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**Expositions of
Holy Scripture:
Isaiah and
Jeremiah**

Alexander Maclaren



Expositions of Holy Scripture: Isaiah and Jeremiah

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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.

ISAIAH AND JEREMIAH

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ISAIAH
Chaps. I to XLVIII

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THE GREAT SUIT: JEHOVAH VERSUS JUDAH

‘The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. I Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me. 3. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. 4. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. 5. Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. 6. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. 7. Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. 8. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. 9. Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah. . . . 16. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes; cease to do evil; 17. Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. 18. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow: though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. 19. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land. 20. But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.’—[ISAIAH i. 1-9; 16-20](#).

The first bars of the great overture to Isaiah’s great oratorio are here sounded. These first chapters give out the themes which run through all the rest of his prophecies. Like most introductions, they were probably written last, when the prophet collected and arranged his life’s labours. The text deals with the three great thoughts, the *leit-motifs* that are sounded over and over again in the prophet’s message.

First comes the great indictment ([vs. 2-4](#)). A true prophet’s words are of universal application, even when they are most specially addressed to a particular audience. Just because this indictment was so true of Judah, is it true of all men, for it is not concerned with details peculiar to a long-past period and state of society, but with the broad generalities common to us all. As another great teacher in Old Testament times said, ‘I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices or thy burnt-offerings, to have been continually before me.’ Isaiah has nothing to say about ritual or ceremonial omissions, which to him were but surface matters after all, but he sets in blazing light the foundation facts of Judah’s (and every man’s) distorted relation to God. And how lovingly, as well as sternly, God speaks through him! That divine lament which heralds the searching indictment is not unworthy to be the very words of the Almighty

Lover of all men, sorrowing over His prodigal and fugitive sons. Nor is its deep truth less than its tenderness. For is not man's sin blackest when seen against the bright background of God's fatherly love? True, the fatherhood that Isaiah knew referred to God's relation to the nation rather than to the individual, but the great truth which is perfectly revealed by the Perfect Son was in part shown to the prophet. The east was bright with the unrisen sun, and the tinted clouds that hovered above the place of its rising seemed as if yearning to open and let him through. Man's neglect of God's benefits puts him below the animals that 'know' the hand that feeds and governs them. Some men think it a token of superior 'culture' and advanced views to throw off allegiance to God. It is a token that they have less intelligence than their dog.

There is something very beautiful and pathetic in the fact that Judah is not directly addressed, but that [verses 2-4](#) are a divine soliloquy. They might rather be called a father's lament than an indictment. The forsaken father is, as it were, sadly brooding over his erring child's sins, which are his father's sorrows and his own miseries. In [verse 4](#) the black catalogue of the prodigal's doings begins on the surface with what we call 'moral' delinquencies, and then digs deeper to disclose the root of these in what we call 'religious' relations perverted. The two are inseparably united, for no man who is wrong with God can be right with duty or with men. Notice, too, how one word flashes into clearness the sad truth of universal experience—that 'iniquity,' however it may delude us into fancying that by it we throw off the burden of conscience and duty, piles heavier weights on our backs. The doer of iniquity is 'laden with iniquity.' Notice, too, how the awful entail of evil from parents to children is adduced—shall we say as aggravating, or as lessening, the guilt of each generation? Isaiah's contemporaries are 'a seed of evil-doers,' spring from such, and in their turn are 'children that are corrupters.' The fatal bias becomes stronger as it passes down. Heredity is a fact, whether you call it original sin or not.

But the bitter fountain of all evil lies in distorted relations to God. 'They have forsaken the Lord'; that is why they 'do corruptly.' They have 'despised the Holy One of Israel'; that is why they are 'laden with iniquity.' Alienated hearts separate from Him. To forsake Him is to despise Him. To go from Him is to go 'away backward.' Whatever may have been our inheritance of evil, we each go further from Him. And this fatherly lament over Judah is indeed a wail over every child of man. Does it not echo in the 'pearl of parables,' and may we not suppose that it suggested that supreme revelation of man's misery and God's love?

After the indictment comes the sentence ([vs. 5-8](#)). Perhaps 'sentence' is not altogether accurate, for these verses do not so much decree a future as describe a present, and the deep tone of pitying wonder sounds through them as they tell of the bitter harvest sown by sin. The penetrating question, 'Why will ye be still stricken, that ye revolt more and more?' brings out the solemn truth that all which men gain by rebellion against God is chastisement. The ox that 'kicks against the pricks' only makes its own hocks bleed. We aim at some

imagined good, and we get—blows. No rational answer to that stern ‘Why?’ is possible. Every sin is an act of unreason, essentially an absurdity. The consequences of Judah’s sin are first darkly drawn under the metaphor of a man desperately wounded in some fight, and far away from physicians or nurses, and then the metaphor is interpreted by the plain facts of hostile invasion, flaming cities, devastated fields. It destroys the coherence of the verses to take the gruesome picture of the wounded man as a description of men’s sins; it is plainly a description of the consequences of their sins. In accordance with the Old Testament point of view, Isaiah deals with national calamities as the punishment of national sins. He does not touch on the far worse results of individual sins on individual character. But while we are not to ignore his doctrine that nations are individual entities, and that ‘righteousness exalteth a nation’ in our days as well as in his, the Christian form of his teaching is that men lay waste their own lives and wound their own souls by every sin. The fugitive son comes down to be a swine-herd, and cannot get enough even of the swine’s food to stay his hunger.

The note of pity sounds very clearly in the pathetic description of the deserted ‘daughter of Zion.’ Jerusalem stands forlorn and defenceless, like a frail booth in a vineyard, hastily run up with boughs, and open to fierce sunshine or howling winds. Once ‘beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, . . . the city of the great King’—and now!

Verse 9 breaks the solemn flow of the divine Voice, but breaks it as it desires to be broken. For in it hearts made soft and penitent by the Voice, breathe out lowly acknowledgment of widespread sin, and see God’s mercy in the continuance of ‘a very small remnant’ of still faithful ones. There is a little island not yet submerged by the sea of iniquity, and it is to Him, not to themselves, that the ‘holy seed’ owe their being kept from following the multitude to do evil. What a smiting comparison for the national pride that is—‘as Sodom,’ ‘like unto Gomorrah’!

After the sentence comes pardon. Verses 16 and 17 properly belong to the paragraph omitted from the text, and close the stern special word to the ‘rulers’ which, in its severe tone, contrasts so strongly with the wounded love and grieved pity of the preceding verses. Moral amendment is demanded of these high-placed sinners and false guides. It is John the Baptist’s message in an earlier form, and it clears the way for the evangelical message. Repentance and cleansing of life come first.

But these stern requirements, if taken alone, kindle despair. ‘Wash you, make you clean’—easy to say, plainly necessary, and as plainly hopelessly above my reach. If that is all that a prophet has to say to me, he may as well say nothing. For what is the use of saying ‘Arise and walk’ to the man who has been lame from his mother’s womb? How can a foul body be washed clean by filthy hands? Ancient or modern preachers of a self-wrought-out morality exhort to impossibilities, and unless they follow their preaching of an unattainable ideal as Isaiah followed his, they are doomed to waste their words. He cried, ‘Make you

clean,' but he immediately went on to point to One who could make clean, could turn scarlet into snowy white, crimson into the lustrous purity of the unstained fleeces of sheep in green pastures. The assurance of God's forgiveness which deals with guilt, and of God's cleansing which deals with inclination and habit, must be the foundation of our cleansing ourselves from filthiness of flesh and spirit. The call to repentance needs the promise of pardon and divine help to purifying in order to become a gospel. And the call to 'repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,' is what we all, who are 'laden with iniquity,' and have forsaken the Lord, need, if ever we are to cease to do evil and learn to do well.

As with one thunder-clap the prophecy closes, peeling forth the eternal alternative set before every soul of man. Willing obedience to our Father God secures all good, the full satisfaction of our else hungry and ravenous desires. To refuse and rebel is to condemn ourselves to destruction. And no man can avert that consequence, or break the necessary connection between goodness and blessedness, 'for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it,' and what He speaks stands fast for ever and ever.

THE STUPIDITY OF GODLESSNESS

‘The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider.’—ISAIAH i. 3.

This is primarily an indictment against Israel, but it touches us all. ‘Doth not know’ *i.e.* has no familiar acquaintance with; ‘doth not consider,’ *i.e.* frivolously ignores, never meditates on.

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

Blank indifference towards Him is far more frequent than conscious hostility. Take a hundred men at random as they hurry through the streets, and how many of them would have to acknowledge that no thought of God had crossed their minds for days or months? So far as they are concerned, either in regard to their thoughts or actions, He *is* ‘a superfluous hypothesis.’ Most men are not conscious of rebellion against Him, and to charge them with it does not rouse conscience, but they cannot but plead guilty to this indictment, ‘God is not in all their thoughts.’

II. This attitude is strange and unnatural.

That a man should be able to forget God, and live as if there were no such Being, is strange. It is one instance of that awful power of ignoring the most important subjects, of which every life affords so many and tragic instances. It seems as if we had above us an opium sky which rains down soporifics, so that we are fast asleep to all that it most concerns us to wake to. But still stranger is it that, having that power of attending or not attending to subjects, we should so commonly exercise it on *this* subject. For, as the ox that knows the hand that feeds him, and the ass that makes for his ‘master’s crib’ where he is sure of fodder and straw, might teach us, the stupidest brute has sense enough to recognise who is kind to him, or has authority over him, and where he can find what he needs. The godless man descends below the animals’ level. And to ignore Him is intensely stupid. But it is worse than foolish, for III. This attitude is voluntary and criminal.

Though there is not conscious hostility in it, the root of it is a subconscious sense of discordance with God and of antagonism between His will and the man’s. When we are quite sure that we love another, and that hearts beat in accord and wills go out towards the same things, we do not need to make efforts to think of that other, but our minds turn towards him or her as to a home, whenever released from the holding-back force of necessary occupations. If we love God, and have our will set to do His will, our thoughts will fly to Him, ‘as doves to their windows.’

It is fed by preoccupation of thought with other things. We have but a certain limited amount of energy of thought or attention, and if we waste it, as much as most of us do, on ‘things seen and temporal,’ there is none left for the unseen realities and the God who is ‘eternal, invisible.’ It is often reinforced by theoretical uncertainty, sometimes real, often

largely unreal. But after all, the true basis of it is, what Paul gives as its cause, 'they did not *like* to retain God in their knowledge.'

The criminality of this indifference! It is heartlessly ungrateful. Dogs lick the hand that feeds them; ox and ass in their dull way recognise something almost like obligation arising from benefits and care. No ingratitude is meaner and baser than that of which we are guilty, if we do not requite Him 'in whose hands our breath is, and whose are all our ways,' by even one thankful heart-throb or one word shaped out of the breath that He gives.

IV. This attitude is fatal.

It separates us from God, and separation from Him is the very definition of Death. A God of whom we never think is all the same to us as a God who does not exist. Strike God out of a life, and you strike the sun out of the system, and wrap all in darkness and weltering chaos. 'This is life eternal, to know Thee'; but if 'Israel doth not know,' Israel has slain itself.

WHAT SIN DOES TO MEN

‘Ye shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth, and as a garden that hath no water. 31. And the strong shall be as tow, and His work as a spark; and they shall both burn together, and none shall quench them.’—[ISAIAH i. 30-31](#).

The original reference of these words is to the threatened retribution for national idolatry, of which ‘oaks’ and ‘gardens’ were both seats. The nation was, as it were, dried up and made inflammable; the idol was as the ‘spark’ or the occasion for destruction. But a wider application, which comes home to us all, is to the fatal results of sin. These need to be very plainly stated, because of the deceitfulness of sin, which goes on slaying men by thousands in silence.

‘That grim wolf with privy paw
Daily devours apace.’

I. Sin withers.

We see the picture of a blasted tree in the woods, while all around are in full leaf, with tiny leaves half developed and all brown at the edges. The prophet draws another picture, that of a garden not irrigated, and therefore, in the burning East, given over to barrenness.

Sin makes men fruitless and withered.

It involves separation from God, the source of all fruitfulness ([Ps. i.](#)).

Think of how many pure desires and innocent susceptibilities die out of a sinful soul. Think of how many capacities for good disappear. Think of how dry and seared the heart becomes. Think of how conscience is stifled.

All sin—any sin—does this.

Not only gross, open transgressions, but any piece of godless living will do it.

Whatever a man does against his conscience—neglect of duty, habitual untruthfulness, idleness—in a word, his besetting sin withers him up.

And all the while the evil thing that is drawing his life-blood is growing like a poisonous, blotched fungus in a wine-cask.

II. Sin makes men inflammable.

‘As tow’ or tinder.

A subsidiary reference may be intended to the sinful man as easily catching fire at temptation. But the main thought is that sin makes a man ready for destruction, ‘whose end is to be burned.’

The materials for retribution are laid up in a man’s nature by wrong-doing. The conspirators store the dynamite in a dark cellar. Conscience and memory are charged with explosives.

If tendencies, habits, and desires become tyrannous by long indulgence and cannot be indulged, what a fierce fire would rage then!

We have only to suppose a man made to know what is the real moral character of his actions, and to be unable to give them up, to have hell.

All this is confirmed by occasional glimpses which men get of themselves. Our own characters are the true Medusa-head which turns a man into stone when he sees it.

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

III. Sin burns up.

'Work as a spark.' The evil deeds brought into contact with the doer work destruction. That is, if, in a future life or at any time, a man is brought face to face with his acts, then retribution begins. We shake off the burden of our actions by want of remembrance. But that power of ignoring the past may be broken down at any time. Suppose it happens that in another world it can no longer be exercised, what then?

Evil deeds are the occasion of the divine retribution. They are 'a spark.' It is they who light the pyre, not God. The prophet here protests in God's name against the notion that He is to be blamed for punishing. Men are their own self-tormentors. The sinful man immolates himself. Like Isaac, he carries the wood and lays the pile for his own burning.

Christ severs the connection between us and our evil. He restores beauty and freshness to the blighted tree, planting it as 'by the river of water,' so that it 'bringeth forth its fruit in its season,' and its 'leaf also doth not wither.'

THE PERPETUAL PILLAR OF CLOUD AND FIRE

‘And the Lord will create over the whole habitation of Mount Zion, and over her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night.’—[ISAIAH iv. 5](#).

The pillar of cloud and fire in the Exodus was one: there are to be as many pillars as there are ‘assemblies’ in the new era. Is it straining the language too much to find significance in that difference? Instead of the formal unity of the Old Covenant, there is a variety which yet is a more vital unity. Is there not a hint here of the same lesson that is taught by the change of the one golden lamp-stand into the seven, which are a better unity because Jesus Christ walks among them?

The heart of this promise, thus cast into the form of ancient experiences, but with significant variations, is that of true communion with God.

That communion makes those who have it glorious.

That communion supplies unfailing guidance.

A man in close fellowship with God will have wonderful flashes of sagacity, even about small practical matters. The gleam of the pillar will illumine conscience, and shine on many difficult, dark places. The ‘simplicity’ of a saintly soul will often see deeper into puzzling contingencies than the vulpine craftiness of the ‘prudent.’ The darker the night, the brighter the guidance.

That communion gives a defence.

The pillar came between Egypt and Israel, and kept the foe off the timid crowd of slaves. Whatever forms our enemies take, fellowship with God will invest us with a defence as protean as our perils. The same cloud is represented in the context as being ‘a pavilion for a shadow in the heat, and for a refuge and for a covert from storm and from rain.’

A PROPHET'S WOES

‘Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth! 9. In mine ears said the Lord of hosts, Of a truth many houses shall he desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant. 10. Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer shall yield an ephah. 11. Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them! 12. And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of His hands. 13. Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge: and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst. 14. Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it. 15. And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled: 16. But the Lord of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. 17. Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat. 18. Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope: 19. That say, Let Him make speed, and hasten His work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it! 20. Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! 21. Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! 22. Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: 23. Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him! 24. Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. 25. Therefore is the anger of the Lord kindled against His people, and He hath stretched forth His hand against them, and hath smitten them: and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still. 26. And He will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly: 27. None shall be weary nor stumble among them; none shall slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed, nor the latchet of their shoes be broken: 28. Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent, their horses’ hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind: 29. Their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions: yea, they shall roar, and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall deliver it. 30. And in that day they shall

roar against them like the roaring of the sea: and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof.'—ISAIAH v. 8-30.

Drunkness is, in this text, one of a ring of plague-spots on the body politic of Judah. The prophet six times proclaims 'woe' as the inevitable end of these; such 'sickness' is 'unto death' unless repentance and another course of conduct bring healing. But drunkness appears twice in this grim catalogue, and the longest paragraph of denunciation (vv. 11-17) is devoted to it. Its connection with the other vices attacked is loose, but it is worth noting that all these have an inner kinship, and tend to appear together. They are 'all in a string,' and where a community is cursed with one, the others will not be far away. They are a knot of serpents intertwined. We touch but slightly on the other vices denounced by the prophet's burning words, but we must premise the general observation that the same uncompromising plainness and boldness in speaking out as to social sins ought to characterise Christian teachers to-day. The prophet's office is not extinct in the church.

The first plague-spot is the accumulation of wealth in few hands, and the selfish withdrawal of its possessors from the life of the community. In an agricultural society like that of Judah, that clotting of wealth took the shape of 'land-grabbing,' and of evicting the small proprietors. We see it in more virulent forms in our great commercial centres, where the big men often become big by crushing out the little ones, and denude themselves of responsibility to the community in proportion as they clothe themselves with wealth. Wherever wealth is thus congested, and its obligations ignored by selfish indulgence, the seeds are sown which will spring up one day in 'anarchism.' A man need not be a prophet to have it whispered in his ear, as Isaiah had, that the end of selfish capitalism is a convulsion in which 'many houses shall be desolate,' and many fields barren. England needs the warning as much as Isaiah's Judah did.

Such selfish wealth leads, among other curses, to indolence and drunkness, as the next woe shows. The people described make drinking the business of their lives, beginning early and sitting late. They have a varnish of art over their swinishness, and must have music as well as wine. So, in many a drink-shop in England, a piano or a band adds to the attractions, and gives a false air of aestheticism to pure animalism. Isaiah feels the incongruity that music should be so prostituted, and expresses it by adding to his list of musical instruments 'and wine' as if he would underscore the degradation of the great art to be the cup-bearer of sots. Such revellers are blind to the manifest tokens of God's working, and the 'operation of His hands' excites only the tipsy gaze which sees nothing. That is one of the curses which dog the drunkard—that he takes no warning from the plain results of his vice as seen in others. He knows that it means shattered health, ruined prospects, broken hearts, but nothing rouses him from his fancy of impunity. High, serious thoughts of God and His government of the world and of each life are strange to him. His sin compels him to be

godless, if he is not to go mad. But sometimes he wakes to a moment's sight of realities, and then he is miserable till his next bout buys fatal forgetfulness.

The prophet forces the end of a drunken nation on the unwilling attention of the roisterers, in [verses 13-17](#), which throb with vehemence of warning and gloomy eloquence. What can such a people come to but destruction? Knowledge must languish, hunger and thirst must follow. Like some monster's gaping mouth, the pit yawns for them; and, drawn as by irresistible attraction, the pomp and the wicked, senseless jollity elide down into it. In the universal catastrophe, one thing alone stands upright, and is lifted higher, because all else has sunk so far,—the righteous judgment of the forgotten God. The grim picture is as true for individuals and their deaths as for a nation and its decay. And modern nations cannot afford to have this ulcer of drunkenness draining away their strength any more than Judah could. 'By the soul only are the nations great and free,' and a people can be neither where the drink fiend has his way.

Three woes follow which are closely connected. That pronounced on daring evil-doers, who not only let sin draw them to itself, but go more than halfway to meet it, needing no temptation, but drawing it to them eagerly, and scoffing at the merciful warnings of fatal consequences, comes first. Next is a woe on those who play fast and loose with plain morality, sophisticating conscience, and sapping the foundations of law. Such juggling follows sensual indulgence such as drunkenness, when it becomes habitual and audacious, as in the preceding woe. Loose or perverted codes of morality generally spring from bad living, seeking to shelter itself. Vicious principles are an afterthought to screen vicious practices. The last subject of the triple woes is self-conceit and pretence to superior illumination. Such very superior persons are emancipated from the rules which bind the common herd. They are so very clever that they have far outgrown the creeping moralities, which may do for old women and children. Do we not know the sort of people? Have we none of them surviving to-day?

Then Isaiah comes back to his theme of drunkenness, but in a new connection. It poisons the fountain of justice. There is a world of indignant contempt in the prophet's scathing picture of those who are 'mighty' and 'men of strength,'—but how is their strength shown? They can stand any quantity of wine, and can 'mix their drinks,' and yet look sober! What a noble use to put a good constitution to! These valiant toppers are in authority as judges, and they sell their judgments to get money for their debauches. We do not see much of such scandals among us, but yet we have heard of leagues between liquor-sellers and municipal authorities, which certainly do *not* 'make for righteousness.' When shall we learn and practise the lesson that Isaiah was reading his countrymen,—that it is fatal to a nation when the private character of public men is regarded as of no account in political and civic life? The prophet had no doubt as to what must be the end of a state of things in which the very courts of law were honeycombed with corruption, and demoralised by the power of drink.

His tremendous image of a fierce fire raging across a dry prairie, and burning the grass to its very roots, while the air is stifling with the thick 'dust' of the conflagration, proclaims the sure fate, sooner or later, of every community and individual that 'rejects the law of the Lord of Hosts, and despises the word of the Holy One of Israel.' Change the name, and the tale is told of us; for it is 'righteousness that exalteth a nation,' and no single vice drags after it more infallibly such a multitude of attendant demons as the vice of drunkenness, which is a crying sin of England to-day.

VISION AND SERVICE

‘In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple. 2. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. 3. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory. 4. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. 5. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. 6. Then flew one of the seraphims onto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: 7. And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. 8. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. 9. And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. 10. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. 11. Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate, 12. And the Lord have removed men far away, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land. 13. But yet in it shall be a tenth, and it shall return, and shall be eaten: as a tell tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their leaves: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof.’—[ISAIAH vi. 1-13](#).

WE may deal with this text as falling into three parts: the vision, its effect on the prophet, and his commission.

I. The Vision.—‘In the year that King Uzziah died’ is more than a date for chronological accuracy. It tells not only when, but why, the vision was given. The throne of David was empty.

God never empties places in our homes and hearts, or in the nation or the Church, without being ready to fill them. He sometimes empties them that He may fill them. Sorrow and loss are meant to prepare us for the vision of God, and their effect should be to purge the inward eye, that it may see Him. When the leaves drop from the forest trees we can see the blue sky which their dense abundance hid. Well for us if the passing of all that can pass drives us to Him who cannot pass, if the unchanging God stands out more clear, more near, more dear, because of change.

As to the substance of this vision, we need not discuss whether, if we had been there, we should have seen anything. It was doubtless related to Isaiah’s thoughts, for God does not send visions which have no point of contact in the recipient. However communicated,

it was a divine communication, and a temporary unveiling of an eternal reality. The form was transient, but Isaiah then saw for a moment 'the things which are' and always are.

The essential point of the vision is the revelation of Jehovah as king of Judah. That relation guaranteed defence and demanded obedience. It was a sure basis of hope, but also a stringent motive to loyalty, and it had its side of terror as well as of joyfulness. 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' The place of vision is the heavenly sanctuary of which the temple was a prophecy. Eminently significant and characteristic of the whole genius of the Old Testament is the absence of any description of the divine appearance. The prophet saw things 'which it is not lawful for a man to utter,' and his silence is not only reverent, but more eloquent than any attempt to put the Ineffable into words. Even in this act of manifestation God was veiled, and 'there was the hiding of His power.' The train of His robe can be spoken of, but not the form which it concealed even in revealing it. Nature is the robe of God. It hides while it discloses, and discloses while it hides.

The hovering seraphim were in the attitude of service. They are probably represented as fiery forms, but are spoken of nowhere else in Scripture. The significance of their attitude has been well given by Jewish commentators, who say, 'with two he covered his face that he might not see, and with two he covered his body that he might not be seen' and we may add, 'with two he stood ready for service, by flight whithersoever the King would send.' Such awe-stricken reverence, such humble hiding of self, such alacrity for swift obedience, such flaming ardours of love and devotion, should be ours. Their song celebrated the holiness and the glory of Jehovah of hosts. We must ever remember that the root-meaning of 'holiness' is separation, and that the popular meaning of moral purity is secondary and derivative. What is rapturously sung in the threefold invocation of the seraphs is the infinite exaltation of Jehovah above all creatural conditions, limitations, and, we may add, conceptions. That separation, of course, includes purity, as may be seen from the immediate effect of the vision on the prophet, but the conception is much wider than that. Very beautifully does the second line of the song re-knit the connection between Jehovah and this world, so far beneath Him, which the burst of praise of His holiness seems to sever. The high heaven is a bending arch; its inaccessible heights ray down sunshine and drop down rain, and, as in the physical world, every plant grows by Heaven's gift, so in the world of humanity all wisdom, goodness, and joy are from the Father of lights. God's 'glory' is the flashing lustre of His manifested holiness, which fills the earth as the train of the robe filled the temple. The vibrations of that mighty hymn shook the 'foundations of the threshold' (Rev. Ver.) with its thunderous harmonies. 'The house was filled with smoke' which, since it was an effect of the seraph's praise, is best explained as referring to the fragrant smoke of incense which, as we know, symbolised 'the prayers of saints.'

II. The effect of the vision on the prophet.—The vision kindled as with a flash Isaiah's consciousness of sin. He expressed it in regard to his words rather than his works, partly because in one aspect speech is even more accurately than act a cast, as it were, of character, and partly because he could not but feel the difference between the mighty music that burst from these pure and burning lips and the words that flowed from and soiled his own. Not only the consciousness of sin, but the dread of personal evil consequences from the vision of the holy God, oppressed his heart. We see ourselves when we see God. Once flash on a heart the thought of God's holiness, and, like an electric searchlight, it discloses flaws which pass unnoticed in dimmer light. The easy-going Christianity, which is the apology for religion with so many of us, has no deep sense of sin, because it has no clear vision of God. 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth Thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'

The next stage in Isaiah's experience is that sin recognised and confessed is burned away. Cleansing rather than forgiveness is here emphasised. The latter is, of course, included, but the main point is the removal of impurity. It is mediated by one of the seraphim, who is the messenger of God, which is just a symbolical way of saying that God makes penitents 'partakers of His holiness,' and that nothing less than a divine communication will make cleansing possible. It is effected by a live coal. Fire is purifying, and the New Testament has taught us that the true cleansing fire is that of the Holy Spirit. But that live coal was taken from the altar. The atoning sacrifice has been offered there, and our cleansing depends on the efficacy of that sacrifice being applied to us.

The third stage in the prophet's experience is the readiness for service which springs up in his purged heart. God seeks for volunteers. There are no pressed men in His army. The previous experiences made Isaiah quick to hear God's call, and willing to respond to it by personal consecration. Take the motive-power of redemption from sin out of Christianity, and you break its mainspring, so that the clock will only tick when it is shaken. It is the Christ who died for our sins to whom men say, 'Command what Thou wilt, and I obey.'

III. The prophet's commission.—He was not sent on his work with any illusions as to its success, but, on the contrary, he had a clear premonition that its effect would be to deepen the spiritual deafness and blindness of the nation. We must remember that in Scripture the certain effect of divine acts is uniformly regarded as a divine design. Israel was so sunk in spiritual deadness that the issue of the prophet's work would only be to immerse the mass of 'this people' farther in it. To some more susceptible souls his message would be a true divine voice, rousing them like a trumpet, and that effect was what God desired; but to the greater number it would deepen their torpor and increase their condemnation. If men love darkness rather than light, the coming of the light works only judgment.

Isaiah recoils from the dreary prospect, and feels that this dreadful hardening cannot be God's ultimate purpose for the nation. So he humbly and wistfully asks how long it is to

last. The answer is twofold, heavy with a weight of apparently utter ruin in its first part, but disclosing a faint, far-off gleam of hope on its second. Complete destruction, and the casting of Israel out from the land, are to come. But as, though a goodly tree is felled, a stump remains which has vital force (or *substance*) in it, so, even in the utmost apparent desperateness of Israel's state, there will be in it 'the holy seed,' the 'remnant,' the true Israel, from which again the life shall spring, and stem and branches and waving foliage once more grow up.

THE EMPTY THRONE FILLED

‘In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple.’—ISAIAH vi. 1.

Uzziah had reigned for fifty-two years, during the greater part of which he and his people had been brilliantly prosperous. Victorious in war, he was also successful in the arts of peaceful industry. The later years of his life were clouded, but on the whole the reign had been a time of great well-being. His son and successor was a young man of five-and-twenty; and when he came to the throne ominous war-clouds were gathering in the North, and threatening to drift to Judah. No wonder that the prophet, like other thoughtful patriots, was asking himself what was to come in these anxious days, when the helm was in new hands, which, perhaps, were not strong enough to hold it. Like a wise man, he took his thoughts into the sanctuary; and there he understood. As he brooded, this great vision was disclosed to his inward eye. ‘In the year that King Uzziah died’ is a great deal more than a date for chronological purposes. It tells us not only the *when*, but the *why*, of the vision. The earthly king was laid in the grave; but the prophet saw that the true King of Israel was neither the dead Uzziah nor the young Jotham, but the Lord of hosts. And, seeing that, fears and forebodings and anxieties and the sense of loss, all vanished; and new strength came to Isaiah. He went into the temple laden with anxious thoughts; he came out of it with a springy step and a lightened heart, and the resolve ‘Here am I; send me.’ There are some lessons that seem to me of great importance for the conduct of our daily life which may be gathered from this remarkable vision, with the remarkable note of time that is appended to it.

Now, before I pass on, let me remind you, in a word, of that apparently audacious commentary upon this great vision, which the Evangelist John gives us: ‘These things said Esaias, when he had beheld *His* glory and spake of *Him*.’ Then the Christ is the manifest Jehovah; is the King of Glory. Then the vision which was but a transitory revelation is the revelation of an eternal reality, and ‘the vision splendid’ does not ‘fade but brightens, into the light of common day’; when instead of being flashed only on the inward eye of a prophet, it is made flesh and walks amongst us, and lives our life, and dies our death. Our eyes have seen the King in as true a reality, and in better fashion, than ever Isaiah did amid the sanctities of the Temple. And the eyes that have seen only the near foreground, the cultivated valleys, and the homes of men, are raised, and lo! the long line of glittering peaks, calm, silent, pure. Who will look at the valleys when the Himalayas stand out, and the veil is drawn aside?

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

It was when ‘King Uzziah died’ that the prophet ‘saw the Lord sitting upon the throne.’ If the Throne of Israel had not been empty, he would not have seen the throned God in the heavens. And so it is with all our losses, with all our sorrows, with all our disappointments,

with all our pains; they have a mission to reveal to us the throned God. The possession of the things that are taken away from us, the joys which our sorrows smite into dust, have the same mission, and the highest purpose of every good, of every blessing, of every possession, of every gladness, of all love—the highest mission is to lead us to Him. But, just as men will frost a window, so that the light may come in but the sight cannot go out, so by our own fault and misuse of the good things which are meant to lead us up to, and to show us, God, we frost and darken the window so that we cannot see what it is meant to show us. And then a mighty and merciful hand shivers the painted glass into fragments, because it has been dimming ‘the white radiance of Eternity.’ And though the casement may look gaunt, and the edges of the broken glass may cut and wound, yet the view is unimpeded. When the gifts that we have misused are withdrawn, we can see the heaven that they too often hide from us. When the leaves drop there is a wider prospect. When the great tree is fallen there is opened a view of the blue above. When the night falls the stars sparkle. When other props are struck away we can lean our whole weight upon God. When Uzziah dies the King becomes visible.

Is that what our sorrows, our pains, losses, disappointments do for us? Well for those to whom loss is gain, because it puts them in possession of the enduring riches! Well for those to whom the passing of all that can pass is a means of revealing Him who ‘is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever’! The message to us of all these our pains and griefs is ‘Come up hither.’ In them all our Father is saying to us, ‘Seek ye My face.’ Well for those who answer, ‘Thy face, Lord, will I seek. Hide not Thy face far from me.’

Let us take care that we do not waste our griefs and sorrows. They absorb us sometimes with vain regrets. They jaundice and embitter us sometimes with rebellious thoughts. They often break the springs of activity and of interest in others, and of sympathy with others. But their true intention is to draw back the thin curtain, and to show us ‘the things that are,’ the realities of the throned God, the skirts that fill the Temple, the hovering seraphim, and the coal from the altar that purges.

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

As I have pointed out already, the thought conveyed to the prophet by this vision was not only the general one, of God’s sovereign rule, but the special one of His rule over and for, and His protection of, the orphan kingdom which had lost its king. The vision took the special shape that the moment required. It was because the earthly king was dead that the living, heavenly King was revealed.

So there is just suggested by it this general thought, that the consciousness of God’s presence and work for us takes in each heart the precise shape that its momentary necessities and circumstances require. That infinite fulness is of such a nature as that it will assume any form for which the weakness and the need of the dependent creature call. Like the one force which scientists now are beginning to think underlies all the various manifestations

of energy in nature, whether they be named light, heat, motion, electricity, chemical action, or gravitation, the one same vision of the throned God, manifest in Jesus Christ, is protean. Here it flames as light, there burns as heat, there flashes as electricity; here as gravitation holds the atoms together, there as chemical energy separated and decomposes them; here results in motion, there in rest; but is the one force. And so the one God will become everything and anything that every man, and each man, requires. He shapes himself according to our need. The water of life does not disdain to take the form imposed upon it by the vessel into which it is poured. The Jews used to say that the manna in the wilderness tasted to each man as each man desired. And the God, who comes to us all, comes to us each in the shape that we need; just as He came to Isaiah in the manifestation of His *kingly* power, because the throne of Judah was vacated.

So when our hearts are sore with loss, the New Testament Manifestation of the King, even Jesus Christ, comes to us and says, 'The same is my mother and sister and brother,' and His sweet love compensates for the love that can die, and that has died. When losses come to us He draws near, as durable riches and righteousness. In all our pains He is our anodyne, and in all our griefs He brings the comfort; He is all in all, and each withdrawn gift is compensated, or will be compensated, to each in Him.

So, dear friends, let us learn God's purpose in emptying hearts and chairs and homes. He empties them that He may fill them with Himself. He takes us, if I might so say, into the darkness, as travellers to the south are to-day passing through Alpine tunnels, in order that He may bring us out into the land where 'God Himself is sun and moon,' and where there are ampler ether and brighter constellations than in these lands where we dwell. He means that, when Uzziah dies, our hearts shall see the King. And for all mourners, for all tortured hearts, for all from whom stays have been stricken and resources withdrawn, the old word is true: 'Lord shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us.'

Let me recall to you what I have already insisted on more than once, that the perfecting of this vision is in the historical fact of the Incarnate Son. Jesus Christ shows us God. Jesus Christ is the King of Glory. If we will go to Him, and fix our eyes and hearts on Him, then losses may come, and we shall be none the poorer; death may unclasp our hands from dear hands, but He will close a dearer one round the hand that is groping for a stay; and nothing can be taken away but He will more than fill the gap it leaves by His own sweet presence. If our eyes behold the King, if we are like John the Seer in his rocky Patmos, and see the Christ in His glory and royalty, then He will lay His hands on us and say, 'Fear not! Weep not; I am the First and the Last,' and forebodings, and fears, and sense of loss will all be changed into trustfulness and patient submission. 'Seeing Him, who is invisible,' we shall be able to endure and to toil, until the time when the vision of earth is perfected by the beholding of heaven. Blessed are they who with purged eyes see, and with yielding hearts obey, the

heavenly vision, and turn to the King and offer themselves for any service He may require, saying, 'Here am I; send me.'

A SERAPH'S WINGS

'With twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.'—ISAIAH vi. 2.

This is the only mention in Scripture of the seraphim. I do not need to enter upon the much-debated, and in some respects interesting, question as to whether these are to be taken as identical with the cherubim, or as to whether they are altogether imaginary and symbolical beings, nor as to whether they are identical with the angels, or part of their hierarchy. All that may be left on one side. I would only notice, before I deal with the specific words of my text, the significance of the name. It means 'the flaming' or 'burning ones,' and so the attendants of the divine glory in the heavens, whether they be real or imaginary beings, are represented as flashing with splendour, as full of swift energy, like a flame of fire, as glowing with fervid love, as blazing with enthusiasm. That is the type of the highest creatural being, which stands closest to God. There is no ice in His presence, and the nearer we get to Him in truth, the more we shall glow and burn. Cold religion is a contradiction in terms, though, alas, it is a reality in professors.

And so with that explanation, and putting aside all these other questions, let us gather up some, at least, of the lessons as to the essentials of worship, and try to grasp the prophecy of the heavenly state, given us in these words.

I. The Wings of Reverence.

He covered his face, or *they* covered *their* faces, lest they should see. As a man brought suddenly into the sunlight, especially if out of a darkened chamber, by an instinctive action shades his eyes with his hand, so these burning creatures, confronted with the still more fervid and fiery light of the divine nature, fold one pair of their great white pinions over their shining faces, even whilst they cry 'Holy! Holy! Holy! is the Lord God Almighty!'

And does not that teach us the incapacity of the highest creature, with the purest vision, to gaze undazzled into the shining light of God? I, for my part, do not believe that any conceivable extension of creatural faculties, or any conceivable hallowing of creatural natures, can make the creature able to gaze upon God. I know that it is often said that the joy of the future life for men is what the theologians call 'the beatific vision,' in which there shall be direct sight of God, using that word in its highest sense, as applied to the perceptions of the spirit, and not of the sense. But I do not think the Bible teaches us that. It does teach us 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' But who is the 'Him'? Jesus Christ. And, in my belief, Jesus Christ will, to all eternity, be the medium of manifesting God, and there will remain, to all eternity, the incapacity which clogs creatures in time—'No man hath seen God at any time, nor *can* see Him.'

But my text, whilst it thus suggests solemn thoughts of a Light that cannot be looked at with undazzled eyes, does also suggest to us by contrast the possibility of far feebler-sighted and more sinful creatures than these symbolical seraphs coming into a Presence in which

God shall be manifest to them; and they will need no veil drawn by themselves across their eyes. God has veiled Himself, that 'we, with unveiled faces, beholding His glory, may be changed into the same image.' So the seraph, with his white wings folded before his eyes, may at once stand to us as a parallel and a contrast to what the Christian may expect. We, *we* can see Jesus, with no incapacity except such as may be swept away by His grace and our will. And direct vision of the whole Christ is the heaven of heaven, even as the partial vision of the partially perceived Christ is the sweetest sweetness of a life on earth.

There is no need for us to draw any screen between our happy eyes and the Face in which we 'behold the glory as of the only Begotten of the Father.' All the tempering that the divine lustre needed has been done by Him who veils His glory with the veil of Christ's flesh, and therein does away the need for any veil that we can draw.

But, beyond that, there is another consideration that I should like to suggest, as taught us by the use of this first pair of the six wings, and that is the absolute need for the lowliest reverence in our worship of God. It is strange, but true, I am afraid, that the Christian danger is to weaken the sense of the majesty and splendour and separation of God from His creatures. And all that is good in the Christian revelation may be so abused as that there shall come, what I am sure does in effect sometimes come, a terrible lack of due reverence in our so-called worship. What does that lofty chorus of 'Holy! Holy! Holy!' that burst from those immortal lips mean but the declaration that God is high above, and separate from, all limitations and imperfections of creatures? And we Christians, who hear it re-echoed in the very last Book of Scripture by the four-and-twenty elders who represent redeemed humanity, have need to take heed that we do not lose our reverence in our confidence, and that we do not part with godly fear in our filial love. If one looks at a congregation of professing Christians engaged in their worship, does not one feel and see that there is often a carelessness and shallowness, a want of realisation of the majesty and sanctity and tremendousness of that Father to whom we draw near? Brethren, if a seraph hides his face, surely it becomes us to see to it that, since we worship a God who is a consuming fire, we serve Him with far deeper 'reverence and godly fear' than ordinarily mark our devotions.

II. The Wings of Humility.

'With twain he covered his feet.' The less comely and inferior parts of that fiery corporeity were veiled lest they should be seen by the Eyes that see all things. The wings made no screen that hid the seraph's feet from the eye of God, but it was the instinctive lowly sense of unworthiness that folded them across the feet, even though they, too, burned as a furnace. The nearer we get to God, the more we shall be aware of our limitations and unworthiness, and it is because that vision of the Lord sitting on 'His throne, high and lifted up,' with the thrilling sense of His glory filling the holy temple of the universe, does not burn before us that we can conceit ourselves to have anything worth pluming ourselves upon. Once lift the curtain, once let my eye be flooded with the sight of God, and away goes all my self-conceit,

and all my fancied superiority above others. One little molehill is pretty nearly the same height as another, if you measure them both against the top of the Himalayas, that lie in the background, with their glittering peaks of snow. 'Star differeth from star in glory' in a winter's night, but when the great sun swims into the sky, they all vanish together. If you and I saw God burning before us, as Isaiah saw Him, we should veil ourselves, and lose all that which so often veils Him from us—the fancy that we are anything when we are nothing. And the nearer we get to God, and the purer we are, the more shall we be keenly conscious of our imperfections and our sins. 'If I say I am perfect,' said Job in his wise way, 'this also should prove me perverse.' Consciousness of sin is the continual accompaniment of growth in holiness. 'The heavens are not pure in His sight, and He chargeth His angels with folly.' Everything looks black beside that sovereign whiteness. Get God into your lives, and you will see that the feet need to be washed, and you will cry, 'Lord! not my feet only, but my hands and my head!'

III. Lastly—The Wings for Service.

'With twain he did fly.' That is the emblem of joyous, buoyant, unhindered motion. It is strongly, sadly contrary to the toilsome limitations of us heavy creatures who have no wings, but can at best run on His service, and often find it hard to 'walk with patience in the way that is set before us.' But—service with wings, or service with lame feet, it matters not. Whosoever, beholding God, has found need to hide his face from that Light even whilst he comes into the Light, and to veil his feet from the all-seeing Eye, will also feel impulses to go forth in His service. For the perfection of worship is neither the consciousness of my own insufficiency, nor the humble recognition of His glory, nor the great voice of praise that thrilled from those immortal lips, but it is the doing of His will in daily life. Some people say the service of man is the service of God. Yes, when it is service of man, done for God's sake, it is so, and only then. The old motto, 'Work is worship,' may preach a great truth or a most dangerous error. But there is no possibility of error or danger in maintaining this: that the climax and crown of all worship, whether for us footsore servants upon earth, or for these winged attendants on the throne of the King in the heavens, is activity in obedience. And that is what is set before us here.

Now, dear brethren, we, as Christians, have a far higher motive for service than the seraphs had. We have been redeemed, and the spirit of the old Psalm should animate all our obedience: 'O Lord, truly I am Thy servant.' Why? The next clause tells us: 'Thou hast loosed my bonds.' The seraphs could not say that, and therefore our obedience, our activity in doing the will of the Father in heaven, should be more buoyant, more joyful, more swift, more unrestricted than even theirs.

The seraphim were winged for service even while they stood above the throne and pealed forth their thunderous praise which shook the Temple. May we not discern in that a hint of the blessed blending of two modes of worship which will be perfectly united in heaven,

and which we should aim at harmonising even on earth? 'His servants serve Him and see His face.' There is possible, even on earth, some foretaste of the perfection of that heavenly state in which no worship in service shall interfere with the worship in contemplation. Mary, sitting at Christ's feet, and Martha, busy in providing for His comfort, may be, to a large extent, united in us even here, and will be perfectly so hereafter, when the practical and the contemplative, the worship of noble aspiration, of heart-filling gazing, and that of active service shall be indissolubly blended.

The seraphs sang 'Holy! Holy! Holy!' but they, and all the hosts of heaven, learn a new song from the experience of earth, and redeemed men are the chorus-leaders of the perfected and eternal worship of the heavens. For we read that it is the four-and-twenty elders who begin the song and sing to the Lamb that redeemed them by His blood, and that the living creatures and all the hosts of the angels to that song can but say 'Amen!'

THE MAKING OF A PROPHET

‘Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.’—[ISAIAH vi. 5](#).

In previous pages we have seen how Isaiah’s vision of Jehovah throned in the Temple, ‘high and lifted up,’ derived significance from the time of its occurrence. It was ‘in the year that’ the earthly King ‘died’ that the heavenly King was revealed. The passing of the transient prepared the way for the revelation of the Eternal, and the revelation of the Eternal more than compensated for the passing of the transient. But strengthening and calming as these thoughts are, they by no means exhaust the purpose of the vision, nor do they describe all its effects on the recipient. These were, first and immediately, the consciousness of unworthiness and sin, expressed in the words that I have taken for my text. Then came the touch of the ‘live coal from the altar,’ laid on the unclean lips by the seraph; and on that followed willing surrender for a perilous service.

These three stages flowing from the vision of God, recognition of sin, experience of purging, abandonment to obedience and service, must be repeated in us all, if we are to live worthy lives. There may be much that is beautiful and elevating and noble without these; but unless in some measure we pass through the prophet’s experience, we shall fail to reach the highest possibilities of beauty and of service that open before us. So I wish to consider, very simply, these three stages in my remarks now.

I. If we see *God* we shall see our *sin*.

There came on the prophet, as in a flash, the two convictions, one which he learned from the song of the seraphs, ringing in music through the Temple, and one which rose up, like an answering note from the voice of conscience within. They sang ‘Holy! holy! holy! Lord God Almighty.’ And what was the response to that, in the prophet’s heart?—‘I am unclean.’ Each major note has a corresponding minor, and the triumphant doxology of the seraph wakes in the hearer’s conscience the lowly confession of personal unlikeness to the holiness of God. It was not joy that sprang in Isaiah’s heart when he saw the throned King, and heard the proclamation of His name. It was not reverence merely that bowed his head in the dust, but it was the awakened consciousness, ‘Thou art holy; and now that I understand, in some measure, what Thy holiness means, I look on myself and I say, “unclean! unclean!”’

The prophet’s confession assumes a form which may strike us as somewhat singular. Why is it that he speaks of ‘unclean lips,’ rather than of an unclean heart? I suppose partly because, in a very deep sense, a man’s words are more accurately a cast, as it were, from a man’s character than even his actions, and partly because the immediate occasion of his confession was the words of the seraphim, and he could not but contrast what came burning from their pure lips with what had trickled from, and soiled, his own.

But, however expressed, the consciousness of personal unlikeness to the holiness of God is the first result, and the instantaneous result, of any real apprehension of that holiness, and of any true vision of Him. Like some search-light flung from a ship over the darkling waters, revealing the dark doings of the enemy away out yonder in the night, the thought of God and His holiness streaming in upon a man's soul, if it does so in any adequate measure, is sure to disclose the heaving waters and the skulking foes that are busy in the dark.

But it was not only the consciousness of sinfulness and antagonism that woke up instantaneously in response to that vision of the holy God. It was likewise a shrinking apprehension of personal evil from contact of God's light with Isaiah's darkness. 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.' What is to become, then, of the man that has neither the one nor the other? The experience of all the world witnesses that whenever there comes, in reality, or in a man's conceptions or fancy, the contact of the supernatural, as it is called, with the natural, there is a shrinking, a sense of eeriness, an apprehension of vague possibilities of evil. The sleeping snake that is coiled in every soul stirs and begins to heave in its bulk, and wake, when the thought of a holy God comes into the heart. Now, I do not suppose that consciousness of sin is the whole explanation of that universal human feeling, but I am very sure it is an element in it, and I suspect that if there were no sin, there would be no shrinking.

At all events, be that as it may, these are the two thoughts that, involuntarily and spontaneously and immediately, sprang in this man's heart when his purged eyes saw the King on His throne. He did not leap up with gladness at the vision. Its consolatory and its strengthening aspects were not the first that impinged upon his eye, or upon his consciousness, but the first thing was an instinctive recoil, 'Woe is me; I am undone.' Now, brethren, I venture to think that one main difference between shallow religion and real is to be found here, that the dim, far-off vision, if we may venture to call it so, which serves the most of us for a sight of God, leaves us quite complacent, and with very slight and superficial conceptions of our own evil, and that if once we saw, in so far as it is possible for humanity to-day to see, God as He is, and heard in the depths of our hearts that 'Holy! holy! holy!' from the burning seraphim, the easy-going, self-satisfied judgment of ourselves which too many of us cherish would be utterly impossible; and would disappear, shrivelled up utterly in the light of God. 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear,' said Job, 'but now mine eye seeth Thee; therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' A hearsay God and a self-complacent beholder—a God really seen, and a man down in the dust before Him! Has that vision ever blazed in on you? And if it has, has not the light shown you the seaminess of much in which a dimmer light detects no flaws or stains? Thank God if, having seen Him, you see yourselves. If you have not felt, 'I am unclean and undone,' depend upon it, your

knowledge of God is faint and dim, and He is rather One heard of from the lips of others than realised in your own experience.

II. Again, note the second stage here, in the education of a soul for service—the sin, recognised and repented, is burned away.

‘Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar; and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo! this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.’

Now, I would notice as to this stage of the process, first, that Isaiah singularly passes beyond all the old ritual in which he had been brought up, and recognises another kind of cleansing than that which it embodied. He had got beyond the ritual to what the ritual meant. We have passed beyond the ritual, too, by another process; and, though I would by no means read full, plain, articulate Christian thought into the vision of Isaiah—which would be an anachronism, and unfaithful to the gradual historical development of the idea and means of redemption—yet I cannot help pointing to the fact that, even although this vision is located as seen in the Temple, there is not a single reference (except that passing allusion to the altar) to the ritual of the Temple, but the cleansing comes in another fashion altogether.

But far more important than that thought is the human condition that is required ere this cleansing can be realised. ‘I am a man of unclean lips.’ ‘I am undone!’ It was because that conviction and confession sprang in the prophet’s consciousness that the seraph winged his way with the purifying fire in his hands. Which being translated is just this: faith alone will not bring cleansing. There must go with it what we call, in our Christian phraseology, repentance, which is but the recognition of my own antagonism to the holiness of God, and the resolve to turn my back on my own past self. Now, it seems to me that a great deal of what is called, and in a sense is, Evangelical teaching, fails to represent the full counsel of God, in the matter of man’s redemption, because it puts a one-sided emphasis on faith, and slurs over the accompanying idea of repentance. And I am here to say that a trust in Jesus Christ, which is unaccompanied by a profound penitent consciousness and abhorrence of one’s own sins, and a resolve to turn away from them for the time to come, is not a faith which will bring either pardon or cleansing. We do not need to have less said about trust; we need to have a great deal more said about repentance. You have to learn what it is to say, ‘I abhor myself; you have to learn what it is to say, ‘I will turn right round, and leave all that past behind me; and go in the opposite direction’; or the faith which you say you are exercising will neither save nor cleanse your souls nor your lives.

Again, note that we have here set forth most strikingly the other great truth that, side by side, and as closely synchronous as the flash and the peal, as soon as the consciousness of sin and the aversion from it spring in a man’s heart, the seraph’s wings are set in motion. Remember that beautiful old story in the historical books, of how the erring king, brought

to sanity and repentance by Nathan's apologue, put all his acknowledgments in these words, 'I have sinned against the Lord'; and how the confession was not out of his lips, nor had died in its vibration in the atmosphere, before the prophet, with divine authority, replied with equal brevity and completeness, and as if the two sayings were parts of one sentence, 'And the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin.' That is all. Simultaneous are the two things. To confess is to be forgiven, and the moment that the consciousness of sin rises in the heart, that moment does the heavenly messenger come to still and soothe.

Still further, notice how the cleansing comes as a divine gift. It is purifying, much more than pardon, that is set forth in the symbolical incident before us. The seraph is the divine messenger, and he brings a coal from the altar, and lays that upon the prophet's lips, which is but the symbolical way of saying that the man who is conscious of his own evil will find in himself a blessed despair of being his own healer, and that he has to turn to the divine source, the vision of which has kindled the consciousness, to find there that which will take away the evil. The Lord is 'He that healeth us.'

