoming at last utterly indifferent to the woes of the world and to the spread of the Gospel. I think I could lay my finger, if I dared, on some of my audience who have got perilously near to that point.

And then again let me remind you that there is another form of the punishment, and that is the loss of all the blessed experience of the reaper's joy; and let me point you in a sentence to the final time of retribution. There shall stand in that last day, as Scripture teaches us, humble workers before the Throne who will say, 'Behold! I, and the children whom Thou hast given me.' And there will stand some before the Throne, solitary; and I wonder if they will not feel lonely when they go into heaven, and find not a soul there to look them in the eyes and say, 'Thou didst lead me to the Christ, and I am here to welcome thee.' 'He that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together.' Do you not think that then there will steal a shadow of shame across the spirit of the servant who stood idle in the market-place all the day with the wretched excuse, 'No man hath hired me,' when the Master had hired him beforehand, and given him such wages in advance?

O dear brethren! the cure for silence is to keep near that Master, and to drink in His Spirit; and then, as I beseech you to do, think, think, think of your obligations in the light of the Cross until you can say, 'Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints is this *grace given*,' not this burden imposed, 'that I, even I, should preach' the Name that is above every name. 'Open Thou my lips, and my mouth *shall* shew forth Thy praise.'

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