But, further, the cleansing is by fire. By which, as I suppose, in the present context, and at Isaiah's stage of religious knowledge and experience, we are to understand that great thought that God burns away our sins, as you put a piece of foul clay into the fire, and the stain melts from the surface like a dissipating cloud as the heat finds its way into the substance. 'He will baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire'—a fire that quickens. A new impulse will be granted, which will become the life of the sinful man's life, and will emancipate him from the power of his own darkness and evil.

Now, let us remember that *we* have the fulness of all that was shadowed to the prophet in this vision, and that the reality of every one of these emblems is gathered together—if I may so say—not with confusion, but with abundance and opulence in Jesus Christ Himself. Is He not the seraph? Is He not Himself the burning coal? Is He not the altar from which it is taken? All that is needed to make the foulest clean is given in Christ's great work. Brethren, we shall never understand the deepest secret of Christ and of Christianity until we learn and hold fast by the conviction that the central work of Jesus is to deal with man's sin; and that whatever else Christianity is, it is first and foremost God's way of redeeming the world, and making it possible for the unholy to dwell with His holy self.

III. Lastly, and only a word, the third stage here is—the purged spirit is ready for service.

God did not bid the prophet go on His mission till the prophet had voluntarily accepted the mission. He said, 'Who will go for us?' He wants no pressed men in His army. He does not work with reluctant servants. There is, first, the yielding of the will, and then there is the enduement with the privilege of service. The prophet, having passed through the preceding experiences, had thereby received a quick ear to hear God's calling for volunteers. And we shall not hear Him asking 'Who will go?' unless we have, in our measure, passed through similar experiences. It will be a test of having done so, of our having been purged from our

evil, if, when other people think that it is only Eli speaking, we know that it is the Lord that has called us, and say, 'Here am I.'

For such experiences as I have been describing do influence the will, and mould the heart, and make it a delight to do God's commandments, and to execute His purpose, and to be the ministers of His great Word. Some of us are willing to say that we have learned God's holiness; that we have seen and confessed our sins; that we have received pardon and cleansing. Have these experiences made you ready for any service? Have they made your will flexible—made you dethrone yourself, and enthrone the King whom the prophet saw? If they have, they are genuine; if they have not, they are not. Submission of will; glorying in being the instrument of the divine purpose; ears sharpened to catch His lowest whisper; eyes that, like those of a dog fixed on his master, watch for the faintest indication from his guiding eye—these are the infallible tests and signs of having had lips and heart touched with the live coal that burns away our uncleanness.

So, friends, would that I could flash upon every conscience that vision! But you can do so for yourselves. Let me beseech you to bring yourselves honestly into that solemn light of the character of God, and to ask yourselves, 'How can two walk together except they be agreed?' Do not put away such thoughts with any shallow, easy-going talk about how God is good and will not be hard upon a poor fellow that has tried to do his best. God is good; God is love. But divine goodness and love cannot find a way by which the unclean shall dwell with the clean. What then? This then—Jesus Christ has come. We may be made clean if we trust in Him, and forsake our sins. He will touch the heart and lips with the fire of His own Spirit, and then it will be possible to dwell with the everlasting burnings of that flaming fire which is a holy God. Blessed are they that have seen the vision; blessed they that have felt it disclosing their own sins; blessed they whose hearts have been purged. Blessed most of all they who, educated and trained through these experiences, have taken this as the motto of their lives, 'Here am I; send me.'

SHILOAH AND EUPHRATES

Forasmuch as this people refuseth the waters of Shiloah that go softly . . . the Lord bringeth up upon them the waters of the river, strong and many.'—ISAIAH viii. 6, 7.

The kingdom of Judah was threatened with a great danger in an alliance between Israel and Damascus. The cowardly King Ahaz, instead of listening to Isaiah's strong assurances and relying on the help of God, made what he thought a master-stroke of policy in invoking the help of the formidable Assyrian power. That ambitious military monarchy was eager to find an excuse for meddling in the politics of Syria, and nothing loath, marched an army down on the backs of the invaders, which very soon compelled them to hasten to Judah in order to defend their own land. But, as is always the case, the help invoked was his ruin. Like all conquering powers, once having got its foot inside the door, Assyria soon followed bodily. First Damascus and Israel were ravaged and subdued, and then Judah. That kingdom only purchased the privilege of being devoured last. Like the Spaniards in Mexico, the Saxons in England, the English in a hundred Indian territories, the allies that came to help remained to conquer, and Judah fell, as we all know.

This is the simple original application of these words. They are a declaration that in seeking for help from others Judah was forsaking God, and that the helper would become ruler, and the ruler an oppressive tyrant.

The waters of Shiloah that go softly stand as an emblem of the Davidic monarchy as God meant it to be, and, since that monarchy was itself a prophecy, they therefore represent the kingdom of God or the Messianic King. The 'waters strong and many' are those of the Euphrates, which swells and overflows and carries havoc, and are taken as the emblem of the wasting sweep of the Assyrian king, whose capital stood on its banks.

But while thus there is a plain piece of political history in the words, they are also the statement of general principles which apply to every individual soul and its relations to the kingdom, the gentle kingdom, of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I. The Gentle Kingdom.

That little brooklet slipping quietly along; what a striking image of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ!

It suggests the character of the King, the 'meek and lowly in heart.' It suggests the manner of His rule as wielded in gentleness and exercising no compulsion but that of love. It suggests the blessed results of His reign under the image of the fertility, freshness, and beauty which spring up wherever 'the river cometh.' That kingdom we are all summoned to enter.

II. The Rejection of the Kingdom.

Strange and awful fact that men do turn away from it and Him.

In what does rejection consist?

In not trusting in His power to help and deliver.

In seeking help from other sources. This rejection is often unconscious on the part of men who are guilty of it.

III. The Allies who are preferred to the gentle King.

The crowd of worldly things.

What is to be noticed is that at first the preference seems to answer and be all right.

IV. The Allies becoming Tyrants.

The swift Euphrates in spate. That is what the rejecters have chosen for themselves. Better to have lived by Shiloah than to have built their houses by the side of such a raging stream. Mark how this is a divine retribution indeed, but a natural process too.

(a) If Christ does not rule us, a mob of tyrants will.

Our own passions. Our own evil habits. The fascinating sins around us.

(b) They soon cease to seem helpers, and become tyrants.

How quickly the pleasure of sin disappears—like some bird that loses its gay plumage as it grows old.

How stern becomes the necessity to obey; how great the difficulty of breaking off evil habits! So a man becomes the slave of his own lusts, of his indulged tastes, which rise above all restraints and carry away all before them, like the Euphrates in flood. Fertility is turned to barrenness; a foul deposit of mud overlays the soil; houses on the sand are washed away; corpses float on the tawny wave. The soul that rejects Christ's gentle sway is harried and laid waste by a mob of base-born tyrants. We have to make our choice—either Christ or these; either a service which is freedom, or an apparent freedom which is slavery; either a worship which exalts, or a worship which embrutes. 'If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.'

'There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God.' It is peaceful to pitch our tents beside its calm flow, whereon shall go no hostile fleets, and whence we shall but pass to the city above, in the midst of the street whereof the 'river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeds out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.'

THE KINGDOM AND THE KING

‘The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. 3. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before Thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. 4. For Thou hast broken the yoke of His burden, and the staff of His shoulder, the rod of His oppressor, as in the day of Midian. 5. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood: but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. 6. For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. 7. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.’—[ISAIAH ix. 2-7](#).

The darker the cloud, the brighter is the rainbow. This prophecy has for its historical background the calamitous reign of the weak and wicked Ahaz, during which the heart of the nation was bowed, like a forest before the blast, by the dread of foreign invasion and conquest. The prophet predicts a day of gloom and anguish, and then, out of the midst of his threatenings, bursts this glorious vision, sudden as sunrise. With consummate poetic art, the consequences of Messiah’s rule are set forth before He Himself is brought into view.

I. Image is heaped on image to tell the blessedness of that reign ([vs. 2-5](#)). Each trait of the glowing description is appropriate to the condition of Israel under Ahaz; but each has a meaning far beyond that limited application. Isaiah may, or may not, have been aware of ‘what’ or ‘what time’ his words portrayed in their deepest, that is, their true meaning, but if we believe in supernatural prediction which, though it may have found its point of attachment in the circumstances of the present, was none the less the voice of the Spirit of God, we shall not make, as is often done now, the prophet’s construction of his words the rule for their interpretation. What the prophecy was discerned to point to by its utterer or his contemporaries, is one thing; quite another is what God meant by it.

First we have the picture of the nation groping in a darkness that might be felt, the emblem of ignorance, sin, and sorrow, and inhabiting a land over which, like a pall, death cast its shadow. On that dismal gloom shines all at once a ‘great light,’ the emblem of knowledge, purity, and joy. The daily mercy of the dawn has a gospel in it to a heart that believes in God; for it proclaims the divine will that all who sit in darkness shall be enlightened, and that every night but prepares the way for the freshness and stir of a new morning. The great prophecy of these verses in its indefiniteness goes far beyond its immediate occasion in the state of Judah under Ahaz. As surely as the dawn floods all lands, so surely shall all who walk in darkness see the great light; and wherever is a ‘land of the shadow of death,’ there shall the light shine. It is ‘the light of the world.’

[Verse 3](#) gives another phase of blessing. Israel is conceived of as dwindled in number by deportation and war. But the process of depopulation is arrested and reversed, and numerical increase, which is always a prominent feature in Messianic predictions, is predicted. That increase follows the dawning of the light, for men will flock to the 'brightness of its rising.' We know that the increase comes from the attractive power of the Cross, drawing men of many tongues to it; and we have a right to bring the interpretation, which the world's history gives, into our understanding of the prophecy. That enlarged nation is to have abounding joy.

Undoubtedly, the rendering 'To it thou hast increased the joy' is correct, as that of the Authorized Version (based upon the Hebrew text) is clearly one of several cases in which the partial similarity in spelling and identity in sound of the Hebrew words for 'not' and 'to it,' have led to a mistaken reading. The joy is described in words which dance and sing, like the gladness of which they tell. The mirth of the harvest-field, when labour is crowned with success, and the sterner joy of the victors as they part the booty, with which mingles the consciousness of foes overcome and dangers averted, are blended in this gladness. We have the joy of reaping a harvest of which we have not sowed the seed. Christ has done that; we have but to enjoy the results of His toil. We have to divide the spoil of a victory which we have not won. He has bound the strong man, and we share the benefits of His overcoming the world.

That last image of conquerors dividing the spoil leads naturally to the picture in [verse 4](#) of emancipation from bondage, as the result of a victory like Gideon's with his handful. Who the Gideon of this new triumph is, the prophet will not yet say. The 'yoke of his burden' and 'the rod of his oppressor' recall Egypt and the taskmasters.

[Verse 5](#) gives the reason for the deliverance of the slaves; namely, the utter destruction of the armour and weapons of their enemy. The Revised Version is right in its rendering, though it may be doubtful whether its margin is not better than its text, since not only are 'boot' and 'booted' as probable renderings of the doubtful words as 'armour' and 'armed man,' but the picture of the warrior striding into battle with his heavy boots is more graphic than the more generalised description in the Revised Version's text. In any case, the whole accoutrements of the oppressor are heaped into a pile and set on fire; and, as they blaze up, the freed slaves exult in their liberty. The blood-drenched cloaks have been stripped from the corpses and tossed on the heap, and, saturated as they are, they burn. So complete is the victory that even the weapons of the conquered are destroyed. Our conquering King has been manifested, that He might annihilate the powers by which evil holds us bound. His victory is not by halves. 'He taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted.'

II. Now we are ready to ask, And who is to do all this? The guarantee for its accomplishment is the person of the conquering Messiah. The hopes of Israel did not, and those of the world do not, rest on tendencies, principles, laws of progress, advance of civilisation, or the

like abstractions or impersonalities, but on a living Person, in whom all principles which make for righteousness and blessedness for individuals and communities are incarnated, and whose vital action works perpetually in mankind.

In this prophecy the prophet is plainly speaking greater things than he knew. We do not get to the meaning if we only ask ourselves what did he understand by his words, or what did his hearers gather from them? They and he would gather the certainty of the coming of Messiah with wondrous attributes of power and divine gifts, by whose reign light, gladness, liberty would belong to the oppressed nation. But the depth of the prophecy needed the history of the Incarnation for its disclosure. If this is not a God-given prediction of the entrance into human form of the divine, it is something very like miraculous that, somehow or other, words should have been spoken, without any such reference, which fit so closely to the supernatural fact of Christ's incarnation.

The many attempts to translate [verse 6](#) so as to get rid of the application of 'Mighty God,' 'Everlasting Father,' to Messiah, cannot here be enumerated or adequately discussed. I must be content with pointing out the significance of the august fourfold name of the victor King. It seems best to take the two first titles as a compound name, and so to recognise four such compounds.

There is a certain connection between the first and second of these which respectively lay stress on wisdom of plan and victorious energy of accomplishment, while the third and fourth are also connected, in that the former gathers into one great and tender name what Messiah is to His people, and the latter points to the character of His dominion throughout the whole earth. 'A wonder of a counsellor,' as the words may be rendered, not only suggests His giving wholesome direction to His people, but, still more, the mystery of the wisdom which guides His plans. Truly, Jesus purposes wonders in the depth of His redeeming design. He intends to do great things, and to reach them by a road which none would have imagined. The counsel to save a world, and that by dying for it, is the miracle of miracles. 'Who hath been His counsellor in that overwhelming wonder?' He needs no teacher; He is Himself the teacher of all truth. All may have His direction, and they who follow it will not walk in darkness.

'The mighty God.' [Chapter x. 21](#) absolutely forbids taking this as anything lower than the divine name. The prophet conceives of Messiah as the earthly representative of divinity, as having God with and in Him as no other man has. We are not to force upon the prophet the full new Testament doctrine of the oneness of the incarnate Word with the Father, which would be an anachronism. But we are not to fall into the opposite error, and refuse to see in these words, so startling from the lips of a rigid monotheist, a real prophecy of a divine Messiah, dimly as the utterer may have perceived the figure which he painted. Note, too, that the word 'mighty' implies victorious energy in battle. It is often applied to human heroes, and here carries warlike connotations, kindred with the previous picture of conflict and

victory. Thus strength as of God, and, in some profound way, strength which is divine, will be the hand obeying the brain that counsels wonder, and all His plans shall be effected by it.

But these are not all His qualities. He is 'the Father of Eternity'—a name in which tender care and immortal life are marvellously blended. This King will be in reality what, in old days, monarchs often called themselves and seldom were,—the Father of His people, with all the attributes of that sacred name, such as guidance, love, providing for His children's wants. Nor can Christians forget that Jesus is the source of life to them, and that the name has thus a deeper meaning. Further, He is possessed of eternity. If He is so closely related to God as the former name implies, that predicate is not wonderful. Dying men need and have an undying Christ. He is 'the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.'

The whole series of names culminates in 'the Prince of Peace,' which He is by virtue of the characteristics expressed in the foregoing names. The name pierces to the heart of Christ's work. For the individual He brings peace with God, peace in the else discordant inner nature, peace amid storms of calamity—the peace of submission, of fellowship with God, of self-control, of received forgiveness and sanctifying. For nations and civic communities He brings peace which will one day hush the tumult of war, and burn chariots and all warlike implements in the fire. The vision tarries, because Christ's followers have not been true to their Master's mission, but it comes, though its march is slow. We can hasten its arrival.

Verses 7 and 8 declare the perpetuity of Messiah's kingdom, His Davidic descent, and those characteristics of His reign, which guarantee its perpetuity. 'Judgment' which He exercises, and 'righteousness' which He both exercises and bestows, are the pillars on which His throne stands; and these are eternal, and it never will totter nor sink, as earthly thrones must do. The very life-blood of prophecy, as of religion, is the conviction that righteousness outlasts sin, and will survive 'the wreck of matter and the crash of worlds.'

The great guarantee for these glowing anticipations is that the 'zeal of the Lord of hosts' will accomplish them. *Zeal*, or rather *jealousy*, is love stirred to action by opposition. It tolerates no unfaithfulness in the object of its love, and flames up against all antagonism to the object. 'He that toucheth you, toucheth the apple of Mine eye.' So the subjects of that Messiah may be sure that a wall of fire is round about them, which to foes without is terror and destruction, and to dwellers within its circuit glows with lambent light, and rays out beneficent warmth.

LIGHT OR FIRE?

‘And the Light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame: and it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one day.’—[ISAIAH x. 17](#).

With grand poetry the prophet pictures the Assyrian power as a forest consumed like thistles and briers by the fire of God. The text suggests solemn truths about the divine Nature and its manifestations.

I. The Essential Character of God.

Light and Holiness are substantially parallel. Light symbolises purity, but also knowledge and joy. Holiness is Separation from Creatures, but chiefly from their Evils.

II. The Different Attitudes which Men assume to that Character.

‘Light of Israel’: ‘His Holy One.’

God becomes ours, and we have an interest in that radiant Personality if we choose to claim it by faith, love, and obedience. We are free to accept God as ours or to reject Him.

III. The Opposite Aspects which that Character accordingly assumes.

(a) The self-same divine Character has two effects according to the character of the beholder.

To those who respond to God’s love it is—heaven. To those who are indifferent or alienated it may be pain, and will harm them if they see it and do not yield to it.

God’s holiness is not retributive justice but moral perfectness, which to a good man will be joy, and to a bad man, intolerable.

The light which is gladsome to a healthy eye is agony to a diseased one.

(b) All the manifestations and operations of that divine Character have a twofold aspect. Christ is either a stone of stumbling or a sure foundation. Men are either the better or the worse for Him. The Gospel is the savour of life unto life or of death unto death. The tremendous ‘either—or.’ The Cross rejected harms the moral nature, hardens conscience, deepens condemnation.

All divine operations are necessarily on the side of God’s lovers and against those who love Him not. They are contrary to Him, therefore He is so to them. ‘With the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward.’

The final Judgment will be either rapture or despair, like the coming of a bridegroom, or the fiery rain that burnt up Sodom.

The very dew of Heavenly Bliss would be corroding poison to a godless spirit.

THE SUCKER FROM THE FELLED OAK

‘And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: 2. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord; 3. And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: 4. But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. 5. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. 6. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. 7. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’s den. 9. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. 10. And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.’—ISAIAH xi. 1-10.

The hopeless fall of Assyria is magnificently pictured in the close of [chapter x.](#), as the felling of the cedars of Lebanon by the axe swung by Jehovah’s own hand. A cedar once cut down puts out no new shoots; and so the Assyrian power, when it falls, will fall for ever. The metaphor is carried on with surpassing beauty in the first part of this prophecy, which contrasts the indestructible vitality of the Davidic monarchy with the irremediable destruction fated for its formidable antagonist. The one is a cedar, the stump of which rots slowly, but never recovers. The other is an oak, which, every woodman knows, will put out new growth from the ‘stool.’ But instead of a crowd of little suckers, the prophet sees but one shoot, and that rising to more than the original height and fruitfulness of the tree. The prophecy is distinctly that of One Person, in whom the Davidic monarchy is concentrated, and all its decadence more than recovered.

Isaiah does not bring the rise of the Messiah into chronological connection with the fall of Assyria; for he contemplates a period of decay for the Israelitish monarchy, and it was the very burden of his message as to Assyria that it should pass away without harming that monarchy. The contrast is not intended to suggest continuity in time. The period of fulfilment is entirely undetermined.

The first point in the prophecy is the descent of the Messiah from the royal stock. That is more than Isaiah’s previous Messianic prophecies had told. He is to come at a time when the fortunes of David’s house were at their worst. There is to be nothing left but the stump of the tree, and out of it is to come a ‘shoot,’ slender and insignificant, and in strange contrast

with the girth of the truncated bole, stately even in its mutilation. We do not talk of a growth from the stump as being a 'branch'; and 'sprout' would better convey Isaiah's meaning. From the top of the stump, a shoot; from the roots half buried in the ground, an outgrowth,—these two images mean but one person, a descendant of David, coming at a time of humiliation and obscurity. But this lowly shoot will 'bear fruit,' which presupposes its growth.

The King-Messiah thus brought on the scene is then described in regard to His character (v. 2), the nature of His rule (vs. 3-5), the universal harmony and peace which He will diffuse through nature (vs. 6-9), and the gathering of all mankind under His dominion. There is much in the prophetic ideal of the Messiah which finds no place in this prophecy. The gentler aspects of His reign are not here, nor the deeper characteristics of His 'spirit,' nor the chiefest blessings in His gift. The suffering Messiah is not yet the theme of the prophet.

The main point as to the character of the Messiah which this prophecy sets forth is that, whatever He was to be, He was to be by reason of the resting on Him of the Spirit of Jehovah. The directness, fulness, and continuousness of His inspiration are emphatically proclaimed in that word 'shall rest,' which can scarcely fail to recall John's witness, 'I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and it abode upon Him.' The humanity on which the Divine Spirit uninterruptedly abides, ungrieved and unrestrained, must be free from the stains which so often drive that heavenly visitant from our breasts. The white-breasted Dove of God cannot brood over foulness. There has never been but one manhood capable of receiving and retaining the whole fulness of the Spirit of God.

The gifts of that Spirit, which become qualities of the Messiah in whom He dwells, are arranged (if we may use so cold a word) in three pairs; so that, if we include the introductory designation, we have a sevenfold characterisation of the Spirit, recalling the seven lamps before the throne and the seven eyes of the Lamb in the Apocalypse, and symbolising by the number the completeness and sacredness of that inspiration. The resulting character of the Messiah is a fair picture of one who realises the very ideal of a strong and righteous ruler of men. 'Wisdom and understanding' refer mainly to the clearness of intellectual and moral insight; 'counsel and might,' to the qualities which give sound practical direction and vigour to follow, and carry through, the decisions of practical wisdom; while 'the knowledge and fear of the Lord' define religion by its two parts of acquaintance with God founded on love, and reverential awe which prompts to obedience. The fulfilment, and far more than fulfilment, of this ideal is in Jesus, in whom were 'hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,' to whom no circumstances of difficulty ever brought the shadow of perplexity, who always saw clearly before Him the path to tread, and had always 'might' to tread it, however rough, who lived all His days in unbroken fellowship with the Father and in lowly obedience.

The prophet saw not all the wonders of perfect human character which that indwelling Spirit would bring to realisation in Him; but what he saw was indispensable to a perfect

King, and was, at all events, an arc of the mighty circle of perfection, which has now been revealed in the life of Jesus. The possibilities of humanity under the influence of the Divine Spirit are revealed here no less than the actuality of the Messiah's character. What Jesus is, He gives it to His subjects to become by the dwelling in them of the spirit of life which was in Him.

The rule of the King is accordant with His character. It is described in [verses 3-5](#). The first characteristic named may be understood in different ways. According to some commentators, who deserve respectful consideration, it means, 'He shall draw His breath in the fear of Jehovah'; that is, that that fear has become, as it were, His very life-breath. But the meaning of 'breathing' is doubtful; and the phrase seems rather to express, as the Revised Version puts it, 'His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.' That might mean that those who fear Jehovah shall be His delight, and this would free the expression from any shade of tautology, when compared with the previous clause, and would afford a natural transition to the description of His rule. It might, on the other hand, continue the description of His personal character, and describe the inward cheerfulness of His obedience, like 'I delight to do Thy will.' In any case, the 'fear of the Lord' is represented as a sweet-smelling fragrance; and, if we adopt the former explanation, then it is almost a divine characteristic which is here attributed to the Messiah; for it is God to whom the fear of Him in men's hearts is 'an odour of a sweet smell.'

Then follow the features of His rule. His unerring judgment pierces through the seen and heard. That is the quality of a monarch after the antique pattern, when kings were judges. It does not appear that the prophet rose to the height of perceiving the divine nature of the Messiah; but we cannot but remember how far the reality transcends the prophecy, since He whose 'eyes are as a flame of fire' knows what is in man, and the earliest prayers of the Church were addressed to Jesus as 'Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men.'

The relation of Messiah to two classes is next set forth. The oppressed and the meek shall have Him for their defender and avenger,—a striking contrast to the oppressive monarchs whom Isaiah had seen. We remember who said 'Blessed are the poor in spirit,' 'Blessed are the meek.' The King Himself has taught us to deepen the meaning of the words of the prophet, and to find in them the expression of the law of His kingdom by which its blessings belong to those who know their need and come with humble hearts. But the same acts which are for the poor are against the oppressors. The emendation which reads 'tyrant' (*arits*) for 'earth' (*erets*) brings the two clauses descriptive of the punitive acts into parallelism, and is probably to be preferred. The same pillar was light to Israel and darkness to the Egyptians. Christ is the savour of life unto life and of death unto death. But what is His instrument of destruction? 'The rod of His mouth' or 'the breath of His lips.' And who is He whose bare word thus has power to kill and make alive? Is not this a divine prerogative? and does it not belong in the fullest sense to Him whose voice rebuked fevers, storms, and demons, and

pierced the dull, cold ear of death? Further, righteousness, the absolute conformity of character and act to the standard in the will of God, and faithfulness, the inflexible constancy, which makes a character consistent with itself, and so reliable, are represented by a striking figure as being twined together to make the girdle, which holds the vestments in place, and girds up the whole frame for effort. This righteous King 'shall not fail nor be discouraged.' He is to be reckoned on to the uttermost, or, as the New Testament puts it, He is 'the faithful and true witness.' This is the strong Son of God, who gathered all His powers together to run with patience the race set before Him, and to whom all may turn with the confidence that He is faithful 'as a Son over His own house,' and will inviolably keep the promise of His word and of His past acts.

We pass from the picture of the character and rule of the King over men to that fair vision of Paradise regained, which celebrates the universal restoration of peace between man and the animals. The picture is not to be taken as a mere allegory, as if 'lions' and 'wolves' and 'snakes' meant bad men; but it falls into line with other hints in Scripture, which trace the hostility between man and the lower creatures to sin, and shadow a future when 'the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.' The psalm which sings of man's dominion over the creatures is to be one day fulfilled; and the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches that it is already fulfilled in Christ, who will raise His brethren, for whom He tasted death, to partake in His dominion. The present order of things is transient; and if earth is to be, as some shadowy hints seem to suggest, the scene of the future glories of redeemed humanity, it may be the theatre of a fulfilment of such visions as this. But we cannot dogmatise on a subject of which we know so little, nor be sure of the extent to which symbolism enters into this sweet picture. Enough that there surely comes a time when the King of men and Lord of nature shall bring back peace between both, and restore 'the fair music that all creatures made To their great Lord.'

[Verse 10](#) begins an entirely new section, which describes the relations of Messiah's kingdom to the surrounding peoples. The picture preceding closed with the vision of the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord, and this verse proclaims the universality of Messiah's kingdom. By 'the root of Jesse' is meant, not the root from which Jesse sprang, but, in accordance with [verse 1](#), the sprout from the house of Jesse. Just as in that verse the sprout was prophesied of as growing up to be fruitbearing, so here the lowly sucker shoots to a height which makes it conspicuous from afar, and becomes, like some tall mast, a sign for the nations. The contrast between the obscure beginning and the conspicuous destiny of Messiah is the point of the prophecy. 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.' Strange elevation for a king is a cross! But it is because He has died for men that He has the right to reign over them, and that they 'shall seek' to Him. 'His resting-place shall be glorious.'

The seat of His dominion is also the seat of His repose. The beneficent activity just described is wielded from a calm, central palace, and does not break the King's tranquillity. That is a paradox, except to those who know that Jesus Christ, sitting in undisturbed rest at the right hand of God, thence works with and for His servants. His repose is full of active energy; His active energy is full of repose. And that place of calm abode is 'glorious' or, more emphatically and literally, 'glory. He shall dwell in the blaze of the uncreated glory of God,—a prediction which is only fulfilled in its true meaning by Christ's ascension and session at the right hand of God, in the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, and into which He has borne that lowly manhood which He drew from the cut-down stem of Jesse.

THE WELL-SPRING OF SALVATION

‘Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.’—[ISAIAH xii. 3.](#)

There are two events separated from each other by more than fifteen hundred years which have a bearing upon this prophecy: the one supplied the occasion for its utterance, the other claimed to be its interpretation and its fulfilment. The first of these is that scene familiar to us all, where the Israelites in the wilderness murmured for want of water, and the law-giver, being at his wits’ end what to do with his troublesome charges, took his anxieties to God, and got for an answer the command to take with him the elders of Israel and his miracle-working rod, and to go to the rock, ‘and the Lord shall stand upon the rock before thee and them, and the water shall flow forth.’ It was not the rock, nor the rod, nor Moses and the elders, but the presence of God that brought the refreshing draught. And that that incident was in Isaiah’s mind when he wrote our text is very clear to anybody who will observe that it occurs in the middle of a song of praise, which corresponds to the Israelites’ song at the Red Sea after the destruction of Pharaoh, and is part of a great prophecy in which he describes God’s future blessings and mercies under images constantly drawn from the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus in the desert. Now, that interpretation, or rather that application, of the words of my text, was very familiar to the Jews long, long before the New Testament was thought about. For, as many of you will know, there came in the course of time a number of ceremonies to be added to a feast established by Moses himself—the Feast of Tabernacles. That was a feast in which the whole body of the Israelitish people dwelt for a week in leafy booths, in order to remind them of the time when they were wanderers in the wilderness; and as is usually the case, the ritual of the celebration developed a number of additional symbolical observances which were tacked on to it in the course of centuries. Amongst these there was this very memorable one: that on each of the days of the Feast of Tabernacles, at a given point in the ceremonial, the priests went from the temple, winding down the rocky path on the temple mountain, to the Pool of Siloam in the valley below, and there in their golden vases they drew the cool sparkling water, which they bore up, and amidst the blare of trumpets and the clash of cymbals poured it on the altar, whilst the people chanted the words of my text, ‘With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.’

That ceremonial had been going on for eight hundred years from Isaiah’s time; and once more the period came round when it was to be performed; and on the seven days of the feast, punctually at the appointed time, the procession wound down the rocky slopes, drew the water in the golden vases, bore it up to the temple, and poured it upon the altar; and on the last great day of the feast, the same ceremonial went on up to a given point; and just as the last rites of the chant of our text were dying on the ears, there was a little stir amidst the crowd, which parted to make way for him, and a youngish man, of mean appearance and rustic dress, stepped forward, and there, before all the gathered multitudes and the priests standing with their empty urns, symbol of the impotence of their system, ‘on the

last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' Brethren, such a commentary, at such a time, from such a commentator, may well absolve me from the necessity of enforcing the evangelistic bearing of the words of my text. And so, then, with that understanding of the deepest meaning of these words that we have to look at, I ask you to take them in the simplest possible way, and to consider three points: the Well of Salvation, the Act of Drawing the Water, the Gladness of those that draw. 'With joy shall ye draw water out of the fountains of salvation.'

Now, with regard to the first point, let me remind you to begin with, that the idea of the word here is not that which we attach to a well, but that which we attach to a spring. It does not describe the source of salvation as being a mere reservoir, still less as being a created or manufactured thing; but there lies in it the deep idea of a source from which the water wells up by its own inward energy. Then, when we have got that explanation, and the deep, full, pregnant meaning of the word salvation as a thing past, a thing present, a thing future, a thing which negatively delivers a man from all sin and sorrow, and a thing which positively endows a man with beauty, happiness, and holiness—when we have got that, then the question next cries aloud for answer—this well-spring of salvation, is—what? Who? And the first answer and the last answer is GOD—GOD HIMSELF. It is no mere bit of drapery of the prophet's imagery, this well-spring of salvation; it is something much more substantial, much deeper than that. You remember the old psalm, 'With Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy light shall we see light'; and what David and John after him called life, Isaiah and Paul after him calls salvation. And you remember too, no doubt, the indictment of another of the prophets, laying hold of the same metaphor in order to point to the folly and the suicide of all godless living: 'My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and they have hewn out for themselves broken cisterns.' They were manufactured articles, and because they were made they could be cracked, but the fountain, because it rises by its own inherent energy, springing up into everlasting life, is all-sufficient. God Himself is the well-spring of salvation.

If I had time to enlarge upon this idea, I might remind you how nobly and blessedly that principle is confirmed when we think of this great salvation, past, present, and future, negative and positive, all-sufficient and complete, as having its origin in His deep nature, as having its process in His own finished work, and as being in its essence the communication of Himself. That last thing I should like to say a word or two about. If there is a man or a woman that thinks of salvation as if it were merely a shutting up of some material hell, or the dodging round a corner so as to escape some external consequence of transgression, let him and her hear this: the possession of God is salvation, that and nothing else. To have Him within me, that is to be saved; to have His life in His dear Son made the foundation of my life, to have my whole being penetrated and filled with God, that is the essence of the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. And because it comes unmotivated, uncaused, self-originated,

springing up from the depths of His own heart; because it is all effected by His own mighty work who has trodden the winepress alone, and, single-handed, has wrought the salvation of the race; and because its essence and heart is the communication of God Himself, and the bestowing upon us the participation in a divine nature, therefore the depth of the thought, *God Himself* is the well-fountain of salvation.

But there is still another step to take. If these things which I have only just been able to glance at in the most superficial, and perhaps, therefore, confused manner, in any measure commend themselves to your judgments and your consciences, let me ask you to go with me one step further, and to figure to yourselves the significance and the strangeness of that moment to which I have already referred, when a man stood up in the temple court, and, with distinct allusion to the whole of the multitude of Old Testament sayings, in which God and the communication of God's own energy were represented as being the fountain of salvation and the salvation from the fountain, and said, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me.' Why, what a thing—let us put it into plain, vulgar English—what a thing for a man to say—'If any man thirst.' Who art Thou that dost thus plant Thyself opposite the race, sure that Thou hast no needs like them, but, contrariwise, canst refresh and satiate the thirsty lips of them all? Who art Thou that dost proclaim Thyself as sufficient for the fruition of the mind that yearns for truth and thirsts for certitude, of the parched heart that wearies and cracks for want of love, of the will that longs to be rightly and lovingly commanded? Oh, dear brethren, not only the Titanic presumption of proposing oneself as enough for a single soul, but the inconceivable madness of proposing oneself as enough for all the race in all generations to the end of time, except on one hypothesis, marks this utterance of Him who has also said, 'I am meek and lowly of heart.' Strange lowliness! singular meekness! Who was He? Who is this that steps into the place that only a God can fill, and says, 'I can do it all. If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink'?

Dear brethren, some of us can, thank God, answer that question as I pray that every one of you may be able to answer it, 'Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ; Thou art the everlasting son of the Father. With Thee is the fountain of life; Thou Thyself art the living water.'

But I think there is a still further step to be taken. It is not only that our Lord Jesus Christ, in His nature, in His person, is the communicator of the divine life to man, just as—if you will let me take such a metaphor—just as up in the hills sometimes you will find some little tarn or loch all shut in; but having trickling from it a thread of limpid life, and, wherever it flows, the water of the loch goes; only, the one is lake and the other is river, and the latter is the medium of communication of the former to the thirsty pastures of the wilderness. And not only so, but—if I might venture to build upon a word of the context—there seems to be another consideration there. The words which precede my text are a quotation from a song of the Israelites in their former Exodus: 'The Lord Jehovah is my strength and my

song; He also is become my salvation.’ Now, if our Bible has been correct—and I do not enter upon that question—in emphasising the difference between *is* and *is become*, mark where it takes us. It takes us to this, that there was some single, definite, historical act wherein God *became* in an eminent manner and in reality what He had always been in purpose, intent, and idea. Then that to which my text originally alludes, to which it looks back, is the great deliverance wrought by the banks of the Red Sea. It was because Pharaoh and his hosts were drowned in it that Miriam and her musical sisters, with their timbrel and dance, not only said, ‘The Lord is my strength,’ but ‘He *has become* my strength’—there where the corpses are floating yet. What answers to that in the matter with which we are concerned? Brethren, it is not enough to say that God is the fountain of salvation, it is not enough to say that the Incarnate Christ is the medium of salvation. Will you take the other step with us, and say that the Cross of Christ is the realisation of the divine intention of salvation? Then He, who from everlasting was the strength and song of all the strong and the songful, *is become* the salvation of all the lost, and the fountain is ‘opened for sin and for uncleanness.’ A definite, historical act, the manifestation of Jesus Christ, is the bringing to man of the salvation of God. So much, then, for that first point to which I desired to ask your attention.

And now let me say a word or two as to the second. I wish to speak about this process of drawing from the fountain. That metaphor, without any further explanation, might very naturally suggest more idea of human effort than in reality belongs to it. Men have said: ‘Yes; no doubt God is the fountain of salvation; no doubt Christ is the river of salvation; no doubt His death is the opening of the fountain for sin and for uncleanness; but how am I to bring myself into contact and connection with it?’ And there have been all sorts of answers. Every kind of pump has been resorted to. Go up to the Agricultural Hall and you will see no end of contrivances for bringing water to the surface. There are not so many there as men have found out for themselves to bring the water of salvation to their lips, and the effect has always been the same. There has been something wrong with the valves; the pump has not worked properly; there has been something wrong with the crank; the pipe has not gone down to the water; and there has been nothing but a great jingling of empty buckets, and aching and wearied elbows, and what the woman said to Christ has been true all round, ‘Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep.’ Ay! thank God, it *is* deep; and if we let our Lord be His own interpreter, we have only to put together three sayings of His in order to come to the true meaning of this metaphor. My text says, ‘With joy ye shall draw water’; and Christ, sitting at the well of Samaria—what a strange combination of the weakness and the weariness of manhood and the strength and self-consciousness of Divinity was there!—wearied with His journey, said, ‘If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give Me to drink, thou wouldest have asked of Him and He would have given thee living water.’ So, then, drawing is asking. That is step number one.

Take another word of the Master's that I have already quoted for other purposes, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' So, then, drawing, or asking, or coming are all equivalent. That is step number two.

And, then, take another word. 'He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst.' So, then, drawing, asking, coming, all melt into the one simple word—believing. Trust in Him, and thou hast come, thou hast asked, thou hast drawn, thou dost possess.

But whilst I would lay the foundation thus broad, thus simple, do not forget, dear brethren, what I was saying about a definite historical act. You will hear people say, 'Oh, I trust in Christ!' What do you trust in Christ? You will hear people say, 'Oh, I look to the goodness of God.' Be it so. God forbid I should say a word to prevent that; but what I would insist upon is that a mere vague regard to a vague Christ is not the faith that is equivalent to drawing from the fountain of salvation. There must be a further object in a faith that saves. It must lay hold of the definite historical act in which Christ has become the salvation of the world.

Do not take it upon my words, take it upon His own. He once said to His fellow-countrymen in His lifetime, 'I am the living bread'; and many of our modern teachers would go that length heartily. Was that where Christ stopped? By no means. Was His Gospel a gospel of incarnation only? Certainly not. 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven.' Anything more? Yes; this more, 'and the bread which I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. He that eateth Me he shall live by Me.' 'Well,' say some people, 'that means following His example, accepting His teaching, being loyal to His Person, absorbing His Spirit.' Yes, it means all that; but is that all it means? Take His own commentary: 'He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood, hath eternal life.' Yes, brethren, a Christ incarnate, blessed be God! A Christ crucified, blessed be God! And not the one but *both* must be the basis of our faith and our hope.

Now, will you let me say one thing about this matter of drawing the water? It is an act of faith in a whole Jesus, and eminently in the mighty act and sacrifice of His Cross. But to go back again to the context: 'He also is become *my* salvation. 'That is what I desire, God helping me, to lay on the hearts of all my hearers—that a definite act of faith in Christ crucified is not enough unless it is a personal act, unless it is what our old Puritan forefathers used to call 'appropriating faith.' Never mind about the somewhat dry and technical phraseology; the thing is what I insist upon—'*my* salvation.' O brother! what does it matter though all Niagara were roaring past your door; you might die of thirst all the same unless you put your own lips to it. Down on your knees like Gideon's men; it is safest there; that is the only attitude in which a man can drink of this fountain. Down on your knees and put your lips to it—your very own lips—and drink for your own soul's salvation. Christ died for the world. Yes; but the world for which Christ died is made up of individuals who were

in His heart. It is Paul's words that I would beseech you to make your own: 'The Son of God, who loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*.' Every one of you is entitled to say that, if you will. You remember that verse filled with adoring contemplation that we sometimes sing, one word in which seems to me to be coloured by the too sombre doctrine of the epoch from which it came:—

'My soul looks back to see
The burden Thou didst bear,
When hanging on the accursed tree,
And *knows* her guilt was there.'

'He also is my strength and my song. He is become my salvation; therefore, in joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.'

Now, I have left myself no time to do more than say one word about that last point, the gladness of the water-drawers. It is a pretty picture in our text, full of the atmosphere and spirit of Eastern life: the cheery talk and the ringing laughter round the village well, where the shepherds with their flocks linger all day long, and the maidens from their tents come—a kind of rude Exchange in the antique world; and, says our prophet, 'As the dwellers in the land at their village springs, so ye, the weary travellers at "the eye of the desert," will draw with gladness.' So we have this joy.

Dear brethren, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is meant for something better than to make us glad, but it is meant to make us glad too, and he is but a very poor Christian who has not found that it is the joy and rejoicing of his heart. We need not put too much emphasis and stress upon that side of the truth; but we need not either suppress it or disregard it in our modern high-flown disinterestedness. There are joys worth calling so which only come from possessing this fountain of salvation. How shall I enumerate them? The best way, I think, will be to quote passages.

There is the gladness of forgiven sin and a quieted conscience: 'Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.' There is the joy of a conscious possession of God: 'Blessed are the people that know the joyful sound; they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy countenance. In Thy name shall they rejoice all the day.' There is the joy of fellowship and communion with Jesus Christ and His full presence: 'I will see you again; and your hearts shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh away from you.' There is the joy of willing obedience: 'I delight to do Thy will.' 'It is joy to the just to do judgment.' There is the joy of a bright hope of an inheritance 'incorruptible,' 'wherein ye greatly rejoice,' and there is a joy which, like that Greek fire they talk about, burns brighter under water, and glows as the darkness deepens—a joy which is independent of circum-

stances, and can say, 'Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.'

And all that, brother and friend, may be yours and mine; and then what this same prophet says may also be true: 'The ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads'—that is for the pilgrimage; 'They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away'—that is for the home. There is another prophecy in this same book of Isaiah: 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters'; that was the voice of the Christ in prophecy. There is a saying spoken in the temple courts: 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink'; that was the voice of the Christ upon earth. There is a saying at the end of Scripture—almost the last words that the Seer in Patmos heard: 'Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely'; that was the voice of the Christ from the throne. And the triple invitation comes to every soul of man in the world, and to thee, and thee, and thee, my brother. Answer, answer as the Samaritan woman did: 'Sir, give me this water that I thirst not, neither come hither' any more to draw of the broken cisterns.

THE HARVEST OF A GODLESS LIFE

‘Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the Rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips: In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow.’—ISAIAH xvii. 10, 11.

The original application of these words is to Judah’s alliance with Damascus, which Isaiah was dead against. He saw that it would only precipitate the Assyrian invasion, as in fact it did. Judah had forsaken God, and because they had done so, they had gone to seek for themselves delights—alliance with Damascus. The image of planting a garden of pleasures, and ‘vine slips of a stranger’ refers to sensuous idolatry as well as to the entangling alliance. Then follows a contemptuous description of the rapid growth of this alliance and of the care with which Israel cultivated it. ‘In a day thou makest thy plant to grow’ (or fencest it), and next morning it was in blossom, so sedulously had they nursed and fostered it. Then comes the smiting contrast of what it was all for—‘A harvest heap in the day of sickness and incurable pain.’

Now we may take this in a more general way as containing large truths which affect the life of every one of us.

I. The Sin of a Godless Life.

(a) Notice the Sin charged. It is merely negative—*forgettest*. There is no charge of positive hostility or of any overt act. This forgetfulness is most natural and easy to be fallen into. The constant pressure of the world. It indicates alienation of heart from God.

It is most common among us, far more so than active infidelity, far more so than gross sin, far more so than conscious hostility.

(b) The implied Criminality of it. He is the ‘Rock of thy strength’ and the ‘God of thy salvation.’ Rock is the grand Old Testament name of God, expressing in a pregnant metaphor both what He is in Himself and what in relation to those who trust Him. It speaks of stability, elevation, massiveness, and of defence and security. The parallel title sets Him forth as the Giver of salvation; and both names set in clear light the sinful ingratitude of forgetting God, and force home the question: ‘Do ye thus requite the Lord, oh foolish people and unwise?’

(c) The implied Absurdity of it. What a contrast between the safe ‘munitions of rocks’ and the unsheltered security of these Damascene gardens! What fools to leave the heights and come down into the plain! Think of the contrast between the sufficiency of God and the emptiness of the substitutes. Forgetfulness of Him and preference of creatures cannot be put into language which does not convict it of absurdity.

II. The Busy Effort and Apparent Success of a Godless Life.

(a) If a man loses his hold on God and has not Him to stay himself on, he is driven to painful efforts to make up the loss. God is needed by every soul. If the soul is not satisfied

in Him, then there are hungry desires. This is the explanation of the feverish activity of much of our life.

(b) Such work is far harder than the work of serving God. It takes a great deal of toil to make that garden grow. The world is a hard taskmaster. God's service is easy. He sets us in Eden to till and dress it, but when we forget Him, the ground is cursed, and bears thorns and thistles, and sweat drips from our brows.

Men take more pains to damn themselves than to save themselves. There is nothing more wearying than the pursuit of pleasure. 'Pleasant plants'—that is a hopeless kind of gardening. There is nothing more degrading.

'Ye lust and desire to have,'—what a contrast is in, Ask and have! We might live even as the lilies or the ravens, or with only this difference, that we laboured, but were as uncaring and as peaceful as they.

God is *given*. The world has to be *bought*. Its terms are 'Nothing for nothing.'

(c) Such work has sometimes quick, present success.

'In the day.' It is hard for men to labour towards far-off unseen good. We like to have what will grow up in a night, like Jonah's gourd. So these present satisfactions in a worldly life appeal to worldly, sensuous natures. And it is hard to set over against these a plant which grows slowly, and only bears fruit in the next world.

III. The End of it all.

'A harvest heap in the day of grief.' This clearly points on to a solemn ending—the day of judgment.

(a) How poor the fruit will be that a God-forgetting man will take out of life! There is but *one heap* from all the long struggle. He has 'sowed much and brought home little.' What shall we take with us out of our busy years as their net result? A very small sack will be large enough to hold the harvest that many of us have reaped.

(b) All this God-forgetting life of pleasure-seeking and idolatry is bringing on a terrible, inevitable consummation.

'Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.'

No doubt there is often a harvest of grief and desperate sorrow springing, even in this life, from forgetting God. For it is only they who set their hopes on Him that are never disappointed, and only they who have chosen Him for their portion who can always say, 'I have a goodly heritage.' But the real harvest is not reaped till death has separated the time of sowing from that of ingathering. The sower shall reap; *i.e.* every man shall inherit the consequences of his deeds. 'They that have planted it shall eat it.'

(c) That harvest home will be a day of sadness to some. These are terrible words—'grief and desperate sorrow,' or 'pain and incurable sickness.' We dare not dilate on this. But if we trust in Christ and sow to the Spirit, we shall then 'rejoice before God as with the joy of harvest,' and 'return with joy, bringing our sheaves with us.'

'IN THIS MOUNTAIN'

'In this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. 7. And He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. 8. He will swallow up death in victory.'—[ISAIAH xxv. 6-8.](#)

A poet's imagination and a prophet's clear vision of the goal to which God will lead humanity are both at their highest in this great song of the future, whose winged words make music even in a translation. No doubt it starts from the comparatively small fact of the restoration of the exiled nation to its own land. But it soars far beyond that. It sees all mankind associated with them in sharing their blessings. It is the vision of God's ideal for humanity. That makes it the more remarkable that the prophet, with this wide outlook, should insist with such emphasis on the fact that it has a local centre. That phrase 'in this mountain' is three times repeated in the hymn; two of the instances occurring in the verses of my text have lying side by side with them the expressions 'all people' and 'all nations,' as if to bring together the local origin, and the universal extent, of the blessings promised.

The sweet waters that are to pour through the world well up from a spring opened 'in this mountain.' The beams that are to lighten every land stream out from a light blazing there. The world's hopes for that golden age which poets have sung, and towards which earnest social reformers have worked, and of the coming of which this prophet was sure, rest on a definite fact, done in a definite place, at a definite time. Isaiah knew the place, but what was to be done, or when it was to be done, he knew not. You and I ought to be wiser. History has taught us that Jesus Christ fulfils the visioned good that inspired the prophet's brilliant words. We might say, with allowable licence, that 'this mountain,' in which the Lord does the great things that this song magnifies, is not so much Zion as Calvary.

Brethren, in these days, when so many voices are proclaiming so many short cuts to the Millennium, this clear declaration of the source of the world's hope is worth pondering. For us all, individually, this localisation of the origin of the universal good of mankind is an offer of blessings to us if we will go thither, where the provision for the world's good is stored—'In this mountain'; therefore, to seek it anywhere else is to seek it in vain.

Now, I wish, under the impression of that conviction, to put before you just these three thoughts: where the world's food comes from; where the unveiling which gives light to the world comes from; and where the life which destroys death for the world comes from—'In this mountain.'

I. Where does the world's food come from?

Physiologists can tell, by studying the dentition—the system of the teeth—and the digestive apparatus of an animal, what it is meant to live upon, whether vegetables or flesh, or a mingled diet of both. And you can tell, if you will, by studying yourself, what, or whom,

you are meant to live upon. The poet said, 'We live by admiration, hope, and love.' But he did not say on what these faculties, which truly nourish man's spirit, are to fix and fasten. He tells of the appetites; he does not tell of their food. My text does: 'In this mountain shall the Lord make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the less well refined.' Friends, look at these hearts of yours with their yearnings, with their passionate desires, with their clamant needs. Will any human love—the purest, the sweetest, the most unselfish, the most utter in its surrender—satisfy the heart-hunger of the poorest of us? No! Look at the capacities of grasping thought and truth in our spirits, which are ever seek, seek, seeking for absolutely certain foundations on which we may build the whole structure of our beliefs. You have to go deeper down than the sand of man's thinkings and teachings before you can reach what will bear without shifting the foundations of a life's credence and confidence. Look at these tumultuous wills of ours that fancy they crave to be independent, and really crave an absolute master whom it is blessedness to obey. You will find none such beneath the stars. The very elements of our being, our heart, will, mind, desires, passions, longings, all with one voice proclaim that the only food for a man is God.

Jesus Christ brings the food that we need. Remember His own adaptation of this great vision of my text in more than one parable; such as the supper that was provided, and to which all men were invited, and, 'with one consent,' declined the invitation. Remember His own utterance, 'I am the Bread of God which came down from heaven to give life to the world.' Remembering such words, let me plead with you to listen to the voice of warning as well as of invitation, which sounds from Cradle and Cross and Throne. 'Why will ye spend your money for that which is not bread'—you know it is not—'and your labour for that which satisfieth not?'—you know it does not. Turn to Him, 'eat, and your souls shall live.' 'In this mountain is prepared a feast. . . for all nations.'

Notice that although it does not appear on the surface, and to English readers, this world's festival, in which every want is met, and every appetite satisfied, is a feast on a sacrifice. That touches the deepest need, about which I shall have a word or two to say presently. But in the meantime let me just press this upon you, that the Christ who died on the Cross is to be lived on by us; and that it is His sacrifice that is to be the nourishment of our spirits.

Would that the earnest men, who are trying to cure the world's evils and to still the world's wants, and are leaving Jesus Christ and His religion out of their programme, would take thought and ask themselves whether there is not something more in the hunger of humanity than their ovens can ever bake bread for! They are spinning ropes of sand, if they are trying to lift the world clear of its miseries and of its hunger, and are not presenting Jesus Christ. I hope I am no bigot; I know that I sympathise earnestly with all these other schemes for helping mankind, but this I am bound to say here—all of them put together will not reach the need of the case, unless they start from, and are subsidiary to, and develop out of, the presenting of the primal supply for the universal want, Christ, who alone is able to still

the hunger of men's hearts. Education will do much, but university degrees and the highest culture will not satisfy a hungry heart. Fitting environment, as it is fashionable to call it, will do a great deal, but nothing outside of a man will staunch his evils or still the hunger that coils and grips in his heart. Competent wealth is a good—there is no need to say that in Manchester—but millionaires have been known to be miserable. A heart at rest in the love of husband, wife, parent, child, is a blessing earnestly to be sought and thankfully to be treasured by us all; but there is more than that wanted. Put a man in the most favourable circumstances; give him competent worldly means; do all that modern philosophers who leave religion out of the question are trying to do; put in practice your most advanced Socialistic schemes, and you will still have a man with a hungry heart. He may not know what he wants; very often he will entirely mistake what that is, but he will be restless for want of an unknown good. Here is the only thing that will still his heart: 'The bread which I give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.'

Brother and sister, this is not a matter only for social reformers, and to be dealt with as bearing upon wide movements that influence multitudes. It comes home to you and me. Some of you do not in the least degree know what I am talking about when I speak of the hunger of men's hearts; for you have lost your appetites, as children that eat too many sweets have no desire for their wholesome meals. You have lost your appetite by feeding upon garbage, and you say you are quite content. Yes, at present; but deep down there lies in your hearts a need which will awake and speak out some day; and you will find that the husks which the swine did eat are scarcely wholesome nutriment for a man. And there are some of you that turn away with disgust, and I am glad of it, from these low, gross, sensuous delights; and are trying to satisfy yourselves with education, culture, refinement, art, science, domestic love, wealth, gratified ambition, or the like. There are tribes of degraded Indians that in times of famine eat clay. There is a little nourishment in it, and it distends their stomachs, and gives them the feeling of having had a meal. And that is like what some of you do. Dear friends, will you listen to this?—'Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?' Will you listen to this?—'I am the Bread of Life,' Will you listen to this?—'In this mountain will the Lord make unto all people a feast of fat things.'

II. Where does the unveiling that gives light to the world come from?

My text, as I have already remarked, emphatically repeats 'in this mountain' in its next clause. 'He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.'

Now, of course, the pathetic picture that is implied here, of a dark pall that lies over the whole world, suggests the idea of mourning, but still more emphatically, I think, that of obscurity and gloom. The veil prevents vision and shuts out light, and that is the picture of humanity as it presents itself before this prophet—a world of men entangled in the folds of a dark pall that lay over their heads, and swathed them round about, and prevented them

from seeing; shut them up in darkness and entangled their feet, so that they stumbled in the gloom. It is a pathetic picture, but it does not go beyond the realities of the case. For, with all our light on other matters, with all our freedom of action, with all our frequent forgetfulness of the fact that we are thus encompassed, it remains true that, apart from the emancipation and illumination that are effected by Jesus Christ, this is the picture of mankind as they are. And you are beneath that veil, and swathed, obstructively as regards light and liberty, by its heavy folds, unless Christ has freed you.

But we must go a step further than that, I think; and although one does not wish to force too much meaning on to a poetic metaphor, still I cannot help supposing that that universal pall, as I called it, which is cast over all nations, has a very definite and a very tragic meaning. There is a universal fact of human experience which answers to the figure, and that is sin. That is the black thing whose ebon folds hamper us, and darken us, and shut out the visions of God and blessedness, and all the glorious blue above us. The heavy, dark mist settles down on the plains, though the sky above is undimmed by it, and the sun is blazing in the zenith. Not one beam can penetrate through the wet, chill obstruction, and men stumble about in the fog with lamps and torches, and all the while a hundred feet up it is brightness and day. Or, if at some points the obstruction is thinned and the sun does come through, it is shorn of all its gracious beams and power to warm and cheer, and looks but like a copper-coloured, livid, angry ball. So the 'veil that is spread over all nations, 'that awful fact of universal sinfulness, shuts out God—who is our light and our joy—from us, and no other lights or joys are more than twinkling tapers in the mist. Or it makes us see Him as men in a fog see the sun—shorn of His graciousness, threatening, wrathful, unlovely.

Brethren, the fact of universal sinfulness is the outstanding fact of humanity. Jesus Christ deals with it by His death, which is God's sacrifice and the world's atonement. That Lamb of God has borne away the world's sins, and my sins and thy sins are there. By the fact of His death He has rent the veil from the top to the bottom, and the light comes in, unhindered by the terrible solemn fact that all of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God. By His life He communicates to each of us, if we will trust our poor sinful souls to Him, a new power of living which is triumphant over temptation, and gives the victory over sin if we will be true to Him. And so the last shreds of the veil, like the torn clouds of a spent thunderstorm, are parted into filmy rags and float away below the horizon, leaving the untarnished heavens and the flaming sunshine; and 'we with unveiled faces' can lift them up to be irradiated by the light. 'In this mountain will the Lord destroy the covering that is spread over all nations.'

The weak point of all these schemes and methods to which I have already referred for helping humanity out of the slough, and making men happier, is that they underestimate the fact of sin. If a man comes to them and says, 'I have broken God's law. What am I to do? I have a power within me that impels me now to evil. How am I to get rid of it?' they

have no adequate answer. There is only one remedy that deals radically with the fact of human transgression; only one power that will deliver each of us, if we will, from the penalty, the guilt, the power of sin; and that is the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, and its result, the inspiration of the spirit of life that was in Jesus Christ, breathed into us from the Throne itself. Thus, and thus only, is the veil done away in Christ.

III. Lastly, where does the life that destroys death come from?

'He will swallow up death in victory,' or, as probably the word more correctly means, 'He will swallow up death *for ever*.' None of the other panaceas for the world's evils that I have been speaking of even attempt to deal with that 'Shadow feared of Man' that sits at the end of all our paths. Jesus Christ has dealt with it. Like the warrior of Judah who went down into a pit and slew a lion, He has gone down into the lair of the dreadful thing, and has come up leaving Death dead on the threshold.

By His death Christ has so altered that grim fact, which awaits us all, that to those who will trust their souls to Him it ceases to be death, even though the physical fact remains unaltered. For what is death? Is it simply the separation of soul from body, the cessation of corporeal existence? Surely not. We have to add to that all the spiritual tremors, all the dreads of passing into the unknown, and leaving this familiar order of things, and all the other reluctances and half-conscious feelings which make the difference between the death of a man and the death of a dog. And all these are swept clean away, if we believe that Jesus died, and died as our Redeemer and our Saviour. So, unconsciously and instinctively, the New Testament writers will seldom condescend to call the physical fact by the ugly old name. It has changed its character; it is 'a sleep' now; it is 'an exodus,' a 'going out' from the land of Egypt into a land of peace. It is a plucking up of the tent-pegs, according to another of the words which the writers employ for death, in preparation for entering, when the 'tabernacle is dissolved,' into 'a house not made with hands,' a stately edifice, 'eternal in the heavens.' To die in Christ is not to die, but becomes a mere change of condition and of place, to be with Him, which is far 'better.' So an Apostle who was coming within measurable distance of his own martyrdom, even whilst the headsman's block was all but in his sight, said: 'He hath abolished death,' the physical fact remaining still.

By His resurrection Jesus Christ has established immortality as a certainty for men. I can understand a man, who has persuaded himself that when he dies he is done with, dressing his limbs to die without dread if without hope. But that is a poor victory over death, which, even in the act of getting rid of the fear of it, invests it with supreme and ultimate power over humanity. Surely, surely, to believe that the grave is a blind alley, with no exit at the other end,—to believe that, however it may minister to a quiet departure, is no victory over the grave. But to die believing, on the other hand, that it is only a short tunnel through which we pass, and come out into fairer lands on the other side of the mountains, is to conquer that last foe even while it seems to conquer us.

Jesus Christ, who died that we might never die, lives that we may always live. For His immortal life will give to each of us, if we join ourselves to Him by simple faith and lowly obedience, an immortal life that shall persist through, and be increased by, the article of bodily death. And when we pass into the higher realm of fulness of joy, then— as Paul quotes the words of my text—‘shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.’

Dear brethren, gather all these thoughts together. Do they not plead with you to cast yourselves on Jesus Christ, and to turn to Him alone? He will give you the food of your souls; if you will not sit at His table you will starve. He will strip you of the covering that is cast over you, as over us all; if you will not let Him unwind its folds from your limbs, then like the clothes of a drowning man, they will sink you. He will give you immortal life, which laughs at death, and you will be able to take up the great song, ‘O Death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy victory? . . . Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory.’ ‘In this mountain’ and in this mountain only, are the food, the illumination, the life of the world. I beseech you, do not turn away from them, lest you stumble on the dark mountains, where are starvation and gloom and death, but rather join that happy company of pilgrims who sing as they march, ‘Come! let us go up to the mountain of the Lord. He will teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths.’

THE FEAST ON THE SACRIFICE

And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast.'—[ISAIAH xxv. 6.](#)

There is here a reference to Sinai, where a feast followed the vision of God. It was the sign of covenant, harmony, and relationship, and was furnished by a sacrifice.

I. The General Ideas contained in this Image of a Feast.

We meet it all through Scripture; it culminates in Christ's parables and in the 'Marriage Supper of the Lamb.'

In the image are suggested:—

Free familiarity of access, fellowship, and communion with Him.

Abundant Supply of all wants and desires.

Festal Joy.

Family Intercommunion.

II. The Feast follows on Sacrifice. We find that usage of a feast following a sacrifice existing in many races and religions. It seems to witness to a widespread consciousness of sin as disturbing our relations with God. These could be set right only by sacrifice, which therefore must precede all joyful communion with Him.

The New Testament accepts that truth and clears it from the admixture of heathenism.

God provides the Sacrifice.

It is not brought by man. There is no need for our efforts—no atonement to be found by us. The sacrifice is not meant to turn aside God's wrath.

Communion is possible through Christ.

In Him God is revealed.

Objective hindrances are taken away.

Subjective ones are removed.

Dark fears—indifference—dislike of fellowship—Sin—these make communion with God impossible.

At Sinai the elders 'saw God, and did eat and drink' Here the end of the preceding chapter shows the 'elders' gazing on the glory of Jehovah's reign in Zion.

III. The Feast consists of a Sacrifice.

Christ is the food of our souls, He and His work are meant to nourish our whole being. He is the object for all our nature.

The Sacrifice must be incorporated with us. It is not enough that it be offered, it must also be partaken of.

Now the Sacrifice is eaten by faith, and by occupation with it of each part of our being, according to its own proper action. Through love, obedience, hope, desire, we may all feed on Jesus.

The Lord's Supper presents the same thoughts, under similar symbols, as Isaiah expressed in his prophecy.

Symbolically we feast on the sacrifice when we eat the Bread which is the Body broken for us. But the true eating of the true sacrifice is by faith. *Crede et manducasti*—Believe, and thou hast eaten.

THE VEIL OVER ALL NATIONS

‘He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.’—ISAIAH xxv. 7.

The previous chapter closes with a prediction of the reign of Jehovah in Mount Zion ‘before His elders’ in Glory. The allusion apparently is to the elders being summoned up to the Mount and seeing the Glory, ‘as the body of heaven in its clearness.’ The veil in this verse is probably a similar allusion to that which covered Moses’ face. It will then be an emblem of that which obscures for ‘all nations the face of God.’ And what is that but sin?

I. Sin veils God from men’s sight.

It is not the necessary inadequacy of the finite mind to conceive of the Infinite that most tragically hides God from us. That inadequacy is compatible with true and sufficient knowledge of Him. Nor is it ‘the veils of flesh and sense,’ as we often hear it said, that hide Him. But it is our sinful moral nature that darkens His face and dulls our eyes. ‘Knowledge’ of God, being knowledge of a Person, is not merely an intellectual process. It is much more truly acquaintance than comprehension; and as such, requires, as all acquaintance does, some foundation of sympathy and appreciation.

Every sin darkens the witness to God in ourselves, In a pure nature, conscience would perfectly reveal God; but we all know too sadly and intimately how it is gradually silenced, and fails to discriminate between what pleases and what displeases God. In a pure nature, the obedient Will would perfectly reveal God and the man’s dependence on Him. We all know how sin weakens that.

Every sin diminishes our power of seeing Him in His external Revelation. Every sin ruffles the surface of the soul, which is a mirror reflecting the light that streams from Creation, from Providence, from History. A mass of black rock flung into a still lake shatters the images of the girdling woods and the overarching sky.

Every sin bribes us to forget God. It becomes our interest, as we fancy, to shut Him out of our thoughts. Adam’s impulse is to carry his guilty secret with him into hiding among the trees of the garden. We cannot shake off His presence, but we can—and when we have sinned, we have but too good reason to exercise the power—we can dismiss the thought of Him. ‘They did not *like* to retain God in their knowledge.’

Individual sins may seem of small moment, but an opaque veil can be woven out of very fine thread.

II. To veil God from our sight is fatal.

We imagine that to forget Him leaves us undisturbed in following aims disapproved by Him, and we spend effort to secure that false peace by fierce absorption in other pursuits, and impatient shaking off of all that might wake our sleeping consciousness of Him.

But what unconscious self-murder that is, which we take such pains to achieve! To know God is life eternal; to lose Him from our sight is to condemn all that is best in our nature,

all that is most conducive to blessedness, tranquillity, and strenuousness in our lives, to languish and die. Every creature separated from God is cut off from the fountain of life, and loses the life it drew from the fountain, of whatever kind that life is. And that in man which is most of kin with God languishes most when so cut off. And when we have blocked Him out from our field of vision, all that remains for us to look at suffers degradation, and becomes phantasmal, poor, unworthy to detain, and impotent to satisfy, our hungry vision.

III. The Veil is done away in Christ.

He shows us God, instead of our own false conceptions of Him, which are but distorted refractions of His true likeness. Only within the limits of Christ's revelation is there knowledge of God, as distinguished from guesses, doubtful inferences, partial glimpses. Elsewhere, the greatest certitude as to Him is a 'peradventure'; Jesus alone says 'Verily, verily.'

Jesus makes us able to see God.

Jesus makes us delight in seeing Him.

All dread of the 'steady whole of the Judge's face' is changed to the loving heart's joy in seeing its Beloved.

IV. The Veil is wholly removed hereafter.

The prophecy from which the text is taken is obviously not yet fulfilled. It waits for the perfect condition of redeemed manhood in another life. But even then, the chief reason why the Christian is warranted in cherishing an unpresumptuous hope that he will know even as he is known is not that then he will have dropped the veil of flesh and sense, but that he will have dropped the thicker, more stifling covering of sin, and, being perfectly like God, will be able perfectly to gaze on Him, and, perfectly gazing on Him, will grow ever more perfectly like Him.

The choice for each of us is whether the veil will thicken till it darkens the Face altogether, and that is death; or whether it will thin away till the last filmy remnant is gone, and 'we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.'

THE SONG OF TWO CITIES

'In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. 2. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in. 3. Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee; because he trusteth in Thee. A. Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength: 5. For He bringeth down them that dwell on high; the lofty city, He layeth it low; He layeth it low, even to the ground He bringeth it even to the dust. 6. The foot shall tread it down, even the feet of the poor, and the steps of the needy. 7. The way of the just is uprightness: Thou, most upright, dost weigh the path of the Just. 8. Yea, in the way of Thy judgments, O Lord, have we waited for Thee; the desire of our soul is to Thy name, and to the remembrance of Thee. 9. With my soul have I desired Thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek Thee early: for when Thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness. 10. Let favour be shewed to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the Lord.'—ISAIAH xxvi. 1-10.

'This song' is to be interpreted as a song, not with the cold-blooded accuracy proper to a scientific treatise. The logic of emotion is as sound as that of cool intellect, but it has its own laws and links of connection. First, the song sets in sharp contrast the two cities, describing, in [verses 1-4](#), the city of God, its strength defences, conditions of citizenship, and the peace which reigns within its walls; and in [verses 5 and 6](#) the fall and utter ruin of the robber city, its antagonist Jerusalem, on its rocky peninsula, supplies the form of Isaiah's thought; but it is only a symbol of the true city of God, the stable, invisible, but most real, polity and order of things to which men, even while wandering lonely and pilgrims, do come, if they will. It is possible even here and now to have our citizenship in the heavens, and to feel that we belong to a great community beyond the sea of time, though our feet have never trodden its golden pavements, nor our eyes seen its happy glories.

In one aspect, it is ideal, but in truth it is more real than the intrusive and false things of this fleeting present, which call themselves realities. 'The things which are' are the things above. The things here are but shows and shadows.

The city's walls are salvation. There is no need to name the architect of these fortifications. One hand only can pile their strength. God appoints salvation in lieu of all visible defences. Whom He purposes to save are saved. Whom He wills to keep safe are kept safe. They who can shelter behind that strong defence need no other. Weak, sense-governed hearts may crave something more palpable, but they do not really need it. A parapet on an Alpine road gives no real security, but only satisfies imagination. The sky needs no pillars to hold it up.

Then an unknown voice breaks in upon the song, calling on unnamed attendants to fling wide the gates. The city is conceived of as empty; its destined inhabitants must have

certain qualifications. They must be righteous, and must 'keep faithfulness' being true to the God who is 'faithful and true' in all His relations. None but the righteous can dwell in conscious citizenship with the Unseen while here, and none but the righteous can enter through the gates into the city. That requirement is founded in the very nature of the case, and is as emphatically proclaimed by the gospel as by the prophet. But the gospel tells more articulately than he was enlightened to do, how righteousness is to be won. The last vision of the Apocalypse, which is so like this song in its central idea, tells us of the fall of Babylon, of the descent to earth of the New Jerusalem, and leaves as its last message the great saying, 'Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may . . . enter in through the gate into the city.'

Our song gives some hint of similar thoughts by passing from the description of the qualifications for entrance to the celebration of the security which comes from trust. The safety which is realised within the walls of the strong city is akin to the 'perfect peace' in which he who trusts is kept; and the juxtaposition of the two representations is equivalent to the teaching that trust, which is precisely the same as the New Testament faith, is the condition of entrance. We know that faith makes righteous, because it opens the heart to receive God's gift of righteousness; but that effect of faith is implied rather than stated here, where security and peace are the main ideas. As some fugitives from the storm of war sit in security behind the battlements of a fortress, and scarcely hear the din of conflict in the open field below, the heart, which has taken refuge by trust in God, is kept in peace so deep that it passes description, and the singer is fain to give a notion of its completeness by calling it 'peace, peace.' The mind which trusts is steadied thereby, as light things lashed to a firm stay are kept steadfast, however the ship toss. The only way to get and keep fixedness of temper and spirit amid change and earthquake is to hold on to God, and then we may be stable with stability derived from the foundations of His throne to which we cling.

Therefore the song breaks into triumphant fervour of summons to all who hear it, to 'trust in Jah Jehovah for ever,' Such settled, perpetual trust is the only attitude corresponding to His mighty name, and to the realities found in His character. He is the 'Rock of Ages' the grand figure which Moses learned beneath the cliffs of Sinai and wove into his last song, and which tells us of the unchanging strength that makes a sure hiding-place for all generations, and the ample space which will hold all the souls of men, and be for a shadow from the heat, a covert from the tempest, a shelter from the foe, and a home for the homeless, with many a springing fountain in its clefts.

The great act of judgment which the song celebrates is now (*vs. 5, 6*) brought into contrast with the blessed picture of the city, and by the introductory 'for' is stated as the reason for eternal trust. The language, as it were, leaps and dances in jubilation, heaping together brief emotional and synonymous clauses. So low is the once proud city brought, that the feet of the poor tread it down. These 'poor' and 'needy' are the true Israel, the suffering saints, who

had known how cruel the sway of the fallen robber city was; and now they march across its site; and its broken columns and ruined palaces strew the ground below their feet. 'The righteous nation' of the one picture are 'the poor and needy' of the other. No doubt the prophecy has had partial accomplishments more than once or twice, when the oppressed church has triumphed, and some hoary iniquity been levelled at a blow, or toppled over by slow decay. But the complete accomplishment is yet future, and not to be realised till that last act, when all antagonism shall be ended, and the net result of the weary history of the world be found to be just these two pictures of Isaiah's—the strong city of God with its happy inhabitants, and the everlasting desolations of the fallen city of confusion.

The triumphant hurry of the song pauses for a moment to gaze upon the crash, and in [verse 7](#) gathers its lessons into a kind of proverbial saying, which is perhaps best translated 'The path of the just is smooth (or "plain"); Thou levellest smooth the path of the just.' To render 'upright' instead of 'smooth' seems to make the statement almost an identical proposition, and is tame. What is meant is, that, in the light of the end, the path which often seemed rough is vindicated. The judgment has showed that the righteous man's course had no unnecessary difficulties. The goal explains the road. The good man's path is smooth, not because of its own nature, but because God makes it so. We are to look for the clearing of our road, not to ourselves, nor to circumstances, but to Him; and even when it is engineered through rocks and roughnesses, to believe that He will make the rough places plain, or give us shoes of iron and brass to encounter them. Trust that when the journey is over the road will be explained, and that this reflection, which breaks the current of the swift song of the prophet, will be the abiding, happy conviction of heaven.

Lastly, the song looks back and tells how the poor and needy, in whose name the prophet speaks, had filled the dreary past, while the tyranny of the fallen city lasted, with yearning for the judgment which has now come at last. [Verses 8 and 9](#) breathe the very spirit of patient longing and meek hope. There is a certain tone of triumph in that 'Yea,' as if the singer would point to the great judgment now accomplished, as vindicating the long, weary hours of hope deferred. That for which 'the poor and needy' wait is the coming 'in the path of Thy judgments.' The attitude of expectance is as much the duty and support of Christians as of Israel. We have a greater future clearer before us than they had. The world needs God's coming in judgment more than ever; and it says little for either the love to God or the benevolence towards man of average Christians, that they should know so little of that yearning of soul which breathes through so much of the Old Testament. For the glory of God and the good of men, we should have the desire of our souls turned to His manifestation of Himself in His righteous judgments. It was no personal end which bred the prophet's yearning. True, the 'night' round him was dreary enough, and sorrow lay black on his people and himself; but it was God's 'name' and 'memorial' that was uppermost in his desires. That is to say, the chief object of the devout soul's longings should be the glory

of God's revealed character. And the deepest reason for wishing that He would flash forth from His hiding-place in judgments, is because such an apocalypse is the only way by which wilfully blind eyes can be made to see, and wilfully unrighteous hearts can be made to practise righteousness.

Isaiah believed in the wholesome effect of terror. His confidence in the power of judgments to teach the obstinate corresponds to the Old Testament point of view, and contains a truth for all points of view; but it is not the whole truth. We know only too well that sorrows and judgments do not work infallibly, and that men 'being often reprov'd, harden their necks.' We know, too, more clearly than any prophet of old could know, that the last arrow in God's quiver is not some unheard-of awfulness of judgment, but an unspeakable gift of love, and that if that 'favour shown to the wicked' in the life and death of God's Son does not lead him to 'learn righteousness,' nothing else will.

But while this is true, the prophet's aspirations are founded on the facts of human nature too, and judgments do sometimes startle those whom kindness had failed to touch. It is an awful thought that human nature may so steel itself against the whole armoury of divine weapons as that favour and severity are equally blunted, and the heart remains unpierced by either. It is an awful thought that there may be induced such truculent obstinacy of love of evil that, even when in 'a land of uprightness,' a man shall choose evil, and forcibly shut his eyes, that he may not see the majesty of the Lord, which he does not wish to see because it condemns his choice, and threatens to burn up him and his work together. A blasted tree when all the woods are green, a fleece dry when all around is rejoicing in the dew, a window dark when the whole city is illuminated, one black sheep amid the white flock, or anything else anomalous and alone in its evil, is less tragic than the sight, so common, of a man so sold to sin that the presence of good only makes him angry and restless. It is possible to dwell amidst the full light of Christian truth, and in a society moulded by its precepts, and to be unblest, unsoftened thereby. If not softened, then hardened; and the wicked who in the land of uprightness deals wrongfully is all the worse for the light which he hated because it showed him the sinfulness of the sin which he obstinately loved and would keep.

OUR STRONG CITY

‘In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.’—ISAIAH xxvi. 1-2.

What day is ‘that day’? The answer carries us back a couple of chapters, to the great picture drawn by the prophet of a world-wide judgment, which is followed by a burst of song from the ransomed people of Jehovah, like Miriam’s chant by the shores of the Red Sea. The ‘city of confusion,’ the centre of the power hostile to God and man, falls; and its fall is welcomed by a chorus of praises. The words of my text are the beginning of one of these songs. Whether or not there were any historical event which floated before the prophet’s mind is wholly uncertain. If there were a smaller judgment upon some city of the enemy, it passes in his view into a world-wide judgment; and my text is purely ideal, imaginative, and apocalyptic. Its nearest ally is the similar vision of the Book of the Revelation, where, when Babylon sank with a splash like a millstone in the stream, the ransomed people raised their praises.

So, then, whatever may have been the immediate horizon of the prophet, and though, there may have stood on it some historical event, the city which he sees falling is other than any material Babylon, and the strong city in which he rejoices is other than the material Jerusalem, though it may have suggested the metaphor of my text. The song fits our lips quite as closely as it did the lips from which it first sprang, thrilling with triumph: ‘We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.’

There are three things, then, here: the city, its defences, its citizens.

I. The City.

Now, no doubt the prophet was thinking of the literal Jerusalem; but the city is ideal, as is shown by the bulwarks which defend, and by the qualifications which permit entrance. And so we must pass beyond the literalities of Palestine, and, as I think, must not apply the symbol to any visible institution or organisation if we are to come to the depth and greatness of the meaning of these words. No church which is organised amongst men can be the New Testament representation of this strong city. And if the explanation is to be looked for in that direction at all, it can only be the invisible aggregate of ransomed souls which is regarded as being the Zion of the prophecy.

But perhaps even that is too definite and hard. And we are rather to think of the unseen but existent order of things or polity to which men here on earth may belong, and which will one day, after shocks and convulsions that shatter all which is merely institutional and human, be manifested still more gloriously.

The central thought that was moving in the prophet’s mind is that of the indestructible vitality of the true Israel, and the order which it represented, of which Jerusalem on its rock

was but to him a symbol. And thus for us the lesson is that, apart altogether from the existing and visible order of things in which we dwell, there is a polity to which we may belong, for 'ye are come unto Mount Zion, the city of the living God,' and that that order is indestructible. Convulsions come, every Babylon falls, all human institutions change and pass. 'The kingdoms old' are 'cast into another mould.' But persistent through them all, and at the last, high above them all, will stand the stable polity of Heaven, 'the city which hath *the* foundations.'

There is a lesson for us, brethren, in times of fluctuation, of change of opinion, of shaking of institutions, and of new social, economical, and political questions, threatening day by day to reorganise society. 'We have a strong city'; and whatever may come—and much destructive will come, and much that is venerable and antique, rooted in men's prejudices, and having survived through and oppressed the centuries, will have to go; but God's polity, His form of human society of which the perfect ideal and antitype, so to speak, lies concealed in the heavens, is everlasting. Therefore, whatsoever changes, whatsoever ancient and venerable things come to be regarded as of no account, howsoever the nations, like clay in the hands of the potter, may have to assume new forms, as certainly they will, yet the foundation of God standeth sure. And for Christian men in revolutionary epochs, whether these revolutions affect the forms in which truth is grasped, or whether they affect the moulds into which society is run, the only worthy temper is the calm, triumphant expectation that through all the dust, contradiction, and distraction, the fair city of God will be brought nearer and made more manifest to man. Isaiah, or whoever was the writer of these great words of my text, stayed his own and his people's hearts in a time of confusion and distress, by the thought that it was only Babylon that could fall, and that Jerusalem was the possessor of a charmed, immortal life.

This strong city, the order of human society which God has appointed, and which exists, though it be hidden in the heavens, will be manifested one day when, like the fair vision of the goddess rising from amidst the ocean's foam, and shedding peace and beauty over the charmed waves, there will emerge from all the wild confusion and tossing billows of the sea of the peoples the fair form of the 'Bride, the Lamb's wife.' There shall be an apocalypse of the city, and whether the old words which catch up the spirit of my text, and speak of that Holy City as 'descending from heaven' upon earth, at the close of the history of the world, are to be taken, as perhaps they are, as expressive of the truth that a renewed earth is to be the dwelling of the ransomed or no, this at least is clear, that the city shall be revealed, and when Babylon is swept away, Zion shall stand.

To this city—existent, immortal, and waiting to be revealed—you and I may belong to-day. 'We *have* a strong city.' You may lay hold of life either by the side of it which is transient and trivial and contemptible, or by the side of it which goes down through all the mutable and is rooted in eternity. As in some seaweed, far out in the depths of the ocean, the tiny

frond that floats upon the billow goes down and down and down, by filaments that bind it to the basal rock, so the most insignificant act of our fleeting days has a hold upon eternity, and life in all its moments may be knit to the permanent. We may unite our lives with the surface of time or with the centre of eternity. Though we dwell in tabernacles, we may still be 'come to Mount Zion,' and all life be awful, noble, solemn, religions, because it is all connected with the unseen city across the seas. It is for us to determine to which of these orders—the perishable, noisy and intrusive and persistent in its appeals, or the calm, silent, most real, eternal order beyond the stars—our petty lives shall attach themselves.

II. Now note, secondly, the defences.

'Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.' This 'evangelical prophet,' as he has been called, is distinguished, not only by the clearness of his anticipations of Jesus Christ and His work, but by the fulness and depth which he attaches to that word 'salvation.' He all but anticipates the New Testament completeness and fulness of meaning, and lifts it from all merely material associations of earthly or transitory deliverance, into the sphere in which we are accustomed to regard it as especially moving. By 'salvation' he means and we mean, not only negative but positive blessings. Negatively it includes the removal of every conceivable or endurable evil, 'all the ills that flesh is heir to,' whether they be evils of sin or evils of sorrow; and, positively, the investiture with every possible good that humanity is capable of, whether it be good of goodness, or good of happiness. This is what the prophet tells us is the wall and bulwark of his ideal-real city.

Mark the eloquent omission of the name of the builder of the wall. 'God' is a supplement. Salvation 'will *He* appoint for walls and bulwarks.' No need to say who it is that flings such a fortification around the city. There is only one hand that can trace the lines of such walls; only one hand that can pile their stones; only one that can lay them, as the walls of Jericho were laid, in the blood of His first-born Son. 'Salvation will He appoint for walls and bulwarks.' That is to say in a highly imaginative and picturesque form, that the defense of the City is God Himself; and it is substantially a parallel with other words which speak about Him as being 'a wall of fire round about it and the glory in the midst of it.' The fact of salvation is the wall and the bulwark. And the consciousness of the fact and the sense of possessing it, is for our poor hearts, one of our best defenses against both the evil of sin and the evil of sorrow. For nothing so robs temptation of its power, so lightens the pressure of calamities, and draws the poison from the fangs of sin and sorrow, as the assurance that the loving purpose of God to save grasps and keeps us. They who shelter behind that wall, feel that between them and sin, and them and sorrow, there rises the inexpugnable defense of an Almighty purpose and power to save, lie safe whatever betides. There is no need of other defenses. Zion

‘Needs no bulwarks,
No towers along the steep.’

God Himself is the shield and none other is required.

So, brethren, let us walk by the faith that is always confident, though it depends on an unseen hand. It is a grand thing to be able to stand, as it were, in the open, a mark for all ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ and yet to feel that around us there are walls most real, though invisible, which permit no harm to come to us. Our feeble sense-bound souls much prefer a visible wall. We, like a handrail on the stair. Though it does not at all guard the descent, it keeps our heads from getting dizzy. It is hard for us, as some travellers may have to do, to walk with steady foot and unthrobbing heart along a narrow ledge of rock with beetling precipice above us and black depths beneath, and we would like a little bit of a wall of some sort, for imagination if not for reality, between us and the sheer descent. But it is blessed to learn that naked we are clothed, solitary we have a Companion, and unarmed we have our defenceless heads covered with the shadow of the great wing, which, though sense sees it not, faith knows is there. A servant of God is never without a friend, and when most unsheltered

‘From marge to blue marge
The whole sky grows his targe,
With sun’s self for visible boss,’

beneath which he lies safe.

‘Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks,’ and if we realise, as we ought to do, His purpose to keep us safe, and His power to keep us safe, and the actual operation of His hand keeping us safe at every moment, we shall not ask that these defences shall be supplemented by the poor feeble earthworks that sense can throw up.

III. Lastly, note the citizens.

Our text is part of a ‘song,’ and is not to be interpreted in the cold-blooded fashion that might suit prose. A voice, coming from whom we know not, breaks in upon the first strain with a command, addressed to whom we know not—‘Open ye the gates’—the city thus far being supposed to be empty—‘that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.’ The central idea there is just this, ‘Thy people shall be all righteous.’ The one qualification for entrance into the city is absolute purity.

Now, brethren, that is true in regard to our present imperfect denizenship within the city; and it is true in regard to men’s passing into it in its perfect and final form. As to the former, there is nothing that you Christian people need more to have dinned into you than this, that your continuance in the state of a redeemed man, with all the security and blessing

that attach thereto, depends upon your continuing to be righteous. Every sin, every flaw, every dropping beneath our own standard in conscience of what we ought to be, has for its inevitable result that we are robbed for the time being of consciousness of the walls of the city being about us and of our being citizens thereof. 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in His holy place?' The New Testament, as emphatically as the old psalm, answers, 'He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.' 'Let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is righteous.' There is no way by which Christian men here on earth can pass into and keep within the city of the living God, except they possess personal purity, righteousness of life, and cleanness of heart.

They used to say that Venice glass was so made that any poison poured into it shattered the vessel. Any drop of sin poured into your cup of communion with God, shatters the cup and spills the wine. Whosoever thinks himself a citizen of that great city, if he falls into transgression, and soils the cleanness of his hands, and ruffles the calm of his pure heart by self-willed sinfulness, will wake to find himself not within the battlements, but lying wounded, robbed, solitary, in the pitiless desert. My brother, it is 'the righteous nation' that 'enters in,' even here on earth.

I do not need to remind you how, admittedly by us all, that is the case in regard to the final form of the city of our God, into which nothing shall enter 'that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination or maketh a lie.' Heaven can only be entered into hereafter by, as here and now it can only enter into, those who are pure of heart. All else there would shrivel as foul things born in the darkness do in the light, and be consumed in the fire. None but the pure can enter and see God.

'The nation which keepeth the truth'—that does not mean adherence to any revelation, or true creed, or the like. The word which is employed means, not truth of thought, but truth of character; and might, perhaps, be better represented by the more familiar word in such a connection, 'faithfulness.' A man who is true to God, keeping up a faithful relation to Him who is faithful to us, he, and only he, will pass into, and abide in, the city.

Now, brethren, so far our text carries us, but no further; unless, perhaps, there may be a hint of something yet deeper in the next clause of this song. If any one asks, How does the nation become righteous? the answer may lie in the immediately following exhortation—'Trust ye in the Lord for ever.' But whether that be so or not, if we want an answer to the questions, How can my stained feet be cleansed so as to be fit to tread the crystal pavements? how can my foul garments be so purged as not to be a blot and an eyesore, beside the white, lustrous robes that sweep along them and gather no defilement there? the only answer that I know of is to be found by turning to the final visions of the New Testament, where the spirit of this whole section of our prophet is reproduced. Again, Babylon falls amidst the songs of saints; and then, down upon all the dust and confusion of the crash of ruin, the seer beholds the Lamb's wife, the new Jerusalem, descending from above. To his

happy eyes its glories are unveiled, its golden streets, its open gates, its walls of precious stones, its flashing river, its peaceful inhabitants, its light streaming from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And when that vision passes, his last message to us is, 'Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may enter through the gates into the city.' None but those who wash their garments, and make them white in the blood of the Lamb, can, living, come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; or, dying, can pass through the iron gate that opens to them of its own accord, and find themselves as day breaks in the street of the Jerusalem which is above.

THE INHABITANT OF THE ROCK

‘Thou wilt keep him In perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in Thee. Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength.’—[ISAIAH xxvi. 3-4](#).

There is an obvious parallel between these verses and the two preceding ones. The safety which was there set forth as the result of dwelling in the strong city is here presented as the consequence of trust. The emblem of the fortified place passes into that of the Rock of Ages. There is the further resemblance in form, that, just as in the two preceding verses we had the triumphant declaration of security followed by a summons to some unknown persons to ‘open the gates,’ so here we have the triumphant declaration of perfect peace, followed by a summons to all to ‘trust in the Lord for ever.’ If we may suppose the invocation of the preceding verses to be addressed to the watchers at the gate of the strong city, it is perhaps not too fanciful to suppose that the invitation in my text is the watcher’s answer, pointing the way by which men may pass into the city.

Whether that be so or no, at all events I take it as by no means accidental that, immediately upon the statement of the Old Testament law that righteousness alone admits to the presence of God, there follows so clear and emphatic an anticipation of the great New Testament Gospel that faith is the condition of righteousness, and that immediately after hearing that only ‘the righteous nation which keepeth the truth’ can enter there, we hear the merciful call, ‘Trust ye in the Lord for ever.’ So, then, I think we have in the words before us, though not formally yet really, very large teaching as to the nature, the object, the blessed effects, and the universal duty of that trust in the Lord which makes the very nexus between man and God, according to the teaching of the New Testament.

I. First, then, I desire to notice in a sentence the insight into the true nature of trust or faith given by the word employed here.

Now the literal meaning of the expression here rendered ‘to trust’ is to lean upon anything. As we say, trust is reliance. As a weak man might stay his faltering, tottering steps upon some strong staff, or might lean upon the outstretched arm of a friend, so we, conscious of our weakness, aware of our faltering feet, and realising the roughness of the road, and the smallness of our strength, may lay the whole weight of ourselves upon the loving strength of Jehovah.

And that is the trust of the Old Testament, the faith of the New—the simple act of reliance, going out of myself to find the basis of my being, forsaking myself to touch and rest upon the ground of my security, passing from my own weakness and laying my trembling hand into the strong hand of God, like some weak-handed youth on a coach-box who turns to a stronger beside him and says: ‘Take thou the reins, for I am feeble to direct or to restrain.’ Trust is reliance, and reliance is always blessedness.

II. Notice, secondly, the steadfast peacefulness of trust.

Now there are difficulties about the rendering and precise significance of the first verse of my text with which I do not need to trouble you. The Authorised Version, and still more perhaps the Revised Version, give substantially, as I take it, the prophet's meaning; and the margin of the Revised Version is still more literal and accurate than the text, 'A steadfast mind Thou keepest in perfect peace, because it trusteth in Thee.' If this, then, be the true meaning of the words, you observe that it is the steadfast mind, steadfast because it trusts, which God keeps In the deep peace that is expressed by the reduplication of the word.

And if we break up that complex thought into its elements, it just comes to this, first, that trust makes steadfastness. Most men's lives are blown about by winds of circumstance, directed by gusts of passion, shaped by accidents, and are fragmentary and jerky, like some ship at sea with nobody at the helm, heading here and there, as the force of the wind or the flow of the current may carry them. If my life is to be steadied, there must not only be a strong hand at the tiller, but some outward object which shall be for me the point of aim and the point of rest. No man can steady his life except by clinging to a holdfast without himself. Some of us look for that stay in the fluctuations and fleetingnesses of creatures; and some of us are wiser and saner, and look for it in the steadfastness of the unchanging God. The men who do the former are the sport of circumstances, and the slaves of their own natures, and there is no consistency in noble aim and effort throughout their lives, corresponding to their circumstances, relations, and nature. Only they who stay themselves upon God, and get down through all the superficial shifting strata of drift and gravel, to the base-rock, are steadfast and solid.

My brother, if you desire to govern yourself, you must let God govern you. If you desire to be firm, you must draw your firmness from the unchangingness of that divine nature which you grasp. How can a willow be stiffened into an iron pillar? Only—if I might use such a violent metaphor—when it receives into its substance the iron particles that it draws from the soil in which it is rooted. How can a bit of thistle-down be kept motionless amidst the tempest? Only by being glued to something that is fixed. What do men do with light things on deck when the ship is pitching? Lash them to a fixed point. Lash yourselves to God by simple trust, and then you will partake of His serene immutability in such fashion as it is possible for the creature to participate in the attributes of the Creator.

And then, still further, the steadfast mind—steadfast because it trusts—is rewarded in that it is kept by God. It is no mere mistake in the order of his thought which leads this prophet to allege that it is the steadfast mind which God keeps. For, though it is true, on the one hand, that the real fixity and solidity of a human character come more surely and fully through trust in God than by any other means, on the other hand it is true that, in order to receive the full blessed effects of trust into our characters and lives, we must persistently and doggedly keep on in the attitude of confidence. If a man holds out to God a tremulous hand with a shaking cup in it, which He sometimes presents and sometimes twitches back,

it is not to be expected that God will pour the treasure of His grace into such a vessel, with the risk of most of it being spilt upon the ground. There must be a steadfast waiting if there is to be a continual flow.

It is the mind that cleaves to God which God keeps. I suppose that there was floating before Paul's thoughts some remembrance of this great passage of the evangelical prophet when he uttered his words, which ring so strikingly with so many echoes of them, when he said, 'The peace of God which passeth understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' It is the steadfast mind that is kept in perfect peace. If we 'keep ourselves,' by that divine help which is always waiting to be given,' in the 'faith and 'love of God,' He will keep us in the hour of temptation, will keep us from falling, and will garrison our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And then, still further, this faithful, steadfast heart and mind, kept by God, is a mind filled with deepest peace. There is something very beautiful in the prophet's abandoning the attempt to find any adjective of quality which adequately characterises the peace of which he has been speaking. He falls back upon the expedient which is the confession of the impotence of human speech worthily to portray its subject when he simply says, 'Thou shalt keep in peace, peace . . . because he trusteth in Thee.' The reduplication expresses the depth, the completeness of the tranquillity which flows into the heart, Such continuity, wave after wave, or rather ripple after ripple, is possible even for us. For, dear brethren, the possession of this deep, unbroken peace does not depend on the absence of conflict, on distraction, trouble, or sorrow, but on the presence of God. If we are in touch with Him, then our troubled days may be calm, and beneath all the surface tumult there may be a centre of rest. The garrison in some high hill-fortress looks down upon the open where the enemy's ranks are crawling like insects across the grass, and scarcely hears the noise of the tumult, and no arrow can reach the lofty hold. So, up in God we may dwell at rest whate'er betide. Strange that we should prefer to live down amongst the unwalled villages, which every spoiler can harry and burn, when we might climb, and by the might and the magic of trust in the Lord bring round about ourselves a wall of fire which shall consume the poison out of the evil, even whilst it permits the sorrow to do its beneficent work upon us!

III. Note again the worthiness of the divine Name to evoke, and the power of the divine character to reward, the trust.

We pass to the last words of *my* text:—'In the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength.'

Now I suppose we all know that the words feebly rendered in the Authorised Version 'everlasting strength' are literally 'the Rock of Ages'; and that this verse is the source of that hallowed figure which, by one of the greatest of our English hymns, is made familiar and immortal to all English-speaking people.

But there is another peculiarity about the words on which I dwell for a moment, and that is, that here we have, for one of the only two times in which the expression occurs in

Scripture, the great name of Jehovah reduplicated. 'In Job Jehovah is the Rock of Ages.' In the former verse the prophet had given up in despair the attempt to characterise the peace which God gave, and fallen back upon the expedient of naming it twice over. In this verse, with similar eloquence of reticence, he abandons the attempt to describe or characterise that great Name, and in adoration, contents himself with twice taking it upon his lips, in order to *impress* what he cannot *express*, the majesty and the sufficiency of that name.

What, then, is the force of that name? We do not need, I suppose, to do more than simply remind you that there are two great thoughts communicated by that self-revelation of God which lies in it. *Jehovah*, in its literal grammatical signification, puts emphasis upon the absolute, underived, and therefore unlimited, unconditioned, unchangeable, eternal being of God. 'I AM THAT I AM.' Men and creatures are what they are made, are what they become, and some time or other cease to be what they were. But God is what He is, and is because He is. He is the Source, the Motive, the Law, the Sustenance of His own Being; and changeless and eternal He is for ever. In that name is the Rock of Ages.

That mighty name, by its place in the history of Revelation, conveys to us still further thoughts, for it is the name of the God who entered into covenant with His ancient people, and remains bound by His covenant to bless us. That is to say, He hath not left us in darkness as to the methods and purpose of His dealings with us, or as to the attitude of His heart towards us. He has bound Himself by solemn words, and by deeds as revealing as words. So we can reckon on God. To use a vulgarism which is stripped of its vulgarity if employed reverently, as I would do it—we know where to have Him. He has given us the elements to calculate His orbit; and we are sure that the calculation will come right. So, because the name flashes upon men the thought of an absolute Being, eternal, and all-sufficient, and self-modified, and changeless, and because it reveals to us the very inmost heart of the mystery, and makes it possible for us to forecast the movements of this great Sun of our heavens, therefore in the name '*Job Jehovah is the Rock of Ages.*'

The metaphor needs no expansion. We understand that it conveys the idea of unchangeable defence. As the cliffs tower above the river that swirls at their base, and takes centuries to eat the faintest line upon their shining surface, so the changeless God rises above the stream of time, of which the brief breakers are human lives, 'sparkling, bursting, borne away.' They who fasten themselves to that Rock are safe in its unchangeable strength, God the Unchangeable is the amulet against any change, that is not growth, in the lives of those who trust Him. Some of us may recall some great precipice rising above the foliage, which stands to-day as it did when we were boys, unwasted in its silent strength, while generations of leaves have opened and withered at its base, and we have passed from childhood to age. Thus, unaffected by the transiency that changes all beneath, God rises, the Rock of Ages in whom we may trust. 'The conies are a feeble folk, but they make their houses in the rocks.' So our weakness may house itself there and be at rest.

IV. Lastly, note the summons to trust.

We know not whose voice it is that is heard in the last words of my text, but we know to whose ears it is addressed. It is to all. 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever.'

Surely, surely the blessed effects of trust, of which we have been speaking, have a voice of merciful invitation summoning us to exercise it. The promise of peace appeals to the deepest, though often neglected and misunderstood, longings of the human heart. Inly we sigh for that repose.' O dear brethren, if it is true that into our agitated and struggling lives there may steal, and in them there may abide, this priceless blessing of a great tranquillity, surely nothing else should be needed to woo us to accept the conditions and put forth the trust. It is strange that we should turn away, as we are all tempted to do, from that rest in God, and try to find repose in what was only meant for stimulus, and is altogether incapable of imparting rest. Storms live in the lower regions of the atmosphere; get up higher and there is peace. Waves dash and break on the surface region of the ocean; get down deeper, nearer the heart of things, and again there is peace.

Surely the name of the Bock of Ages is an invitation to us to put our trust in Him. If a man knew God as He is, he could not choose but trust Him. It is because we have blackened His face with our own doubts, and darkened His character with the mists that rise from our own sinful hearts, that we have made that bright Sun in the heavens, which ought to fall upon our hearts with healing in its beams, into a lurid ball of fire that shines threatening through the dim obscurity of our misty hearts. But if we knew Him we should love Him, and if we would only listen to His own self-revelation, we should find that He draws us to Himself by the manifestation of Himself, as the sun binds all the planets to his mass and his flame by the irradiation of his own mystic energies.

The summons is a summons to a faith corresponding to that upon which it is built. 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever, for in the Lord is the strength that endures for ever.' Our continual faith is the only fit response to His unchanging faithfulness. Build rock upon rock.

The summons is a summons addressed to us all. 'Trust ye'—whoever ye are—in the Lord for ever.' You and I, dear friends, hear the summons in a yet more beseeching and tender voice than was audible to the prophet, for our faith has a nobler object, and may have a mightier operation, seeing that its object is 'the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world'; and its operation, to bring to us peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. When from the Cross there comes to all our hearts the merciful invitation, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,' why should not we each answer,

'Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee?'

THE GRASP THAT BRINGS PEACE

‘Let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me; yea, let him make peace with Me.’—[ISAIAH xxvii. 5](#).

Lyrical emotion makes the prophet’s language obscure by reason of its swift transitions from one mood of feeling to another. But the main drift here is discernible. God is guarding Israel, His vineyard, and before Him its foes are weak as ‘thorns and briars,’ whose end is to be burned. With daring anthropomorphism, the prophet puts into God’s mouth a longing for the enemies to measure their strength against His, a warrior’s eagerness for the fight. But at once this martial tone gives place to the tender invitation of the text, and the infinite divine willingness to be reconciled to the enemy speaks wooingly and offers conditions of peace. All this has universal application to our relations to God.

I. The Hostility.

That our relations with God are ‘strained,’ and that men are ‘enemies of God,’ is often repelled as exaggeration, if not as directly false. And, no doubt, the Scripture representation has often been so handled as to become caricature rather than portraiture. Scripture does not deny the lingering presence in men of goodness, partial and defective, nor does it assert that conscious antagonism to God is active in godless men. But it does assert that ‘God is not in all their thoughts,’ and that their wills are ‘not subject to the law of God.’ And in such a case as man’s relations to God, indifference and forgetfulness cannot but rest upon divergence of will and contrast of character. Why do men ‘not like to retain God in their knowledge, ‘but because they feel that the thought of Him would spoil the feast, like the skeleton in the banqueting chamber? Beneath the apparent indifference lie opposition of will, meeting God’s ‘Thou shalt’ with man’s ‘I will not’; opposition of moral nature, impurity shrinking from perfect purity; opposition of affection, the warmth of human love being diverted to other objects than God.

II. The entreating Love that is not turned aside by hostility.

The antagonism is wholly on man’s part.

True, man’s opposition necessarily turns certain sides of the divine character to present a hostile front to him. Not only God’s physical attributes, if we may so call them, but the moral attributes which guide the energies of these, namely, His holiness and His righteousness, and the acts of His sovereignty which flow from these, must be in opposition to the man who has set himself in opposition to God. ‘The face of the Lord is against them that do evil.’ If it were not, He would not be God.

But still, God’s love enfolds all men in its close and tender clasp. As the context says, in close connection with the threat to burn the briars and thorns, ‘Fury is not in Me.’ Man’s hostility does not rouse God’s. He wars against the sin because He still loves the sinner. His love ‘must come with a rod,’ but, at the same time, it comes ‘with the spirit of meekness.’ It gives its enemy all that it can; but it cannot give all that it would.

He stoops to sue for our amity. It is the creditor who exhausts beseechings on His debtor, so much does He wish to 'agree with His adversary quickly.' The tender pleading of the Apostle was but a faint echo of the marvellous condescension of God, when he, 'in God's stead, besought: 'Be ye reconciled to God.'

III. The grasp which ends alienation.

The word for 'strength' here means a stronghold or fortified place, which serves as an asylum or refuge. There may be some mingling of an allusion to the fugitive's taking hold of the horns of the altar, and so being safe from the vengeance of his pursuers. If we may take this double metaphor as implied in the text, it vividly illustrates the essence of the faith which brings us into peace with God. That faith is the flight of the soul to God, and, in another aspect, it is the clinging of the soul to Him. How much more these two metaphors tell of the real nature of faith than many a theological treatise! They speak of the urgency of the peril from which it seeks deliverance. A fugitive with the hot breath of the avenger of blood panting behind him, and almost feeling the spear-point in his back, would not let the grass grow under his feet. They speak of the energetic clutch of faith, as that of the man gripping the horns of the altar. They suggest that faith is something much more vital than intellectual assent or credence, namely, an act of the whole man realising his need and casting himself on God.

And they set in clear light what is the connection between faith and salvation. It is not the hand that grasps the altar that secures safety, but the altar itself. It is not the flight to the fortress, but the massive walls themselves, which keeps those who hunt after the fugitive at bay. It is not my faith, but the God on whom my faith fastens, that brings peace to my conscience.

IV. The peace that this grasp brings.

In Christ God has 'put away all His wrath, and turned Himself from the fierceness of His anger.' And He was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. It is a one-sided warfare that men wage with Him, and when we abandon our opposition to Him, the war is ended. We might say that God, clasped by faith and trusted in and loved, is the asylum from God opposed and feared. His moral nature must be against evil, but faith unites us to Jesus, and, by union with Him, we receive the germ of a nature which has no affinity with evil, and which God wholly delights in and loves. To those who live by the life, and growingly bear the image of His Son, the divine Nature turns a face all bright and favouring, and His moral and physical attributes are all enlisted on their side. The fortress looks grim to outsiders gazing up at its strong walls and frowning battlements, but to dwellers within, these give security, and in its inmost centre is a garden, with flowers and a springing fountain, whither the noise of fighting never penetrates. We have but to cease to be against Him, and to grasp the facts of His love as revealed in the Cross of Christ, the sacrifice who taketh away the sin of the world, and we are at peace with God. Being at peace with Him, the discords of our

natures warring against themselves are attuned into harmony, and we are at peace within. And when God and we are at one, and we are at one with ourselves, then all things will be on our side, and will work together for good. To such a man the ancient promise will be fulfilled: 'Thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.'

THE JUDGMENT OF DRUNKARDS AND MOCKERS

‘Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine! 2. Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and strong one, which, as a tempest of hail, and a destroying storm, as a flood of mighty waters overflowing, shall cast down to the earth with the hand. 3. The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under feet: 4. And the glorious beauty, which is on the head of the fat valley, shall be a fading flower, and as the hasty fruit before the summer; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in his hand he eateth it up. 5. In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of His people. 6. And for a spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment, and for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate. 7. But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way: the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. 8. For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean. 9. Whom shall He teach knowledge? and whom shall He make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. 10. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: 11. For with stammering lips, and another tongue, will He speak to this people. 12. To whom He said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear. 13. But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.’—[ISAIAH xxviii. 1-13](#).

This prophecy probably falls in the first years of Hezekiah, when Samaria still stood, and the storm of war was gathering black in the north. The portion included in the text predicts the fall of Samaria ([verses 1-6](#)) and then turns to Judah, which is guilty of the same sins as the northern capital, and adds to them mockery of the prophet’s message. Isaiah speaks with fiery indignation and sharp sarcasm. His words are aflame with loathing of the moral corruption of both kingdoms, and he fastens on the one common vice of drunkenness—not as if it were the only sin, but because it shows in the grossest form the rottenness underlying the apparent beauty.

I. The woe on Samaria ([verses 1-6](#)). Travellers are unanimous in their raptures over the fertility and beauty of the valley in which Samaria stood, perched on its sunny, fruitful hill, amid its vineyards. The situation of the city naturally suggests the figure which regards it as a sparkling coronet or flowery wreath, twined round the brows of the hill; and that poetical metaphor is the more natural, since revellers were wont to twist garlands in their hair, when they reclined at their orgies. The city is ‘the crown of pride’—that is, the object of

boasting and foolish confidence—and is also ‘the fading flower of his sparkling ornament’; that is, the flower which is the ornament of Ephraim, but is destined to fade.

The picture of the city passes into that of the drunken debauch, where the chief men of Samaria sprawl, ‘smitten down’ by wine, and with the innocent flowers on their hot temples drooping in the fumes of the feast. But bright and sunny as the valley is, glittering in the light as the city sits on her hill, careless and confident as the revellers are, a black cloud lies on the horizon, and one of the terrible sudden storms which such lands know comes driving up the valley. ‘The Lord hath a mighty and strong one’—the conqueror from the north, who is God’s instrument, though he knows it not.

The swift, sudden, irresistible onslaught of the Assyrian is described, in harmony with the figure of the flowery coronal, as a tempest which beats down the flowers and flings the sodden crown to the ground. The word rendered ‘tempest’ is graphic, meaning literally a ‘downpour.’ First comes hail, which batters the flowers to shreds; then the effect of the storm is described as ‘destruction,’ and then the hurrying words turn back to paint the downpour of rain, ‘mighty’ from its force in falling, and ‘overflowing’ from its abundance, which soon sets all the fields swimming with flood water. What chance has a poor twist of flowers in such a storm? Its beauty will be marred, and all the petals beaten off, and nothing remains but that it should be trampled into mud. The rush of the prophet’s denunciation is swift and irresistible as the assault it describes, and it flashes from one metaphor to another without pause. The fertility of the valley of Samaria shapes the figures. As the picture of the flowery chaplet, so that which follows of the early fig, is full of local colour. A fig in June is a delicacy, which is sure to be plucked and eaten as soon as seen. Such a dainty, desirable morsel will Samaria be, as sweet and as little satisfying to the all-devouring hunger of the Assyrian.

But storms sweep the air clear, and everything will not go down before this one. The flower fadeth, but there is a chaplet of beauty which men may wreath round their heads, which shall bloom for ever. All sensuous enjoyment has its limits in time, as well as in nobleness and exquisiteness; but when it is all done with, the beauty and festal ornament which truly crowns humanity shall smell sweet and blossom. The prophecy had regard simply to the issue of the historical disaster to which it pointed, and it meant that, after the storm of Assyrian conquest, there would still be, for the servants of God, the residue of the people, both in Israel and in Judah, a fuller possession of the blessings which descend on the men who make God their portion. But the principle involved is for ever true. The sweeping away of the perishable does draw true hearts nearer to God.

So the two halves of this prophecy give us eternal truths as to the certain destruction awaiting the joys of sense, and the permanence of the beauty and strength which belong to those who take God for their portion.

Drunkenness seems to have been a national sin in Israel; for Micah rebukes it as vehemently as Isaiah, and it is a clear bit of Christian duty in England to-day to 'set the trumpet to thy mouth and show the people' this sin. But the lessons of the prophecy are wider than the specific form of evil denounced. All setting of affection and seeking of satisfaction in that which, in all the pride of its beauty, is 'a fading flower,' is madness and sin. Into every life thus turned to the perishable will come the crash of the destroying storm, the mutterings of which might reach the ears of the feasters, if they were not drunk with the fumes of their deceiving delights. Only one kind of life has its roots in that which abides, and is safe from tempest and change. Amaranthine flowers bloom only in heaven, and must be brought thence, if they are to garland earthly foreheads. If we take God for ours, then whatever tempests may howl, and whatever fragile though fragrant joys may be swept away, we shall find in Him all that the world 'fails to give to its votaries. He is 'a crown of glory' and 'a diadem of beauty.' Our humanity is never so fair as when it is made beautiful by the possession of Him. All that sense vainly seeks in earth, faith finds in God. Not only beauty, but 'a spirit of judgment,' in its narrower sense and in its widest, is breathed into those to whom God is 'the master light of all their seeing'; and, yet more, He is strength to all who have to fight. Thus the close union of trustful souls with God, the actual inspiration of these, and the perfecting of their nature from communion with God, are taught us in the great words, which tell how beauty, justice, and strength are all given in the gift of Jehovah Himself to His people.

II. The prophet turns to Judah ([vs. 7-13](#)), and charges them with the same disgusting debauchery. His language is vehement in its loathing, and describes the filthy orgies of those who should have been the guides of the people with almost painful realism. Note how the words 'reel' and 'stagger' are repeated, and also the words 'wine' and 'strong drink.' We see the priests' and prophets' unsteady gait, and then they 'stumble' or fall. There they lie amid the filth, like hogs in a sty. It is very coarse language, but fine words are the Devil's veils for coarse sins; and it is needful sometimes to call spades spades, and not to be ashamed to tell men plainly how ugly are the vices which they are not ashamed to commit. No doubt some of the drunken priests and false prophets in Jerusalem thought Isaiah extremely vulgar and indelicate, in talking about staggering teachers and tables swimming in 'vomit.' But he had to speak out. So deep was the corruption that the officials were tipsy even when engaged in their official duties, the prophets reeled while they were seeing visions; the judges could not sit upright even when pronouncing judgment.

[Verses 9 and 10](#) are generally taken as a sarcastic quotation of the drunkards' scoffs at the prophet. They might be put in inverted commas. Their meaning is, 'Does he take us grave and reverend seigniors, priests and prophets, to be babies just weaned, that he pesters us with these monotonous petty preachings, fit only for the nursery, which he calls his

“message”?’ In [verse 10](#), the original for ‘precept upon precept,’ etc., is a series of short words, which may be taken as reproducing the ‘babbling tones of the drunken mockers.’

The loose livers of all generations talk in the same fashion about the stern morality which rebukes their vice. They call it weak, commonplace, fit for children, and they pretend that they despise it. They are much too enlightened for such antiquated teaching. Old women and children may take it in, but men of the world, who have seen life, and know what is what, are not to be fooled so. ‘What will this babbler say?’ was asked by the wise men of Athens, who were but repeating the scoffs of the prophets and priests of Jerusalem, and the same jeers are bitter in the mouth of many a profligate man to-day. It is the fate of all strict morality to be accounted childish by the people whom it inconveniently condemns.

In [verse 11](#) and onwards the prophet speaks. He catches up the mockers’ words, and retorts them. They have scoffed at his message as if it were stammering speech. They shall hear another kind of stammerers when the fierce invaders’ harsh and unintelligible language commands them. The reason why these foreign voices would have authority, was the national disregard of God’s voice. ‘Ye would not hear’ Him when, by His prophet, He spoke gracious invitations to rest, and to give the nation rest, in obedience and trust. Therefore they shall hear the battle-cry of the conqueror, and have to obey orders spoken in a barbarous tongue.

Of course, the language meant is the Assyrian, which, though cognate with Hebrew, is so unlike as to be unintelligible to the people. But is not the threat the statement of a great truth always being fulfilled towards the disobedient? If we will not listen to that loving Voice which calls us to rest, we shall be forced to listen to the harsh and strident tones of conquering enemies who command us to slavish toil. If we will not be guided by His eye and voice, we shall be governed by whip and bridle. Our choice is either to hearken to the divine call, which is loving and gentle, and invites to deep repose springing from faith, or to have to hear the voice of the taskmasters. The monotony of despised moral and religious teaching shall give place to a more terrible monotony, even that of continuous judgments.

‘The mills of God grind slowly.’ Bit by bit, with gradual steps, with dismal persistence, like the slow drops on the rock, the judgments of God trickle out on the mocking heart. It takes a long time for a child to learn a pageful when he gets his lesson a sentence at a time. So slowly do His chastisements fall on men who have despised the continuous messages of His love. The word of the Lord, which was laughed at when it clothed itself in a prophet’s speech, will be heard in more formidable shape, when it is wrapped in the long-drawn-out miseries of years of bondage. The warning is as needful for us as for these drunken priests and scornful rulers. The principle embodied is true in this day as it was then, and we too have to choose between serving God in gladness, hearkening to the voice of His word, and so finding rest to our souls, and serving the world, the flesh, and the devil, and so experiencing the perpetual dropping of the fiery rain of His judgments.

A CROWN OF PRIDE OR A CROWN OF GLORY

‘The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under feet; 4. And the glorious beauty, which is on the head of the fat valley, shall be a fading flower, and as the hasty fruit before the summer; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in his hand he eateth it up. 5. In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of his people.’—[ISAIAH xxviii. 3-5](#).

The reference is probably to Samaria as a chief city of Israel. The image is suggested by the situation of Samaria, high on a hill-side, crowning the valley, and by the rich vegetation and bright flowers which makes it even now one of the few lovely scenes in Palestine; and by the luxurious riot and sensual excess that were always characteristic of the northern kingdom.

The destruction of Samaria and of the kingdom, then, is here prophesied—the garland will fade, the hail will batter all its drooping flowerets, and it shall be trodden under foot. Look at that withered wreath that gleamed yesterday on some fair head, to-day flung into the ashpit or kicked about the street. That is a modern rendering of the prophet’s imagery. But the reference goes further than merely to the city: the whole state of the nation is expressed by the symbol, as doomed to quick decay, fading in itself, and further smitten down by divine judgments.

There is a contrasted picture, that of ‘the residue of the people’ to whom there is an amaranthine crown, a festal diadem glorious and beautiful, which can never fade, even God Himself. To them who love Him He is an ornament, and His presence is the consecration of the true joyful feast. They who are crowned by Him are crowned, not for idle revelry, but for strenuous toil (‘sit in judgment’) and for brave purpose (‘turn the battle to the gate,’) and their coronation day is ever the day when earthly garlands are withered, whether it be the crises and convulsions of nations and institutions, or times of personal trial, or ‘in the hour of death or in the day of judgment.’

Expanding then these thoughts, we have—

I. All godless joys are but fading chaplets.

Of course the first application of such words is to purely sensuous delights.

Men who seek to make life a mere revel and banquet.

Nothing is so short-lived as gratification of appetite. It is not merely that each act lasts but for a moment, but also that past gratifications leave no sort of solace to the appetite behind them; whereas past acquirements or deeds of goodness are a perpetual joy as well as the foundation of the present. There is something essentially isolated in each act of sensuous delight. No man can by so willing recall the taste of eaten food, nor slake his thirst by remembrance of former draughts, or cool himself by thinking of ‘frosty Caucasus.’ But each such gratification is done when it is done, and there is an end of its power to gratify.

Further, the power of enjoyment wanes, though the lust for it waxes. Hence each act has less and less power of satisfying.

One sees *blase* young men of twenty-five. It was a man of under thirty-five who wrote, 'Man delights not me, no, nor woman neither.' It was a used-up *roue* that was represented as saying, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' It was of sensuous 'pleasures' that poor Burns wrote,—

'Like the snowfall in the river,
A moment white,—then melts for ever.'

When a people is given over to such excess, late or soon the fate of Samaria comes upon them. Think of the French Revolution or of the fall of Rome, and learn that the prophet was announcing a law for all nations, in his fiery denunciation, and one which holds good to-day as ever.

But we may generalise more widely. Every godless life is essentially transitory; of course, all life is so in one view. But suppose two men, working side by side at the same occupation, passing through the same circumstances. So far as physical changes go, these men are the same. Both lose much. Both leave behind much. Both cease to be interested in much that was dear to them. Both die at last, and leave it all. Is there any difference? The transitoriness is the same, and the eternal consequences are eternal alike in both; and yet there is a very solemn sense in which the one man's life has utterly perished, and the other's abides. Suppose a man, educated to be a first-rate man of business, dies. Which of his trained faculties will he have scope for in that new order of things? Or a student, or a lawyer, or a statesman?

Oh, it is not our natural mortality that makes these thoughts so awful; but it is the thought that the man who is doing these things is immortal. The head which wears the fading wreath will live for ever. 'What will ye do in the end?'

II. Godly life brings unfading joys.

Communion with God yields abiding joys. The law of change remains the same. The law of death remains the same. But the motives which direct and impel the godly man are beyond the reach of change.

The habits which he contracts are for heaven as well as for earth. The treasures which he amasses will always be his.

His life in its essence and his work are one in all worlds. What a grand continuity, then, knits into one a godly life whether it is lived on earth or in heaven!

Communion with God gives beauty and ornament to the whole character. It brings the true refining and perfecting of the soul. No doubt many Christian men, as we see them, are but poor specimens of this effect of godliness; still, it is an effect produced in proportion to the depth and continuity of their communion. We might dwell on the effect on Will, Affec-

tions, Understanding, produced by dwelling in God. It is simple fact that the highest conceivable type of beauty is only reached through communion with God.

Communion with God gives power as well as gladness. The life of abiding with God is also one of strenuous effort and real warfare. In the context it is promised that God will be for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate.

The luxurious life of self-indulgence ends, as all selfish life must do, in the vanishing of delights. The life of joy in God issues, as all true joy does, in power for work and in power for conflict.

‘God doth anoint thee with His odorous oil, to wrestle, not to reign.’

III. There will be a coronation day.

‘In that day,’ the day when ‘the crown of pride shall be trodden under foot,’ the people of God are crowned with the diadem of beauty which is God Himself. That twofold work of that one day suggests—

The double aspect of trials and sorrows.

The double aspect of death.

The double aspect of final Judgment.

‘Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day.’

To be crowned or discrowned ‘in that day’ is the alternative set before each of us. Which of the two do we choose?

MAN'S CROWN AND GOD'S

'In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty.'—ISAIAH xxviii. 5.

'Thou shall also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord.'—ISAIAH lxii 3.

Connection of first prophecy—destruction of Samaria. Its situation, crowning the hill with its walls and towers, its fertile 'fat valley,' the flagrant immorality and drunkenness of its inhabitants, and its final ruin, are all presented in the highly imaginative picture of its fall as being like the trampling under foot of a garland on a reveller's head, the roses of which fade and droop amid the fumes of the banqueting hall, and are then flung out on the highway. The contrast presented is very striking and beautiful. When all that gross and tumultuous beauty has faded and died, then God Himself will be a crown of beauty to His people.

The second text comes into remarkable line with this. The verbal resemblance is not quite so strong in the original. The words for *diadem* and *crown* are not the same; the word rendered *glory* in the second text is rendered *beauty* in the first, but the two texts are entirely one in meaning. The same metaphor, then, is used with reference to what God is to the Church and what the Church is to God. He is its crown, it is His.

I. The Possession of God is the Coronation of Man.

(a) Crowns were worn by guests at feasts. They who possess God sit at a table perpetually spread with all which the soul can wish or want. Contrast the perishable delights of sense and godless life with the calm and immortal joys of communion with God; 'a crown that fadeth not away' beside withered garlands.

(b) Crowns were worn by kings. They who serve God are thereby invested with rule over selves, over circumstances, over all externals. He alone gives completeness to self-control.

(c) Crowns were worn by priests. The highest honour and dignity of man's nature is thereby reached. To have God is like a beam of sunshine on a garden, which brings out the colours of all the flowers; contrast with the same garden in the grey monotony of a cloudy twilight.

II. The Coronation of Man in God is the Coronation of God in Man.

That includes the following thoughts.

The true glory of God is in the communication of Himself. What a wonderful light that throws on divine character! It is equivalent to 'God is Love.'

He who is glorified by God glorifies God, as showing the most wonderful working of His power in making such a man out of such material, by an alchemy that can convert base metal into fine gold; as showing the most wonderful condescension of His love in taking to His heart man, into whose flesh the rotting leprosy of sin has eaten.

Such a man will glorify God by becoming a conscious herald of His praise. He who has God in his heart will magnify Him by lip and life. Redeemed men are 'secretaries of His

praise' to men, and 'to principalities and powers in heavenly places is made known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God.'

He who thus glorifies God is held in God's hand.

'None shall pluck them out of My Father's hand.'

All this will be perfected in heaven. Redeemed men lead the universal chorus that thunders forth 'glory to Him that sitteth on the throne.'

'He shall come to be glorified in His saints.'

'Glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son also may glorify Thee.'

THE FOUNDATION OF GOD

‘Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.’—*ISAIAH xxviii. 16.*

‘Therefore thus saith the Lord.’ Then these great words are God’s answer to something. And that something is the scornful defiance by the rulers of Israel of the prophet’s threatenings. By their deeds, whether by their words or no, they said that they had made friends of their enemies, and that so they were sure that, whatsoever came, they were safe. To this contemptuous and false reliance God answers, not as we might expect, first of all, by a repetition of the threatenings, but by a majestic disclosure of the sure refuge which He has provided, set in contrast to the flimsy and false ones, on which these men built their truculent confidence; ‘I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone.’ And then, after the exhibition of the great mercy which has been evoked by the very blasphemy of the rulers, and not till then, does He reiterate the threatenings of judgment, against which this foundation is laid, that men may escape; God first declares the refuge, and then warns of the tempest.

Without entering at all upon the question, which for all believing and simple souls is settled by the New Testament, of the Messianic application of the words before us, I take it for granted. There may no doubt be an allusion here to the great solid blocks which travellers tell us may still be seen at the base of the encircling walls of the Temple hill. A stone so gigantic and so firm God has laid for man to build upon.

I. Note, then, first, the foundation, which is Christ.

There are many aspects of the great thought on which I cannot touch even for a moment. For instance, let me remind you how, in a very deep sense, Jesus Christ is the foundation of the whole of the divine dealings with us; and how, in another aspect, historically, since the day on which He appeared on earth, He has more and more manifestly and completely been the foundation of the whole history of the world. But passing these aspects, let us rather fix upon those which are more immediately in the prophet’s mind.

Jesus Christ is the foundation laid for all men’s security against every tempest or assault. The context has portrayed the coming of a tremendous storm and inundation, in view of which this foundation is laid. The building reared on it then is, therefore, to be a refuge and an asylum. Have not we all of us, like these scornful men in Jerusalem, built our refuges on vain hopes, on creatural affections, on earthly possessions, on this, that, and the other false thing, all of which are to be swept away when the storm comes? And does there not come upon us all the blast of the ordinary calamities to which flesh is heir, and have we not all more or less consciousness of our own evil and sinfulness; and does there not lie before every one of us at the end of life that solemn last struggle, and beyond that, as we most of us believe, a judgment for all that we have done in the body? ‘I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone.’ Build upon that, and neither the tempest of earthly calamities, changes, disappoint-

ments, sorrows, losses, nor the scourge that is wielded because of our sins, nor the last wild tempest that sweeps a man on the wings of its strong blast from out of life into the dark region, nor the solemn final retribution and judgment, shall ever touch us. And when the hail sweeps away the refuge of lies, and the waters overflow the hiding-place, this foundation stands sure—

And lo! from sin and grief and shame
I hide me, Jesus, in Thy name.

Brethren, the one foundation on which building, we can build secure, and safe as well as secure, is that foundation which is laid in the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God. The foundation of all our security is Jesus Christ.

We may look at the same thought under somewhat different aspects. He is the foundation for all our thinking and opinions, for all our belief and our knowledge. 'In Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,' and whatsoever of solid fact men can grasp in their thinkings in regard to all the most important facts and truths with which they come into relation, is to be found in the life and death of Jesus Christ, and in the truths which these reveal. He is the foundation of all our knowledge of God, and of all our true knowledge of ourselves, of all our true knowledge of duty, and all our true knowledge of the relations between the present and the future, between man and God.

And in His life, in the history of His death and resurrection, is the only foundation for any real knowledge of the awful mysteries that lie beyond the grave. He is the Alpha from whom all truth must be deduced, the Omega to which it all leads up. Certitude is in Him. Apart from Him we are but groping amid peradventures. If we *know* anything about God it is due to Jesus Christ. If we *know* anything about ourselves it is due to Him. If we *know* anything about what men ought to do, it is because He has done all human duty. And if, into the mist and darkness that wraps the future, there has ever travelled one clear beam of insight, it is because He has died and risen again. If we have Him, and ponder upon the principles that are involved in, and flow from, the facts of His life and death, then we know; and 'the truth as it is in Jesus' is the truth indeed. To possess Him is to hold the key to all mysteries, and knowledge without Him is but knowledge of the husk, the kernel being all unreachd. That Stone is the foundation on which the whole stately fabric of man's knowledge of the highest things must ever be reared.

He is the foundation of all restful love. A Czar of Russia, in the old days, was mad enough to build a great palace upon the ice-blocks of the Neva. And when the spring came, and the foundations melted, the house, full of delights and luxury, sank beneath the river. We build upon frozen water, and when the thaw comes, what we build sinks and is lost to sight. Instead of love that twines round the creature and trails, bleeding and bruised, along the ground

when the prop is taken away, let us turn our hearts to the warm, close, pure, perfect changeless love of the undying Christ, and we shall build above the fear of change. The dove's nest in the pine-tree falls in ruin when the axe is laid to the root. Let us build our nests in the clefts of the rock and no hand will ever reach them. Christ is the foundation on which we may build an immortal love.

He is the foundation for all noble and pure living. He is the fixed pattern to which it may be conformed. Otherwise man's notions of what is virtuous and good are much at the mercy of conventional variations of opinion. This class, that community, this generation, that school, all differ in their notions of what is true nobleness and goodness of life. And we are left at the mercy of fluctuating standards unless we take Christ in His recorded life as the one realised ideal of manhood, the pattern of what we ought to be. We cannot find a fixed and available model for conduct anywhere so useful, so complete, so capable of application to all varieties of human life and disposition as we find in Him, who was not this man or that man, in whom the manly and the feminine, the gentle and the strong, the public and the private graces were equally developed. In Christ there is no limitation or taint. In Christ there is nothing narrow or belonging to a school. This water has no taste of any of the rocks through which it flowed. You cannot say of Jesus Christ that He is a Jew or a Gentile, that He is man or woman, that He is of the ancient age or the modern type, that He is cut after this pattern or that. All beauty and all grace are in Him, and every man finds there the example that he needs. So, as the perfect pattern, He is the foundation for all noble character.

As the one sufficient motive for holy and beautiful living, He is the foundation. 'If ye love Me, keep My commandments.' That is a new thing in the world's morality, and that one motive, and that motive alone, has power, as the spring sunshine has, to draw beauty from out the little sheaths of green, and to tempt the radiance of the flowers to unfold their lustre. They that find the reason and the motive for goodness and purity in Christ's love to them, and their answering love to Christ, will build a far fairer fabric of a life than any others, let them toil at the building as they may. So, dear brethren, on this foundation God has built His mercy to all generations, and on this foundation you and I may build our safety, our love, our thinkings, our obedience, and rest secure.

II. Note next the tried preciousness of the foundation.

The language of the text, 'a stone of proof,' as it reads in the original, probably means a stone which has been tested and stood the trial. And because it is thus a tested stone, it therefore is a precious stone. There are two kinds of testing—the testing from the assaults of enemies, and the testing by the building upon it of friends. And both these methods of proof have been applied, and it has stood the test.

Think of all the assaults that have been made from this side and the other against Christ and His gospel, and what has become of them all? Travellers tell us how they often see some wandering tribes of savage Arabs trying to move the great stones, for instance, of Baal-

bec—those wonders of unfinished architecture. But what can a crowd of such people, with all their crowbars and levers, do to the great stone bedded there, where it has been for centuries? They cannot stir it one hair's-breadth. And so, against Jesus Christ and His gospel there has stormed for eighteen hundred years an assaulting crowd, varying in its individuals and in its methods of attack, but the same in its purpose, and the same in the fruitlessness of its effort. Century after century they have said, as they are saying to-day, 'Now the final assault is going to be delivered; it can never stand *this*.' And when the smoke has cleared away there may be a little blackening upon the edge, but there is not a chip off its bulk, and it stands in its bed where it did; and of all the grand preparations for a shattering explosion, nothing is left but a sulphurous smell, and a wreath of smoke, and both are floating away down into the distance. Generation after generation has attacked the gospel; generation after generation has been foiled; and I do not need to be a prophet, or the son of a prophet, to be quite sure of this, that all who to-day are trying to destroy men's faith in the Incarnate Son of God, who died for them and rose again, will meet the same fate. I can see the ancient and discredited systems of unbelief, that have gone down into oblivion, rising from their seats, as the prophet in his great vision saw the kings of the earth, to greet the last comer who had fought against God and failed, with 'Art thou also become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?' The stone will stand, whosoever tries to blow it up with his dynamite, or to pound it with his hammers.

But there is the other kind of testing. One proves the foundation by building upon it. If the stone be soft, if it be slender, if it be imperfectly bedded, it will crumble, it will shift, it will sink. But this stone has borne all the weight that the world has laid upon it, and borne it up. Did any man ever come to Jesus Christ with a sorrow that He could not comfort, with a sin that He could not forgive, with a soul that He could not save? And we may trust Him to the end. He is a 'tried stone.' 'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles,' has been the experience of nineteen centuries.

So, being tried, it is precious,—precious to God who laid it there at a great and real cost to Himself—having given up 'His only begotten Son'; precious, inasmuch as building upon it is the one safety from the raging tempest and flood that would else engulf and destroy us.

III. Note, next, the process of building.

The metaphor seems to be abandoned in the last words of our text, but it is only apparently so. 'He that believeth shall not make haste.' So, then, we build by believing. The act of building is simple faith in Jesus Christ. We *come* to Him, as the Apostle Peter has it in his quotation of this text—come to Him as unto a living stone, and the coming and the building are both of them metaphors for the one simple thing, trust in the Lord. The bond that unites men on earth with Christ in Heaven, is the exercise of simple faith in Him. By it they come into contact with Him, and receive from Him the security and the blessing that He can bestow. Nothing else brings a man into living fellowship with Him. When we trust in the Lord

we, as it were, are bedded into Him; and resting upon Him with all our weight, then we are safe. That confidence involves the abandonment of all the 'refuges of lies.' There must be utter self-distrust and forsaking and turning away from every dependence upon anything else, if we are to trust ourselves to Jesus Christ. But the figure of a foundation which gives security and stability to the stones laid upon it, does not exhaust all the blessedness of this building upon Christ. For when we really rest upon Him, there comes from the foundation up through all the courses a vital power. Thus Peter puts it: 'To whom, coming as unto a living stone, ye also as living stones are built up.' We might illustrate this by the supposition of some fortress perched upon a rock, and in the heart of the rock a clear fountain, which is guided by some pipe or other into the innermost rooms of the citadel. Thus, builded upon Christ, 'our defence shall be the munitions of rocks, and our waters shall be sure.' From Him, the foundation, there will rise into all the stones, built upon Him, the power of His own endless life, and they, too, become living stones.

IV. So note, lastly, the quiet confidence of the builders.

'He that believeth shall not *make haste*.' The word is somewhat obscure, and the LXX., which is followed by the New Testament, renders it, 'Shall not be confounded or put to shame.' But the rendering of our text seems to be accurate enough. 'He shall not make haste.' Remember the picture of the context—a suddenly descending storm, a swiftly rising and turbid flood, the lashing of the rain, the howling of the wind. The men in the clay-built hovels on the flat have to take to flight to some higher ground above the reach of the inundation, on some sheltered rock out of the flashing of the rain and the force of the tempest. He who is built upon the true foundation knows that his house is above the water-level, and he does not need to be in a hurry. He can remain quietly there till the flood subsides, knowing that it will not rise high enough to drown or even disturb him. When all the other buildings are gone, his stands. And he that thus dwells on high may look out over the wild flood, washing and weltering to the horizon, and feel that he is safe. So shall he not have to make haste, but may wait calm and quiet, knowing that all is well.

Dear friends, there is only one refuge for any of us—only one from the little annoyances and from the great ones; from to-day's petty troubles, and from the day of judgment; from the slight stings, if I may so say, of little sorrows, cares, burdens, and from the poisoned dart of the great serpent. There is only one refuge for any of us, to build upon Jesus Christ, as we can do by simple faith.

And oh! remember, He must either be the foundation on which we build, or the stone of stumbling against which we stumble, and which one day will fall upon us and grind us to powder. Do you make your choice; and when God says, as He says to each of us: 'Behold! I lay in Zion a foundation,' do you say, 'And, Lord, I build upon the foundation which Thou hast laid.'

GOD'S STRANGE WORK

'That He may do His work, His strange work; and bring to pass His act, His strange act.'—[ISAIAH xxviii. 21.](#)

How the great events of one generation fall dead to another! There is something very pathetic in the oblivion that swallows up world-resounding deeds. Here the prophet selects two instances which to him are solemn and singular examples of divine judgment, and we have difficulty in finding out to what he refers. To him they seemed the most luminous illustrations he could find of the principle which he is proclaiming, and to us all the light is burned out of them. They are the darkest portion of the verse. Several different events have been suggested. But most probably the historical references here are to David's slaughter of the Philistines ([2 Sam. v.](#), and [I Chron. xiv.](#)). This is probable, but by no means certain. If so, the words are made still more threatening by asserting that He will treat the Israelites as if they were Philistines. But the point on which we should concentrate attention is this remarkable expression, according to which judgment is God's strange work. And that is made more emphatic by the use of a word translated 'act,' which means service, and is almost always used for work that is hard and heavy—a toil or a task.

I. The work in which God delights.

It is here implied that the opposite kind of activity is congenial to Him. The text declares judgment to be an anomaly, out of His ordinary course of action and foreign to His nature.

We may pause for a moment on that great thought that God has a usual course of action, which is usual because it is the spontaneous expression and true mirror of His character. What He thus does shows that character to His creatures, who cannot see Him but in the glass of His works, and have to infer His nature, as they best may, from His works. The Bible begins with His nature and thence interprets His work.

The work in which God delights is the utterance of His love in blessing.

The very essence of love is self-manifestation.

The very being of God is love, and all being delights in its own self-manifestation, in its own activity.

How great the thought is that He is glad when we let Him satisfy His nature by making us glad!

The ordinary course of His government in the world is blessing.

II. The Task in which He does not delight, or His Strange Work.

The consequences of sin are God's work. The miseries consequent on sin are self-inflicted, but they are also God's judgments on sin. We may say that sin automatically works out its results, but its results follow by the will of God on account of sin.

That work is a necessity arising from the nature of God. It is foreign to His heart but not to His nature. God is both 'the light of Israel' for blessing, and 'a consuming fire.' The two opposite effects are equally the result of the contact of God and man. Light pains a dis-

eased eye and gladdens a sound one. The sun seen through a mist becomes like a ball of red-hot iron. The whole revelation of God becomes a pain to an unloving soul.

But God's very love compels Him to punish.

Some modern notions of the love of God seem to strike out righteousness from His nature altogether, and substitute for it a mere good nature which is weakness, not love, and is cruelty, not kindness.

There is nothing in the facts of the world or in the teachings of the gospel which countenances the notion of a God whose fondness prevents Him from scourging.

What do you call it when a father spares the rod and spoils the child?

Even this world is a very serious place for a man who sets himself against its laws. Its punishments come down surely and not always slowly. There is nothing in it to encourage the idea of impunity.

That work is to Him an Unwelcome Necessity. Bold words. 'I have no pleasure in the death of a sinner.' 'He doth not willingly inflict.' The awful power of sin to divert the current of blessing. Christ's tears over Jerusalem. How unwelcome that work is to them is shown by the slowness of His judgments, by multiplied warnings. 'Rising up early,' He tells men that He will smite, in order that He may never need to smite.

That work is a certainty. However reluctantly He smites, the blow *will* fall.

III. The Strange Work of Redemption.

The mightiest miracle. The revelation of God's deepest nature. The wonder of the universe.

THE HUSBANDMAN AND HIS OPERATIONS

‘Give ye ear, and hear my voice; hearken, and hear my speech. 24. Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? doth he open and break the clods of his ground! 25. When lie hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place? 26. For his God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him. 27. For the fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument, neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod. 28. Bread corn is bruised; because he will not ever be threshing it, nor break it with the wheel of his cart, nor bruise it with his horsemen. 29. This also cometh forth from the Lord of Hosts, which is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working.’—[ISAIAH xxviii. 23-29](#).

The prophet has been foretelling a destruction which he calls God’s *strange* act. The Jews were incredulous, ‘scornful men.’ They did not believe him; and the main reason for their incredulity was that a divine destruction of the nation was so opposite to the divine conservation of it as to amount to an impossibility. God had raised up and watched over the people. He had planted it in the mountain of His inheritance, and now was it going to be thrown down by the same hand which had built it up? Impossible.

The prophet’s answer to that question is this parable of the husbandman, who has to perform a great variety of operations. He ploughs, but that is not all. He lays aside the plough when it has done its work, and takes up the seed-basket, and, in different ways, sows different seeds, scattering some broadcast, and dropping others carefully, grain by grain, into their place—‘dibbling’ it in, as we should say. But seedtime too, passes, and then he cuts down what he had so carefully sown, and pulls up what he had so sedulously planted, and, in different ways, breaks and bruises the grain. Is he inconsistent because he ploughs in winter and reaps in harvest? Does his carrying the seed-basket at one time make it impossible that he shall come with flail and threshing-oxen at another? Are not all the various operations co-operant to one end? Does not the end need them all? Is not one purpose going steadily forward through ploughing, sowing, reaping, threshing? Is not that like the work of the great Husbandman, who changes His methods and preserves His plan through them all, who has His ‘time to sow’ and His ‘time to reap,’ and who orders the affairs of men and kingdoms, for the one purpose that He may gather His wheat into His garner, and purge from it its chaff?

This parable sets forth a philosophy of the divine operations very beautiful and true, and none the less impressive for the simple garb in which it is clothed.

I. All things come from one steady, divine purpose.

We may notice in passing how reverentially the prophet believes that agriculture is taught by God. He would have said the same of cotton-spinning or coal-mining. Think how

striking a figure that is, of all the world as God's farm, where He practises His husbandry to grow the crops which He desires.

What a picture the parable gives of sedulous and patient labour for a far-off result!

It insists on the thought of one steady divine purpose ever directing the movements of the divine hand.

That is the negation of the godless theory that the affairs of men are merely the work of men, or are merely the result of impersonal causes. The world is not a jungle where any or every plant springs of itself, but it is cultivated ground which has an Owner who looks after it.

It is the affirmation that God's action is regulated by a purpose which is intelligent, unchanging, all-embracing to us because revealed.

II. That steady purpose is man's highest good.

The end of all the farmer's care is the ripening of the seed. God's purpose is our moral, intellectual, and spiritual perfecting.

Neither His own 'glory' nor man's 'happiness,' which are taken by different schools of thought to be the divine aim in creation and providence, is an object worthy of Him or adequate to explain the facts of every man's experience, unless both are regarded as needing man's perfecting, for their attainment. God's glory is to make men godlike. Man's happiness cannot be secured without His holiness.

God has larger and nobler designs for us than merely to make us happy.

'This is the will of God concerning you, even your sanctification.'

Nothing short of that end would be worthy of God, or would explain His methods.

III. That purpose needs great variety of processes.

This is true about nations and about individuals.

Different stages of growth need different treatment.

The parable names three operations:—

Ploughing, which is preparation;

Sowing, or casting in germinating principles;

Threshing, which is effected by tribulation, a word which means driving a 'tribulum' or threshing-sedge over ears of grain.

So sorrow is indispensable for our perfecting.

By it earthly affections are winnowed away, and our dependence on God increased. A certain refinement of spirit results, like the pallor on the face of a chronic invalid, which has a delicate beauty unattained by ruddy health. A capacity for sympathy, too, is often the result of one's own trials. Rightly borne, they tend to bend or break the will, and they teach how great it is to suffer and be strong.

But sorrow is not enough; joy is indispensable too. The crop is threshed in tribulation, but is grown mostly in sunshine. Calm, uneventful hours, continuous possession of blessings,

have a ministry not less than afflictions have. The corn in the furrow, waving in the western wind, and with golden sunlight among its golden stems, is preparing for the loaf no less than when bound in bundles and lying on the threshing-floor, or cut and bruised by sharp teeth of dray or heavy hoofs of oxen, or blows of swinging flails.

So do not suppose that sorrow is the only instrument for perfecting character, and see that you do not miss the sanctifying and ripening effect of your joyous hours.

Again, different types of character require different modes of treatment. In the parable, 'the fitches' are sown in one fashion, and 'the cummin' in another the 'wheat' and 'barley' in still another; and similar variety marks the methods of separating the grain from the husk, one kind of crop being threshed another having a wheel turned upon it. Thus each of us gets the kind of joys and pains that will have most effect on us. God knows where is the tenderest spot, and makes no mistakes in His dealing. He sends us 'afflictions sorted, sorrows of all sizes.'

Let us see that we trust to His loving and wise adaptation of our trials to our temperaments and needs. Let us see that we never let clouds obscure the clearness of our perception, or, failing perception, the serenity of our trust, that all things work together, and all work for our highest good—our being made like our Lord. We should less often complain of the mysteries of Providence if we had learned the meaning of Isaiah's parable.

IV. All the processes end in garnering the grain.

There is a barn or storehouse for the ripened and threshed crops. The farmer's toil and careful processes would be absurd and unintelligible if, after them all, the crop, so sedulously ripened and cultivated and cleansed, was left to rot where it fell. And no less certainly does the discipline of this life cry aloud for heaven and a conscious personal future life, if it is not to be all set down as grim irony or utterly absurd. There must be a heaven if we are not to be put to intellectual bewilderment.

What was needed for growth here drops away there, as blossoms fall when their work is done. Sunshine and rain are no more necessary when the fields are cleared and the barn-yard is filled. Much in our nature, in our earthly condition, in God's varying processes, will drop away. When school-time is done the rod is burned. But nothing will perish that can contribute to our perfecting.

So let us ask Him to purge us with His fan in His hand now, lest we should be found at last fruitless cumberers of the ground or chaff which is rootless, and fit only to be swept out of the threshing-floor.

'QUIETNESS AND CONFIDENCE'

'In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.'—ISAIAH xxx. 15.

ISRAEL always felt the difficulty of sustaining itself on the height of dependence on the unseen, spiritual power of God, and was ever oscillating between alliances with the Northern and Southern powers, linking itself with Assyria against Egypt, or with Egypt against Assyria. The effect was that whichever was victorious it suffered; it was the battleground for both, it was the prize of each in turn. The prophet's warnings were political wisdom as truly as religious.

Here Judah is exhorted to forsake the entangling dependence on Egypt, and to trust wholly to God. They had gone away from Him in their fears. They must come back by their faith. To them the great lesson was trust in God. Through them to us the same lesson is read. The principle is far wider than this one case. It is the one rule of life for us all.

The two clauses of the text convey substantially the same idea. They are in inverted parallelism. 'Returning and rest' correspond to 'quietness and confidence,' so as that 'rest' answers to 'quietness' and 'returning' to 'confidence.' In the former clause we have the action towards God and then its consequence. In the latter we have the consequence and then the action.

I. The returning.

Men depart from God by speculative thought or by anxious care, or by sin.

To 'return' is just to trust.

The parallel helps us here—'returning' is parallel with 'confidence.' This confidence is to be exercised especially in relation to one's own path in life and the outward trials and difficulties which we meet, but its sphere extends far beyond these. It is a disposition of mind which covers all things. The attitude of trust, the sense of dependence, the assurance of God's help and love are in all life the secrets of peace and power.

Am I sinful? then trust. Am I bewildered and ignorant? then trust. Am I anxious and harassed? then trust.

Note the thought, that we come back to God by simple confidence, not by preparing ourselves, not by our expiation, but only by trusting in Him.

Of course the temptations to the opposite attitude are many and great.

Note, too, that every want of confidence is a departure from God. We go away from Him not only by open sin, not only by denial of Him, but by forgetfulness, by want of faith.

The *ground* of this confidence is laid in our knowledge of Him, especially in our knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The *exercise* of this confidence is treated as voluntary. Every man is responsible for his faith.

The *elements* of this confidence are, as regards ourselves, our sense of want in all its various aspects; and, as regards Him, our assurance of His love, of His nearness to help.

II. Confiding nearness to God brings quiet rest.

'Rest' and 'being quiet' are treated here partly as consequences of faith, partly as duties which we are bound to strive to achieve.

1. See how confidence in God stills and quiets the soul.

The very exercise of communion with Him brings peace and rest, inasmuch as all things are then possessed which we can desire. There is a still fruition which nothing can equal and nothing destroy.

Trust in God brings rest from our own evil consciences.

It brings rest from our own plans and purposes.

Trust gives insight into the meaning of all this else unintelligible world.

It brings the calming and subduing of desires, which in their eagerness torture, in their fruition trouble, and in their disappointment madden.

It brings the gathering in of ourselves from all the disturbing diffusion of ourselves through earthly trifles.

2. Notice what this rest is not.

It does not mean the absence of causes of disturbance.

It does not mean the abnegation of forethought.

It does not mean an indolent passiveness.

3. Notice the duty of being thus quiet and resting.

How much we fail in this respect.

We have faith, but there seems some obstruction which stops it from flowing refreshingly through our lives.

We are bound to seek for its increased continuity and power in our hearts and lives.

III. Confidence and rest in God bring safety and strength.

That is true in the lowest sense of 'saved,' and not less true in the highest. The condition of all our salvation from temporal as well as spiritual evils lies thus in the same thing—that we trust God.

No harm comes to us when we trust, because then God is with us, and works for us, and cares for us. So all departments of life are bound together by the one law. Trust is the condition of being 'saved.'

And not only so, but also trust is strength. God works *for* us; yes, but better than that, God works *in* us and fits *us* to work.

What powers we might be in the world! Trust should make us strong. To have confidence in God should bring us power to which all other power is as nothing. He who can feel that his foot is on the rock, how firm he should stand!

Best gives strength. The rest of faith doubles our forces. To be freed from anxious care makes a man much more likely to act vigorously and to judge wisely.

Stillness of soul, born of communion with God, makes us strong.

Stillness of soul, born of deliverance from our fears, makes us strong.

Here then is a golden chain—or shall we rather say a live wire?— whereof one end is bound to the Throne and the other encircles our poor hearts. Trust, so shall we be at rest and safe. Being at rest and safe, we shall be strong. If we link ourselves with God by faith, God will flash into us His mysterious energy, and His strength will be made perfect in our weakness.

GOD'S WAITING AND MAN'S

‘And therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you, and therefore will He be exalted, that He may have mercy upon you: for the Lord is a God of judgment: blessed are they that wait for Him.’—ISAIAH xxx. 18.

God's waiting and man's—bold and beautiful, that He and we should be represented as sharing the same attitude.

I. God's waiting,

1. The first thought is—why should He wait—why does He not act at once? Because something in us hinders. We cannot enter into spiritual blessings till we are made capable of them by faith. It would not be for our good to receive some temporal blessings till sorrow has done its work on us. The great thought here is that God has a right time for help. He is ‘a God of judgment,’ *i.e.* discerns our moral condition and shapes His dealings thereby. He never gives the wrong medicine.

2. His waiting is full of work to fit us to receive His grace. It is not a mere passive standing by, till the fit conditions are seen in us; but He ‘is exalted’ while He waits, *i.e.* lifted up in the manifestation of His might, and by His energy in preparing us for the gifts that He has prepared for us. ‘He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God.’ He who prepares a place for us is preparing us for the place. He who has grace which He is ready to give us here, is making us ready for His grace. The meaning of all God's work on us is to form a character fit to possess His highest gifts.

3. His waiting is very patient. The divine husbandman ‘waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it.’ How wonderful that in a very real sense He attends on our pleasure, as it were, and lets us determine His time to work.

4. That waiting is full of divine desire to help. It is not the waiting of indifference, which says: ‘If you will have it—well and good. If not, it does not matter to Me.’ But ‘more than they that watch for the morning,’ God waits ‘that He may be gracious unto you.’

II. Man's waiting.

Our attitude is to be in some real sense analogous to His.

Its main elements are firm anticipation, patient expectation, steadfast desire, self-discipline to fit us for the influx of God's grace.

We are not to prescribe ‘times and seasons which the Father hath put in His own power.’ The clock of Eternity ticks more slowly than our short-pendulumed timepieces. ‘If the vision tarry, wait for it.’ We may well wait for God when we know that He waits for us, and that, for the most part, when He sees that we are waiting, He knows that His time is come.

But it is to be noted that the waiting desire to which He responds is directed to something better and greater than any gifts from Him, even to Himself, for it is they who ‘wait for *Him*,’ not only for His benefits apart from Himself, however precious these may be, who are blessed.

The blessedness of such waiting, how it calms the heart, brings into constant touch with God, detaches from the fever and the fret which kill, opens our eyes to mark the meanings of our life's history, and makes the divine gifts infinitely more precious when they do come.

After all, the time of waiting is at the longest very short. And when the perfect fruition is come, and we enter into the great spaces of Eternity, it will seem as an handbreadth.

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

THREE PICTURES OF ONE REALITY

‘As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem; defending also He will deliver it; and passing over He will preserve it’—**ISAIAH xxxi. 5.**

The immediate occasion of this very remarkable promise is, of course, the peril in which Jerusalem was placed by Sennacherib’s invasion; and the fulfilment of the promise was the destruction of his army before its gates. But the promise here, like all God’s promises, is eternal in substance, and applies to a community only because it applies to each member of that community. Jerusalem was saved, and that meant that every house in Jerusalem was saved, and every man in it the separate object of the divine protection. So that all the histories of Scripture, and all the histories of men in the world, are but transitory illustrations of perennial principles, and every atom of the consolation and triumph of this verse comes to each of us, as truly as it did to the men that with tremulous heart began to take cheer, as they listened to Isaiah. There is a wonderful saying in one of the other prophets which carries that lesson, where, bringing down the story of Jacob’s struggle with the angel of Peniel to the encouragement of the existing generation, he says, ‘He spake to *us*.’ They were hundreds of years after the patriarch, and yet had fallen heirs to all that God had ever said to him. So, from that point of view, I am not spiritualising, or forcing the meaning of these words, when I bring them direct into the lives of each one of ourselves.

I. And, first, I would note the very striking and beautiful pictures that are given in these verses.

There are three of them, on each of which I must touch briefly. ‘As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem.’ The form of the words in the original shows that it is the mother-bird that is thought about. And the picture rises at once of her fluttering over the nest, where the callow chickens are, unable to fly and to help themselves. It is a kind of echo of the grand metaphor in the song that is attributed to Moses, which speaks of the eagle fluttering over her nest, and taking care of her young. Jerusalem was as a nest on which, for long centuries, that infinite divine love had brooded. It was but a poor brood that had been hatched out, but yet ‘as birds flying’ He had watched over the city. Can you not almost see the mother-bird, made bold by maternal love, swooping down upon the intruder that sought to rob the nest, and spreading her broad pinion over the callow fledglings that lie below? That is what God does with us. As I said, it is a poor brood that is hatched out. That does not matter; still the Love bends down and helps. Nobody but a prophet could have ventured on such a metaphor as that, and nobody but Jesus Christ would have ventured to mend it and say, ‘As a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings,’ when there are hawks in the sky. So He, in all the past ages, was the One that ‘as birds flying . . . defended’ His people, and would have gathered them under His wings, only they would not.

Now, beautiful as this metaphor is, as it stands, it seems to me, like some brilliant piece of colouring, to derive additional beauty from its connection with the background upon

which it stands out. For just a verse before the prophet has given another emblem of what God is and does, and if you will carry with you all those thoughts of tenderness and maternal care and solicitude, and then connect them with that verse, I think the thought of His tenderness will start up into new beauty. For here is what precedes the text: 'Like as a lion, and the young lion roaring on his prey when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor bow himself for the noise of them. So shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion.' Look at these two pictures side by side, on the one hand the lion, with his paw on his prey, and the angry growl that answers when the shepherds vainly try to drag it away from him. That is God. Ay! but that is only an aspect of God. 'As birds flying, so the Lord will defend Jerusalem.' We have to take that into account too. This generation is very fond of talking about God's love; does it believe in God's wrath? It is very fond of speaking about the gentleness of Jesus; has it pondered that tremendous phrase, 'the wrath of the Lamb'? The lion that growls, and the mother-bird that hovers—God is like them both. That is the first picture that is here.

The second one is not so obvious to English readers, but it is equally striking, though I do not mean to dwell upon it. The word that is translated in our text twice, 'defend' and 'defending'—'So will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem, and defending will deliver'—means, literally, 'shielding.' Thus we have the same general idea as that in the previous metaphor of the mother-bird hovering above the nest: God is like a shield held over us, and so flinging off front the broad and burnished surface of the Almighty buckler, all the darts that any foe can launch against as. 'Our God is a Sun and Shield.' I need not enlarge on this familiar metaphor.

But the third picture I wish to point to in more detail: 'Passing over, He will deliver.' Now, the word that is there rendered 'passing over,' is almost a technical word in the Old Testament, because it is that employed in reference to the Passover. And so you see the swiftness of genius with which the prophet changes his whole scene. We had the nest and the mother-bird, we had the battlefield and the shield; now we are swept away back to that night when the Destroying Angel stalked through the land, and 'passed over' the doors on which the blood had been sprinkled. And thus this God, who in one aspect may be likened to the mother-bird hovering with her little breast full of tenderness, and made brave by maternal love conquering natural timidity, and in another aspect may be likened to the broad shield behind which a man stands safe, may also be likened to that Destroying Angel that went through Egypt, and smote wherever there were not the tokens of the blood on the lintels, and 'passed over' wherever there were. Of course, the original fulfilment of this third picture is the historical case of the army of Sennacherib; outside the walls, widespread desolation; inside the walls, an untroubled night of peace. That night in Egypt is paralleled, in the old Jewish hymn that is still sung at the Passover, with the other night when Sennacherib's men were slain; and the parallel is based on our text. So, then, here is another illustration

of what I started with saying, that the past events of Scripture are transient expressions of perennial principles and tendencies. For the Passover night was not to be to the contemporaries of the prophet an event receding ever further into the dim distance, but it was a present event, and to be reproduced in that catastrophe when 'in the morning when they arose, they were all dead corpses.' And the event is being repeated to-day, and will be for each of us, if we will.

So, then, there are these three pictures—the Nest and the Mother-bird, the Battlefield and the Shield, Egypt and the Destroying Angel.

II. We note the reality meant by these pictures.

They mean the absolute promise from God of protection for His people from *every* evil. We are not to cut it down, not to say that it applies absolutely in regard to the spiritual world, but that it does not apply in regard to temporal things. Yes, it does entirely, only you have to rise to the height of God's conception of what is good and what is evil in regard to outward things, before you understand how completely, and without qualification or deduction, this promise is fulfilled to every man that puts his trust in Him. Of course, I do not need to remind you, for your own lives will do so sufficiently, that this hovering protector, this strong Shield, this Destroying Angel that passes by our houses if the blood is on the threshold, does not guarantee us any exemption from the common 'ills that flesh is heir to.' We all know that well enough. But what does it guarantee? That all the poison shall be wiped off the arrow, that all the evil shall be taken out of the evil, that it will change its character, that if we observe the conditions, the sharpest sorrow will come to us with this written on it by the Father's hand, 'With My love to My child'; that pain will be discipline, and discipline will be blessed. Ah! dear friends! I am sure there are many of us that can set to our seals that God is true in this matter, and that we have found that His rod does blossom, and that our sorest sorrows have been our greatest mercies, drawing us nearer to Him; 'Defending He will deliver, and passing over He will preserve.'

III. And now let me remind you of the way by which we can make the reality of these pictures ours.

You know that all the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament are conditional, and that there are many of them that were never fulfilled, and were spoken in order that they might not be fulfilled, if only the people took warning. I wish folk would carry a little more consciously in their minds that principle in interpreting them all, and in asking about their fulfilment. Not only in regard to these ancient events, but in regard to our individual experience, God's promises and threatenings are conditional.

Take that first metaphor of the hovering mother-bird. Listen to this expansion of it in one of the psalms: 'He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust.' The word for *trust* here means to 'fly into a refuge.' Can you not see the picture? A little brood round the parent bird, frightened by some beast of prey, or hovering hawk in

the sky, and fluttering under its wings, and all safe and huddled together there close against the warm breast, and in amongst the downy feathers. 'Under His wings shalt thou trust.' Put thou thy trust in God, and God is to thee the hovering bird, the broad shield, the Angel that 'passes over.'

Take the other picture of the Passover night. Only by our individual faith in Jesus Christ as our individual Saviour can we put the blood on our door-posts so that the Destroying Angel shall pass by. So, if we would have the sweetness of such words as these fulfilled in our daily lives, however disturbed and troubled and sorrowful and solitary they may be, the first condition is that under His wings shall we flee for refuge, and we do so by trust in Him.

But having thus fled thither, we must continue there, if we would continue under His protection. Such continuance of safety because of continuous faith is possible only by continued communion. Remember our Lord's expansion of the metaphor in His lament: 'How often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not.' We can resist the drawing. We can get away from the shelter of the wing. We can lift up our wills against Him. And what becomes of the chicken that does *not* run to the mother's pinions when the hawk is hovering? That is what becomes of the man that stops outside the refuge in Christ, or that by failure of his faith departs from that refuge. 'Ye would not; therefore your house is left unto you desolate.' That house, in the Jerusalem which God 'defends,' is *not* defended.

Another condition of divine protection is obedience. We need not expect that God will take care of us, and preserve us, when we did not ask His leave to get into the dangerous place that we find ourselves in. Many of us do the converse of what the Apostle condemns, we begin 'in the flesh,' and think we shall end 'in the Spirit'; which being translated is, we do not ask God's leave to do certain things, to enter into certain engagements or arrangements with other people, and the like, and then we expect God to come and help us in or out of them. That is by no means an uncommon form of delusion. You remember what Jesus Christ said when the Devil tried to entice Him to do a thing of that sort, by quoting Scripture to Him—'He shall give His angels charge concerning Thee, to keep Thee in all Thy ways. Cast Thyself down. Trust to the promise as a kind of parachute to keep Thee from falling bruised on the stones of the Temple-court.' Christ's answer was: 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.' You will not get God's protection in ways of your own choosing.

And so, brethren, 'all things work together for good to them that love,' to them that trust, to them that keep close, to them that obey. And for such the old faithful promise will be faithful and new once more, 'Because He hath set His love upon Me, therefore will I deliver Him'—that will be the summing up of our lives; 'and I will set Him on high because He hath known My Name,' that will be the meaning of our deaths.

THE LORD'S FURNACE

'The Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.'—ISAIAH xxxi. 9.

This very remarkable characterisation of God stands here as a kind of seal, set upon the preceding prophecy. It is the reason why that will certainly be fulfilled. And what precedes is mainly a promise of a deliverance for Israel, which was to be a destruction for Israel's enemies. It is put in very graphic and remarkable metaphors: 'Like as a lion roareth on his prey when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor abase himself for the noise of them: so shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion.' The enemies of Israel are picturesquely and poetically represented as a crowd of shepherds vainly trying to scare a lion by their shouts. He stands undaunted, with his strong paw on his prey, and the boldest of them durst not venture to drag it from beneath his claws. So, says Isaiah, with singularly daring imagery, God will put all His strength into keeping fast hold of Israel, and no one can pluck His people from His hands.

Then, with a sudden and striking change of metaphor, the prophet passes from a picture of the extreme of fierceness to one of the extreme of tenderness. 'As birds flying'—mother birds fluttering over their nests—'so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem,' hovering over it and going from side to side to defend with His broad pinions, 'passing over, He will preserve it.' These figures are next translated into the plain promise of utter discomfiture and destruction, panic and flight as the portion of the enemies of Israel, and the whole has this broad seal set to it, that He who promises is 'the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.'

We shall not understand these great words if we regard them as only a revelation of destructive and terrible power. They are that indeed, but they are far more than that. It is the very beauty and completeness of this emblem that has a double aspect, and is no less rich in joy and blessing than pregnant with warning and terror. As Isaiah says in another place, Jerusalem is 'Ariel,' which probably means 'the hearth of God.' His presence in the city is as a fire for the comfort and defence of the happy inhabitants, and at the same time for the destruction of all evil and enemies. Far more truly than He dwelt in the city of David does God dwell in the Church, and His presence is its security. What, then, of instruction and hope may we gather from this wonderful emblem?

I. In the Church, God is present as a great reservoir of fervid love.

Every language has taken fire as the symbol of love and emotion. We speak so naturally of warm love, fervent feeling, glowing earnestness, ardent enthusiasm and the like, that we are scarcely aware of using figurative language. We do not usually ascribe emotion to God, but surely the deepest and most sacred of the senses in which it is true that fire is His emblem, is that He is love. His fire is in Zion. He dwells in His Church, a storehouse of blazing love, heated seventy times seven hotter than any creatural love, and pouring out its ardours for

the quickening and gladdening of all who walk in the light of that fire, and thaw their coldness at its blaze.

Then, if so, how comes it that so many Christian Churches are ice-houses instead of furnaces? How comes it that they who profess to live in the Zion where this fire flames are themselves so cold? If God's blazing furnace is in Jerusalem, it should send the thermometer up in all the houses of the city. But what a strange contradiction it is for men to be in God's Church, the very focus and centre of His burning love, and themselves to be almost down below zero in their temperature! The Christian Church ought to be all aflame in all its members, with the fire of love kindled and alight from God Himself. Every community of Christian people ought to radiate warmth and light which it has absorbed from its present God. Our love ought to answer His, and, being caught and kindled from that mighty fire, should throw back to its source some of the heat received, in fervours of reflected love, and should pour the rest beneficently on all around. Love to God and love to man are regarded in Christian morals as beams of the same fire, only travelling in different directions. But what a miserable contrast to such an ideal the reality in so many of our churches is! A fiery furnace with its doors hung with icicles is no greater a contradiction and anomaly than a Christian Church or a single soul, which professes to have been touched by the infinite loving kindness of God, and yet lives as cold and unmoved as we do. The 'Lord's fire is in Zion.' Are there any tokens of that fire amongst us, in our own hearts and in our collective temperature as Christian Churches?

There is no religion worth calling so which has not warmth in it. We hear a great deal from people against whom I do not wish to say a word, about the danger of an 'emotional Christianity.' Agreed, if by that they mean a Christianity which has no foundation for its emotion in principle and intelligence; but not agreed if they mean to recommend a Christianity which professes to accept truths that might kindle a soul beneath the ribs of death and make the dumb sing, and yet is never moved one hair's-breadth from its quiet phlegmaticism. There is no religion without emotion. Of course it must be intelligent emotion, built upon the acceptance of divine truth, and regulated and guided by that, and so consolidated into principle, and it must be emotion which works for its living, and impels to Christian conduct. These two provisoes being attended to, then we can safely say that warmth is the test of life, and the readings of the thermometer, which measure the fervour, measure also the reality of our religion. A cold Christian is a contradiction in terms. If the adjective is certainly applicable, I am afraid the applicability of the noun is extremely doubtful. If there is no fire, what is there? Cold is death.

We want no flimsy, transitory, noisy, ignorant, hysterical agitation. Smoke is not fire. If the temperature were higher, and the fire more wisely fed, there would not be any. But we do want a more obvious and powerful effect of their solemn, glorious, and heart-melting beliefs on the affections and emotions of professing Christians, and that they may be more

mightily moved by love, to all heroisms and service and enthusiasms and to consecration which shall in some measure answer to the glowing heart of that fire of God which flames in Zion.

II. God's revelation of Himself, and presence in His Church, are an instrument of cleansing.

Fire purifies. In our great cities now there are 'disinfecting ovens,' where infected articles are taken, and exposed to a high temperature which kills the germs of disease, so that tainted things come out sweet and clean. That is what God's furnace in Zion is meant to do for us. The true way of purifying is by fire. To purify by water, as John the Baptist saw and said, is but a poor, cold way of getting outward cleanliness. Water cleanses the surface, and becomes dirty in the process. Fire cleanses within and throughout, and is not tainted thereby. You plunge some foul thing into the flame, and, as you look, the specks and spots melt out of it. Raise the temperature, and you kill the poison germs. That is the way that God cleanses His people; not by external application, but by getting up the heat. The fire of His love, the fire of His spirit, is, as St. Bernard says, a blessed fire, which 'consumes indeed, but does not hurt; which sweetly burns and blessedly lays waste, and so puts forth the force and fire against our vices, as to display the operation of the anointing oil upon our souls.' The Hebrew captives were flung into the fiery furnace. What did it burn? Only their bonds. They themselves lived and rejoiced in the intense heat. So, if we have any real possession of the divine flame, it will burn off our wrists the bands and chains of our old vices, and we shall stand pure and clean, emancipated by the fire which will consume only our sins, and be for our true selves as our native home, where we walk at liberty and expatiate in the genial warmth. That is the blessed and effectual way of purifying, which slays only the death that we carry about with us in our sin, and makes us the more truly living for its death. Cleansing is only possible if we are immersed in the Holy Ghost and in fire, as some piece of foul clay, plunged into the furnace, has all the stains melted out of it. For all sinful souls seeking after cleansing, and finding that the 'damned spot' will not 'out' for all their washing, it is surely good news and tidings of great joy that the Lord has His fire in Zion, and that its purifying power will burn out all their sin.

III. Further, there is suggested another thought: that God, in His great revelation of Himself, by which He dwells in His Church, is a power of transformation.

Fire turns all which it seizes into fire. 'Behold how much wood is kindled by how small a fire' (R.V.). The heap of green wood with the sap in it needs but a tiny light pushed into the middle, and soon it is all ablaze, transformed into ruddy brightness, and leaping heavenwards. However heavy, wet, and obstinate may be the fuel, the fire can change it into aspiring and brilliant flame.

And so God, coming to us in His 'Spirit of burning,' turns us into His own likeness, and makes us possessors of some spark of Himself. Therefore it is a great promise, 'He shall

baptize you in the Holy Ghost, and in fire.' He shall plunge you into the life-giving furnace, and so 'make His ministers like a flame of fire,' like the Lord whom they serve. The seraphim who stand round the throne are 'burning' spirits, and the purity which shines, the love which glows, the swift life which flames in them, are all derived from that unkindled and all-animating Fire who is their and our God. The transformation of all the dwellers in Zion into miniature likenesses of this fire is the very highest hope that springs from the solemn and blessed truth that the Lord has His fire in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.

IV. But, further, this figure teaches that the same divine fire may become destructive.

The emblem of fire suggests a double operation, and the very felicity of it as an emblem is that it has these two sides, and with equal naturalness may stand for a power which quickens, and for one which destroys. The difference in the effects springs not from differences in the cause, but in the objects with which the fire plays. The same God is the fire of life, the fire of love, of purifying and transformation and glad energy to whosoever will put his trust in Him, and a fire of destruction and anger unto whosoever resists Him. The alternative stands before every soul of man, to be quickened by fire or consumed by it. We may make the furnace of God our blessedness and the reservoir of a far more joyful and noble life than ever we could have lived in our coldness; or we may make it terror and destruction. There lie the two possibilities before every one of us. We cannot stand apart from Him; we have relations with Him, whether we will or no; He is something to us. He is, and must be for all, a flaming fire. We can settle whether it shall be a fire which is life-giving unto life, or a fire which is death-giving unto death.

Here are two buildings: the one the life of the man that lives apart from God, and therefore has built only with wood, hay, and stubble; the other the life of the man that lives with God and for Him, and so has built with gold, silver, and precious stones. The day and the fire come; and the fates of these two are opposite effects of the same cause. The licking tongues surround the wretched hut, built of combustibles, and up go wood and hay and stubble, in a smoking flare, and disappear. The flames play round the gold and silver and precious stones, and every leap of their light is answered by some facet of the gems that flash in their brilliancy, and give back the radiance.

You can settle which of these two is to be your fate. 'The Lord's fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.' To those who, by faith in that dear Lord who came to cast fire on earth, have opened their hearts, to the entrance of that searching, cleansing flame, and who therefore burn with kindred and answering fervours, it is joy to know that their 'God is a consuming fire,' for therein lies their hope of daily purifying and ultimate assimilation. To those, on the other hand, who have closed their hearts to the warmth of His redeeming love in Christ, and the quickening of His baptism by fire, what can the knowledge be but terror, what can contact with God in judgment be but destruction? 'The day cometh, it burneth as

a furnace; and all the proud, and all that work wickedness, shall be as stubble, and the day that cometh shall burn them up.' What will that day do for you?

THE HIDING-PLACE

‘And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.’—[ISAIAH xxxii. 2.](#)

We may well say, Of whom speaketh the prophet this? Here are distinctly attributed to one of ourselves, if we take the words in their simplicity and fulness, functions and powers which universal experience has taught us not to look for in humanity. And there have been a great many attempts—as it seems to me, altogether futile and baseless ones—to break the force of these words as a distinct prophecy of Jesus Christ. Surely the language is far too wide to have application to any real or ideal Jewish monarch, except one whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom? Surely the experience of a hundred centuries might teach men that there is *one* man, and one alone, who is the refuge from all dangers, the fruition of all desires, the rest and refreshment in all toils.

And I, for my part, have no hesitation in saying that the only reference of these words which gives full value to their wealth of blessing, is to regard them as a prophecy of *the* man—Christ Jesus; hiding in whom we are safe, ‘coming’ to whom we ‘never thirst,’ guarded and blest by whom no weariness can befall us, and dwelling in whom this weary world shall be full of refreshment and peace!

I do not need to point out the exquisite beauty of the imagery or the pathos and peace that breathe in the majestic rhythm of the words. There is something more than poetical beauty or rhetorical amplification of a single thought in those three clauses. The ‘hiding-place’ and ‘covert’ refer to one class of wants; the ‘rivers of water in a dry place’ to yet another; and ‘the shadow of a great rock in a weary land’ to yet a third. And, though they are tinged and dyed in Eastern imagery, the realities of life in Western lands, and in all ages, give them a deeper beauty than that of lovely imagery, and are the true keys to understanding their meaning. We shall, perhaps, best grasp the whole depth of that meaning according to the Messianic reference which we give to the text, if we consider the sad and solemn conception of man’s life that underlies it; the enigmatical and obstinate hope which it holds out in the teeth of all experience—‘A *man* shall be a refuge’; and the solution of the riddle in the man Christ Jesus.

I. First, there underlies this prophecy a very sad but a very true conception of human life.

The three classes of promises have correlative with them three phases of man’s condition, three diverse aspects of his need and misery. The ‘covert’ and the ‘hiding-place’ imply tempest, storm, and danger; the ‘river of water’ implies drought and thirst; ‘the shadow of a great rock’ implies lassitude and languor, fatigue and weariness. The view of life that arises from the combination of these three bears upon its front the signature of truth in the very fact that it is a sad view.

For, I suppose, notwithstanding all that we may say concerning the beauty and the blessedness scattered broadcast round about us; notwithstanding that we believe, and hold as for our lives the happy 'faith that all which we behold is full of blessing,' it needs but a very short experience of this life, and but a superficial examination of our own histories and our own hearts, in order to come to the conclusion that the world is full of strange and terrible sadness, that every life has dark tracts and long stretches of sombre tint, and that no representation is true to fact which dips its pencil only in light and flings no shadows on the canvas. There is no depth in a Chinese picture, because there is no shade. It is the wrinkles and marks of tear and wear that make the expression in a *man's* portrait. 'Life's sternest painter "is" its best.' The gloomy thoughts which are charged against Scripture are the true thoughts about man and the world as man has made it. Not, indeed, that life needs to be so, but that by reason of our own evil and departure from God there have come in as a disturbing element the retributive consequences of our own godlessness, and these have made danger where else were safety, thirst where else were rivers of water, and weariness and lassitude where else were strength and bounding hope.

So then, look for a moment at these three points that come out of my text, in order to lay the foundation for subsequent considerations.

We live a life defenceless and exposed to many a storm and tempest. I need but remind you of the adverse circumstances—the wild winds that go sweeping across the flat level, the biting blasts that come down from the snow-clad mountains of destiny that lie round the low plain upon which we live. I need but remind you of the dangers that are lodged for our spiritual life in the temptations to evil that are round us. I need but remind you of that creeping and clinging consciousness of being exposed to a divinely commissioned retribution and punishment, which perverts the Name that ought to be the basis of all our blessedness into a Name unwelcome and terrible, because threatening judgment. I need but remind you how men's sins have made it needful that when the mighty God, even the Lord, appears before them, 'it shall be very tempestuous round about him.' Men fear and ought to fear 'the blast of the breath of His nostrils,' which must burn up all that is evil. And I need but remind you of that last wild wind of Death that whirls the sin-faded leaves into dark corners where they lie and rot.

My brother, you have not lived thus long without learning how defenceless you are against the storm of adverse circumstances. You have not lived thus long without learning that though, blessed be God! there do come in all our lives long periods of halcyon rest, when 'birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave,' and the heavens above are clear as sapphire, and the sea around is transparent as opal—yet the little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, may rise on the horizon, and may thicken and blacken and grow greater and nearer till all the sky is dark, and burst in lightning and rain and fierceness of wind, till 'through the torn sail the wild tempest is streaming,' and the white crests of the waves are

like the mane of Death's pale horse leaping upon the broken ship. We have all learnt in how profound a sense, by reason of outward adverse circumstances and inward temptations, by reason of the fears of a Justice which we know is throned at the centre of the creation, by reason of a death which to us is a terror, and by reason of that universal fear of 'after death the judgment,' storm and tempest swoop upon our paths. God made the sunshine, and we have made it a storm. God made life blessed and full of safety and peace, and we have wrenched ourselves from Him and stand defenceless amidst its dangers.

Then, there is another aspect and conception of life which underlies these words of my text. The image of the desert was before the prophet's rapt vision. He saw the sand whirled into mad dancing columns before the blast which swept across the unsheltered flat, with nothing, for a day's march, to check its force. But the wilderness is not only shelterless, it is waterless too—a place in which wild and ravening thirst finds no refreshing draughts, and the tongue cleaves to the blackening gums.

'Rivers of water in a dry place'; and what is the prose fact of that? That you and I live in the midst of a world which has no correspondence with, nor power of satisfying, our truest and deepest selves—that we bear about with us a whole set of longings and needs and weaknesses and strengths and capacities, all of which, like the climbing tendrils of some creeping plant, go feeling and putting out their green fingers to lay hold of some prop and stay—that man is so made that for his rest and blessedness he must have an external object round which his spirit may cling, on which his desires may fasten and rest, by which his heart may be blessed, which shall be authority for his will, peace for his fears, sprinkling and cleansing for his conscience, light for his understanding, shall be in complete correspondence with his inward nature—be water for his thirst, and bread for his hunger.

And as thus, on the very nature which each of us carries, there is stamped the signature of dependence, and the necessity of finding an external object on which to rest; and as, further, men will not be tutored even by their own miseries or by the voice of their own wants, and ever confound their wishes with their wants and their whims with their needs, therefore it comes to pass that the appetite which was only meant to direct us to God, and to be as a wholesome hunger in order to secure our partaking with relish and delight of the divine food that is provided for it, becomes unsatisfied, a torture, and unslaked, a ravening madness; and men's needs become men's misery; and men's hunger becomes men's famine; and men's thirst becomes men's death. We do dwell in a dry land where no water is.

All about us there are these creatures of God, bright and blessed and beautiful, fit for their functions and meant to minister to our gladness. They are meant to be held in subordination. It is not meant that we should find in them the food for our souls. Wealth and honour and wisdom and love and gratified ambition and successful purpose, and whatsoever other good things a man may gather about him and achieve—he may have them all, and yet in spite of them all there will be a great aching, longing vacuity in his soul. His true and

inmost being will be groping through the darkness, like a plant growing in a cellar, for the light which alone can tinge its pale petals and swell its shrivelling blossoms to ripeness and fruit.

A dry place, as well as a dangerous place—have not you found it so? I believe that every soul of man has, if he will be honest with himself, and that there is not one among us who would not, if he were to look into the deepest facts and real governing experience of his life, confess—I thirst: ‘my soul thirsteth.’ And oh, brethren, why not go on with the quotation, and make that which is else a pain, a condition of blessedness? Why not recognise the meaning of all this restless disquiet, and say ‘My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God’?

And then there is the other idea also underlying these words, yet another phase of this sad life of ours—not only danger and drought, but also weariness and languor. The desert stretches before us again, where there is no shelter from the blast and no trickling stream amid the yellowing sand; where the fierce ball above beats down cruelly, and its hot rays are flung up cruelly into our faces, and the glare blinds us, and the stifling heat wearies us, and work is a torture and motion is misery, and we long for nothing so much as to be quiet and to hide our heads in some shade.

I was reading recently one of our last books of travel in the wilderness of the Exodus, in which the writer told how, after toiling for hours under a scorching sun, over the hot, white, marly flat, seeing nothing but a beetle or two on the way, and finding no shelter anywhere from the pitiless beating of the sunshine, the weary travellers came at last to a little Retem bush only a few feet high, and flung themselves down and tried to hide, at least, their heads, from those ‘sunbeams like swords,’ even beneath its ragged shade. And my text tells of a great rock, with blue dimness in its shadow, with haply a fern or two in the moist places of its crevices, where there is rest, and a man can lie down and be cool, while all outside is burning sun, and burning sand, and dancing mirage.

Oh! the weariness felt by us all, of plod, plod, plodding across the sand! That fatal monotony into which every man’s life stiffens, as far as outward circumstances, outward joys and pleasures go! the depressing influence of custom which takes the edge off all gladness and adds a burden to every duty! the weariness of all that tugging up the hill, of all that collar-work which we have to do! Who is there that has not his mood, and that by no means the least worthy and man-like of his moods, wherein he feels not, perhaps, that all is vanity, but—‘how infinitely wearisome it all is.’

And so every race of man that ever has lived has managed out of two miseries to make a kind of shadowy gladness; and, knowing the weariness of life and the blackness of death, has somewhat lightened the latter by throwing upon it the thought of the former, and has said, ‘Well, at any rate, if the grave be narrow and dark, and if outside “the warm precincts of the cheerful day” there be that ambiguous night, at least it is the place for sleep; and, if we cannot be sure of anything more, we shall rest then, at any rate.’ So the hope of ‘long

disquiet merged in rest' becomes almost bright, and man's weariness finds most pathetic expression in his thinking of the grave as a bed where he can stretch himself and be still. Life is hard, life is dry, life is dangerous.

II. But another thought suggested by these words is—The Mysterious Hope which shines through them.

One of ourselves shall deliver us from all this evil in life. 'A *man* shall be a refuge, rivers of water, the shadow of a great rock.' Such an expectation seems to be right in the teeth of all experience and far too high-pitched ever to be fulfilled. It appears to demand in him who should bring it to pass powers which are more than human, and which must in some inexplicable way be wide as the range of humanity and enduring as the succession of the ages.

It is worth while to realise to ourselves these two points which seem to make such words as these of our text a blank impossibility. Experience contradicts them, and common-sense demands for their fulfilment an apparently impossible human character.

All experience seems to teach—does it not?—that no human arm or heart can be to another soul what these words promise, and what we need. And yet the men who have been disappointed and disenchanted a thousand times do still look among their fellows for what their fellows, too, are looking for, and none have ever found. Have *we* found what we seek among men? Have we ever known amongst the dearest that we have clung to, one arm that was strong enough to keep us in all danger? Has there ever been a human love to which we can run with the security that *there* is a strong tower where no evil can touch us? There have been many delights in all our lives mediated and ministered to us by those that we loved. They have taught us, and helped us, and strengthened us in a thousand ways. We have received from them draughts of wisdom, of love, of joy, of guidance, of impulse, of comfort, which have been, as water in the desert is, more precious than gold. Our fellow-travellers have shared their store with us, 'letting down their pitchers upon their hand,' and giving us drink; but has the draught ever slaked the thirst? They carry but a pitcher, and a pitcher is not a fountain. Have there been any in all the round of those that we have loved and trusted, to whom we have trusted absolutely, without having been disappointed? They, like us, are hemmed in by human limitations. They each bear a burdened and thirsty spirit, itself needing such supplies. And to the truest, happiest, most soul-sufficing companionship, there comes at last that dread hour which ends all sweet commerce of giving and receiving, and makes the rest of life, for some of us, one monotonous ashen-grey wilderness where no water is. These things make it impossible for us to find anywhere amongst men our refuge and our fruition.

And yet how strange, how pathetic, is the fact that after all disappointments, men still obstinately continue to look among their fellows for guidance and for light, for consolation, for defence, and for strength! After a thousand failures they still hope. Does not the search at once confess that hitherto they have not found, else why be seeking still?—and that they

yet believe they will yet find, else why not cease the vain quest? And surely He who made us, made us not in vain, nor cursed us with immortal hopes which are only persistent lies. Surely there is some living Person who will vindicate these unquenchable hopes of humanity, and receive and requite our love and trust, and satisfy our longings, and explain the riddle of our lives. If there be not, nor ever has been, nor ever can be a man who shall satisfy us with his love, and defend us with his power, and be our all-sufficient satisfaction and our rest in weariness, then much of man's noblest nature is a mistake, and many of his purest and profoundest hopes are an illusion, a mockery, and a snare. The obstinate hope that, within the limits of humanity, we shall find what we need is a mystery, except on one hypothesis, that it, too, belongs to 'the unconscious prophecies' that God has lodged in all men's hearts.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, how such functions as those of which my text speaks not only seem to be contradicted by all experience, but manifestly and obviously to transcend the possibilities of human nature. *A man* to defend me; and he himself—does *he* need no defence? A man to supply my wants; and is his spirit, then, other than mine, that it can become the all-sufficient fulness for my emptiness? He that can do this for one spirit must be greater than the spirit for which he doeth it. He that can do it for the whole race of man, through all ages, in all circumstances, down to the end of time, in every latitude, under every condition of civilisation—who must *he* be who, for the whole world, evermore and always, is their defence, their gladness, their shelter, and their rest?

The function requires a divine power, and the application of the power requires a human hand. It is not enough that I should be pointed to a far-off heaven, where there dwells an infinite loving God—I believe that we need more than that. We need both of the truths: 'God is my refuge and my strength,' and 'A man shall be a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest.'

III. That brings me to the last point to be noticed, namely:—The solution of the mystery in the person of Jesus Christ.

That which seemed impossible is real. The forebodings of humanity have not fathomed the powers of Divine Love. There *is* a man, our brother, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, who can be to single souls the adequate object of their perfect trust, the abiding home of their deepest love, the unfailing supply for their profoundest wants. There *is* one man to whom it is wise and blessed to look as the exclusive source of all our peace, the absolute ruler of all our lives. There *is* a man in whom we find all that we have vainly sought in men. There *is* a man, who can be to all ages and to the whole race their refuge, their satisfaction, their rest. 'It behoved Him to be made in all points like unto His brethren,' that His succour might be ever near, and His sympathy sure. The man Christ Jesus who, being man, is God manifest in the flesh, exercises in one and the same act the offices of divine pity and human compassion, of divine and human guardianship, of divine and human love.

‘And so the Word had breath, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds
In loveliness of perfect deeds,
More strong than all poetic thought.’

The dreams of weary hearts that have longed for an impossible perfection are all below the reality. The fact surpasses all expectation. It is more than all prophecies, it is more than all hopes, it is more than all praise. It is God’s unspeakable gift. Well might an angel voice proclaim the mystery of love, ‘Unto you is *born* a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.’ The ancient promise of our text is history now. A man has been and is all these things for us.

A refuge and a hiding-place from every storm—adverse circumstances sweep upon us, and His mighty hand is put down there as a buckler, behind which we may hide and be safe. Temptations to evil storm upon us, but if we are enclosed within Him they never touch us. The fears of our own hearts swirl like a river in flood against the walls of our fortress home, and we can laugh at them, for it is founded upon a rock! The day of judgment rises before us solemn and certain, and we can await it without fear, and approach it with calm joy. I call upon no mountains and hills to cover me.

‘Rock of ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.’

‘Rivers of water in a dry place,’—hungry and thirsty, my soul fainted within me. I longed for light, and behold darkness. I longed for help, and there was none that could come close to my spirit to succour and to give me drink in the desert. My conscience cried in all its wounds for cleansing and stanching, and no comforter nor any balm was there. My heart, weary of limited loves and mortal affections, howsoever sweet and precious, yearned and bled for one to rest upon all-sufficient and eternal. I thirsted with a thirst that was more than desire, that was pain, and was coming to be death, and I heard a voice which said, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.’

‘The shadow of a great rock in a weary land,’—and my heart was weary by reason of the greatness of the way, and duties and tasks seemed toils and burdens, and I was ready to say, ‘Wherefore has Thou made me and all men in vain? Surely all this is vanity and vexation of spirit,’ and I heard One that laid His hand upon me and said, ‘Come unto Me, and I will give thee rest.’ I come to Thee, O Christ, faint and perishing, defenceless and needy, with many a sin and many a fear; to Thee I turn for Thou hast died for me, and for me thou dost live. Be Thou my shelter and strong tower. Give me to drink of living water. Let me rest in Thee while in this weary land, and let Thy sweet love, my Brother and my Lord, be mine all on earth and the heaven of my heaven!

HOW TO DWELL IN THE FIRE OF GOD

‘Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? 15. He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.’—[ISAIAH xxxiii. 14, 15](#).

‘He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God’—[1 JOHN iv. 16](#).

I have put these two verses together because, striking as is at first sight the contrast in their tone, they refer to the same subject, and they substantially preach the same truth. A hasty reader, who is more influenced by sound than by sense, is apt to suppose that the solemn expressions in my first text, ‘the devouring fire’ and ‘everlasting burnings,’ mean *hell*. They mean *God*, as is quite obvious from the context. The man who is to ‘dwell in the devouring fire’ is the *good* man. He that is able to abide ‘the everlasting burnings’ is ‘the man that walketh righteously and speaketh uprightly,’ that ‘despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.’ The prophet has been calling all men, far and near, to behold a great act of divine judgment in which God has been manifested in flaming glory, consuming evil; now he represents the ‘sinners in Zion,’ the unworthy members of the nation, as seized with sudden terror, and anxiously asking this question, which in effect means: ‘Who among us can abide peacefully, joyfully, fed and brightened, not consumed and annihilated, by that flashing brightness and purity?’ The prophet’s answer is the answer of common-sense—like draws to like. A holy God must have holy companions.

But that is not all. The fire of God is the fire of love as well as the fire of purity; a fire that blesses and quickens, as well as a fire that destroys and consumes. So the Apostle John comes with his answer, not contradicting the other one, but deepening it, expanding it, letting us see the foundations of it, and proclaiming that as a holy God must be surrounded by holy hearts, which will open themselves to the flame as flowers to the sunshine, so a loving God must be clustered about by loving hearts, who alone can enter into deep and true friendship with Him.

The two answers, then, of these texts are one at bottom; and when Isaiah asks, ‘Who shall dwell with the everlasting fire?’—the perpetual fire, burning and unconsumed, of that divine righteousness—the deepest answer, which is no stern requirement but a merciful promise, is John’s answer, ‘He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.’

The simplest way, I think, of bringing out the force of the words before us will be just to take these three points which I have already suggested: the world’s question, the partial answer of the prophet, the complete answer of the Apostle.

I. The World’s Question.

I need only remind you how frequently in the Old Testament the emblem of fire is employed to express the divine nature. In many places, though by no means in all, the prominent idea in the emblem is that of the purity of the divine nature, which flashes and flames as against all which is evil and sinful. So we read in one grand passage in this book of Isaiah, 'the Light of Israel shall become a fire'; as if the lambent beauty of the highest manifestation of God gathered itself together, intensified itself, was forced back upon itself, and from merciful, illuminating light turned itself into destructive and consuming fire. And we read, you may remember, too, in the description of the symbolical manifestation of the divine nature which accompanied the giving of the Law on Sinai, that 'the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain,' and yet into that blaze and brightness the Lawgiver went, and lived and moved in it.

There is, then, in the divine nature a side of antagonism and opposition to evil, which flames against it, and labours to consume it. I would speak with all respect for the motives of many men in this day who dread to entertain the idea of the divine wrath against evil, lest they should in any manner trench upon the purity and perfectness of the divine love. I respect and sympathise with the motive altogether; and I neither respect nor sympathise with the many ferocious pictures of that which is called the wrath of God against sin, which much so-called orthodox teaching has indulged in. But if you will only remove from that word 'anger' the mere human associations which cleave to it, of passion on the one hand, and of a wish to hurt its object on the other, then you cannot, I think, deny to the divine nature the possession of such passionless and unmalignant wrath, without striking a fatal blow at the perfect purity of God. A God that does not hate evil, that does not flame out against it, using all the energies of His being to destroy it, is a God to whose character there cleaves a fatal suspicion of indifference to good, of moral apathy. If I have not a God to trust in that hates evil because He loveth righteousness, then 'the pillared firmament itself were rottenness, and earth's base built on stubble'; nor were there any hope that this damnable thing that is killing and sucking the life-blood out of our spirits should ever be destroyed and cast aside. Oh! it is short-sighted wisdom, and it is cruel kindness, to tamper with the thought of the wrath of God, the 'everlasting burnings' of that eternally pure nature wherewith it wages war against all sin.

But then, let us remember that, on the other side, the fire which is the destructive fire of perfect purity is also the fire that quickens and blesses. God is love, says John, and love is fire, too. We speak of 'the flame of love,' of 'warm affections,' and the like. The symbol of fire does not mean destructive energy only. And these two are one. God's wrath is a form of God's love; God hates because He loves.

And the 'wrath' and the 'love' differ much more in the difference of the eyes that look, than they do in themselves. Here are two bits of glass; one of them sifts out and shows all the fiery-red rays, the other all the yellow. It is the one same pure, white beam that passes

through them both, but one is only capable of receiving the fiery-red beams of the wrath, and the other is capable of receiving the golden light of the love. Let us take heed lest, by destroying the wrath, we maim the love; and let us take heed lest, by exaggerating the wrath, we empty the love of its sweetness and its preciousness; and let us accept the teaching that these are one, and that the deepest of all the things that the world can know about God lies in that double saying, which does not contradict its second half by its first, but completes its first by its second—God is Righteousness, God is Love.

Well, then, that being so, the question rises to every mind of ordinary thoughtfulness: ‘Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?’ A God fighting against evil; can you and I hope to hold familiar fellowship with Him? A God fighting against evil; if He rises up to exercise His judging and His punishing energies, can we meet Him? ‘Can thy heart endure and thy hands be strong, in the day that I shall deal with thee?’ is the question that comes to each of us if we are reasonable people. I do not dwell upon it; but I ask you to take it, and answer it for yourselves.

To ‘dwell with everlasting burnings’ means two things. First, it means to hold familiar intercourse and communion with God. The question which presents itself to thoughtful minds is—What sort of man must I be if I am to dwell near God? The lowliest bush may be lit by the divine fire and not be consumed by it; and the poorest heart may be all aflame with an indwelling God, if only it yield itself to Him, and long for His likeness. Electricity only flames into consuming fire when its swift passage is resisted. The question for us all is—How can I receive this holy fire into my bosom, and not be burned? Is any communion possible, and if it is, on what conditions? These are the questions which the heart of man is really asking, though it knows not the meaning of its own unrest.

‘To dwell with everlasting burnings’ means, secondly, to bear the action of the fire—the judgment of the present and the judgment of the future. The question for each of us is—How can we face that judicial and punitive action of that Divine Providence which works even here, and how can we face the judicial and punitive action in the future?

I suppose you all believe, or at least say that you believe, that there is such a future judgment. Have you ever asked yourselves the question, and rested not until you got a reasonable answer to it, on which, like a man leaning on a pillar, you can lean the whole weight of your expectations—How am I to come into the presence of that devouring fire? Have you any fireproof dress that will enable you to go into the furnace like the Hebrew youths, and walk up and down in the midst of it, well and at liberty? Have you? ‘Who shall dwell amidst the everlasting fires?’

That question has stirred sometimes, I know, in the consciences of every man and woman that is listening to me. Some of you have tampered with it and tried to throttle it, or laughed at it and shuffled it out of your mind by the engrossments of business, and tried to get rid of it in all sorts of ways: and here it has met you again to-day. Let us have it settled, in the

name of common-sense (to invoke nothing higher), once for all, upon reasonable principles that will stand; and do you see that you settle it to-day.

II. And now, look next at the prophet's answer.

It is simple. He says that if a man is to hold fellowship with, or to face the judgment of, the pure and righteous God, the plainest dictate of reason and common-sense is that he himself must be pure and righteous to match. The details into which his answer to the question runs out are all very homely, prosaic, pedestrian kind of virtues, nothing at all out of the way, nothing that people would call splendid or heroic. Here they are:—'He that walks righteously,'—a short injunction, easily spoken, but how hard!—'and speaketh uprightly, he that despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, that shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.' Righteous action, righteous speech, inward hatred of possessions gotten at my neighbour's cost, and a vehement resistance to all the seductions of sense, shutting one's hands, stopping one's ears, fastening one's eyes up tight so that he may not handle, nor hear, nor see the evil—there is the outline of a trite, everyday sort of morality which is to mark the man who, as Isaiah says, can 'dwell amongst the everlasting fires.'

Now, if at your leisure you will turn to [Psalms xv.](#) and [xxiv.](#), you will find there two other versions of the same questions and the same answer, both of which were obviously in our prophet's mind when he spoke. In the one you have the question put: 'Who shall abide in Thy tabernacle?' In the other you have the same question put: 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?' And both these two psalms answer the question and sketch the outline (and it is only an outline) of a righteous man, from the Old Testament point of view, substantially in the same fashion that Isaiah does here.

I do not need to remark upon the altogether unscientific and non-exhaustive nature of the description of righteousness that is set forth here. There are a great many virtues, plain and obvious, that are left out of the picture. But I ask you to notice one very special defect, as it might seem. There is not the slightest reference to anything that we call religion. It is all purely pedestrian, worldly morality; do righteous things; do not tell lies; do not cheat your neighbour; stop your ears if people say foul things in your hearing; shut your eyes if evil comes before you. These are the kind of duties enjoined, and these only. The answer of my text moves altogether on the surface, dealing only with conduct, not with character, and dealing with conduct only in reference to this world. There is not a word about the inner nature, not a word about the inner relation of a man to God. It is the minimum of possible qualifications for dwelling with God.

Well, now, do you achieve that minimum? Suppose we waive for the moment all reference to God; suppose we waive for the moment all reference to motive and inward nature; suppose we keep ourselves only on the outside of things, and ask what sort of *conduct* a man must have that is able to walk with God? We have heard the answer.

Now, then, is that *me*? Is this sketch here, admittedly imperfect, a mere black-and-white swift outline, not intended to be shaded or coloured, or brought up to the round; is this mere outline of what a good man ought to be, at all like me? Yes or no? I think we must all say No to the question, and acknowledge our failure to attain to this homely ideal of conduct. The requirement pared down to its lowest possible degree, and kept as superficial as ever you can keep it, is still miles above me, and all I have to say when I listen to such words is, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.'

My dear friends, take this one thought away with you:—the requirements of the most moderate conscience are such as no man among us is able to comply with. And what then? Am I to be shut up to despair? am I to say: Then nobody can dwell within that bright flame? Am I to say: Then when God meets man, man must crumble away into nothing and disappear? Am I to say, for myself: Then, alas for me! when I stand at His judgment bar?

III. Let us take the Apostle's answer.

God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.' Now, to begin with, let us distinctly understand that the New Testament answer, represented by John's great words, entirely endorses Isaiah's; and that the difference between the two is not that the Old Testament, as represented by psalmist and prophet, said, 'You must be righteous in order to dwell with God,' and that the New Testament says, 'You need not be.' Not at all! John is just as vehement in saying that nothing but purity can bind a man in thoroughly friendly and familiar conjunction with God as David or Isaiah was. He insists as much as anybody can insist upon this great principle, that if we are to dwell with God we must be like God, and that we are like God when we are like Him in righteousness and love.

'He that saith he hath fellowship with Him, and walketh in darkness, is a liar!' That is John's short way of gathering it all up. Righteousness is as essential in the gospel scheme for all communion and fellowship with God as ever it was declared to be by the most rigid of legalists; and if any of you have the notion that Christianity has any other terms to lay down than the old terms—that righteousness is essential to communion—you do not understand Christianity. If any of you are building upon the notion that a man can come into loving and familiar friendship with God as long as he loves and cleaves to any sin, you have got hold of a delusion that will wreck your souls yet,—is, indeed, harming, wrecking them now, and will finally destroy them if you do not get rid of it. Let us always remember that the declaration of my first text lies at the very foundation of the declaration of my second.

What, then, is the difference between them? Why, for one thing it is this—ISAIAH tells us that we must be righteous, John tells us how we may be. The one says, 'There are the conditions,' the other says, 'Here are the means by which you can have the conditions.' Love is the productive germ of all righteousness; it is the fulfilling of the law. Get that into your hearts, and all these relative and personal duties will come. If the deepest, inmost life is right,

all the surface of life will come right. Conduct will follow character, character will follow love.

The efforts of men to make themselves pure, and so to come into the position of holding fellowship with God, are like the wise efforts of children in their gardens. They stick in their little bits of rootless flowers, and they water them; but, being rootless, the flowers are all withered to-morrow and flung over the hedge the day after. But if we have the love of God in our hearts, we have not rootless flowers, but the seed which will spring up and bear fruit of holiness.

But that is not all. Isaiah says 'Righteousness,' John says 'Love,' which makes righteousness. And then he tells us how we may get love, having first told us how we may get righteousness: 'We love Him because He first loved us.' It is just as impossible for a man to work himself into loving God as it is for a man to work himself into righteous actions. There is no difference in the degree of impossibility in the two cases. But what we can do is, we can go and gaze at the thing that kindles the love; we can contemplate the Cross on which the great Lover of our souls died, and thereby we can come to love Him. John's answer goes down to the depths, for his notion of love is the response of the believing soul to the love of God which was manifested on the Cross of Calvary. To have righteousness we must have love; to have love we must look to the love that God has to us; to look rightly to the love that God has to us we must have faith. Now you have gone down to the very bottom of the matter. Faith is the first step of the ladder, and the second step is love and the third step is righteousness.

And so the New Testament, in its highest and most blessed declarations, rests itself firmly upon these rigid requirements of the old law. You and I, dear brethren, have but one way by which we can walk in the midst of that fire, rejoicing and unconsumed, namely that we shall know and believe the love which God hath to us, love Him back again 'with pure hearts fervently,' and in the might of that receptive faith and productive love, become like Him in holiness, and ourselves be 'baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire.' Thus, fire-born and fiery, we shall dwell as in our native home, in God Himself.

THE FORTRESS OF THE FAITHFUL

‘He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks; bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure.’—ISAIAH xxxiii. 16.

This glowing promise becomes even more striking if we mark its connection with the solemn question in the previous context. ‘Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire?’ is the prophet’s question; ‘who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?’ That question really means, Who is capable ‘of communion with God?’ The prophet sketches the outline of the character in the subsequent verses, and then recurring to his metaphor of a habitation, and yet with a most lovely and significant modification, he says, ‘he’—the man that he has been sketching—‘shall dwell,’ not ‘with the everlasting burnings,’ but ‘on high; his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks,’ like some little hill, fort, or city, perched upon a mountain, and having within it ample provision and an unfailing spring of water. ‘His bread shall, be given him, his water shall be sure.’ To dwell with ‘the devouring fire’ is to ‘dwell on high,’ to be safe and satisfied. So then, whilst the words before us have, of course, direct and immediate reference to the Assyrian invasion, and promise, in a literal sense, security and exemption from its evils to the righteous in Israel, they widen and deepen into a picturesque, but not less real, statement of what comes into the religious life, by communion with God. There are three things: elevation, security, satisfaction.

‘He shall dwell on high.’

In the East, and in all unsettled countries, you will find that the sites of the cities are on the hilltops, for a very plain reason, and that is the fact that underlies the prophet’s representation. To hold fellowship with God, to live in union with Him, to have His thoughts for my thoughts, and His love wrapping my heart, and His will enshrined in my will; to carry Him about with me into all the pettinesses of daily life, and, amidst the whirlpool of duties and changing circumstances, to sit in the centre, as it were the eye of the whirlpool where there is a dead calm, *that* lifts a man on high. Communion with God secures elevation of spirit, raising us clean above the flat that lies beneath. There are many ways by which men seek for lofty thoughts, and a general elevation above the carking cares and multiplied minutenesses of this poor, mortal, transient life; but while books and great thoughts, and the converse of the wise, and art, and music, and all these other elevating influences have a real place and a blessed efficiency in ennobling life, there is not one of them, nor all of them put together, that will give to the human spirit that strange and beautiful elevation above the world and the flesh and the devil, which simple communion with God will give. I have seen many a poor man who knew nothing about the lofty visions that shape and lift humanity, who had no side of him responsive to aesthetics or art or music, who was no thinker, no student, who never had spoken to anybody above the rank of a poor labouring man, and to whom all the wisdom of the nations was a closed chamber, who yet in his life, ay! and on his face, bore marks of a spirit elevated into a serene region where there was no tumult, and

where nothing unclean or vicious could live. A few of the select spirits of the race may painfully climb on high by thought and effort. Get God into your hearts, and it will be like filling the round of a silken balloon with light air; you will soar instead of climbing, and 'dwell on high.' When you are up there, the things below that look largest will dwindle and 'show,' as Shakespeare has it, 'scarce so gross as beetles,' looked at from the height, and the noises will sink to a scarcely audible murmur, and you will be able to see the lie of the country, and, as it says in the context, 'your eyes shall behold the land that is very far off.' Yes! the hilltop is the place for wide views, and for understanding the course of the serpentine river, and it is the place to discover how small are the mightiest things at the foot, and how little a way towards the sun the noises of human praise or censure can ever travel. 'He shall dwell on high,' and he will see a long way off, and understand the relative magnitude of things, and the strife of tongues will have ceased for him.

And more than that is implied in the promise. If we dwell on high, we shall come down with all the more force on what lies below. There is no greater caricature and misconception of Christianity than that which talks as if the spirit that lived in daily communion with God, high above the world, was remote from the world. Why, how do they make electricity nowadays? By the fall of water from a height, and the higher the level from which it descends, the mightier the force which it generates in the descent. So nobody will tell on the world like the man who lives above it. The height from which a weight rushes down measures the force of its dint where it falls, and of the energy with which it comes. 'He shall dwell on high'; and only the man that stands above the world is able to influence it.

Again, here is another blessing of the Christian life, put in a picturesque form: 'His defence shall be munitions of rocks.' That is a promise of security from assailants, which in its essence is true always, though its truth may seem doubtful to the superficial estimate of sense. The experience of the South African war showed how impregnable 'the munitions of rocks' were. The Boers lay safe behind them, and our soldiers might fire lyddite at them all day and never touch them. So, the man who lives in communion with God has between him and all evil the Rock of Ages, and he lies at the back of it, quiet and safe, whatever foe may rage on the other side of it.

Now, of course, the prophet meant to tell his countrymen that, in the theocracy of which they were parts, righteousness and nothing else was the national security, and if a man or a nation lived in communion with God, it bore a charmed life. That is a great deal more true, in regard to externals, in the miraculous 'dispensation,' as it is called, of the Old Testament than it is now, and we are not to take over these promises in their gross literal form into the Christian era, as if they were unconditional and absolutely to be fulfilled. But at the same time, if you reflect how many of our troubles do come to us mainly because we break our communion with God, I think we shall see that this old word has still an application to our daily lives and outward circumstances. Deduct from any man's life all the discomfort

and trouble and calamity which have come down upon him because he was not in touch with God, and there will not be very much left. Yet there will be some, and the deepest and sorest of all our sorrows are not to be interpreted as occasioned by defects in our dwelling in God. Then has my text no application to them? Yes, because what still remains of earthly cares and sorrows and evils would, in communion with God, change its character. The rind is the same; but all the interior contents have been, as children will do with a fruit, scooped out, and another kind of thing has been put inside, so that though the outward appearance is the same, what is at the heart of it is utterly different. It is no longer some coarse, palate-biting, common vegetable, but a sweet confection, made by God's own hands, and put into the gourd, which has been hollowed out and emptied of its evil. That is, perhaps, a very violent figure, but take a plain case as illustration. Suppose two men, each of them going to his wife's funeral. The two hearses pass inside the cemetery gates, one after the other. Outwardly the two afflictions are the same, but the one man says, 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away'; the other man says, 'They have taken away my gods, and what shall I do more?' *Are* the two things the same? 'He shall dwell on high, his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks,' and if we do hide ourselves in the cleft, then no evil shall befall us, nor any plague come nigh our dwelling.

But there is another truth contained in this great promise, viz., that in regard to all the real evils which beset men, and these are all summed up in the one, the temptation to do wrong, their arrows will be blunted, and their force be broken, if we keep our minds in touch with God through humble communion and lowly obedience. Dear brethren, the way by which we can conquer temptations around, and silence inclinations within which riotously seek to yield to the temptations is, I believe, far more by cultivating a consciousness of communion with God, than by specific efforts directed to the overcoming of a given and particular temptation. Keep inside the fortress, and no bullet will come near you. Array yourselves in the most elaborate precautions and step out from its shadow, and every bullet will strike and wound. Let me keep up my fellowship with God, and I may laugh at temptation. Security depends on continual communion with God by faith, love, aspiration, and obedience.

Now, I need not say more than a word about the last element in these promises, the satisfaction of desires. 'His bread shall be given him, and his water shall be sure.' In ancient warfare sieges were usually blockades; and strong fortresses were reduced by famine much more frequently than by assault. Mafeking and Ladysmith and Port Arthur were in most danger from that cause. The promise here assures us that we shall have all supplies in our abode, if God is our abode. Wherever he who dwells in God goes, he carries with him his provisions, and he does not need elaborate arrangements of pipes or reservoirs, because there is a fountain in the courtyard that the enemy cannot get at. They may stop the springs throughout the land, they may cut off all water supplies, so that 'there shall be no fruit in

the vine, and the labour of the olive shall fail,' but they cannot touch the fountain. 'His water shall be sure,' and he can say, 'In the days of famine I shall be satisfied.'

God is and gives all that we need for sustenance, for growth, for refreshment, for satisfaction of our desires. Keep near Him, and you will find in the heart of the devouring fire a shelter, and you will have all that you want for life here. My text will be true about us, in the measure in which we do thus dwell, and if we thus dwell here, and so dwell on high, with the munitions of rocks for our fortress, and 'the bread of God that came down from heaven' for our food, and the water of life for our refreshment, then, when there is no longer any need of places for defence, the other saying will be true, 'They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them . . . and shall lead them to living fountains of waters, and God, the Lord, shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.'

THE RIVERS OF GOD

‘But there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby.’—*ISAIAH xxxiii. 21.*

One great peculiarity of Jerusalem, which distinguishes it from almost all other historical cities, is that it has no river. Babylon was on the Euphrates, Nineveh on the Tigris, Thebes on the Nile, Rome on the Tiber; but Jerusalem had nothing but a fountain or two, and a well or two, and a little trickle and an intermittent stream. The water supply to-day is, and always has been, a great difficulty, and an insuperable barrier to the city’s ever having a great population.

That deficiency throws a great deal of beautiful light on more than one passage in the Old Testament. For instance, this same prophet contrasts the living stream, the waters of Siloam, as an emblem of the gentle sway of the divine King of Israel, with ‘the river, strong and mighty,’ which was the symbol of Assyria; and a psalm that we all know well, sings, ‘There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God,’—a triumphant exclamation which is robbed of half its force, unless we remember that the literal Jerusalem had no river at all. The vision of living waters flowing from the Temple which Ezekiel saw is a variation of the same theme, and suggests that in the Messianic days the deficiency shall be made good, and a mysterious stream shall spring up from behind, and flow out from beneath, the temple doors, and then with rapid increase and depth and width, but with no tributaries coming into it, shall run fertilising and life-giving everywhere, till it pours itself into the noisome waters of the sullen sea of death and heals even them.

The same general representation is contained in the words before us. Isaiah’s great vision is not, as I take it, of a future, but of what the Jerusalem of his day might be to the Israelite if he would live by faith. The mighty Lord, ‘the glorious Lord,’ shall Himself ‘be a place of broad rivers and streams.’

I. First, then, this remarkable promise suggests to me how in God there is the supply of all deficiencies.

The city was perched on its barren, hot rock, with scarcely a drop of water, and its inhabitants must often have been tempted to wish that there had been running down the sun-bleached bed of the Kedron a flashing stream, such as laved the rock-cut temples and tombs of Thebes. Isaiah says, in effect, ‘You cannot see it, but if you will trust yourselves to God, there will be such a river.’

In like manner every defect in our circumstances, everything lacking in our lives—and we all have something which does not correspond with, or which falls beneath, our wishes and apparent needs—everything which seems to hamper us in some aspects, and to sadden us in others, may be compensated and made up if we will hold fast by God; and although to outward sense we dwell ‘in a dry and barren land where no water is,’ the eye of faith will

see, flashing and flowing all around, the rejoicing waters of the divine presence, and they will mirror the sky, and the reflections will teach us that there is a heaven above us.

If there is in any life a gap, that is a prophecy that God will fill it. If there is anything in your circumstances in regard to which you often feel sadly, and are sometimes tempted to feel bitterly, how much stronger and more fully equipped you would be, if it were otherwise, be sure that in God there is that which can supply the want, and that the consciousness of the want is a merciful summons to seek its supply from and in Him. If there is a breach in the encircling wall of your defences, God has made it in order that He Himself, and not an enemy, may enter your lives and hearts. 'In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne,' and it did not matter though that mortal king was dead, for the true King was thereby revealed as living for ever, just as when the summer foliage, fluttering and green, drops from the tree, the sturdy stem and the strong branches are made the more visible. Our felt deficiencies are doors by which God may come in. Do you sometimes feel as if you would be better if you had easier worldly circumstances? Is your health precarious and feeble? Have you to walk a solitary path through this world, and does your heart often ache for companionship? You can have all your heart's desire fulfilled in deepest reality in God, in the same way that that riverless city had Jehovah for 'a place of broad rivers and streams.'

II. Take another side of the same thought. Here is a revelation of God and His sweet presence as our true defence.

The river that lay between some strong city and the advancing enemy was its strongest fortification when the bridge of boats was taken away. One of the ancient cities to which I have referred is described by one of the prophets as being held as within the coils of a serpent, by which he means the various bendings and twistings of the Euphrates, which encompassed Babylon, and made it so hard to be conquered. The primitive city of Paris owed its safety in the wild old times when it was founded, to its being on an island. Venice has lived through many centuries, because it is girded about by its lagoons. England is what it is, largely because of 'the streak of silver sea.' So God's city has a broad moat all round it. The prophet goes on to explain the force of his bold figure in regard to the safety promised by it, when he says: 'Wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby.' Not a keel of the enemy shall dare to cut its waters, nor break their surface with the wet splash of invading oars. And so, if we will only knit ourselves with God by simple trust and continual communion, it is the plainest prose fact that nothing will harm us, and no foe will ever get near enough to us to shoot his arrows against us.

That is a truth for faith, and not for sense. Many a man, truly compassed about by God, has to go through fiery trial and sorrow and affliction. But I venture to appeal to every heart that has known grief most acutely, protractedly, and frequently, and has borne it in the faith of God, and with submission to Him; and I know that they who are the 'experts,' and who

alone have the right to speak with authority on the subject, will confirm the statement that I make, that sorrows recognised as sent from God are the truest blessings of our lives. No real evil befalls us, because, according to the old superstition that money bewitched was cleansed if it was handed across running water, our sorrows only reach us across the river that defends.

Isaiah is full of symbols of various kinds for the impregnability of Zion. Sometimes, as in my text, he falls back upon the thought of the bright waters of the moat on which no enemy can venture to sail. Sometimes he draws his metaphor from the element opposed to water, and speaks of a wall of fire round about us. But the simple reality that lies below all the poetry is, that trust in God brings His presence around me, and that makes it impossible that any evil should befall me, and certain that whatever does befall me is His messenger, His loving messenger, for my good. If we believed that, and lived on the belief, the whole world would be different.

III. Take, again, another aspect of this same thought, which suggests to us God's presence as our true refreshment and satisfaction.

The waterless city depended on cisterns, and they were often broken, and were always more or less foul, and sometimes the water fell very low in them. Isaiah says to us: Even when you are living in external circumstances like that:

‘When all created streams are dry,
Thy fulness is the same.’

The fountain of living waters—if we may slightly vary the metaphor of my text—never sinks one hair's-breadth in its crystal basin, however many thirsty lips may be glued to its edge, and however large may be their draughts from it. This metaphor, turned to the purpose of suggesting how in God every part of our nature finds its appropriate nourishment and refreshment which it does not find anywhere besides, has become one of the commonplaces of the pulpit. Would it were the commonplace of our lives! It is easy to talk about Him as being the fountain of living waters; it is easy to quote and to admire the words which the Master spoke to the Samaritan woman when He said, ‘I would have given thee living water,’ and ‘the water which I give will be a fountain springing up into everlasting life.’ We repeat or learn such sayings, and then what do we do? We go away and try to slake our thirst at broken cisterns, and every draught which we take is like the salt water from which a shipwrecked-boat's crew in its madness will sometimes not be able to refrain, each drop increasing the raging thirst and hastening the impending death.

If we believed that God was the broad river from which we could draw and draw, and drink and drink, for ever and ever, should we be clinging with such desperate tenacity, as most of us exhibit, to earthly goods? Should we whimper with such childish regrets, as most

of us nourish, when these goods are diminished or withdrawn? Should we live as we constantly do, day in and day out, seldom applying ourselves to the one source of strength and peace and refreshment, and trying, like fools, to find what apart from Him the world can never give? The rivers in northern Tartary all lose themselves in the sand. Not one of them has volume or force enough to get to the sea. And the rivers from which we try to drink are sand-choked long before our thirst is slaked. So, if we are wise, we shall take Isaiah's hint, and go where the water flows abundantly, and flows for ever.

IV. There is a last point that I would also suggest, namely, the manifold variety in the results of God's presence.

It shapes itself into many forms, according to our different needs. 'The glorious Lord shall be a place of broad rivers.' Yes; but notice the next words—'and streams.' Now, the word which is there translated 'streams' means little channels for irrigation and other purposes, by which the water of some great river is led off into the melon patches, and gardens, and plantations, and houses of the inhabitants. So we have not only the picture of the broad river in its unity, but also that of the thousand little rivulets in their multiplicity, and in their direction to each man's plot of ground. It is the same idea that is in the psalm which I have already quoted: 'There is a river, *the streams* whereof make glad the city of our God.' You can divide the river up into very tiny trickles, according to the moment's small wants. If you make but a narrow channel, you will get but a shallow streamlet; and if you make your channel broad and deep, you will get much of Him.

It is of no profit that we live on the river's bank if we let its waters go rolling and flashing past our door, or our gardens, or our lips. Unless you have a sluice, by which you can take them off into your own territory, and keep the shining blessing to be the source of fertility in your own garden, and of coolness and refreshment to your own thirst, your garden will be parched, and your lips will crack. There is a 'broad river,' and there are also 'streams'; which, being brought down to its simplest expression, just comes to this—that we may and must make God our very own property. It is useless to say 'our God,' 'the God of Israel,' 'the God of the Church,' 'the Great Creator,' 'the Universal Father,' and so on, unless we say '*my* God and *my* Saviour,' '*my* Refuge and *my* Strength.' How much of the river have you dipped up in your own vessel? How much of it have you taken with which to water your own vineyard and refresh your own souls?

The time comes when Isaiah's prophecy shall be perfectly fulfilled, according to the great words in the closing hook of Scripture, about the river of the water of life proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb. But, till that time comes, we do not need to wander thirsty in a desert; but all round us we may hear the mighty waters rolling everywhere, and drink deep draughts of delight and supply for all our needs, from the very presence of God Himself.

JUDGE, LAWGIVER, KING

‘For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King; He will save us.’—[ISAIAH xxxiii. 22](#).

There is reference here to the three forms of government in Israel: by Moses, by Judges, by Kings. In all, Israel was a Theocracy. Isaiah looks beyond the human representative to the true divine Reality.

I. A truth for us, in both its more specific and its more general forms.

(a) Specific. Christ is all these three for us—Authority; His will law; Defender.

(b) More general. Everything that human beings are to us, they are by derivation from Him—and He sums in Himself all forms of good and blessing. Every name among men for any kind of helper belongs to Him. All tender, helpful relationships are but ‘broken lights of Thee.’

II. A lesson hard to learn and to remember.

One knows not whether it is harder for faith to look beyond the visible helpers or delights to the Unseen Real One, or to look through tears, when these are gone, and to see Him clearly filling an otherwise empty field of vision. When we have a palpable prop to lean on, it is difficult to be clearly aware that, unless the palpable support were held up by the Unseen, it could not be a prop, and to lean on it would be like resting one’s weight on a staff stuck in yielding mud. But it is no less difficult to tell our hearts that we have all that we ever had, when what we had leaned on for many happy days and found to hold us up is stricken from beneath us. Present, the seen lawgiver, judge, or king stays the eyes that should travel past him to God Himself; removed, his absence makes a great emptiness, in whose vacuity it is difficult for faith to discern the real presence of Him who is all that the departed seemed to be. The painted glass stays the eye; shattered, it lets in only the sight of a void and far-off sky.

Israel could not breathe freely in the rarefied air on the heights of a theocracy, and demanded a visible king. It had its desire, and as a consequence, ‘leanness in its soul.’ Christendom has found it as difficult to do without visible embodiments of authority, law, defence, and hence many evils and corruptions in the institutions and practices of organised Christianity.

III. A conviction which makes strong and blessed.

To have dominant in our minds, and operative through our lives, the settled conviction that God in Christ is for us judge, lawgiver, and king, and that the purpose of all these offices or relationships is that ‘He will save us’ is the secret of tranquillity, the fountain of courage, the talisman which makes life all different and us who live in it different. Fear cannot survive where that conviction rules and fortifies a heart. We shall not be slavish adherents of men if we are accustomed to take our orders from our Lawgiver. Earthly prizes or dignities will not dazzle eyes that have seen the King in His beauty. We shall pay little heed to men’s

judgments if there flames ever before conscience the thought, 'He that judgeth me is the Lord.' 'He will save us'; who can destroy what His hand is stretched out to preserve? 'If God is for us, who is against us? It is God that justifieth; who is He that condemneth?'

MIRACLES OF HEALING

‘Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.’—[ISAIAH xxxv. 5, 6.](#)

‘Then’—when? The previous verse answers, ‘Behold, your God will come, He will come and save you.’ And what or when is that ‘coming’? A glance at the place which this grand hymn occupies in the series of Isaiah’s prophecies answers that question. It stands at the close of the first part of these, and is the limit of the prophet’s vision. He has been setting forth the Lord’s judgments upon all heathen, and His deliverance of Israel from its oppressors; and the ‘coming’ is His manifestation for that double purpose. Before its flashing brightness, barrenness is changed into verdure, diseases that lame men’s powers vanish, the dry and thirsty land gleams with the shining light of sudden streams. Across the wilderness stretches a broad path, raised high above the bewildering monotony of pathless sand, too plain to be missed, too lofty for wild beasts’ suppleness to spring upon it: along it troop with song and gladness the returning exiles, with hope in their hearts as they journey to Zion, where they find a joyful home undimmed by sorrow, and in which sighing and sorrow are heard and felt no more.

Now this is poetry, no doubt; the golden light of imagination suffuses it all, but it is poetry with a solid meaning in it. It is not a mere play of fancy exalting the ‘coming of the Lord’ by heaping together all images that suggest the vanishing of evil and the coming of good. If there is a basis of facts in it, what are they? What is the period of that emphatic ‘then’ at the beginning of our text? The return of the Jews from exile? Yes, certainly; but some greater event shines through the words. Some future restoration of that undying race to their own land? Yes, possibly, again we answer, but that does not exhaust the prophecy. The great coming of God to save in the gift of His Son? Yes, that in an eminent degree. The second coming of Christ? Yes, that too. All the events in which God has come for men’s deliverance are shadowed here; for in them all, the same principles are at work, and in all, similar effects have followed. But mainly the mission and work of Jesus Christ is pointed at here—whether in its first stage of Incarnation and Passion, or in its second stage of Coming in glory, ‘the second time without sin, unto salvation.’

And the bodily diseases here enumerated are symbols, just as Christ’s miracles were symbolical, just as every language has used the body as a parable of the soul, and has felt that there is such a harmony between them that the outward and visible does correspond to and shadow the inward and spiritual.

I think, then, that we may fairly take these four promises as bringing out very distinctly the main characteristics of the blessed effects of Christ’s work in the world. The great subject of these words is the power of Christ in restoring to men the spiritual capacities which are all but destroyed. We have here three classes of bodily infirmities represented as cured at

the date of that blessed 'Then.' Blindness and deafness are defects in perception, and stand for incapacities affecting the powers of knowledge. Lameness affects powers of motion, and stands for incapacity of activity. Dumbness prevents speech, and stands for incapacity of utterance.

I. Christ as the restorer of the powers of knowing.

Bodily diseases are taken to symbolise spiritual infirmities.

Mark the peculiarities of Scripture anthropology as brought out in this view of humanity:—

Its gloomy views of man's actual condition.

Its emphatic declaration that that condition is abnormal.

Its confidence of effecting a cure.

Its transcendently glorious conception of what man may become.

Men are blind and deaf; that is to say, their powers of perception are destroyed by reason of disease. What a picture! The great spiritual realities are all unseen, as Elisha's young servant was blind to the fiery chariots that girdled the prophet. Men are blind to the starry truths that shine as silver in the firmament. They are deaf to the Voice which is gone out to the ends of the earth, and yet they have eyes and ears, conscience, intuitions. They possess organs, but these are powerless.

And while the blindness is primarily in regard to spiritual and religious truths, it is not confined to these, but wherever spiritual blindness has fallen, the whole of a man's knowledge will suffer. There will be blindness to the highest philosophy, to the true basis and motive of morals, to true psychology, to the noblest poetry. All will be of the earth, earthy. You cannot strike religion out of men's thoughts, as you might take a stone out of a wall and leave the wall standing; you take out foundation and mortar, and make a ruinous heap.

I know, of course, that there may be much mental activity without any perception of spiritual realities, but all knowledge which is not purely mathematical or physical suffers by the absence of such perception. All this blindness is caused by sin.

Christ is the giver of spiritual sight. He restores the faculty by taking away the hindrance to its exercise. Further, He gives sight because He gives light.

But turn to facts of experience, and consider the mental apathy of heathenism as contrasted with the energy of mind within the limits of Christendom. Greece, of course, is a brilliant exception, but even there (1) what of the conceptions of God? (2) what of the effect of the wise on the mass of the nation? Think of the languid intellectual life of the East. Think of the energy of thought which has been working within the limits of Christianity. Think of Christian theology compared with the mythologies of idolatry. And the contrast holds not only in the religious field but all over the field of thought.

There is no such sure way of diffusing a culture which will refine and strengthen all the powers of mind as to diffuse the knowledge of Jesus, and to make men love Him. In His light they will see light.

To know Him and to keep company with Him is 'a liberal education,' as is seen in many a lowly life, all uninfluenced by what is called learning, but enriched with the finest flowers of 'culture,' and having gathered them all in Christ's garden.

Christ is the true light; in Him do we see. Without Him, what is all other knowledge? He is central to all, like genial heat about the roots of a plant. There is other knowledge than that of sense; and for the highest of all our knowledge we depend on Him who is the Word. In that region we can neither observe nor experiment. In that region facts must be brought by some other means than we can command, and we can but draw more or less accurate deductions from them. Logic without revelation is like a spinning-machine without any cotton, busy drawing out nothing. Here we have to listen. 'The entrance of Thy words giveth light.' Your God shall come and save you; then, by that divine coming and saving, 'the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.'

II. Christ as the Restorer of the Powers of Action.

Again turn to heathenism, see the apathetic indolence, the unprogressive torpor, 'Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.' Sin lames for service of God; it leaves the lower nature free to act, and that freedom paralyses all noble activity.

Christianity brings the Energising of the Soul—

(a) By its reference of everything to God—our powers and our circumstances and our activities.

(b) By its prominence given to Retribution. It speaks not merely of *vita brevis*—but of *vita brevis* and an Eternity which grows out of it.

(c) By its great motive for work—love.

(d) By the freedom It brings from the weight that paralysed.

It takes away sin. Lifting that dreary load from our backs, it makes us joyful, strong, and agile.

The true view of Christianity is not, as some of its friends, and some of its foes, mistakenly concur in supposing, that it weakens interest in, and energy on, the Present, but that it heightens the power of action. A life plunged in that jar of oxygen will glow with redoubled brilliance.

III. Christ as the Restorer of Powers of Utterance.

The silence that broods over the world. It is dumb for all holy, thankful words; with no voice to sing, no utterance of joyful praise.

Think of the effect of Christianity on human speech, giving it new themes, refining words and crowding them with new meanings. Translate the Bible into any language, and that language is elevated and enriched.

Think of the effect on human praise. That great treasure of Christian poetry.

Think of the effect on human gladness. Christ fills the heart with such reasons for praise, and makes life one song of joy.

Thus Christ is the Healer.

To men seeking for knowledge, He offers a higher gift—healing. And as for true knowledge and culture, in Christ, and in Christ alone, will you find it.

Let your culture be rooted in Him. Let your Religion influence all your nature.

The effects of Christianity are its best evidence. What else does the like of that which it does? Let Jannes and Jambres ‘do the same with their enchantments.’ We may answer the question, ‘Art Thou He that should come?’ as Christ did, ‘The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear.’

The perfect Restoration will be in heaven. Then, indeed, when our souls are freed from mortal grossness, and the thin veils of sense are rent and we behold Him as He is, then when they rest not day nor night, but with ever renewed strength run to His commandments, then when He has put into their lips a new song—‘then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf be unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.’

MIRAGE OR LAKE

‘For in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the glowing sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.’—[ISAIAH xxxv. 6, 7](#).

What a picture is painted in these verses! The dreary wilderness stretches before us, monotonous, treeless, in some parts bearing a scanty vegetation which flourishes in early spring and dies before fierce summer heats, but for the most part utterly desolate, the sand blinding the eyes, the ground cracked and gaping as if athirst for the rain that will not fall; over it the tantalising mirage dancing in mockery, and amid the hot sand the yelp of the jackals. What does this dead land want? One thing alone—water. Could that be poured upon it, all would be changed; nothing else will do any good. And it comes. Suddenly it bursts from the sand, and streams bring life along the desert. It gathers into placid lakes, with their whispering reeds and nodding rushes, and the thick cool grass round their margins. The foul beasts that wandered through dry places seeking rest are drowned out. So full of blessed change will be the coming of the Lord, of which all this context speaks. Mark that this burst of waters is when ‘the Lord shall come,’ and that it is the reason for the restoration of lost powers in men, and especially for a chorus of praise from dumb lips. This, then, is the central blessing. It is not merely a joyful transformation, but it is the reason for a yet more joyful transformation ([chap. xliv. 3](#)). Recall Christ’s words to the Samaritan woman and in the Temple on the great day of the Feast.

Then this is pre-eminently a description of the work of Christ.

I. Christ brings the Supernatural Communication of a New Life.

We may fairly regard this metaphor as setting forth the very deepest characteristic of the gospel. Consider man’s need, as typified in the image of the desert. Mark that the supply for that need must come from without; that coming from without, it must be lodged in the heart of the race; that the supernatural communication of a new life and power is the very essence of the work of Christ; that such a communication is the only thing adequate to produce these wondrous effects.

II. This new life slakes men’s thirst.

The pangs and tortures of the waterless wilderness. The thirst of human souls; they long, whether they know it or not, for—

Truth for Understanding.

Love for Heart.

Basis and Guidance for Will and Effort.

Cleansing for Conscience.

Adequate objects for their powers.

They need that all these should be in One.

The gnawing pain of our thirst is not a myth; it is the secret of man’s restlessness. We are ever on the march, not only because change is the law of the world, nor only because

effort and progress are the law for civilised men, but because, like caravans in the desert, we have to search for water.

In Christ it is slaked; all is found there.

III. The Communication of this New Life turns Illusions into Realities.

‘The mirage shall become a pool.’ Life without Christ is but a long illusion. ‘Sin makes a mock of fools.’ How seldom are hopes fulfilled, and how still less frequently are they, when fulfilled, as good as we painted them! The prismatic splendours of the rain bow, which gleam before us and which we toil to catch, are but grey rain-drops when caught. Joys attract and, attained, have incompleteness and a tang of bitterness. The fish is never so heavy when landed on the sward as it felt when struggling on our hook. ‘All is vanity’—yes, if creatures and things temporal are pursued as our good. But nothing is vanity, if we have the life in us which Jesus comes to give. His Gospel gives solid, unmingled joys, sure promises which are greater when fulfilled than when longed for, certain hopes whose most brilliant colours are duller than those of the realities. The half has not been told of the ‘things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.’

Sure Promises.

A certain Hope.

IV. This New Life gives Fruitfulness. It stimulates all our nature. A godless life is in a very tragic sense barren, and a wilderness. There is in it nothing really worth doing, nor anything that will last. Christ gives Power, Motive, Pattern, and makes a life of holy activity possible. The works done by men apart from Him are, if measured by the whole relations and capacities of the doers, unfruitful works, however they may seem laden with ruddy clusters. It is only lives into which that river of God which is full of water flows that bring forth fruit, and whose fruit remains. The desert irrigated becomes a garden of the Lord.

Note, too, how this river drowns out wild beasts. The true way of conquering evil is to turn the river into it. Cultivate, and weeds die. The expulsive power of a new affection is the most potent instrument for perfecting character.

What is the use of water if we do not drink? We may perish with thirst even on the river’s bank. ‘If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink.’

THE KING'S HIGHWAY

‘And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called the way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there.’—[ISAIAH xxxv. 8, 9](#).

We can fancy what it is to be lost in a forest where a traveller may ride round in a circle, thinking he is advancing, till he dies. But it is as easy to be lost in a wilderness, where there is nothing to see, as in a wood where one can see nothing. And there is something even more ghastly in being lost below the broad heavens in the open face of day than ‘in the close covert of innumerable boughs.’ The monotonous swells of the sand-heaps, the weary expanse stretching right away to the horizon, no land-marks but the bleaching bones of former victims, the gigantic sameness, the useless light streaming down, and in the centre one tiny, black speck toiling vainly, rushing madly hither and thither—a lost man—till he desperately flings himself down and lets death bury him, that is the one picture suggested by the text. The other is of that same wilderness, but across it a mighty king has flung up a broad, lofty embankment, a highway raised above the sands, cutting across them so conspicuously that even an idiot could not help seeing it, so high above the land around that the lion’s spring falls far beneath it, and the supple tiger skulks baffled at its base. It is like one of those roads which the terrible energy of conquering Rome carried straight as an arrow from the milestone in the Forum over mountains, across rivers and deserts, morasses and forests, to flash along them the lightning of her legions, and over whose solid blocks we travel to-day in many a land.

The prophet has seen in his vision the blind and deaf cured, the capacities of human nature destroyed by sin restored. He has told us that this miraculous change has come from the opening of a spring of new life in the midst of man’s thirsty desert, and now he gets before us, in yet another image, another aspect of the glorious change which is to follow that coming of the Lord to save, which filled the farthest horizon of his vision. The desert shall have a plain path on which those diseased men who have been healed journey. Life shall no longer be trackless, but God will, by His coming, prepare paths that we should walk in them; and as He has given the lame man power to walk, so will he also provide the way by which His happy pilgrims will journey to their home.

I. The pathless wandering of godless lives.

The old, old comparison of life to a journey is very natural and very pathetic. It expresses life’s ceaseless change; every day carries us into a new scene, every day the bends of the road shut out some happy valley where we fain would have rested, every day brings new faces, new associations, new difficulties, and even if the same recur, yet it is with such changes that they are substantially new, and of each day’s march it is true, even when life is most monotonous, that ‘ye have not passed this way heretofore.’ It expresses life’s ceaseless effort

and constant plodding. To-day's march does not secure to-morrow's rest, but, however footsore and weary, we have to move on, like some child dragged along by a careless nurse. It expresses the awful crumbling away of life beneath us. The road has an end, and each step takes us nearer to it. The numbers that face us on the milestones slowly and surely decrease; we pass the last and on we go, tramp, tramp, and we cannot stop till we reach the narrow chamber, cold and dark, where, at any rate, we have got the long march over.

But to many men, the journey of life is one which has no definite direction deliberately chosen, which has no all-inclusive aim, which has no steady progress. There may be much running hither and thither, but it is as aimless as the marchings of a fly upon a window, as busy and yet as uncertain as that of the ants who bustle about on an ant-hill.

Now that is the idea, which our text implies, of all the activity of a godless life, that it is not a steady advance to a chosen goal, but a rushing up and down in a trackless desert, with many immense exertions all thrown away. Then, in contrast, it puts this great thought: that God has come to us and made for us a path for our feet.

II. The highway that God casts up.

Of course that coming we take to be Christ's coming, and we have just to consider the manner in which His coming fulfils this great promise, and has made in the trackless wilderness a way for us to walk in.

1. Christ gives us a Definite Aim for Life. I know, of course, that men may have this apart from Him, definite enough in all conscience. But such aims are unworthy of men's whole capacities. Not one of them is fit to be made the exclusive, all-embracing purpose of a life, and, taken together, they are so multifarious that in their diversity they come to be equal to none. How many we have all had! Most of us are like men who zig-zag about, chasing after butterflies! Nor are any such aims certain to be reached during life, and they all are certain to be lost at death.

Godless men are enticed on like some dumb creature lured to slaughter-house by a bunch of fodder—once inside, down comes the pole-axe.

But Christ gives us a definite aim which is worthy of a man, which includes all others; which binds this life and the next into one.

2. Christ gives us distinct knowledge of whither we should go. It is not enough to give general directions; we need to know what our next step is to be. It is of no avail that we see the shining turrets far off on the hill, if all the valleys between are unknown and trackless. Well: we have Him to point us our course. He is the exemplar—the true ideal of human nature. Hour by hour His pattern fits to our lives. True, we shall often be in perplexity, but that perplexity will clear itself by patient thought, by holding our wills in suspense till He speaks, and by an honest wish to go right. There will no longer be doubt as to what is our law, though there may be as to the application of it. We are not to be guided by men's maxims, nor by the standards and patterns round us, but by Him.

3. Christ gives means by which we can reach the aim. He does so by supplying a stimulus to our activity, in the motive of His love; by the removal of the hindrances arising from sin, through His redeeming work; by the gifts of new life from His Spirit.

'The labour of the foolish wearith every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.' But he that follows Jesus treads the right way to the city of habitation.

4. Christ goes with us. The obscure words, 'It shall be for those' are by some rendered, 'He shall be with them,' and we may take them so, as referring to the presence with His happy pilgrims of the Lord Himself. Perhaps Isaiah may have been casting back a thought to the desert march, where the pillar led the host. But at all events we have the same companion to 'talk with us by the way,' and make 'our hearts burn within us,' as had the two disconsolate pedestrians on the road to Emmaus. It is Jesus who goes before us, whether He leads us to green pastures and waters of quietness or through valleys of the shadow of death, and we can be smitten by no evil, since He is with us.

III. The travellers upon God's highway.

Two conditions are laid down in the text. One is negative—the unclean can find no footing there. It is 'the way of holiness,' not only because holiness is in some sense the goal to which it leads, but still more, because only holy feet can tread it, holy at least in the travellers' aspiration and inward consecration, though still needing to be washed daily. One is positive—it is 'the simple' who shall not err therein. They who distrust themselves and their own skill to find or force a path through life's jungle, and trust themselves to higher guidance, are they whose feet will be kept in the way.

No lion or ravenous beast can spring or creep up thereon. Simple keeping on Christ's highway elevates us above temptations and evils of all sorts, whether nightly prowlers or daylight foes.

This generation is boasting or complaining that old landmarks are blotted out, ancient paths broken, footmarks obliterated, stars hid, and mist shrouding the desert. But Christ still guides, and His promise still holds good: 'He that followeth Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life.' The alternative for each 'traveller between life and death' is to tread in His footsteps or to 'wander in the wilderness in a solitary way, hungry and thirsty,' with fainting soul. Let us make the ancient prayer ours: 'See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'

WHAT LIFE'S JOURNEY MAY BE

'The redeemed shall walk there: And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.'—[ISAIAH xxxv. 9, 10](#).

We have here the closing words of Isaiah's prophecy. It has been steadily rising, and now it has reached the summit. Men restored to all their powers, a supernatural communication of a new life, a pathway for our journey—these have been the visions of the preceding verses, and now the prophet sees the happy pilgrims flocking along the raised way, and hears some faint strains of their glad music, and he marks them, rank after rank, entering the city of their solemnities, and through the gates can behold them invested with joy and gladness, while sorrow and sighing, like some night-loving birds shrinking from the blaze of that better sun which lights the city, spread their black wings and flee away.

The noble rhythm of our English version rises here to a strain of pathetic music, the very cadence of which stirs thoughts that lie too deep for tears, and one shrinks from taking these lofty words of immortal hope—which life's sorrows have interpreted, I trust, for many of us—as the text of a sermon. But I would fain try whether some of their gracious sweetness and power may not survive even our rude handling of them.

The prophet here is not only speaking of the literal return of his brethren from captivity. The place which this prophecy holds at the very close of the book, the noble loftiness of the language, the entire absence of any details or specific allusions which compel reference to the Captivity, would be sufficient of themselves to make us suspect that there was very much more here. The structure of prophecy is misunderstood unless it be recognised that all the history of Israel was itself a prediction, a great supernatural system of types and shadows, and that all the interventions of the divine hand are one in principle, and all foretell the great intervention of redeeming love, in the person of Jesus Christ. Nor need that be unlikely in the eyes of any who believe that Christ's coming is the centre of the world's history, and that there is in prophecy a supernatural element. We are not reading our own fancies into Scripture; we are not using, in allowable freedom, words which had another meaning altogether, to adorn our own theology, but we are apprehending the innermost meaning of prophecy, when we see in it Christ and His salvation ([1 Peter i. 10](#)).

We have then here a picture of what Christ does for us weary journeyers on life's road, I. Who are the travellers?

'Redeemed,' 'ransomed of the Lord.' Israel had in its past history one great act, under the imagery of which all future deliverances were prophesied. The events of the Exodus were the great storehouse from which prophets drew the clothing of their brightest hopes; and that is a lesson for us of how to use the history of God's past deliverances. They believed that each transitory act was a revelation of an unchanging purpose and an unexhausted power, and that it would be repeated over and over again. Experience supplied the material

out of which Hope wove its fairest webs, but Faith drove the shuttle. Here the names which describe the pilgrims come from the old story. They are slaves, purchased or otherwise set free from captivity by a divine act. The epithets are transferred to the New Testament, and become the standing designation for those who have been delivered by Christ.

That designation, 'ransomed of the Lord,' opens out into the great evangelical thoughts which are the very life-blood of vital Christianity.

Emancipation from bondage is the first thing that we all need. 'He that committeth sin is the slave of sin.' An iron yoke presses on every neck.

The needed emancipation can only be obtained by a ransom price. The question of to whom the ransom is paid is not in the horizon of prophet or apostle or of Jesus Himself, in using this metaphor. What is strongly in their minds is that a great surrender must be greatly made by the Emancipator.

Jesus conceived of Himself as giving 'His life a ransom for the many.'

The emancipation must be a divine act. It surpasses any created power.

There can be no happy pilgrims unless they are first set free.

II. The end of the journey.

'They shall come to Zion.' It is one great distinctive characteristic and blessedness of the Christian conception of the future that it takes away from it all the chilling sense of strangeness, arising from ignorance and lack of experience, and invests it with the attraction of being the mother-city of us all. So the pilgrims are not travelling a dreary road into the common darkness, but are like colonists who visit England for the first time, and are full of happy anticipations of 'going home,' though they have never seen its shores.

That conception of the future perfect state as a 'city' includes the ideas of happy social life, of a settled polity, of stability and security. The travellers who were often solitary on the march will all be together there. The nomads, who had to leave their camping-place each morning and let the fire that cheered them in the night die down into a little ring of grey ashes, will 'go no more out,' but yet make endless progress within the gates. The defenceless travellers, who were fain to make the best 'laager' they could, and keep vigilant watch for human and bestial enemies crouching beyond the ring of light from the camp-fires, are safe at last, and they that swallowed them up shall be far away.

Contrast the future outlook of the noblest minds in heathenism with the calm certainty which the gospel has put within the reach of the simplest! 'Blessed are your eyes, for they see.'

III. The joy of the road.

The pilgrims do not plod wearily in silence, but, like the tribes going up to the feasts, burst out often, as they journey, into song. They are like Jehoshaphat's soldiers, who marched to the fight with the singers in the van chanting 'Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever.' The Christian life should be a joyful life, ever echoing with the 'high

praises of God.' However difficult the march, there is good reason for song, and it helps to overcome the difficulties. 'A merry heart goes all the day, a sad heart tires in a mile.' Why should the ransomed pilgrims sing? For present blessings, for deliverance from the burden of self and sin, for communion with God, for light shed on the meaning of life, and for the sure anticipation of future bliss.

'Everlasting joy on their heads.' Other joys are transitory. It is not only 'we poets' who 'in our youth begin with gladness,' whereof 'cometh in the end despondency and madness'; but, in a measure, these are the outlines of the sequence in all godless lives. The world's festal wreathes wilt and wither in the hot fumes of the banqueting house, and 'the crown of pride shall be trodden under foot.' But joy of Christ's giving 'shall remain,' and even before we sit at the feast, we may have our brows wreathed with a garland 'that fadeth not away.'

IV. The perfecting of joy at last.

'They shall obtain joy and gladness': but had they not had it on their heads as they marched? Yes; but at last they have it in perfect measure and manner. The flame that burned but dimly in the heavy air of earth flashes up into new brightness in the purer atmosphere of the city.

And one part of its perfecting is the removal of all its opposites. Sorrow ends when sin and the discipline that sin needs have ended. 'The inhabitant shall not say: I am sick; the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.' Sighing ends when weariness, loss, physical pain, and all the other ills that flesh is heir to have ceased to vex and weigh upon the spirit. Life purges the dross of imperfection from character. Death purges the alloy of sorrow and sighing from joy, and leaves the perfected spirit possessor of the pure gold of perfect and eternal gladness.

THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH

‘And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord. 15. And Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord, saying, 16. O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, Thou art the God, even Thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: Thou hast made heaven and earth. 17. Incline Thine ear, O Lord, and hear; open Thine eyes, O Lord, and see: and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent to reproach the living God. 18. Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries, 19. And have cast their gods into the fire: for they were no gods, but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone: therefore they have destroyed them. 20. Now therefore, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art the Lord, even Thou only. 21. Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent unto Hezekiah, saying. Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Whereas thou hast prayed to Me against Sennacherib king of Assyria. . . . 33. Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast a bank against it. 34. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord. 35. For I will defend this city to save it for mine own sake, and for my servant David’s sake. 36. Then the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. 37. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. 38. And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Armenia: and Esarhaddon his you reigned in his stead.’—[ISAIAH xxxvii. 14-21, 33-38](#).

Is trust in Jehovah folly or wisdom? That was the question raised by Sennacherib’s invasion. A glance at the preceding chapters will show how the high military official, ‘the rabshakeh,’ or chief of the officers, shaped all his insolent and yet skilful mixture of threats and promises so as to demonstrate the vanity of trust in Egypt or in Jehovah, or in any but ‘the great king.’ Isaiah had been labouring to lift his countrymen to the height of reliance on Jehovah alone, and now the crucial test of the truth of his contention had come. On the one hand were Sennacherib and his host, flushed with victory, and sure of crushing this puny kingly Hezekiah and his obstinate little city, perched on its rock. On the other was nothing but a prophet’s word. Where is the stronger force? And does political prudence dictate reliance on the Unseen or on the visible? The moment is the crisis of Isaiah’s work, and this narrative has been placed, with true insight into its importance, at the close of the first half of this book.

To grasp the significance of the text the preceding events have to be remembered. Hezekiah’s kingdom had been overrun, and tribute exacted from him. The rabshakeh had

been sent from the main body of the Assyrian army, which was down at Lachish in the Philistine low country on the road to Egypt, in order to try to secure Jerusalem by promises and threats, since it was too important a post to leave in the rear, if Egypt was to be invaded. That attempt having failed, and the Egyptian forces being in motion, this new effort was made to induce Hezekiah to surrender. A letter was sent, whether accompanied by any considerable armed force or no does not appear. At this point the narrative begins. It may be best studied as an illustration of the trial of faith, its refuge, its pleading, and its deliverance.

I. Note the trial of faith. Rabshakeh had derided the obstinate confidence in Jehovah, which kept these starving men on the walls grimly silent in spite of his coaxing. The letter of Sennacherib harps on the same string. It is written in a tone of assumed friendly remonstrance, and lays out with speciousness the apparent grounds for calling trust in Jehovah absurdity. There are no threats in it. It is all an appeal to common sense and political prudence. It marshals undeniable facts. Experience has shown the irresistible power of Assyria. There have been plenty of other little nations which have trusted in their local deities, and what has become of them? Barbarous names are flourished in Hezekiah's face, and their wasted dominions are pointed to as warnings against his committing a parallel folly. There is nothing in the letter which might not have been said by a friend, and nothing which was not said by the Jews who had lost their faith in their God. It was but the putting into plain words of what 'common-sense' and faint faith had often whispered to Hezekiah. The very absence of temper or demand in the letter gives it an aspect of that 'sweet reasonableness' so dear to sense-bound souls.

Mutatis mutandis, the letter may stand for a specimen of the arguments which worldly prudence brings to shake faith, in all ages. We, too, are assailed by much that sounds most forcible from the point of view of mere earthly calculation. Sennacherib does not lie in boasting of his victories. He and his shoals of soldiers are very real and potent. It does seem madness for one little kingdom to stand out, and all the more so because its king is cooped up in his city, as the cuneiform inscription proudly tells, 'like a bird in a cage,' and all the rest of his land is in the conqueror's grip. They who look only at the things seen cannot but think the men of faith mad. They who look at the things unseen cannot but know that the men of sense are fools. The latter elaborately prove that the former are impotent, but they have left out one factor in their calculations, and that is God. One man and God at his back are stronger than Sennacherib and all his mercenaries.

II. Note the refuge of tempted faith. What was Hezekiah to do with the crafty missive? It was hoped that he would listen to reason, and come down from his perch. But he neither yielded nor took counsel with his servants, but, like a devout man, went into the house of the Lord, and spread the letter before the Lord. It would have gone hard with him if he had not been to the house of the Lord many a time before. It is not easy to find our way thither for the first time, when our eyes are blinded by tears or our way darkened by calamities. But

faith instinctively turns to God when anything goes wrong, because it has been accustomed to turn to Him when all was right, according to the world's estimate of right and wrong. Whither should the burdened heart betake itself but to Him who daily bears our burdens? The impulse to tell God all troubles is as truly a mark of the faithful soul as the impulse to tell everything to the beloved is the life-breath of love.

The act of spreading the letter before the Lord is an eloquent symbol, which some prosaic and learned commentators have been dull enough to call gross, and to compare to Buddhist praying-mills! Its meaning is expressed in the prayer which follows. It is faith's appeal to His knowledge. It is faith's casting of its burden on the Lord. Our faith is of little power to bless, unless it impels us to take God into confidence in regard to everything which troubles us. If the letter is not grave enough to be spread before *Him*, it is too small to annoy *us*. If we truly live in fellowship with God, we shall find ourselves in His house, with the cause of our trouble in our hands, before we have time to think. Instinct acts more quickly than reason, and, if our faith be vital, it will not need to be argued into speaking to God of all that weighs upon us.

III. Note the pleading of faith. Hezekiah's address to God is no mere formal recapitulation of divine names, but is the effort of faith to grasp firmly the truths which the enemy denies, and on which it builds. So considered, the accumulation of titles in [verse 16](#) is very instructive, and shows how a trustful soul puts forth the energy of its faith in summoning to mind the great aspects of the divine name as bulwarks against suggested fears, and bases of supplication. Hezekiah appeals to 'the God of Hosts,' the Ruler of all the embattled forces of the universe, as well as of the armies of angels. What is Sennacherib's array compared with these? He appeals to the 'God of Israel,' as pleading the ancient relationship, which binds the unchangeable Guardian of the people to be still what He has been, and casts the responsibility of Israel's preservation upon Him. He appeals to Him 'who sits between the cherubim,' as thence defending and filling the threatened city. He grasps the thought that Jehovah is 'God alone' with a vividness which is partly due no doubt to Isaiah's teaching, but is also the indignant recoil of faith from the assumption of the letter, that Jehovah was but as the beaten deities of Gozan and the rest. Faith clings the more tenaciously to truths denied, as a dog will hold on to the stick that one tries to pull from it.

Thus, having heartened himself and pled with God by all these names, Hezekiah comes to his petition. It is but translating into words the symbol of spreading the letter before God. He asks God to behold and to hear the defiant words. Prayer tells God what it knows that He knows already, for it relieves the burdened heart to tell Him. It asks Him to see and hear what it knows that He does see and hear. But the prayer is not for mere observance followed by no divine act, but for taking knowledge as the precursor of the appropriate help. Of such seeing and hearing by God, believing prayer is the appointed condition. 'Your Father knoweth

what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him'; but that is not a reason for silence, but for supplication.

Hezekiah rightly regarded Sennacherib's words as meant to reproach the living God, for the point of the letter was to dissuade from trust in Him, as no more powerful than the petty deities of already conquered cities. The prayer, therefore, pleads that God would take care of His own honour, and by delivering Jerusalem, show His sole sovereignty. It is a high and wonderful level for faith to reach, when it regards personal deliverance mainly in its aspect as vindicating God and warranting faith. We may too easily conclude that God's honour is involved in our deliverance, and it is well to be on our guard against that.

But it is possible to die to self so fully as to feel that our cause is His, because His is so entirely ours; and then we may come to that heroic faith which seeks even personal good more for God's sake than for our own. It was noble that this man should have no word to say about self but 'Save us, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art God alone.' Like him, we may each feel that our defence is more God's affair than ours, in proportion as we feel we are His rather than our own. That siege of Jerusalem was indeed as a duel between faith and unbelief on the one hand, and between Jehovah and the gods who were 'no gods' on the other. Sennacherib's letter was a defiant challenge to Jehovah to do His best for this people, and when faith repeated in prayer the insolence of unbelief only one result was possible. It came.

IV. Note the deliverance of faith. Isaiah's grand prophecy tempts us to linger over its many beauties and magnificent roll of triumphant scorn, but it falls outside our purpose. As for the catastrophe, it should be noted that its place and time are not definitely stated, and that probably the notion that the Assyrian army was annihilated before Jerusalem is a mistake. Sennacherib and his troops were at Libnah, on their way to meet the Egyptian forces. If there were any of them before Jerusalem, they would at most be a small detachment, sufficient to invest it. Probably the course of events was that, at some time not specified, soon after the dismissal of the messengers who brought the letter, the awful destruction fell, and that, when the news of the disaster reached the detachment at Jerusalem, as the psalm which throbs with the echoes of the triumph says, 'They were troubled, and hasted away.'

How complete was the crushing blow the lame record of this campaign in the inscriptions shows, in which the failure of the attempt to capture the city is covered up by vapouring about tribute and the like. If it had not failed, however, the success would certainly have been told, as all similar cases are told, with abundant boasting. The other fact is also to be remembered, that Sennacherib tried no more conclusions with Jerusalem and Jehovah, and though he lived for some twenty years afterwards, never again ventured on to the soil where that mighty God fought for His people.

The appended notice of Sennacherib's death has been added by some narrator, since it probably occurred after Isaiah's martyrdom. 'All they that take the sword shall perish with

the sword.' Such a career as his could not but give taste for violence and bloodshed, and diminish regard for human life. Retribution comes slowly, for twenty years intervened between the catastrophe to the army and the murder of the king. Its penalties increase as its fall delays; for first came the blotting out of the army, and then, when that had no effect, at last the sword in his own heart. 'He that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.'

But the great lesson of that death is the same as that of the other king's deliverance. Hezekiah 'went unto the house of the Lord,' and found Him a very present help in trouble. Sennacherib was slain in the house of his god. The two pictures of the worshippers and their fates are symbolic of the meaning of the whole story. Sennacherib had dared Jehovah to try His strength against him and his deities. The challenge was accepted, and that bloody corpse before the idol that could not help preaches a ghastly sermon on the text, 'They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them. O Israel, trust thou in the Lord: He is their help and their shield.'

WHERE TO CARRY TROUBLES

And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.’—[ISAIAH xxxvii. 14.](#)

When Hezekiah heard the threatenings of Sennacherib’s servants, he rent his clothes and went into the house of the Lord, and sent to Isaiah entreating his prayers. When he received the menacing letter, his faith was greater, having been heartened by Isaiah’s assurances. So he then himself appealed to Jehovah, spreading the letter before Him, and himself prayed God to guard His own honour, and answer the challenge flung down by the insolent Assyrian. It is noble when faith increases as dangers increase.

I. We have here an example of what to do with troubles and difficulties.

We are to lay them out before God, as we can do by praying about them. Hezekiah’s trouble was great. His kingdom could be crushed like an eggshell by the grasp of Sennacherib’s hand. But little troubles as well as great ones are best dealt with by being ‘spread before the Lord.’ Whatever is important enough to disturb me is important enough for me to speak to God about it. Whether the poison inflaming our blood be from a gnat’s bite, or a cobra’s sting, the best antidote is—pray about it.

How much more real and fervid our prayers would be, if we habitually turned all our affairs into materials for petition! That is a very empty dispute as to whether we ought to pray for deliverance from outward sorrows. If we are living in touch with God, we cannot but take Him into our confidence, if we may so say, as to everything that affects us. And we should as soon think of hiding any matter from our dearest on earth as from our Friend in heaven. ‘In *everything*, by prayer and supplication’ is the commandment, and will be the instinct of the devout heart.

Note Hezekiah’s assurance that God cares about him.

Note his clear perception that God is his only help.

Note his identification of his own deliverance with God’s honour. We cannot identify our welfare, or deliverance in small matters, with God’s fair fame, in such a fashion. But we ought to be quite sure that He will not let us sink or perish, and will never desert us. And we can be quite sure that, if we identify ourselves and our work with Him, He will identify Himself with us and it. His treatment of His servants will tell the world (and not one world only) what He is, how faithful, how loving, how strong.

II. We have here an example of how God answers His servants’ prayers.

It was ‘by terrible things in righteousness’ that Hezekiah’s answer came. His prayer was at one end of the chain, and at the other was a camp full of corpses. One poor man’s cry can set in motion tremendous powers, as a low whisper can start an avalanche. That magnificent theophany in [Psalm xviii.](#), with all its majesty and terror of flashing lightnings and a rocking earth, was brought about by nothing more than ‘In my distress I called upon the Lord,’ and

its purpose was nothing more than to draw the suppliant out of many waters and deliver him from his strong enemy.

That army swept off the earth may teach us how much God will do for a praying child of His. His people's deliverance is cheaply purchased at such a price. 'He reproveth kings for their sake.'

One man with God beside him is stronger than all the world. As the psalmist learned in his hour of peril, 'Thou, Lord, makest me to dwell in safety, thou alone!'

GREAT VOICES FROM HEAVEN

‘Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 2. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. 3. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: 5. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. 6. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: 7. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. 8. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. 9. Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid: say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! 10. Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him: behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him.’—[ISAIAH xl. 1-10](#).

How majestically this second part of the Book of Isaiah opens with these mysterious voices! Other prophecies are wont to begin with symbolic visions, but here the ear takes the place of the eye; and instead of forms and flashing lights, which need to be translated, the prophet hears words, the impressiveness of which is heightened by the absence of any designation of the speakers. This much is clear, that the first words are God’s, addressed to the prophets. They are the keynote of the whole. Israel is comforted in the assurance that her trial is ended and her sin purged. Then there is silence, broken by a voice to which no personality is attached, the herald and forerunner of the coming King and God. When the echoes of it have died away, another is heard, commanding yet another unnamed to ‘cry,’ and, in response to the latter’s asking what is to be the burden of his message, bidding him peel out the frailty of man and the eternal vigour of the word of the Lord, which assures its own fulfilment.

Then comes a longer pause. The way has been prepared, the coming God has come; He has set up His throne in the restored Jerusalem, and His glory is seen upon her. So there rings out from unnamed lips the stirring command to the city, thus visited by the indwelling God, to proclaim the glad tidings with a voice, the strength of which shall correspond to their gladness and certainty. This rapid glance at the structure of the whole naturally suggests the fourfold division to which we shall adhere.

I. God speaks and bids His servants speak ([vs. 1, 2](#)), That is a wonderfully tender word with which the silence and sadness of exile are broken. The inmost meaning of God’s voice is ever comfort. What a world of yearning love there is, too, in the two little words ‘my’ and ‘your’! The exiles are still His; He who has hidden His face from them so long is still theirs.

And what was true of them is true of us; for sin may separate us from God, but it does not separate Him from us, and He still seeks to make us recognise the imperishable bond, which itself is the ground of both our comfort and of His will that we should be comforted.

As the very first words go deep into the meaning of all God's voices, and unveil the permanence of His relation of love even to sinful and punished men, so the next disclose the tender manner of His approach to us, and prescribe the tone for all His true servants: 'Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem,' with loving words, which may win her love; for is she not the bride of Jehovah, fallen though she be? And is not humanity the beloved of Jesus, in whom God's heart is unveiled that our hearts may be won? How shall human voices be softened to tenderness worthy of the message which they carry? Only by dwelling near enough to Him to catch the echoes, and copy the modulations, of His voice, as some birds are taught sweeter notes than their own. The prophet's charge is laid upon all who would speak of Christ to men. Speak to the heart, not only to the head or to the conscience. God beseeches in the person of His 'ambassadors.' The substance of the message may well find its way to the heart; for it is the assurance that the long, hard service of the appointed term of exile is past, that the sin which brought it about is forgiven, and, more wonderful and gracious still, that God's mercy reckons that the ills which followed on faithlessness have more than expiated it. We need not seek for any other explanation of these startling words than the exuberance of the divine pity, which 'doth not willingly afflict.'

Of course, the captivity is in the foreground of the prophet's vision; but the wider sense of the prophecy embraces the worse captivity of sin under which we all groan, and the divine voice bids His prophets proclaim that Jehovah comes, to set us all free, to end the weary bondage, and to exact no more punishment for sins.

II. The forerunner speaks. There is something very impressive in the abrupt bursting in of this second voice, all unnamed. It is the reverberation, as it were, of the former, giving the preparation on the side of man for the coming of Jehovah. Israel in bondage in Egypt had been delivered by Jehovah marching through the wilderness, a wilderness stretched between Babylon and Jerusalem; these supply the scenery, so to speak; but the scenery is symbolic, and the call is really one to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness of human sin, by raising up the cast-down by reason of transgressions or sorrows, to subdue lofty thoughts and self-sufficiency by humble self-abnegation, to make the 'crooked things' or 'rugged things' straight or smooth, and the rough ground where heights were tumbled on heights a deep valley, by forsaking evil.

The moral preparation, not the physical, is meant. It was fitting that the road for such a coming should be prepared. But the coming was not so contingent on the preparation that the 'glory of the Lord' would not 'be revealed' unless men made a highway for Him. True, that the revelation of His glory to the individual soul must be preceded by such a preparation; but that raising of abjectness and levelling of loftiness needs some perception

of Him ere it can be done by man. Christ must come to the heart before the heart can be prepared for His coming. John the Baptist came crying in the wilderness, but his fiery message did little to cast up a highway for the footsteps of the King. John's immovable humility pierced to the very heart of the prophecy when he answered the question 'Who art thou?' with 'I am a voice. The voice was unnamed; why, what does it matter who I am?'

The substance and the range of the coming manifestation are next defined. It is to be the revelation of 'the glory of the Lord,' and to be for all mankind, not for Israel only. That lowly life and that shameful death were a strange revelation of God's glory. If *they* revealed it, then it cannot consist in power or any of the majestic 'attributes,' but in love, pity, and long-suffering. Love is the divinest thing in God. The guarantee for all lies simply here, that God has spoken it. It is because the unnamed herald's ear has heard the divine voice uttering the gracious assurances of [verse 1](#), that *his* voice is lifted up in the commands and assurances of [verse 4](#). Absolute faith in God's utterances, however they seem to transcend experience, is wisdom and duty.

III. Yet another voice, whether sounding from heaven or earth is as uncertain as is the person to whom it is addressed, authoritatively commands a third to 'cry,' and, on being asked what is to be the burden of the call, answers. This new herald is to proclaim man's frailty and the immortal vigour of God's word, which secures the fulfilment of His promises. Is it the questioning voice, or the commanding one, which says, 'All flesh is grass, . . . the people is grass'? If the former, it is the utterance of hopelessness, all but refusing the commission. But, dramatic as that construction is, it seems better to regard the whole as the answer to the question, 'What shall I cry?' The repetition of the theme of man's frailty is not unnatural, and gives emphasis to the contrast of the unchangeable stability of God's word. An hour of the deadly hot wind will scorch the pastures, and all the petals of the flowers among the herbage will fall. So everything lovely, bright, and vigorous in humanity wilts and dies. One thing alone remains fresh from age to age,—the uttered will of Jehovah. His breath kills and makes alive. It withers the creatural, and it speaks the undying word.

This message is to follow those others which tell of God's merciful promises, that trembling hearts may not falter when they see all created things sharing the common lot, but may rest assured that God's promises are as good as God's facts, and so may hope when all things visible would preach despair. It was given to hearten confidence in the prophecy of a future revelation of the glory of God. It remains with us to hearten confidence in a past revelation, which will stand unshaken, whatever forces war against it. Its foes and its friends are alike short-lived as the summer's grass. The defences of the one and the attacks of the other are being antiquated while being spoken; but the bare word of God, the record of the incarnate Word, who is the true revelation of the glory of God, will stand for ever,—'And this is the Word which by the gospel is preached to you.'

IV. The prophet seems to be the speaker in [verses 9-11](#), or perhaps the same anonymous voice which already commanded the previous message summons Jerusalem to become the ambadress of her God. The coming of the Lord is conceived as having taken place, and He is enthroned in Zion. The construction which takes Jerusalem or Zion (the double name so characteristic of the second part of Isaiah) to be the recipient of the good tidings is much less natural than that which regards her as their bearer.

The word rendered 'tellest good tidings' is a feminine form, and falls in with the usual personification of a city as a woman. She, long laid in ruins, the Niobe of nations, the sad and desolate widow, is bid to bear to her daughter cities the glad tidings, that God is in her of a truth. It is exactly the same thought as 'Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.' The prophecy refers to the Church. It sets forth her highest office as being the proclamation of her indwelling King. The possession of Christ makes the Church the evangelist for the world; for it gives the capacity and the impulse as well as the obligation to speak the glad tidings. Every Christian has this command binding on him by the fact of his having Christ.

The command sets forth the bold clearness which should mark the herald's call. Naturally, any one with a message to peal out to a crowd would seek some vantage-ground, from which his words might fly the farther. If we have a message to deliver, let us seek the best place from which to deliver it. 'Lift up thy voice with strength.' No whisper will do. Bated breath is no fit vehicle for God's gospel. There are too many of God's heralds who are always apologising for their message, and seeking to reconcile it with popular opinions. We are all apt to speak truth less confidently because it is denied; but, while it is needful to speak with all gentleness and in meekness to them that oppose, it is cowardly, as well as impolitic, to let one tremor be heard in our tones though a world should deny our message.

The command tells the substance of the Church's message. Its essence is the proclamation of the manifested God. To gaze on Jesus is to behold God. That God is made known in the twin glories of power and gentleness. He comes 'as a strong one.' His dominion rests on His own power, and on no human allies. His reign is retributive, and that not merely as penally recompensing evil, but as rewarding the faith and hope of those who waited for Him.

But beyond the limits of our text, in [verse 11](#), we have the necessary completion of the manifestation, in the lovely figure of the Shepherd carrying the lambs in His arms, and gently leading the flock of returning exiles. The strength of Jesus is His lowliness; and His mighty arm is used, not to wield an iron sceptre, but to gather us to His bosom and guide us in His ways. The paradox of the gospel, which points to a poor, weak man dying in the dark on a cross and says, 'Behold the great Power of God!' is anticipated in this prophecy. The triumphant paradox of the Apostle is shadowed here: 'We preach Christ crucified, . . . the power of God, and the wisdom of God.'

O THOU THAT BRINGEST GOOD TIDINGS

‘O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain: O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!’—[ISAIAH xl. 9](#).

There is something very grand in these august and mysterious voices which call one to another in the opening verses of this chapter. First, the purged ear of the prophet hears the divine command to him and to his brethren—Comfort Jerusalem with the message of the God who comes for her deliverance. Then afar off another voice is heard, the herald and forerunner of the approaching Deity; and when thus the foundation has been laid, yet another takes up the speech, and ‘The voice said, Cry,’ and the anonymous recipient of the command asks with what message he shall be entrusted, and the answer is the signature and pledge of the divine fulfilment of the word thus spoken. And then there comes, as I take it, a pause of silence, within which the great Epiphany and manifestation takes place, and the coming God comes, enters into the rebuilt city, and there shines in His beauty; and then breaks forth the rapturous commandment of my text to the resuscitated city, to tell to all her daughters of Judah the glad tidings of a present God.

I need not, I suppose, spend your time in vindicating the translation of our Bible as against one which has been made very familiar by being wedded to Handel’s music, and has commended itself to many, according to which Zion is rather the recipient than the herald of the tidings, ‘O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength,’ and so on.

And I suppose I need not either spend any time in vindicating the transference of the text to the Gentile Church, beyond the simple remark that, whatever be the date of this second portion of Isaiah’s prophecy, its standpoint is the time of the Captivity, when Jerusalem lay desolate, burned with fire, and all their pleasant things were laid waste, so that the city here addressed is the new form of the ancient Zion, which had risen from her ashes, and had a better tidings of glad significance to impart to all the nations. And so, dear brethren, looking at the words from that point of view, I think that they may very fairly yield to us two or three very old-fashioned and well-worn thoughts, which may yet be stimulating and encouraging to us. I take them as simply as possible, just as they run here in this text, which brings out very strikingly and beautifully, first, the function of the Evangelist Zion; secondly, the manner of her message; and lastly, its contents.

I. Look with me at the thoughts that cluster round the name, ‘O Zion, that bringest glad tidings.’

It is almost a definition of the Church; at any rate, it is a description of her by her most characteristic office and function, that which marks and separates her from all associations and societies of men. This is her highest office; this is the reason of her being; this is her noblest dignity. All mystical powers have been claimed for her, men have been bidden to

submit their judgment and manhood to her authority; but her true dignity is that she bears a gospel in her hand, and that grace is poured into her lips. Fond and sense-bound regrets have been sighed forth that her miracle-working gifts have faded away; but so long as her voice can quicken dead souls, and make the tongue of the dumb to speak, her noblest energies remain unimpaired, and so we may think of her as most exalted and dignified in that her Master addresses her, 'O Zion, that bringest good tidings.'

Now, if I was right in my preliminary remark, to the effect that, prior to my text, we are to suppose the manifestation and approach of the Divine Deliverer, then I think it is quite clear that what constitutes Zion the messenger of good tidings is the presence in her of the living God. Translate that into New Testament language, and it just comes to this: that what constitutes the Church the evangelist for the world is the simple possession of Christ or of the Gospel. That thought branches into some considerations on which we may touch.

The first of them is this: Whoever has Christ has the power to impart Him. All believers are preachers, or meant to be so, by virtue of the possession of that Divine Christ for your own. We Nonconformists are ready enough to proclaim the universal priesthood of all believers when we are opposing ecclesiastical assumption; are we as ready to take it for the law of our own lives, and to say, 'Yes, priests by the imposition of a mightier hand, and ministers of Christ by the possession of Christ, and therefore bound and able to impart Him to all around'? He has given us His love, and He thereby has made us fit to impart Him. Zion only needed to receive its God, in order thereby to possess the power to say unto all the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God.' It does not take much genius, it does not take much culture, it does not need any prolonged training, for a man who has Christ to say, 'Behold, I have Him.' The very first Christian sermon that was ever preached was a very short one, and a very effectual one, for it converted the whole congregation, and it was this: 'We have found the Messiah.' That was all—the utterance of individual possession and personal experience—and it 'brought him to Jesus.'

Take another point. The possession of Christ for ourselves imposes upon us the obligation to impart Him. All property in this world is trust property, and everything that a man has that can help or bless the moral or spiritual or intellectual condition of his fellows, he is thereby under solemn obligation to impart. There is an obligation arising from the bands that knit us to one another, so that no man can possess his good alone without being untrue to what we call nowadays the solidarity of humanity. You have, you say, the bread of life: very well, what would you think of a man in a famine who, when women were boiling their children, and men were fighting with the swine on the dunghill for garbage, was content to eat his morsel alone, and leave others to perish by starvation? You possess, you say, the healing for all the diseases of humanity: very well, what would you think of a man who, in a pestilence, was contented with swallowing his own specific, and leaving others to die and to rot in the street? If you have the Christ, you have Him that you may impart Him. 'He that

withholdeth bread, the people shall curse him'; of how much deeper malediction from despairing lips will they be thought worthy who call themselves the followers of Him that gave His life to be the bread of the world, and yet withhold it from famishing souls?

And it is an obligation that arises, too, from the very purposes of our calling. What are Christian men and women saved for? For their own blessedness? Yes, and no. No creature in God's great universe but is great enough to be a worthy end of the divine action; the happiness of the humblest and most insignificant moves His mighty hand. Ay, but no creature in God's universe so great as that he is a worthy end of the divine action, if he is going to keep all the divine gifts in himself. We are all brought into the light that we may impart light.

'Heaven doth with us as we with torches do;
Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touch'd
But to fine issues.'

II. And now turn to the second thought which I desire to draw from these words. We have here, in a very picturesque and vivid form, the setting forth of the manner in which the Evangelist Zion is to proclaim her message.

The fair-featured herald is bidden to get up into the high mountain— perhaps a mere picturesque detail, perhaps some reference to the local position of the city set upon a hill—like the priests on Ebal and Gerizim, or Alpine shepherds, calling to each other across the valleys, to secure some vantage-ground, and next, to let her voice roll out across the glen. No faltering whisper will do, but a voice that compels audience, that can be heard above the tumult and afar off, and confident and loud and clear, because courageous and without dread. 'Lift up thy voice with strength.' Yes, but a timid heart will make a tremulous voice, and fear and doubt will whisper a message when courage will ring it out. 'Be not afraid' is the foundation of the clearness and the loudness with which the word is to be uttered.

That thought opens itself out into these two others, on each of which I say a word or two. Our message is to be given with a courage and a force that are worthy of it; 'Be not afraid.' That is a lesson for this day, my brethren. There are plenty of causes of fear round about us if, like poor Peter on the water, we look at the waves instead of at the Master. There are the great forces of evil that are always arrayed against Christ. There is the thoroughgoing and formidable rejection of all that is dearest to us, which is creeping like poison through cultivated society at home; there is the manifest disproportion between our resources and the task that we have set ourselves to. 'They need not depart; give ye them to eat,' said the Master. What! five thousand people need not depart, and only this scanty provision of loaves

and fishes! Yes; the Master's hand can multiply it. There is the consciousness of our own weakness; there is the apparent slow progress of the Gospel in the world. All these things come surging in upon us when our spirits are low and our faith weak; and yet the message comes to us, 'Be not afraid.' I venture to break that injunction up into two or three exhortations, which I cast into the shape of exhortations, not from any assumption of superiority, but for the sake of point and force.

First of all, I would say, let us cherish a firm, soul-absorbing confidence in the power and truth of the message we have to carry. I do not speak now of the intellectual discipline which may be required from each of us to meet the difficulties of this day—that is outside of my present subject; but there is a moral discipline quite as important as the intellectual. There cannot be any question, I suppose, to any one who looks round about, and notices the tendencies of his own mind, but that all we Christian people, in our various circles and organisations, are under a very great temptation to a very perceptible lowering of our key in the presence of widespread doubt. We are tempted to fancy that a truth is less certain because it is denied; that because a has attacked this thing, and b's clever book has unsettled that thing, and c's researches seem to cast a great deal of doubt upon that other thing, therefore we are to surrender them all, and talk about them as if they were doubtful problems or hypotheses rather than sure verities of our faith. And there are some of us, I venture to say, who are in danger of another temptation, and that is of getting a little ashamed and becoming afraid to say 'Yes, I stand by that great truth, God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself,' for fear of being thought to be—well, 'narrow' is the favourite word, 'old-fashioned,' or 'holders of a creed outworn,' 'in antagonism with the spirit of the age,' and so on, and so on. Brethren, I am not the man, I hope, to preach an unreasonable attitude of antagonism; I am not the man to ask anybody to exaggerate his beliefs because somebody else denies them, but I do believe that among us all, and especially among young men, there is the temptation just to be a little bit afraid, and not to let the voice ring out with that clear certitude which becomes the messenger of the Cross. Try by mental discipline to find intellectual standing-ground that will be firm below your feet, and then remember that that is not all, but that moral discipline is wanted also that I may open my mouth boldly, as I ought to speak.'

And then, if I might venture to dwell for a moment or two further upon this class of consideration, I would say, Do not let us make too much of the enemy. There is no need why we should take them at their own appraisal. Men are always tempted to think that no generation ever had such a fight as their own generation. They have said that ever since there was a Christian Church. But the true, healthy way of looking at the adversary—and by that I mean all the various forms of difficulty which beset us in our evangelistic work, difficulties in the mission-field, difficulties in the state of things here round us—the true, healthy way of looking at them all, is to look at them as the brave Apostle Paul did, when

he said, 'I am going to stop at Ephesus till Pentecost, for there is a great and effectual door opened to me.' And how did he know that? He tells us in the next clause, 'There are many adversaries.' Where there are many adversaries, there is an effectual door, if you and I are bold and big enough to go in and occupy.

And then I would venture to say, still further, let us remember the victories of the past. Let us make personal experience of the overcoming powers that are stored and hidden in Christ's Gospel. And, above all, let us remember who fights with us. Jesus Christ and one man are always the majority. There is an old story, which you may remember, about the Conqueror of Rome, who dashed his sword into the scales when the ransom was being weighed; and Christ flings His sharp sword with the two edges into the scales when we are weighing resources, and the other kicks the beam. There are enemies, plenty of them, all round about. Yes, and the spreading forth of their wings fills the breadth of the land. Be it so. But notwithstanding the irruption of the barbarous and cruel hosts, it is 'Thy land, O Emanuel!' And in His time He will sweep them before His presence, as the north wind drives the locusts into the hindermost sea. I do not know if any of you remember an ancient Christian legend, and I do not know whether it is a legend or a truth—it does not matter, it will serve for our purpose all the same either way—how when the Emperor Julian, surnamed the Apostate, once taunted a humble Christian man with the question, 'What is the carpenter's son doing now?' and the answer was, 'Hewing wood for the emperor's funeral pile,' and not very long after there came the fatal field on which, according to ancient tradition, he died with the words on his lips, 'Thou hast conquered, Galilean. As in Carlyle's grand translation of Luther's Hymn of the Reformation—

'Of our own strength we nothing can,
Full soon were we downriden;
But for us fights the proper Man,
Whom God Himself hath bidden.
Ask ye, who is the same?
Christ Jesus is His name,
The Lord Sabaoth's Son.
He and none other one
Shall conquer in this battle.'

'Lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid.'

III. I come to the last thought that emerges from these words, and that is the substance and contents of the Evangelist Zion's message: 'Say unto the cities of Judah, behold your God!'

They were to be pointed to a great historical act, in which God had manifested and made Himself visible to men; and the words of my text are, not only an exclamation, but they are an entreaty, and the message was to be given to these little daughter cities of Judah as representing all of those for whom the deliverance had been wrought—all which things are paralleled in the message that is committed to our hand.

For, first of all, we all have given to us the charge of pointing men to the great historical fact wherein God is visible to men, and so crying, 'Behold your God!' God cannot be revealed by word, God cannot be revealed by thought. There is no way open to Him to make Himself known to His creatures except the way by which men make themselves known to one another; that is, by their deeds; and so, high above all speculation, high above all abstraction, nearer to us than all thought stands the historical fact in which God shows Himself to the world, and that is the person and work of Jesus Christ, 'the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person,' in whom the abysses of the divine nature are opened, and through whom all the certitude of divine light that human eyes can receive pours itself in genial and yet intensest radiance upon the world. How beautiful in that connection the verses following my text are I need only indicate in a word as I pass, 'Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand,' and yet, 'behold, He shall feed His flock like a shepherd.' And so in Christ is the power of God, for I take it that He is the arm of the Lord; and in Christ is the gentleness of God; and whilst men grope in the darkness, our business is to point to the living, dying Son, and to say, 'There you have the complete, the ultimate revelation of the unseen God.'

And do not let us forget that the burning centre of all that brightness is the Cross, that ever-wondrous paradox; that the depth of humiliation is the height of glorifying; that Christ's Cross is the throne of the manifested divine power quite as much as it is the seat of the manifested divine love, and that when He is hanging there in His weakness and mortal agony, the words are yet true—strange, paradoxical, blessedly true—'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.' And when we say, pointing to His Cross and Him there, His brow pale with dying, and His soul faint with loss—when we say, 'Behold the Lamb!' we are also and therein saying, 'Behold your God!'

And therefore, with what of gentleness, with what of tenderness, with what of patient entreaty as well as strength and confidence, the word that speaks of a strength manifested in weakness, and a God made visible in Christ, should be spoken, it needs not here to enlarge upon—only take that one last thought that I suggested, that this message comes to all those for whom God has appeared, and for whom the deliverance has been wrought. We each have the right, and we each have the charge, to go to every man and say, 'Behold your God!' and the hearts of men will leap up to meet the message. For, though overlaid by sin, perverted often into its own opposite by fear, misinterpreted and misunderstood by the very men that bear it, there yet lies deep in every heart the aching thirst for the living God, and we have the word that alone can meet that thirst. All around us men are saying—'In all the fields of

science and of nature, in human history and in the spirit of men, I find no God,' and are falling back into that dreary negation, 'Behold, we know not anything!' And some of them, orphaned in their agony, are crying, though it be often in contemptuous tones that almost sound as if they meant the opposite, 'Oh, that I knew where I might find Him!' We have a word that can meet that. For cultivated Europe it has come to this—Christ or nothing; either He has shown us the Father, or there is no knowledge of Him possible. We do not need to dread the alternative; we can face it, and overcome it. And in far-off lands men are groping in twilight uncertainty, worshipping, with a nameless horror at their hearts, gods capricious, gods cruel, gods terrible—tamely believing in gods far-off and mysterious, cowering before gods careless and heartless, degrading their manhood by imitating gods foul and bestial, and yet all the while dimly feeling, 'Surely, surely there is somewhere a good and a fair Being, that has an eye to see my sorrows, and a heart to pity them; an ear to hear my prayer, and a hand to stretch out.' We have a word that can meet that. Let that word ring out, brother, as far as your influence can reach. Set the trumpet to thy mouth, and say, 'Behold your God!' and be sure that from the uttermost parts of the earth we shall hear the choral songs of many voices answering, 'Lo! this is our God, we have waited for Him, and He will save us! This is our God; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation!'

'HAVE YE NOT? HAST THOU NOT?'

'Have ye not known, have ye not heard? hath it not been told yon from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? . . . Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard?'—[ISAIAH xl. 21 and 28](#).

The recurrence of the same form of interrogation in these two verses is remarkable. In the first case the plural is used, in the second the singular, and we may reasonably conclude that as Israel is addressed in the latter, the nations outside the sphere illumined by Revelation are appealed to in the former. The context of the two passages confirms this reference, for the witness of Creation and History is summoned in the former section, and that of God's inward dealings with trustful souls is brought out in the latter.

I. What Nature and History tell men about God.

Observe that emphatic '*told you*'; then the witness here appealed to is truly a Revelation, though a silent one. 'There is no speech nor language,' yet 'their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.'

The general idea of the divine nature, as revealed 'from the beginning' and 'from the foundation of the earth,' is that of Majesty transcending all comparison.

The contrast is drawn between Him and men, in the magnificent image of Him as throned above 'the circle of the earth,' and so far above that all the busy tribes of men 'are as grasshoppers,' their restless activity but aimless leaping, and 'the tumult of the peoples' only as a meaningless chirping.

God's creative and sustaining power is further set forth by that great image of His 'stretching out the heavens as a curtain, and spreading them out as a tent to dwell in.' As easily as travellers set up their tents when the day's march is done, did He stretch the great expanse above the low earth; and all its depths and spaces are, in comparison with Him, thin, transient, and as easily rolled up and put aside as the stuff that makes a nomad's home for a night. Nor are the two implied thoughts that 'the heavens' are a veil screening Him from men even while they tell of Him to men, and that they are His lofty dwelling-place, to be left out of view.

But in [verse 26](#) we have a more specific and grander exhibition of God's relation to the Universe. The stars, in number numberless, are conceived of as a great army drilled and directed by Him. And that metaphor, familiar to us as it is, and condensed into the divine title so frequent in this prophetic book, is pregnant with great truths.

It speaks of God as the Emperor, the Commander, exercising supreme authority by 'the word of His power,' and of creation as obedient thereto. 'For ever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in the heavens.' The Commander needs but to speak, and so mystic is the power of His uttered will, that effects on the material universe follow that altogether immaterial energy.

It speaks of the harmony and order of the whole Creation. 'By number' and 'by name' He sways and ranks them. 'All things work together.' They are an ordered whole—a kosmos, not a chaos. Modern science is slowly establishing by experiment the truth which is enshrined in that old name, 'the Lord of hosts,' that all things in the physical universe are a unity.

It speaks of the perfectness of God's knowledge of each item in the mighty whole. 'He calleth them all by name.' Thereby are expressed authority, ownership, particular knowledge of, and relation to, each individual of the overwhelming aggregate. God knows all, because He knows each.

It speaks of the inexhaustible energy of His sustaining power, and the consequent strength of His creatures. 'Preservation is a continued creation.' The prophet saw much deeper than the mechanical view of the creative act. To him God was, to use more modern language, 'immanent' as well as 'transcendent.' True, He 'sits above the circle of the earth,' but as truly He is working on His creatures, and it is by His communicated strength that they are strong. If any being—star, or insect—were separated utterly from Him, it would crumble into nothingness.

But the appeal to Creation is singularly interrupted by an appeal to History. The prophet drops from the serene expanse of the silent yet eloquent heavens to the stormy scenes of changing dynasties and revolutions of earth's kingdoms. How calm the one, how tumultuous the other! How the one witnesses to Him by its apparently unchanging continuance! how the other witnesses by its swift mutations! In the one, He is revealed as Preserver; in the other, the most clear demonstration of His power is given in His destroying of rebel kingdoms. But in these acts by which ancient and firmly rooted dynasties are rooted up or withered as by the simoom, He reveals a side of His nature to which the calm heavens bore no witness. He is the moral Governor of the world, 'The history of the world is the judgment of the world,' and when hoary iniquities are smitten to death, 'the Holy One' is revealed as the righteous Judge. And the conjoint witness of creation and of history attests that none can be 'likened' to Him.

II. What Revelation tells Israel about God.

It is noteworthy that in the section of which our first text is the centre, there is no mention of the divine Name, and even the well-known title, 'the Holy One of Israel,' is truncated, so as to leave out reference to the people of Revelation; whereas in this section He is not only designated as God and Creator, but as Jehovah, the God who has made a covenant with Israel, and made known His will and to some extent His nature. The distinct climax in the divine Names itself implies a nobler relation to men, and a clearer revelation than was declared in the former part of this prophecy. It is the fitting preparation for the loftier and infinitely more tender and touching aspect of the divine nature which shines with lambent, inviting lustre within the sphere of Revelation.

The distinctive glory of the long process of God's self-manifestation to Israel is that, while it emphasises all that nature and history affirm of Him, it sets Him forth as restoring the weak, as well as sustaining the strong. The sad contrast between the untroubled and unwearied strength of the calm heavens and the soon-exhausted strength of struggling and often beaten men strikes the poet prophet's sensitive soul. He did not know, what modern astronomy teaches us, that change, convulsions, ruin, are not confined to earth, but that stars as well as men faint and fail, dwindle and die. The scriptural view of Nature is not that of the scientist, but that of the poet and of the devout man. It lies quite apart from the scientific attitude, and has as good a right to exist as it has. The contrast of heaven and earth is for the prophet the contrast of strength with weakness, of joyful harmony with moral disorder, of punctual, entire obedience with rebellion and the clash of multitudes of anarchic self-willed men.

But there is a sadder contrast still—namely, that between God and the wretched weaklings that men have made of themselves. 'He fainteth not, neither is weary.' Strange anomaly that in His universe there should be the faint and 'them that have no might'! The only explanation of such an exception to the order of Creation is that men have broken loose from Creation's dependence on God, and that therefore the inflow of sustaining strength has been checked. In other words, man's weakness comes from man's sin.

Hence to restore strength to those whose power has been drained away by sin is God's divinest work. It is more to restore than to sustain. It takes less energy to keep a weight stationary at a height than to roll it up again if it falls to the bottom. Since sin is the cause of our weakness, the first step to deliver from the weakness is to deliver from the sin. If we are ever to be restored, hearts, consciences, averted wills must be dealt with—and but One Hand can deal with these.

And not only does God outdo all His mightiest works in the work of restoring strength to the faint, but He crowns that restoration by making the restored weakling like Himself. 'He fainteth not, neither is weary.' They, too, 'shall ran and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' In the long drawn out grind of monotonous marching along the common path of daily small duties and uneventful life, they shall not faint; in the rare occasional spurts, occurring in every man's experience, when extraordinary tax is laid on heart and limbs, they shall not be weary. And they will be able both to walk and to run, because they soar on wings as eagles. And they do all because they wait on the Lord. Communion with Him buoys us above this low earth, and bears us up into the heavenly places, and, living there, we shall be fit for the slow hours of commonplace plodding and for the crowded moments of great crises.

UNFAILING STARS AND FAINTING MEN

‘ . . . For that He is strong in power; not one faileth. . . . He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength.’—*ISAIAH xl. 26 and 29.*

These two verses set forth two widely different operations of the divine power as exercised in two sadly different fields, the starry heavens and this weary world. They are interlocked, as it were, by the recurrence in the latter of the emphatic words of the former. The one verse says, ‘He is strong in power’; the other, ‘He giveth power.’ In the former verse, ‘the greatness of His might’ sustains the stars; in the latter verse, a still diviner operation is set forth in that ‘to them that have no might He increaseth strength.’ Thus there are three contrasts suggested: that between unfailing stars, and men that faint; that between the unwearied God and wearied men; and that between the sustaining power that is exercised in the heavens and the restoring power that is manifested on earth.

There is another interlocking between the latter of these two texts and its context, which is indicated by a similar recurrence of epithets. In my second text we read of the ‘faint,’ and in the verse that follows it, again we find the expressions ‘faint’ and ‘weary,’ while in the verse before my text we read that ‘the Lord fainteth not, neither is weary.’ So again the contrast between Him and us is set forth, but, in the verse that closes the chapter, we read how that contrast merges into likeness, inasmuch as the unfainting and unwearied God makes even the men that wait upon Him unwearied and unfainting. Here, then, we have lessons that we may well ponder.

Note, first—

I. That sad contrast.

The prophet in the former of these verses seems to be expanding the thoughts that lie in the name, ‘the Lord of hosts,’ in so far as that name expresses the divine relation to the starry universe. The image that underlies both it and the words of the text is that of a captain who commands his soldiers, and they obey. Discipline and plan array them in their ranks; they are not a mob, but an army. The voice that reads the roll-call summons one after another to his place, and, punctually obedient, there they stand, ready for any evolution that may be prescribed. The plain prose of which is, that night by night above the horizon rise the bright orbs, and roll on their path obedient to the Sovereign will; ‘because He is strong in might not one’ is lacking. Astronomers have taught us, what the prophet did not know, that even in the apparently serene spaces there are collisions and catastrophes, and that stars may dwindle and dim, and finally go out. But while Scripture deals with creation neither from the scientific nor from the aesthetic point of view, it leaves room for both of these—for all that the poet’s imagination can see or say, for all that the scientist’s investigation can discover, it sees that beneath the beauty is the Fountain of all loveliness, beneath and behind the ‘number’ of the numberless stars works the infinite will of God. Surely an intelligible creation must have an intelligent source. Surely a universe in which Mind can apprehend

order and number must have a Mind at the back of it. Wordsworth has nobly said of Duty what we may more truly say of God: 'Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong, And the most ancient heavens through Thee are fresh and strong.' 'For that He is great in might, not one faileth.' Scripture bids us think of God, not as a creative energy that set the universe in motion, and leaves it to roll or spin, but as of a Divine Presence—to use a word which can only be in a very modified sense applied to that mysterious, intelligent Entity—operating in, and being the sustaining Cause of, all that is. This Divine Presence stamps its signature on the unfailing strength of these bright creatures above.

But in our second text we drop from the illumination of the heavens to the shadowed plain of this low earth. It is as if a man, looking up into the violet sky, with all its shining orbs, should then turn to some reeking alley, with its tumult and its squalor. Just because man is greater than the stars, man 'fails,' whilst they shine on unwearied. For what the prophet has in view as the clinging curse that cleaves to our greatness, is not merely the bodily fatigue which is necessarily involved in the very fact of bodily existence, since energy cannot be put forth without waste and weariness, but it is far more the weary heart, the heart that is weary of itself, the heart that is weary of toil, the heart that is weary of the momentary crises that demand effort, and wearier still of the effortless monotony of our daily lives; the heart that all of us carry, and which to all of us sometimes whispers, with a dark and gloomy voice which we cannot contradict, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' I was going to say, happy are you if you do not know that weariness, but I check myself and say, tenfold more miserable are you if you have never been sober and wise enough to have felt the weariness and weight of all this unintelligible world, and of your own sorry selves.

For it is ever to be remembered that the faintness and the ebbing away of might, which is the truly tragic thing in humanity, does not depend upon physical constitution, but upon separation from the Source of all strength, breaking the union between ourselves and God. If a star could shake off its dependence, and shut out the influx of the sustaining power that by continual creation preserves it, it would die into darkness, or crumble into dust. It cannot, and we cannot, in so far as our physical being is concerned, but we can shake ourselves free from God, in so far as the life of the spirit is concerned, and the godless spirit bears the Cain-curse of restlessness and weariness ever upon it. So the contrast between the unfailing strengths that ever shine down upon us from the heavens, and the weariness of body and of mind afflicting the sleeping millions on whom they shine, is tragical indeed. But far more tragical is the contrast, of which the other is but an indication because it is a consequence, the contrast between the punctual obedience with which these hosts, summoned by the great Commander, appear and take their places, and the self-will which turns a man into a 'wandering star unto whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever.' Above is peace and order, because above is the supremacy of an uncontested will. Below is tumult and weariness, because when God says 'Thou shalt,' men respond, 'I will not.'

Secondly, my text suggests to us—

II. Another sad contrast, melting into a blessed likeness.

‘He fainteth not, neither is weary.’ ‘He giveth power to the faint.’ ‘Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fail,’ but waiting on God the curse removes, and faintness and weariness cease, and the humble man becomes in some measure participant of, and conformed to, that life which knows no exhausting, operates unspent, burns with an undying flame, works and never wearies. We may take to ourselves all the peace and strength that come from that transcendent hope, whilst we are still subject, as of course we must be, to the limitations imposed on spirits fettered, as well as housed, in body. Whilst toil leaves as its consequence fatigue, and as our days increase our strength wanes; whilst physical weariness remains unaffected, there may pour into our spirits the influx of divine power, by which they will remain fresh and strong through advancing years and heavy tasks and stiff battles. Is it not something to believe it possible that

‘In old age, when others fade,
We fruit still forth shall bring’

Is it not something to know it as a possibility that we may have that within us which has no tendency to decay, which neither perishes with the using nor is exhausted by exercise, which grows the more the longer we live, which has in it the pledge of immortality, because it has in it the impossibility of exhaustion? Thus to all of us who know how weary life sometimes is, thus to those of us who in the flush of our youth are deceived into thinking that the vigorous limbs will always be vigorous, and the clear eyesight will always be keen, and to those of us who, in the long weary levels of middle life, where there are few changes, are worn out by the eventless recurrence, day after day, of duties that have become burdensome, because they are so small, and to those of us who are learning by experience how inevitably early strength utterly fails; to us all surely it comes us a gospel, ‘They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.’ It is true; and each of us may set to our seals, if we will, that the promise is faithful and sure.

Is that not a higher exercise of power than to ‘preserve the stars from wrong’? Is not the strength that restores mightier than the strength that sustains? Is not the hand that, put beneath the falling body, stops its plunge, and lifts it whence it fell, displaying a greater manifestation of strength, than the hand that held it unfailing at the height? The mighty miracle of the calm, steadfast heavens, with no vacant spaces where yesterday a star blazed, is less than the miracle of that restoring energy which, coming to men separated from the Fountain of power, re-establishes the connection between them, and out of the fainting creature makes one that is neither faint nor weary for ever. God is greater, in the miracle that He works upon you and me, poor strengthless souls, than when He rolls the stars along. Redemption

is more than Creation, and to the hosts of 'the principalities and powers in heavenly places, is made known,' by the Church, 'of restored and redeemed souls, the manifold wisdom of God.'

What are the consequences that the prophet traces to this restoring power? 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles.' Power to soar, to lift our heavy selves from earth, and to reach the heavenly places where we shall commune with God, that is the greatest of all gifts to strengthened spirits. And it is the foundation of all the others, for it is only they who know how to soar that can creep, and it is only they who have renewed their strength hour by hour, by communion with the Source of all energy and might, who when they 'drop with quivering wings, composed and still,' down to the low earth, there live unwearied and unfainting.

'They shall run and not be weary.' Crises come—moments when circumstances demand from us more than ordinary energy and swifter rate of progress. We have often, in the course of our years, to make short spurts of unusual effort. 'They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk.' The bulk of our lives is a slow jog-trot, and it is harder to keep elasticity, buoyancy, freshness of spirit, in the eventless mill—horse round of our trivial lives than it is in the rarer bursts. Excitement helps us in the one; nothing but dogged principle, and close communion with God, 'mounting on wings as eagles,' will help us in the other. But we may have Him with us in all the arid and featureless levels across which we have to plod, as well as in the height to which we sometimes have to struggle upwards, or in the depths into which we have sometimes to plunge. If we have the life of Christ within us, then neither the one nor the other will exhaust our energy or darken our spirits.

Lastly, one word as to—

III. The way by which these contrasts can be reconciled, and this likeness secured.

'They that wait upon the Lord'—that is the whole secret. What does waiting on the Lord include? Let me put it in three brief exhortations. Keep near Him; keep still; expect. If I stray away from Him, I cannot expect His power to come to me. If I fling myself about, in vain impatience, struggling, resisting providences, shirking duties, perturbing my soul, I cannot expect that the peace which brings strength, or the strength which brings peace, will come to me. It must be a windless sea that mirrors the sunshine and the blue, and the troubled heart has not God's strength in it. If I do not expect to get anything from Him, He will not give me anything; not because He will not, but because He cannot. Take the old Psalmist's words, 'I have quieted myself as a weaned child,' and nestle on the great bosom, and its warmth, its fragrance, its serenity will be granted to you. Keep hold of God's hand in expectation, in submission, in close union, and the contact will communicate something of His own power. 'In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.' The bitter contrasts may all be harmonised, and the miraculous assimilation of humanity to divinity may, in growing measure according to our faith, be realised in us. And though we must still bear the limita-

tions of our present corporeal condition, and though life's tasks must still oftentimes be felt by us as toils, and life's burdens as too burdensome for our feeble shoulders, yet we shall be held up. 'As thy day so shall thy strength be,' and at last, when we mount up further than eagle's wings have ever soared, and look down upon the stars that are 'rolled together as a scroll,' we shall through eternal ages 'run and not be weary' and 'walk and not faint.'

THE SECRET OF IMMORTAL YOUTH

‘Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.’—ISAIAH xl. 30, 31.

I remember a sunset at sea, where the bosom of each wavelet that fronted the west was aglow with fiery gold, and the back of each turned eastward was cold green; so that, looking on the one hand all was glory, and on the other all was sober melancholy. So differently does life look to you young people and to us older ones. Every man must buy his own experience for himself, and no preaching nor talking will ever make you see life as we see it. It is neither possible nor desirable that you should; but it is both possible and most desirable that you should open your eyes to plain, grave facts, which do not at all depend on our way of looking at things, and that if they be ascertainable, as they are, you should let them shape your lives.

Here are a couple of facts in my text which I ask you to look steadily in the face, and to take account of them, because, if you do so now, it may save you an immense deal of disappointment and sorrow in the days that are to come. You have the priceless prerogative still in your hands of determining what that future is to be; but you will never use that power rightly if you are guided by illusions, or if, unguided by anything but inclination, you let things drift, and do as you like.

So, then, my object is simply to deal with these two forecasts which my text presents; the one a dreary certainty of weariness and decay, the other a blessed possibility of inexhaustible and incorruptible strength and youth, and on the contrast to build as earnest an appeal to you as I can make.

I. Now, then, look at the first fact here, that of the dreary certainty of weariness and decay.

I do not need to spend much time in talking about that. It is one of the commonplaces which are so familiar that they have lost all power of impression, and can only be rescued from their trivial insignificance by being brought into immediate connection with our own experience. If, instead of the toothless generality, ‘the youths shall faint and be weary,’ I could get you young people to say, ‘*I—I shall faint and be weary, and, as sure as I am living, I shall lose what makes to me the very joy of life at this moment,*’ I should not have preached in vain.

Of course the words of my text point to the plain fact that all created and physical life, by the very law of its being, in the act of living tends to death; and by the very operation of its strength tends to exhaustion. There are three stages in every creature’s life—that of growth, that of equilibrium, that of decay. You are in the first. If you live, it is as certain as fate that you will come to the second and the third. *Your* ‘eyes will grow dim,’ *your* ‘natural force’ will be ‘abated,’ *your* body will become a burden, *your* years that are full of buoyancy

will be changed for years of heaviness and weariness, strength will decay, 'and the young men'—that is *you*—'shall utterly fall.'

And the text points also to another fact, that, long before your natural life shall have begun to tend towards decay, hard work and occasional sorrows and responsibilities and burdens of all sorts will very often make you wearied and ready to faint. In your early days you dream of life as a kind of enchanted garden, full of all manner of delights; and you stand at the threshold with eager eyes and outstretched hands. Ah! dear young friend, long before you have traversed the length of one of its walks, you will often have been sick and tired of the whole thing, and weary of what is laid upon you.

My text points to another fact, as certain as gravitation, that the faintness and weariness and decay of the bodily strength will be accompanied with a parallel change in your feelings. We are drawn onward by hopes, and when we get them fulfilled we find that they are disappointing. Custom, which weighs upon us 'heavy as frost, and deep almost as life,' takes the edge off everything that is delightful, though it does not so completely take away the pain of things that are burdensome and painful. Men travel from a tinted morning into the sober light of common day, and with failing faculties and shattered illusions and dissipated hopes, and powers bending under the long monotony of middle life, most of them live. Now all that is the veriest threadbare morality, and I dare say while I have been speaking, some of you have been thinking that I am repeating platitudes that every old woman could preach. So I am. That is to say, I am trying to put into feeble words the universal human experience. That is your experience, and what I want to get you to think about now is that, as sure as you are living and rejoicing in your youth and strength, this is the fate that is awaiting you—'the youths shall faint and be weary, and shall utterly fall.'

Well, then, one question: Do you not think that, if that is so, it would be as well to face it? Do you not think that a wise man would take account of all the elements in forecasting his life and would shape his conduct accordingly? If there be something certain to come, it is a very questionable piece of wisdom to make that the thing which we are most unwilling to think about. I do not want to be a kill-joy; I do not want to take anything out of the happy buoyancy of youth. I would say, as even that cynical, bitter Ecclesiastes says, 'Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth.' By all means; only take all the facts into account, and if you have joys which shrivel up at the touch of this thought, then the sooner you get rid of such joys the better. If your gladness depends upon your forcibly shutting your eyes to what is inevitably certain to come about, do you not think that you are living in a fool's paradise that you had better get out of as soon as possible? There is the fact. Will you be a wise and brave man and front it, and settle how you are going to deal with it, or will you let it hang there on your horizon, a thunder-cloud that you do not like to look at, and that you are all the more unwilling to entertain the thought of, because

you are so sure that it will burst in storm? Lay this, then, to heart, though it is a dreary certainty, that weariness and decay are sure to be your fate.

II. Now turn, in the next place, to the blessed opposite possibility of inexhaustible and immortal strength. 'They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.' The life of nature tends inevitably downward, but there may be another life within the life of nature, which shall have the opposite motion, and tend as certainly upwards. 'The youths shall faint and be weary'—whether they be Christians or not, the law of decay and fatigue will act upon them; but there may be that within each of us, if we will, which shall resist that law, and have no proclivity whatsoever to extinction in its blaze, to death in its life, to weariness in its effort, and shall be replenished and not exhausted by expenditure. 'They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,' and, in all forms of motion possible to a creature they shall expatiate and never tire. So let us look on this blessed possibility a little more closely.

Note, then, how to get at it. 'They that wait upon the Lord' is Old Testament dialect for what in New Testament phraseology is meant by 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.' For the notion expressed here by 'waiting' is that of expectant dependence, and the New Testament 'faith' is the very same in its attitude of expectant dependence, while the object of the Old Testament 'waiting,' Jehovah, is identical with the object of the New Testament faith, which fastens on God manifest in the flesh, the Man Jesus Christ.

Therefore, I am not diverting the language of my text from its true meaning, but simply opening its depth, when I say that the condition of the inflow of this unwearied and immortal life into our poor, fainting, dying humanity is simply the trust in Jesus Christ the Redeemer of our souls. True, the revelation has advanced; the contents of that which we grasp are more developed and articulate, blessed be God! True, we know more about Jehovah, when we see Him in Jesus Christ, than Isaiah did. True, we have to trust in Him as dying on the Cross for our salvation and as the pattern and example in His humanity of all nobleness and beauty of life for young or old, but the Christ is the 'same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.' And the faith that knit the furthest back of the saints of old to the Jehovah, whom they dimly knew, is in essence identical with the faith that binds my poor sinful heart to the Christ that died and that lives for my redemption and salvation. So, dear brethren, here is the simple old message for each of you, young or old. No matter where we stand on the course of life, there may come into our hearts a Divine Indweller, who laughs at weariness and knows nothing of decay; and He will come if, as sinful men, we turn ourselves to that dear Lord, who fainted and was weary many a time in His humanity, and who now lives, the 'strong Son of God, immortal love,' to make us partakers in His immortality and His strength. The way, then, by which we get this divine gift is by faith in Jesus Christ, which is the expansion, as it was the root, of trust in Jehovah.

Further, what is this strength that we thus get, if we will, by faith? It is the true entrance into our souls of a divine life. God in His Son will come to us, according to His own gracious and profound promise: 'If any man open the door I will enter in.' He will come into our hearts and abide there. He will give to us a life derived from, and therefore, kindred with, His own. And in that connection it is very striking to notice how the prophet, in the context, reiterates these two words, '*fainteth not, neither is weary.*' He begins by speaking of 'God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, who fainteth not, neither is weary.' He passes on to speak of His gift of power to the faint. He returns to the contrast between the Creator's incorruptible strength and the fleeting power of the strongest and youngest. And then he crowns all with the thought that the same characteristics will mark them in whom the unwearied God dwells, as mark Him. We too, like Him, if we have Christ in our hearts by faith, will share, in some fashion and degree, in His wondrous prerogative of unwearied strength.

So, brethren, here is the promise. God will give Himself to you, and in the very heart of your decaying nature will plant the seed of an immortal being which shall, like His own, shake off fatigue from the limbs, and never tend to dissolution or an end. The life of nature dies by living; the life of grace, which may belong to us all, lives by living, and lives evermore thereby. And so that life is continuous and progressive, with no tendency to decay, nor term to its being. 'The path of the just is as the shining light that shineth more and more,' until it riseth to the zenith of the noontide of the day. Each of you, looking forward to the certain ebbing away of creatural power, to the certain changes that will pass upon you, may say, 'I know that I shall have to leave behind me my present youthful strength, my unworn freshness, my buoyancy, my confidence, my wonder, my hope; but I shall carry my Christ; and in Him I shall possess the secret of an immortal youth.'

The oldest angels are the youngest. The longer men live in fellowship with Christ, the stronger do they grow. And though our lives, whether we are Christians or no, are necessarily subject to the common laws of mortality, we may carry all that is worth preserving of the earliest stages into the latest; and when grey hairs are upon us, and we are living next door to our graves, we may still have the enthusiasm, the energy, and above all, the boundless hopefulness that made the gladness and the spring of our long-buried youth. 'They shall still bring forth fruit in old age.' 'The youths shall faint and be weary, but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.'

There is one more point to touch, and then I have done, and that is the manner in which this immortal strength is exercised. The latter clauses of my text give us, so to speak, three forms of motion. 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles.' Some good commentators find in this a parallel to the words in the 103rd Psalm, 'My youth is renewed like the eagle's,' and propose to translate it in this fashion, 'They shall cast their plumage like the eagle.' But it seems much more in accordance with the context and the language to adopt substantially the reading of our English version here, or to make the slight change, 'They shall lift up their

wings as the eagle,' implying, of course, the steady upward flight towards the light of heaven.

So, then, there are three forms of unwearied strength lying ready for you, young men and women, to take for your very own if you like: strength to soar, strength to run, strength to walk.

There is strength to soar. Old men generally shed their wings, and can only manage to crawl. They have done with romance. Enthusiasms are dead. Sometimes they cynically smile at their own past selves and their dreams. And it is a bad sign when an old man does that. But for the most part they are content, unless they have got Christ in their hearts, to keep along the low levels, and their soaring days are done. But if you and I have Jesus Christ for the life of our spirits, as certainly as fire sends its shooting tongues upwards, so certainly shall we rise above the sorrows and sins and cares of this 'dim spot which men call earth,' and find an ampler field for buoyant motion high up in communion with God. Strength to soar means the gracious power of bringing all heaven into our grasp, and setting our affections on things above. As the night falls, and joys become fewer and life sterner, and hopes become rarer and more doubtful, it is something to feel that, however straitened may be the ground below, there is plenty of room above, and that, though we are strangers upon earth, we can lift our thoughts yonder. If there be darkness here, still we can 'outsoar the shadow of our night,' and live close to the sun in fellowship with God. Dear brethren, life on earth were too wretched unless it were possible to 'mount up with wings as eagles.'

Again, you may have strength to run—that is to say, there is power waiting for you for all the great crises of your lives which call for special, though it may be brief, exertion. Such crises will come to each of you, in sorrow, work, difficulty, hard conflicts. Moments will be sprung upon you without warning, in which you will feel that years hang on the issue of an instant. Great tasks will be clashed down before you unexpectedly which will demand the gathering together of all your power. And there is only one way to be ready for such times as these, and that is to live waiting on the Lord, near Christ, with Him in your hearts, and then nothing will come that will be too hard for you. However rough the road, and however severe the struggle, and however swift the pace, you will be able to keep it up. Though it may be with panting lungs and a throbbing heart, and dim eyes and quivering muscles, yet if you wait on the Lord you will run and not be weary. You will be masters of the crises.

Strength to walk may be yours—that is to say, patient power for persistent pursuit of weary, monotonous duty. That is the hardest, and so it is named last. Many a man finds it easy, under the pressure of strong excitement, and for a moment or two, to keep up a swift pace, who finds it very difficult to keep steadily at unexciting work. And yet there is nothing to be done except by doggedly plodding along the dusty road of trivial duties, unhelped by excitement and unwearied by monotony. Only one thing will conquer the disgust at the wearisome round of mill-horse tasks which, sooner or later, seizes all godless men, and that is to bring the great principles of the gospel to bear on them, and to do them in the might

and for the sake of the dear Lord. 'They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk' along life's common way in cheerful godliness, 'and they shall not faint.'

Dear friends, life to us all is, and must be, full of sorrow and of effort. Constant work and frequent sorrows wear us all out, and bring us many a time to the verge of fainting. I beseech you to begin right, and not to add to the other occasions for weariness that of having to retrace, with remorseful heart and ashamed feet, the paths of evil on which you have run. Begin right, which is to say, begin with Christ and take Him for inspiration, for pattern, for guide, for companion. 'Run with patience the race set before you, looking unto Jesus the author of your faith, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.'

And if you have Him in your hearts, then, however your creatural power may grow weary, yet because He is with you, 'your shoes shall be iron and brass, and as your days so shall your strength be,' and you may lift up in your turn the glad, triumphant acknowledgment: 'For this cause we faint not, but though our outward man perish, our inward man is renewed day by day.'

God bless you all and make that your experience!

CHRIST THE ARRESTER OF INCIPIENT EVIL AND THE NOURISHER OF INCIPIENT GOOD

‘A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench. . . . He shall not fail nor be discouraged.’—[ISAIAH xlii. 3, 4.](#)

The two metaphors which we have in the former part of these words are not altogether parallel. ‘A bruised reed’ has suffered an injury which, however, is neither complete nor irreparable. ‘Smoking flax,’ on the other hand—by which, of course, is meant flax used as a wick in an old-fashioned oil lamp—is partially lit. In the one a process has been begun which, if continued, ends in destruction; in the other, a process has been begun which, if continued, ends in a bright flame. So the one metaphor may refer to the beginnings of evil which may still be averted, and the other the beginnings of incipient and incomplete good. If we keep this distinction in mind, the words of our text gain wonderfully in comprehensiveness.

Then again, it is to be noticed that in the last words of our text, which are separated from the former by a clause which we omit, we have an echo of these metaphors. The word translated ‘fail’ is the same as that rendered in the previous verse ‘smoking,’ or ‘dimly burning’; and the word ‘discouraged’ is the same as that rendered in the previous verse ‘bruised.’ So then, this ‘Servant of the Lord,’ who is not to break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax, is fitted for His work, because He Himself has no share in the evils which He would heal, and none in the weaknesses which He would strengthen. His perfect manhood knows no flaws nor bruises; His complete goodness is capable of and needs no increase. Neither outward force nor inward weakness can hinder His power to heal and bless; therefore His work can never cease till it has attained its ultimate purpose. ‘He shall not fail nor be discouraged’; shall neither be broken by outward violence, nor shall the flame of His fading energy burn faint until He hath ‘set judgment in the earth,’ and crowned His purposes with complete success.

We have, then, here set before us three significant representations of the servant of the Lord, which may well commend Him to our confidence and our love. I shall not spend any time in answering the question: Of whom speaketh the prophet this? The answer is plain for us. He speaks of the personal Servant of the Lord, and the personal Servant of the Lord is Jesus Christ our Saviour. I ask you then to come with me while I deal, as simply as may be, with these three ideas that lie before us in this great prophecy.

I. Consider then, first, the representation of the Servant of the Lord as the arrester of incipient ruin.

‘He shall not break the bruised reed.’ Here is the picture—a slender bulrush, growing by the margin of some tarn or pond; its sides crushed and dented in by some outward power, a gust of wind, a sudden blow, the foot of a passing animal. The head is hanging by a thread, but it is not yet snapped or broken off from the stem.

But, blessed be God! there emerges from the metaphor not only the solemn thought of the bruises by sin that all men bear, but the other blessed one, that there is no man so bruised as that he is broken; none so injured as that restoration is impossible, no depravity so total but that it may be healed, none so far off but that he may be brought nigh. On no man has sin fastened its venomous claws so deeply but that these may be wrenched away. In none of us has the virus so gone through our veins but that it is capable of being expelled. The reeds are all bruised, the reeds are none of them broken. And so my text comes with its great triumphant hopefulness, and gathers into one mass as capable of restoration the most abject, the most worthless, the most ignorant, the most sensuous, the most godless, the most Christ-hating of the race. Jesus looks on all the tremendous bulk of a world's sins with the confidence that He can move that mountain and cast it into the depths of the sea.

There is a man in Paris that says he has found a cure for that horrible disease of hydrophobia, and who therefore regards the poor sufferers of whom others despair as not beyond the reach of hope. Christ looks upon a world of men smitten with madness, and in whose breasts awful poison is working, with the calm confidence that He carries in His hand an elixir, one drop of which inoculated into the veins of the furious patient will save him from death, and make him whole. 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.' 'He will not break,' and that means He will restore, 'the bruised reed.' There are no hopeless outcasts. None of you are beyond the reach of a Saviour's love, a Saviour's blood, a Saviour's healing.

But then the words in my text may be taken in a somewhat narrower sense, applying more particularly to a class. In accordance with other metaphors of Scripture, we may think of 'the bruised reed' as expressive of the condition of men whose hearts have been crushed by the consciousness of their sins. 'The broken and the contrite heart,' bruised and pulverised, as it were, by a sense of evil, may be typified for us by this bruised reed. And then from the words of my text there emerges the great and blessed hope that such a heart, wholesomely removed from its self-complacent fancy of soundness, shall certainly be healed and bound up by His tender hand. Did you ever see a gardener dealing with some plant, a spray of which may have been wounded? How delicately and tenderly the big, clumsy hand busies itself about the tiny spray, and by stays and bandages brings it into an erect position, and then gives it water and loving care. Just so does Jesus Christ deal with the conscious and sensitive heart of a man who has begun to find out how bad he is, and has been driven away from all his foolish confidence. Christ comes to such an one and restores him, and just because he is crushed deals with him gently, pouring in His consolation. Wheresoever there is a touch of penitence, there is present a restoring Christ.

And the words may be looked at from yet another point of view. We may think of them as representing to us the merciful dealing of the Master with the spirits which are beaten and bruised, sore and wounded, by sorrows and calamities; to whom the Christ comes in

all the tenderness of His gentleness, and lays a hand upon them—the only hand in all the universe that can touch a bleeding heart without hurting it.

Brother and sister suffering from any sorrow, and bleeding from any wound, there is a balm and a physician. There is one hand that will never be laid with blundering kindness or with harshness upon our sore hearts, but whose touch will be healing, and whose presence will be peace.

The Christ who knows our sins and sorrows will not break the bruised reed. The whole race of man may be represented in that parable that came from His own lips, as fallen among thieves that have robbed him and wounded him and left him bruised, but, blessed be God! only 'half dead'; sorely wounded, indeed, but not so sorely but that he may be restored. And there comes One with the wine and the oil, and pours them into the wounds. 'The bruised reed shall He not break.'

II. Now, in the next place, look at the completing thought that is here, in the second clause, which represents Christ as the fosterer of incipient and imperfect good.

'The dimly-burning wick He shall not quench.' A process, as I have said, is begun in the smoking flax, which only needs to be carried on to lead to a brilliant flame. That represents for us not the beginnings of a not irreparable evil, but the commencement of very dim and imperfect good. Now, then, who are represented by this 'smoking flax'? You will not misunderstand me, nor think that I am contradicting what I have already been saying, if I claim for this second metaphor as wide a universality as the former, and say that in all men, just because the process of evil and the wounds from it are not so deep and complete as that restoration is impossible, therefore is there something in their nature which corresponds to this dim flame that needs to be fostered in order to blaze brightly abroad. There is no man out of hell but has in him something that needs but to be brought to sovereign power in his life in order to make him a light in the world. You have consciences at the least; you have convictions, you know you have, which if you followed them out would make Christians of you straight away. You have aspirations after good, desires, some of you, after purity and nobleness of living, which only need to be raised to the height and the dominance in your lives which they ought to possess, in order to revolutionise your whole course. There is a spark in every man which, fanned and cared for, will change him from darkness into light. Fanned and cared for it needs to be, and fanned and cared for it can only be by a divine power coming down upon it from without. This second metaphor of my text, as truly as the other, belongs to every soul of man upon the earth. He from whom all sparks and light have died out is not a man but a devil. And for all of us the exhortation comes: 'Thou hast a voice within testifying to God and to duty'; listen to it and care for it.

Then again, dear brethren, in a narrower way, the words may be applied to a class. There are some of us who have in us a little spark, as we believe, of a divine life, the faint beginnings of a Christian character. We call ourselves Christ's disciples. We are; but oh! how dimly the

flax burns. They say that where there is smoke there is fire. There is a great deal more smoke than fire in the most of Christian people in this generation, and if it were not for such thoughts as this of my text about that dear Christ who will not lay a hasty hand upon some little tremulous spark, and by one rash movement extinguish it for ever, there would be but small hope for a great many of us.

Whether, then, the dimly-burning wick be taken to symbolise the lingering remains of a better nature which still abides with all sinful men, yet capable of redemption, or whether it be taken to mean the low and imperfect and inconsistent and feeble Christianity of us professing Christians, the words of my text are equally blessed and equally true. Christ will neither despise, nor so bring down His hand upon it as to extinguish, the feeblest spark. Look at His life on earth, think how He bore with those blundering, foolish, selfish disciples of His; how patient the divine Teacher was with their slow learning of His meaning and catching of His character. Remember how, when a man came to Him with a very imperfect goodness, the Evangelist tells us that Jesus, beholding him, loved him. And take out of these blessed stories this great hope, that howsoever small men 'despise the day of small things,' the Greatest does not; and howsoever men may say 'Such a little spark can never be kindled into flame, the fire is out, you may as well let it alone,' He never says that, but by patient teaching and fostering and continual care and wise treatment will nourish and nurture it until it leaps into a blaze.

How do you make 'smoking flax' burn? You give it oil, you give it air, and you take away the charred portions. And Christ will give you, in your feebleness, the oil of His Spirit, that you may burn brightly as one of the candlesticks in His Temple; and He will let air in, and sometimes take away the charred portions by the wise discipline of sorrow and trial, in order that the smoking flax may become a shining light. But by whatsoever means He may work, be sure of this, that He will neither despise nor neglect the feeblest inclination of good after Him, but will nourish it to perfection and to beauty.

The reason why so many Christian men's Christian light is so fuliginous and dim is just that they keep away from Jesus Christ. 'Abide in Me and I in you.' 'As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.' How can the Temple lamps burn bright unless the Priest of the Temple tends them? Keep near Him that His hand may nourish your smoking dimness into a pure flame, leaping heavenward and illuminating your lives.

III. And now, lastly, we have here the representation of the servant of the Lord's exemption from human evil and weakness, as the foundation of His restoring and fostering work.

'He shall not burn dimly nor be broken till He hath set judgment in the earth.' There are no bruises in this reed; that is to say, Christ's manhood is free from all scars and wounds of evil or of sin. There is no dimness in this light, that is to say, Christ's character is perfect, His goodness needs no increase. There is no trace of effort in His holiness, no growth

manifest in His God-likeness, from the beginning to the end. There is no outward violence that can be brought to bear upon Him that will stay Him in His purpose. There is no inward failure of strength in Him that may lead us to fear that His work shall not be completed. And because of these things, because of His perfect exemption from human infirmity, because in Him was no sin. He is manifested to take away our sins. Because in Him there was goodness incapable of increase, being perfect from the beginning, therefore He is manifested to make us participants of His own unalterable and infinite goodness and purity. Because no outward violence, no inward weakness, can ever stay His course, nor make Him abandon His purpose, therefore His gospel looks upon the world with boundless hopefulness, with calm triumph; will not hear of there being any outcast and irreclaimable classes; declares it to be a blasphemy against God and Christ to say that any men or any nations are incapable of receiving the gospel and of being redeemed by it, and comes with supreme love and a calm consciousness of infinite power to you, my brother, in your deepest darkness, in your moods most removed from God and purity, and insures you that it will heal you, and will raise all that in you is feeble to its own strength. Every man may pray to that strong Christ who fails not nor is discouraged—

‘What in me is dark
Illumine; what is low, raise and support,’

in the confidence that He will hear and answer. If you do that you will not do it in vain, but His gentle hand laid upon you will heal the bruises that sin has made. Out of your weakness, as of ‘a reed shaken with the wind,’ the Restorer will make a pillar of marble in the Temple of His God. And out of your smoking dimness and wavering light, a spark at the best, almost buried in the thick smoke that accompanies it, the fostering Christ will make a brightness which shall flame as the perfect light that ‘shineth more and more unto the noontide of the day.’

THE BLIND MAN'S GUIDE

'I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them.'—ISAIAH xlii. 16.

The grand stormy verses before these words, with all their dread array of natural convulsions, have one object—the tender guidance promised in the text. So we have the combination of terror and love, the blending in the divine government of terrible judgments and most gentle guidance. The words apply, of course, primarily to the redemption of Israel; but through them shines a picture of the greater redemption of humanity.

1. The blind travellers. They are blind, and their road is unknown to them. It is a symbol of our condition and of our paths in life. Our limited foresight cannot discern certainly even the next moment. It is always the unexpected that happens. We cannot tell what lies behind the next bend in the road, and there are so many bends; and behind one of them, we cannot tell whether it may be the next, sits 'the Shadow feared of man.' Life is like the course of the Congo, which makes so mighty a bend northward that, till it had been followed from source to mouth, no one could have supposed that it was to enter the ocean far away to the west. Not only God's mercies, but our paths, are 'new every morning.' Experience, like conscience, sheds light mainly on what lies behind, and scarcely 'doth attain to something of prophetic strain.'

2. The Leader. How tenderly God makes Himself the leader of the blind pilgrims! It does not matter about being blind, if we put our hands in His. Then He will 'be to us instead of eyes.' Jesus took the blind man by the hand.

So here is the promise of guidance by Providence, Word, Spirit. And here is the condition of receiving it, namely, our conscious blindness and realisation of the complexities of life, leading to putting ourselves into His hands in docile faith.

3. The gradual light. Darkness is made light. We receive the knowledge of each step, when it needs to be taken; the light shines only on the next; we are like men in a fog, who are able only to see a yard ahead.

4. The clearing away of hindrances. 'Crooked things straight.' A careful guide lifts stones out of a blind man's way. How far is this true? There will be plenty of crooked things left crooked, but still so many straightened as to make our road passable.

5. The perpetual Presence. If God is with me, then all these blessings will surely be mine. He will be with me if I keep myself with Him. It is His felt presence that gives me light on the road, and levels and straightens out the crookedest and roughest path.

THY NAME: MY NAME

‘I have called thee by thy name.’—[ISAIAH xliii. 1.](#)

‘Every one that is called by My name.’—[ISAIAH xliii. 7.](#)

Great stress is laid on names in Scripture. These two parallel and antithetic clauses bring out striking complementary relations between God and the collective Israel. But they are as applicable to each individual member of the true Israel of God.

I. What does God’s calling a man by his name imply?

1. Intimate knowledge.

Adam naming the creatures.

Christ naming His disciples.

2. Loving friendship.

Moses, ‘I know thee by name, and thou hast found grace in my sight.’

3. Designation and adaptation to work.

Bezaleel—[Exodus xxxi. 2;](#) Cyrus—[ISAIAH xlv. 3;](#) Servant of the Lord—[ISAIAH xlix. 1.](#)

II. What does God’s calling a man by His name imply?

1. God’s possession of him. That possession by God involves God’s protection and man’s safety. He does not hold His property slackly. ‘None shall pluck them out of My Father’s hand.’

2. Kindred. The man bears the family name. He is adopted into the household. The sonship of the receiver of the new name is dimly shadowed.

3. Likeness.

The Biblical meaning of ‘name’ is ‘character manifested.’

Nomen and omen coincide.

We must bring into connection with the texts the prominence given in the Apocalypse to analogous promises.

‘I will write on him the name of My God.’ That means a fuller disclosing of God’s character, and a clear impress of that character on perfected men ‘His name shall be in their foreheads.’

JACOB—ISRAEL—JESHURUN

‘Yet now hear, O Jacob My servant; and Israel, whom I have chosen. . . . Fear not, O Jacob, My servant; and thou, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.’—**ISAIAH xliv. 1, 2.**

You observe that there are here three different names applied to the Jewish nation. Two of them, namely Jacob and Israel, were borne by their great ancestor, and by him transmitted to his descendants. The third was never borne by him, and is applied to the people only here and in the Book of Deuteronomy.

The occurrence of all three here is very remarkable, and the order in which they stand is not accidental. The prophet begins with the name that belonged to the patriarch by birth; the name of nature, which contained some indications of character. He passes on to the name which commemorated the mysterious conflict where, as a prince, Jacob had power with God and prevailed. He ends with the name Jeshurun, of which the meaning is ‘the righteous one,’ and which was bestowed upon the people as a reminder of what they ought to be.

Now, as I take it, the occurrence of these names here, and their sequence, may teach us some very important lessons; and it is simply to these lessons, and not at all to the context, that I ask your attention.

I. I take, then, these three names in their order as teaching us, first, the path of transformation.

Every ‘Jacob’ may become a ‘righteous one,’ if he will tread Jacob’s road. We start with that first name of nature which, according to Esau’s bitter etymology of it, meant ‘a supplanter’—not without some suggestions of craft and treachery in it. It is descriptive of the natural disposition of the patriarch, which was by no means attractive. Cool, calculating, subtle, with a very keen eye to his own interests, and not at all scrupulous as to the means by which he secured them, he had no generous impulses, and few unselfish affections. He told lies to his poor old blind father, he cheated his brother, he met the shiftiness of Laban with equal shiftiness. It was ‘diamond cut diamond’ all through. He tried to make a bargain with God Himself at Bethel, and to lay down conditions on which he would bring Him the tenth of his substance. And all through his earlier career he does not look like the stuff of which heroes and saints are made.

But in the mid-path of his life there came that hour of deep dejection and helplessness, when, driven out of all dependence on self, and feeling round in his agony for something to lay hold upon, there came into his nightly solitude a vision of God. In conscious weakness, and in the confidence of self-despair, he wrestled with the mysterious Visitant in the only fashion in which He can be wrestled with. ‘He wept and made supplication to Him,’ as one of the prophets puts it, and so he bore away the threefold gift—blessing from those mighty lips whose blessing is the communication, and not only the invocation, of mercy, a deeper knowledge of that divine and mysterious Name, and for himself a new name.

That new name implied a new direction given to his character.

Hitherto he had wrestled with men whom he would supplant, for his own advantage, by craft and subtlety; henceforward he strove with God for higher blessings, which, in striving, he won. All the rest of his life was on a loftier plane. Old ambitions were dead within him, and though the last of these names in our text was never actually borne by him, he began to deserve it, and grew steadily in nobleness and beauty of character until the end, when he sang his swan-song and lay down to die, with thanksgiving for the past and glowing prophecies for the future, pouring from his trembling lips.

And now, brethren, that is the outline of the only way in which, from out of the evil and the sinfulness of our natural disposition, any of us can be raised to the loftiness and purity of a righteous life. There must be a Peniel between the two halves of the character, if there is to be transformation.

Have you ever been beaten out of all your confidence, and ground down into the dust of self-disgust and self-abandonment? Have you ever felt, 'there is nothing in me or about me that I can cling to or rely upon'? Have you ever in the thickest of that darkness had, gleaming in upon your solitude, the vision of His face, whose face we see in Jesus Christ? Have you ever grasped Him who is infinitely willing to be held by the weakest hand, and who never 'makes as though He would go further,' except in order to induce us to say, with deeper earnestness of desire, 'Abide with us, for it is dark'? And have you ever, in fellowship with Him thus, found pouring into your enlightened mind a deeper reading of the meaning of His character and a fuller conception of the mystery of His love? And have you ever—certainly you have if these things have preceded it, certainly you have not if they have not—have you ever thereby been borne up on to a higher level of feeling and life, and been aware of new impulses, hopes, joys, new directions and new capacities budding and blossoming in your spirit?

Brethren! there is only one way by which, out of the mire and clay of earth, there can be formed a fair image of holiness, and that is, that Jacob's experience, in deeper, more inward, more wonderful form, should be repeated in each one of us; and that thus, penitent and yet hopeful, we should behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and draw from Him our righteousness. That is the path of transformation. The road passes through Peniel, and Jacob must become Israel before he is Jeshurun. He must hold communion with God in Christ before he is clothed with righteousness.

How different that path is from the road which men are apt to take in working out their own self-improvement! How many forms of religion, and how many toiling souls put the cart before the horse, and in effect just reverse the process, and say practically—'first make yourselves righteous, and then you will have communion with God!' That is an endless and a hopeless task. I have no doubt that some of you have spent—and I would not say wasted, but it has been almost so—years of life, not without many an honest effort, in the task of

self-improvement, and are very much where you were long ago. Why have you failed? Because you have never been to Peniel. You have never seen the face of God in Christ, You have not received from Him the blessing, even righteousness, from the God of your salvation.

Dear friends, give up treading that endless, weary path of vain effort; and learn—oh! learn—that the righteousness which makes a soul pure and beautiful must come as a gift from God, and is given only in Jesus Christ.

This sequence too, I think, may very fairly be used to teach us the lesson that there is no kind of character so debased but that it may partake of the purifying and ennobling influence. All the Jacobs may be turned into righteous ones, however crafty, however subtle, however selfish, however worldly they are. Christianity looks at no man and says, ‘That is too bad a case for me to deal with.’ It will undertake any and every case, and whoever will take its medicines can be cured ‘of whatsoever disease he had.’

To all of us, no matter what our past may have been, this blessed message comes: ‘There is hope for thee, if thou wilt use these means.’ Only remember, the road from the depths of evil to the heights of purity always lies through Peniel. You must have power with God and draw a blessing from Him, and hold communion with Him, before you can become righteous.

How do they print photographs? By taking sensitive paper, and laying it, in touch with the negative, in the sun. Lay your spirits on Christ, and keep them still, touching Him, in the light of God, and that will turn you into His likeness. That, and nothing else will do it.

II. And now there is a second lesson from the occurrence of these three names, viz., here we may find expressed the law for the Christian life.

There are some religious people that seem to think that it is enough if only they can say; ‘Well! I have been to Jesus Christ and I have got my past sins forgiven; I have been on the mountain and have held communion with God; I do know what it is to have fellowship with Him, in many an hour of devout communion.’ and who are in much danger of treating the further stage of simple, practical righteousness as of secondary importance. Now the order of these names here points the lesson that the apex of the pyramid, the goal of the whole course, is—Righteousness. The object for which the whole majestic structure of Revelation has been builded up, is simply to make good men and women. God does not tell us His Name merely in order that we may know His Name, but in order that, knowing it, we may be smitten with the love of it, and so may come into the likeness of it. There is no religious truth which is given men for the sake of clearing their understandings and enlightening their minds only. We get the truth to enlighten our minds and to clear our understandings in order that thereby, as becomes reasonable men with heads on our shoulders, we may let our principles guide our conduct. Conduct is the end of principle, and all Revelation is given to us in order that we may be pure and good men and women.

For the same end all God’s mercy of forgiveness and deliverance from guilt and punishment in Jesus Christ is given to you, not merely in order that you may escape the penalties

of your evil, but in order that, being pardoned, you may in glad thankfulness be lifted up into an enthusiasm of service which will make you eager to serve Him and long to be like Him. He sets you free from guilt, from punishment, and His wrath, in order that by the golden cord of love you may be fastened to Him in thankful obedience. God's purpose in redemption is that 'we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies should serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.'

And in like manner, righteousness, by which, in the present connection, we mean simply the doing of the things, and the being the character, which a conscience enlightened by the law of God dictates to us to be and to do—righteousness is the intention and the aim of all religious emotion and feeling. It is all very well to have the joy of fellowship with God in our inmost soul, but there is a type of Christianity which is a great deal stronger on the side of devout emotion than on the side of transparent godliness; and although it becomes no man to say what Jesus Christ could say to those whose religion is mainly emotional, 'Hypocrites!' it is the part of every honest preacher to warn all that listen to him that there does lie a danger, a very real danger, very close to some of us, to substitute devout emotion for plain, practical goodness, and to be a great deal nearer God in the words of our prayers than we are in the current and set of our daily lives. Take, then, these three names of my text as flashing into force and emphasis the exhortation that the crown of all religion is righteousness, and as preaching, in antique guise, the same lesson that the very Apostle of affectionate contemplation uttered with such earnestness:—'Little children! let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous.' An ounce of practical godliness is worth a pound of fine feeling and a ton of correct orthodoxy. Remember what the Master said, and take the lesson in the measure in which you need it: 'Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name have cast out devils, and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you, depart from Me.' And the proof that I never knew you, nor you Me, is: 'Ye that work iniquity.'

III. Then there is another lesson still which I draw from these words, viz. the merciful judgment which God makes of the character of them that love Him.

Jeshurun means 'the righteous one.' How far beneath the ideal of the name these Jewish people fell we all know, and yet the name is applied to them. Although the realisation of the ideal has been so imperfect, the ideal is not destroyed. Although they have done so many sins, yet He calls them by His name of 'righteous.' And so we Christian people find that the New Testament calls us 'saints.' That name is not applied to some select and lofty specimens of Christianity, but to all Christians, however imperfect their present life and character may be. Then people sneer and say, 'Ah! a strange kind of saints these Christians are! Do you think that a man can condone practical immorality by saying that he is trusting in Jesus Christ? The Church's "saint" seems to mean less than the world's "man of honour."' God

forbid that it should be fancied that Christian sainthood is more tolerant of evil than worldly morality, or has any fantastic standard of goodness which makes up for departures from the plain rule of right by prayers and raptures. But surely there may be a principle of action deep down at the bottom of a heart, very feeble in its present exercise and manifestation, which yet is the true man, and is destined to conquer the whole nature which now wars against it. Here, for instance, is a tiny spark, and there is a huge pile of damp, green wood. Yes; and the little spark will turn all the wood into flame, if you give it time and fair play. The leaven may be hid in an immensely greater mass of meal, but it, and not the three measures of flour, is the active principle. And if there is in a man, overlaid by ever so many absurdities, and contradictions, and inconsistencies, a little seed of faith in Jesus Christ, there will be in him proportionately a little particle of a divine life which is omnipotent, which is immortal, which will conquer and transform all the rest into its own likeness; and He who sees not as men see, beholds the inmost tendencies and desires of the nature, as well as the facts of the life, and discerning the inmost and true self of His children, and knowing that it will conquer, calls us 'righteous ones,' even while the outward life has not yet been brought into harmony with the new man, created in righteousness after God's image.

All wrong-doing is inconsistent with Christianity, but, thank God, it is not for us to say that *any* wrong-doing is incompatible with it; and therefore, for ourselves there is hope, and for our estimate of one another there ought to be charity, and for all Christian people there is the lesson—live up to your name. *Noblesse oblige!* Fulfil your ideal. Be what God calls you, and 'press toward the mark for the prize.'

If one had time to deal with it, there is another lesson naturally suggested by these names, but I only put it in a sentence and leave it; and that is the union between the founder of the nation and the nation. The name of the patriarch passes to his descendants, the nation is called after him that begat it. In some sense it prolongs his life and spirit and character upon the earth. That is the old-world way of looking at the solidarity of a nation. There is a New Testament fact which goes even deeper than that. The names which Christ bears are given to Christ's followers. Is He a King, is He a Priest? He 'makes us kings and priests.' Is He anointed the Messiah? God 'hath anointed us in Him.' Is He the Light of the World?

'Ye are the lights of the world.' His life passeth into all that love Him in the measure of their trust and love. We are one with Jesus if we rest upon Him; one in life, one in character, approximating by slow degrees, but surely, to His likeness; and blessed be His name! one in destiny. Then, my friend, if you will only keep near that Lord, trust Him, live in the light of His face, go to Him in your weakness, in your despair, in your self-abandonment; wrestle with Him, with the supplication and the tears that He delights to receive, then you will be knit to Him in a union so real and deep that all which is His shall be yours, His life shall be the life of your spirit, His power the strength of your life, His dominion the foundation of

your dignity as a prince with God, His all-prevailing priesthood the security that your prayer shall have power, and the spotless robe of His righteousness the fine linen, clean and white, in which arrayed, you shall be found of Him, and in Him at last, in peace, 'not having your own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.'

FEEDING ON ASHES

‘He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?’—[ISAIAH xliv. 20](#).

The prophet has been pouring fierce scorn on idolaters. They make, he says, the gods they worship. They take a tree and saw it up: one log serves for a fire to cook their food, and with compass and pencil and plane they carve the figure of a man, and then they bow down to it and say, ‘Deliver me, for thou art my god!’ He sums up the whole in this sentence of my text, in which the tone changes from bitter irony to astonished pity. Now, if this were the time and the place, one would like to expand and illustrate the deep thoughts in these words in reference to idolatry; thoughts which go dead in the teeth of a great deal that is now supposed to be scientifically established, but which may be none the more true for all that. He asserts that idolatry is empty, a feeding on ashes. He declares, in opposition to modern ideas, that the low, gross forms of polytheism and idol-worship are a departure from a previous higher stage, whereas to-day we are told by a hundred voices that all religion begins at the bottom, and slowly struggles up to the top. Isaiah says the very opposite. The pure form is the primitive; the secondary form is the gross, which is a corruption. They tell us too, nowadays, that all religion pursues a process of evolution, and gradually clears itself of its more imperfect and carnal elements. Isaiah says, ‘he cannot deliver his soul’; and no religion ever worked itself up, unless under the impulse of a revelation from without. That is Isaiah’s philosophy of idolatry, and I expect it will be accepted as the true one some day.

But my text has a wider bearing. It not only describes, in pathetic language, the condition of the idolater, but it is true about all lives, which are really idolatrous in so far as they make anything else than God their aim and their joy. Every word of this text applies to such lives—that is to say, to the lives of a good many people listening to me now. And I would fain try to lay the truths here on some hearts. Let me just take them as they lie in the words before me.

I. A life that substantially ignores God is empty of all true satisfaction.

‘He feedeth on ashes’! Very little imagination will realise the force of that picture. The gritty cinders will irritate the lips and tongue, will dry up the moisture of the mouth, will interfere with the breathing, and there will be no nourishment in a sackful of them.

Dear brethren, the underlying truth is this—God is the only food of a man’s soul. You pick up the skeleton of a bird upon a moor; and if you know anything about osteology—the science of bones—you will see, in the very make of its breast-bone and its wing-bones, the declaration that its destiny was to soar into the blue. You pick up the skeleton of a fish lying on the beach, and you will see in its very form and characteristics that its destiny is to expatiate in the depths of the sea. And, written on you, as distinctly as flight on the bird, or swimming on the fish, is this, that you are meant, by your very make, to soar up into the heights of the glory of God, and to plunge deep into the abysses of His infinite love and

wisdom. Man is made for God. 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' said Christ. The coin belongs to the king whose head and titles are displayed upon it; and on your heart, friend, though a usurper has tried to recoin the piece, and put his own foul image on the top of the original one, is stamped deep that you belong to the King of kings, to God Himself.

For what does our heart want? A perfect, changeless, all-powerful love. And what does our mind want? Reliable, guiding, inexhaustible, and yet accessible truth. And what does our will want? Commandments which have an authoritative ring in their very utterance, and which will serve for infallible guides for our lives. And what do our weak, sinful natures want? Something that shall free our consciences, and shall deliver us from the burden of our transgressions, and shall calm our fears, and shall quicken and warrant our lofty hopes. And what do men whose destiny is to live for ever want but something that shall go with them through all changes of condition, and, like a light in the midst of the darkest tunnel, shall burn in the passage between this and the other world, and shall never be taken away from them? We want a Person to be everything to us. No accumulation of things will satisfy a man. And we want all our treasures to be in one Person, and we need that that Person shall live as long as we live, and as long as we need shall be sufficient to supply us. And all this is only the spelling in many letters of the one name—God. That is what we want, that, and nothing less.

Then the next step that I suggest to you is, that where a man will take God for the food of his spirit, and turn love and mind and will and conscience and practical life to Him, seeing Him in everything, and seeing all things in Him; saturating, as it were, the universe with the thought of God, and recreating his own spirit with communion of friendship to Him; to that man lower goods do first disclose their real sweetness, their most poignant delight, and their most solid satisfaction. To say of a world where God has set us, that it is all 'vanity and vexation of spirit,' goes in flat contradiction to what He said when, creation finished, He looked upon His world, and proclaimed to the waiting seraphim around that 'it was very good.' There is a view of the world which calls itself pious, but is really an insult to God; and the irreligious pessimism that is fashionable nowadays, as if human life were a great mistake, and everything were mean and poor and insufficient, is contrary to the facts and to the consciousness of every man. But if you make things first which were meant to be second, then you make what was meant to be food 'ashes.' They are all good in their place. Wealth is good; wisdom is good; success is good; love is good. And all these things may be enjoyed without God, and will each of them yield their proportional satisfaction to the part of our nature to which they belong. But if you put them first you degrade them; a change passes over them at once. A long row of cyphers means nothing; put a significant digit in front of it, and it means millions. Take away the digit, and it goes back to nothing again. The world, and all its fading sweets, if you put God in the forefront of it, and begin the series with Him, is sweet, though it may be fleeting, and is meant to be felt by us as such. But if you take away

Him, it is a row of cyphers signifying nothing, and able to contribute nothing to the real, deepest necessities of the human soul. And so the old question comes—‘Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?’ It is bread, if only you will remember first that God is the food of your souls. But if you try to nourish yourselves on it alone, then, as I said, a sackful of such ashes will not stay your appetite. Oh! brethren, God has not so blundered in making the world that He has surrounded us with things that are all lies, but He has so made it that whosoever flies in the face of the gracious commandment which is also an invitation, ‘Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness,’ has not only no security that the ‘other things’ shall ‘be added unto him,’ but has the certainty that though they were added to him, in degree beyond his dreams and highest hopes, they would avail nothing to satisfy the hunger of his heart. As George Herbert puts it—

‘Shadows well mounted, dreams in a career,
Embroidered lies, nothing between two dishes,
These are the pleasures here.’

‘He feedeth on ashes,’ because he does not take God for the food of his soul.

II. So, secondly, notice that a life which thus ignores God is tragically unaware of its own emptiness.

‘A deceived heart hath turned him aside.’ That explains how the man comes to fancy that ashes are food. His whole nature is perverted, his vision distorted, his power of judgment marred. He is given over to hallucinations and illusions and dreams.

That explains, too, why men persist in this feeding on ashes after all experience. There is no fact stranger or more tragical in our histories than that we do not learn by a thousand failures that the world will not avail to make us restful and blessed. You will see a dog chasing a sparrow,—it has chased hundreds before and never caught one. Yet, when the bird rises from the ground, away it goes after it once more, with eager yelp and rush, to renew the old experience. Ah! that is like what a great many of you are doing, and you have not the same excuse that the dog has. You have been trying all your lives—and some of you have grey hairs on your heads—to slake your thirst by dipping leaky buckets into empty wells, and you are at it yet. As some one says, ‘experience throws a light on the wave behind us,’ but it does very little to fling a light on the sea before us. Experience confirms my text, for I venture to put it to the experience of every man—how many moments of complete satisfaction and rest can you summon up in your memory as having been yours in the past? ‘He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase.’ Appetite always grows faster than supply. And so, though we have tried them in vain so often, we turn again to the old discredited sources, and fancy we shall do better this time. Is it not

strange? Is there any explanation of it, other than that of my text? 'A deceived heart hath turned him aside.'

And that deceived heart, stronger than experience, is also stronger than conscience. Do you not know that you ought to be Christians? Do you not know that it is both wrong and foolish of you to ignore God? Do you not know that you will have to answer for it? Have you not had moments of illumination when there has risen up before you the whole vanity of your past lives, and when you have felt 'I have played the fool, and erred exceedingly'? And yet, what has come of it all with some of you? Why, what comes of it with the drunkard in the Book of Proverbs, who, as soon as he has got over the bruises and the sickness of his last debauch, says, 'I will seek it yet again.' 'A deceived heart hath turned him aside.'

And how is it that this hallucination that you have fed full and been satisfied, when all the while your hunger has not been appeased, can continue to act on us? For the very plain reason that every one of us has in himself a higher and a lower self, a set of desires for the grosser, more earthly, and, using the word in its proper sense, worldly sort—that is to say, directed towards material things, and a higher set which look right up to God if they were allowed fair play. And of these two sets—which really are one at bottom, if a man would only see it—the lower gets the upper hand, and suppresses the higher and the nobler. And so in many a man and woman the longing for God is crushed out by the grosser delights of sense.

One sometimes hears of cowardly, unmanly sailors, who in shipwreck push the women and children aside, and struggle to the boats. And there are in all of us groups of sturdy mendicants, so to speak, who elbow their way to the front, and will have their wants satisfied. What becomes of the gentler group that stand behind, unnoticed and silent? It is an awful thing when men and women do, as so many of us do, pervert the tastes that are meant to lead them to God, in order to stifle the consciousness that they need a God at all. There are tribes of low savages who are known as 'clay-eaters.' That is what a great many of us are; we feed upon the serpent's meat, the dust of the earth, and let all the higher heavenly food, which addresses itself first to loftier desires, but also satisfies these lower ones, stand unnoticed, unsought for, unpartaken of. Dear friends, do not be befooled by that treacherous heart of yours, but let the deepest voices in your soul be heard. Understand, I beseech you, that their cry is for no created person or thing, and that only God Himself can satisfy them.

III. And now, lastly, notice that a life thus ignoring God needs a power from without to set it free.

'He cannot deliver his soul.' Can you? Do you think you can break the habits of a lifetime? Do you think that, left to yourself, you would ever have any inclination to break them? Certainly, left to yourselves, you will never have the power. These long indulged appetites of ours grow with indulgence; and that which first was light as a cobweb, and soft as a silken bracelet, becomes heavier and solider until it is an iron fetter upon the limb, which no man

can break. There is nothing more awful in life than the influence of habit, so unthinkingly acquired, so inexorably certain, so limiting our possibilities and enclosing us in its grip.

Dear brethren, there is something more wanted than yourselves to break this chain. You have tried, I have no doubt, in the course of your lives, more and more resolutely, to cure yourselves of some more or less unworthy habits. They may be but mere slight tricks of attitude or intonation, or movement. Has your success been such as to encourage you to think that you can revolutionise your lives, and dethrone the despots that have ruled over you in the past? I leave the question to yourselves. To me it seems that the world of men is certain to go on ignoring God, and seeking its delight only in the world of creatures, unless there comes in an outside power into the heart of the world and revolutionises all things.

It is that power that I have to preach, the Christ who is the 'Bread of God that came down from Heaven,' who can lift up any soul from the most obstinate and long-continued grovelling amongst the transitory things of this limited world, and the superficial delights of sense and a gratified bodily life; who can bring the forgiveness which is essential, the deliverance from the power of evil which is not less essential, and who can fill our hearts with Himself the food of the world. He comes to each of us; He comes to you, with the old unanswerable question upon His lips, 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not?' It is unanswerable, for you can give no reason sufficient for such madness. All that you could say, and you durst not say it to Him, is, 'a deceived heart hath turned me aside.' He comes with the old gracious word upon His lips, 'Take! eat! this is My body which is broken for you.' He offers us Himself. He can stay all the hungers of all mankind. He can feed your heart with love, your mind with truth which is Himself, your will with His sweet commands.

As of old He made the thousands sit down upon the grass, and they did all eat and were filled, so He stands before the world to-day and says, 'I am the Bread of Life; He that cometh to Me shall never hunger.' And if you will only come to Him—that is to say, will trust yourselves altogether to the merits of His sacrifice, and the might of His indwelling Spirit—He will take away all the taste for the leeks and onions and garlic, and will give you the appetite for heavenly food. He will spread for you a table in the wilderness, and what would else be ashes will become sweet, wholesome, and nourishing. Nor will He cease there, for in His own good time He will call us to the banqueting house above, where He will make us to sit down to meat, and come forth Himself and serve us. Here, hunger often brings pain, and eating is followed by repletion. But there, appetite and satisfaction will produce each other perpetually, and the blessed ones who then hunger will not hunger so as to feel faintness or emptiness, nor be so filled as to cease to desire larger portions of the Bread of God. I beseech you, cry, 'Lord, ever more give us this bread!'

WRITING BLOTTED OUT AND MIST MELTED

‘I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins.’—[ISAIAH xlv. 22](#).

Isaiah has often and well been called the Evangelical Prophet. Many parts of this second half of his prophecies referring to the Messiah read like history rather than prediction. But it is not only from the clearness with which the great figure of the future king of Israel stands out on his page that he deserves that title. Other thoughts belonging to the very substance of the gospel appear in him with a vividness and a frequency which well warrants its application to him. He speaks much of the characteristically Christian conceptions of sin, forgiveness, and redemption. The whole of the latter parts of this book are laden with that burden. They are gathered up in the extraordinarily pregnant and blessed words of my text, in which metaphors are blended with much disregard to oratorical propriety, in order to bring out the whole fulness of the prophet’s meaning. ‘I have blotted out’—that suggests a book. ‘I have blotted out as a cloud’—that suggests the thinning away of morning mists. The prophet blends the two thoughts together, and on that great revelation of a forgiveness granted before it has been asked, and given, not only to one penitent soul wailing out like the abased king of Israel in his deep contrition, ‘according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions,’ but promised to a whole people, is rested the great invitation, ‘Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.’

Let me try and bring out, as simply and earnestly as I can, the great teaching that is condensed into these words.

I. Observe here the penetrating glance into the very essential characteristics of all sin.

There are two words, as you see, employed in my text, ‘transgressions’ and ‘sins.’ They apply to the same kind of actions, but they look at them from different angles and points of view. They are partially synonymous, but they cover very various conceptions, and if we take note of the original significations of the two words, we get two very important and often forgotten thoughts.

For that expression rendered in my text, and rendered correctly enough —transgressions—means at bottom, ‘rebellion,’ the rising up of a disobedient will, not only against a law, but against a lawgiver. There we have a deepening of that solemn fact of a man’s wrongdoing, which brings it into immediate connection with God, and marks its foulness by reason of that connection.

Ah! brethren, it makes all the difference to a man’s notions of right and wrong, whether he stops on the surface or goes down to the depths; whether he says to himself, ‘The thing is a vice; it is wrong; it is contrary to what I ought to be’; or whether he gets down to the darker, deeper, and truer thought, and says, ‘The damnable thing about every little evil that I do is this, that in it *I*—poor puny *I*—perk myself up against God, and say to Him, “Thou wilt; wilt thou? *I* shall not!”’ Sin is rebellion.

And so what becomes of the hazy distinction between great sins and little ones? An overt act of rebellion is of the same gravity, whatsoever may be its form. The man that lifts his sword against the sovereign, and the man behind him that holds his horse, are equally criminal. And when once you let in the notion that in all our actions we have to do with a Person, to whom we are bound to be obedient, then the distinction which sophisticates so many people's consciences, and does such infinite harm in so many lives, between great and small transgressions, disappears altogether. Sin is rebellion.

Then the other word of my text is equally profound and significant. For it, literally taken, means—as the words for 'sin' do in other languages besides the Hebrew—missing a mark. Every wrong thing that any man does is beside the mark, at which he, by virtue of his manhood, and his very make and nature, ought to aim. It is beside the mark in another sense than that. As some one says, 'A rogue is a roundabout fool.' No man ever secures that, and only that, which he aims at by any departure from the straight path of imperative duty. For if he gets some vulgar and transient titillation of appetite, or satisfaction of desire, he gets along with it something that takes all the guilt off the gingerbread, and all the sweetness out of the satisfaction. So that it is always a blunder to be bad, and every arrow that is drawn by a sinful hand misses the target to which all our arrows should be pointed, and misses even the poor mark that we think we are aiming at. Take these two thoughts with you—I will not dwell on them, but I desire to lay them upon all your hearts—all evil is sin, and every sin is rebellion against God, and a blunder in regard to myself.

II. And now I come to the second point of our text, and ask you to note the permanent record which every sin leaves.

I explained in the earlier part of my remarks that we have a case here of the thing that horrifies rhetoricians, but does not matter a bit to a prophet, the blending or confusing of two metaphors. The first of them—'I have blotted out'—suggests a piece of writing, a book, or manuscript of some sort. And the plain English of what lies behind that metaphor is this solemn thought, which I would might blaze before each of us, in all our lives, that God's calm and all-comprehensive knowledge and remembrance takes and keeps filed, and ready for reference, the whole story of our whole acts. There *is* a book. It is a violent metaphor, no doubt, but there is a solemn truth underlying it which we are too apt to forget. The world is groaning nowadays with two-volume memoirs of men that nobody wants to know anything more about. But every man is ever writing his autobiography with invisible but indelible ink. You have seen those old-fashioned 'manifold writers' in your places of business, and the construction of them is this: a flimsy sheet of tissue paper, a bit of black to be put in below it, and then another sheet on the other side; and the pen that writes on the flimsy top surface makes an impression that is carried through the black to the sheet below, and there is a duplicate which the writer keeps. You and I, upon the flimsinesses of this fleeting—sometimes, we think, futile—life, are penning what is neither flimsy nor futile, which goes through the

opaque dark, and is reproduced and docketed yonder. That is what we are doing every day and every minute, writing, writing, writing our own biography. And who is going to read it? Well, God does read it now, and you will have to read it out one day, and how will you like that?

This metaphor will bear a little further expansion. Scripture tells us, and conscience tells us, what manner of manuscript it is that we are each so busy adding line upon line to. It is a ledger; it is an indictment. Our own handwriting puts down in the ledger our own debts, and we cannot deny our own handwriting when we are confronted with it. It is an indictment, and our own hand draws it, and we have to plead 'guilty,' or 'not guilty,' to it. Which, being translated into plain fact, is this—that there goes with all our deeds some sense and reality of responsibility for them, and that all our rebellions against God, and our blunders against self, be they great or small, carry with them a sense of guilt and a reality of guilt whether we have the sense of it or not. God has a judgment at this moment about every man and woman, based upon the facts of the unfinished biography which they are writing.

Mystical and awful, yet blessed and elevating, is the thought that nothing—*nothing*, ever dies; and that what was, is now, and always will be.

Amongst the specimens from the coal measures in a museum you will find slabs upon which the tiniest fronds of ferns that grew nobody knows how many millenniums since are preserved for ever. Our lives, when the blow of the last hammer lays them open, will, in like manner, bear the impress of the minutest filament of every deed that we have ever done.

But my metaphor will bear yet further expansion, for this autobiographical record which we are busy preparing, which is at once ledger and indictment, is to be read out one day. There is a great scene in the last book of Scripture, the whole solemn significance of which, I suppose, we shall not understand till we have learned it by experience, but the truth of which we have sufficient premonitions to assure us of, which declares that at a given time, on the confines of Eternity, the Great White Throne is to be set, and the books are to be opened, and the dead are judged 'out of the books,' which, the seer goes on to explain, is 'according to their works.' The story of Esther tells us how the sleepless monarch in the night-watches sent for the records of the kingdom and had them read to him. The King who never slumbers nor sleeps, in that dawning of heaven's eternal morning, will have the books opened before Him, and my deeds will be read out. He and I will hear them, whether any else may hear or no. That is my second lesson.

III. The third is, that we have here suggested the darkening power of sin.

The prophet, as I said, mixes metaphors. 'I have blotted out as a cloud thy transgressions.' He uses two words for 'cloud' here; both of them mean substantially the same thing, and both suggest the same idea. When cloud fills the sky it darkens the earth, and shuts out the sunshine and the blue, it closes the petals of the little flowers, it hushes the songs of the birds. Sin makes for the sinning man 'an under-roof of doleful grey,' which shuts out all the glories

above. Put that metaphor into plain English, and it is just this, 'Your sins have separated between you and your God, and your iniquities have hid His face from you that He will not hear.' It is impossible for a man that has his heart all stiffened by the rebellion of his will against God's, or all seething with unrestrained passions, or perturbed with worldly longings and desires, to enter into calm fellowship with God or to keep the thought of God clear before his mind. For we know Him, not by sense nor by reason, but by sympathy and by feeling. And whatsoever comes in to disturb a man's purity, comes in to hinder his vision of God. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they'—and they only—'shall see God.' Whenever from the undrained swamps of my own passions and sensualities, or from the as malarious though loftier grounds of my own self-regard, be I student or thinker, or moral man, there rise up these light mists, they will fill the sky and hide the sun. On a winter's night you will see the Pleiades, or other bright constellations, varying in brilliancy from moment to moment as some invisible cloud-wrack floats across the heavens. So, brother, every evil thing that we do rises up and gets diffused through our atmosphere, and blots out from our vision the face of God Himself, the blessed Son.

Not only by reason of dimming and darkening my thoughts of Him is my sin rightly compared to an obscuring cloud; but the comparison also holds good because, just as the blanket of a wet mist swathing the wintry fields prevents the sunshine from falling upon them in blessing, so the accumulated effect of my evil doings and evil designings and thinkings and willings comes between me and all spiritual blessings which God can bestow, so that the very light of light, the highest blessings that He yearns to give, and we faint for want of possessing, are impossible even to His love to communicate until the cloud is swept away. So my sin darkens my soul, and separates me from the light of life.

But the metaphor carries with it, too, a suggestion of the limitations of the power of sin. For when the cloud is thickest and most obscuring it only hugs the earth, and rises but a little way into the heavens; and far above it the blue is as blue, and the sunshine as bright, as if there were no mist or fog in the lower regions. Therefore, let us remember that, while the cloud must veil us from the light, the light is above it, and 'every cloud that veileth love' may some day be thinned away by the love it veils.

IV. That brings me to the last word of my text,—viz. the prophet's teaching as to the removal of the sin.

We have to carry both the metaphors together with us here. 'I have blotted out'—that is, as erasing from a book. 'I have blotted out as a cloud'—that is, the thinning away of the mist. The blurred and stained page can be cancelled. Chemicals will take the ink out. 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin'; and it, passed over all that foul record, makes it pure and clean. 'What I have written, I have written,' said Pilate in his obstinacy. 'What I have written, I have written,' wails many a man in the sense of the irrevocableness of his

past. Brother! be not afraid. Christ can take away all that stained record, and give you back the page ready to receive holier words.

The cloud is thinned away. What thins the cloud? As I have said, the light which the cloud obscures, shining on the upper surface of it, dissipates it layer by layer till it gets down at last to the lowermost, and then rends a gap in it, and sends the shaft of the sunbeam through on to the green earth. And that is only a highly imaginative way of saying that it is the love against which we transgress that thins away the cloud of transgression, and at last, as the placid moon, by simply shining silently on, will sweep the whole sky clear of its clouds, dissipates them all, and leaves the calm blue. God forgives. The ledger account—if I may use so grossly commercial a figure—is settled in full; the indictment is endorsed, ‘acquitted.’ He remembers the sins only to breathe into the child’s heart the assurance of pardon, and no obstacle rises by reason of forgiven transgression between the sinning man and the reconciled God.

Now, all this preaching of Isaiah’s is enlarged and confirmed, and to some extent the *rationale* of it is set before us in the great Gospel truth of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. Unless we know that truth, we may well stand amazed and questioning as to whether a righteous God, administering a rigorous universe, can ever pardon sin. And unless we know that by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, granted to our spirits, our whole nature may be remade and moulded, we might well be tempted to say, Ah! the Ethiopian cannot change his skin nor the leopard his spots. But Jesus Christ can change more than skin, even the heart and spirit, the inmost depths of the nature.

Now, brother, my text speaks of this great blotting out as a past fact. It is so in the divine mind with regard to each of us, because Christ’s great work has made reconciliation and atonement for all the sins of all the world. And on the fact that it is past is based the exhortation, ‘Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.’ God does not say, ‘Come back and I will forgive’; He does not say, ‘Return and I will blot out’; but He says, ‘Return, for I *have* blotted out.’ Though accomplished, the forgiveness has to be appropriated by individual faith. The sins of the world have been borne, and borne away, by the Lamb of God, but your sins are not borne away unless your hand is laid on this head.

If it is, then you do not need to say, ‘What I have written is written, and it cannot be blotted out.’ But as in the old days a monk would take some manuscript upon which filthy stories about heathen gods and foolish fables were written, and erase these to write the legends of saints, or perhaps the words of the Gospels themselves; so on our hearts, which have been scribbled all over with obscenities and follies, He will write His new best name of Love, and we may be epistles of Christ, written with the Spirit of the living God.

HIDDEN AND REVEALED

‘Verily thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour. . . . I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth; I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain: I the Lord speak righteousness, I declare things that are right.’—[ISAIAH xlv. 15, 19](#).

The former of these verses expresses the thoughts of the prophet in contemplating the close of a great work of God’s power which issues in the heathen’s coming to Israel and acknowledging God. He adores the depth of the divine counsels which, by devious ways and after long ages, have led to this bright result. And as he thinks of all the long-stretching preparations, all the apparently hostile forces which have been truly subsidiary, all the generations during which these Egyptian and Ethiopian tribes have been the enemies and oppressors of that Israel whom they at last acknowledge for the dwelling-place of God, and enemies of that Jehovah before whom they finally bow down, he feels that he has no measuring-line to fathom the divine purposes, and bows his face to the ground in reverent contemplation with that word upon his lips: ‘Verily Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.’ It is a parallel to the apostolic words, ‘O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out.’

But such thoughts are but a half truth, and may very easily become in men’s minds a whole error, and therefore they are followed by a marvellous section in which the Lord Himself speaks, and of which the whole burden is—the clearness and fulness with which God makes Himself known to men. True it is that there are depths inaccessible in the divine nature. True it is that there are mysteries unrevealed in the method of the divine procedure, and especially in that of the relation of heathen tribes to His gospel and His love. True it is that there are mysteries opened in the very word of His grace. But notwithstanding all this—it is also true that He makes Himself known to us all, that He declares righteousness, that He calls us to seek Him, and that He wills to be found and known by us.

The collocation of these two passages may be taken, then, as representing the two phases of the Divine Manifestation, the obscurity which must ever be associated with all our finite knowledge of God, and the clear sunlight in which blazes all that we need to know of Him.

I. After all revelation, God is hidden.

There is revelation of His Name in all His works. His action must be all self-manifestation. But after all it is obscure and hidden.

1. Nature hides while it reveals.

Nature’s revelation is unobtrusive.

God is concealed behind second causes.

God is concealed behind regular modes of working (laws).

Nature’s revelation is partial, disclosing only a fragment of the name.

Nature's revelation is ambiguous. Dark shadows of death and pain in the sensitive world, of ruin and convulsions, of shivered stars, seem to contradict the faith that all is very good; so that it has been possible for men to drop their plummet in the deep and say, 'I find no God,' and for others to fall into Manichaeism or some form or other of dualism.

2. Providence hides while it reveals.

That is the sphere in which men are most familiar with the idea of mystery.

There is much of which we do not see the issue. The process is not completed, and so the end is not visible.

Even when we believe that 'to Him' and 'for good' are 'all things,' we cannot tell how all will come circling round. We are like men looking only at one small segment of an ellipse which is very eccentric.

There is much of which we do not see the consistency with the divine character.

We are confronted with stumbling-blocks in the allotment of earthly conditions; in the long ages and many tribes which are without knowledge of God; in the sore sorrows, national and individual.

We can array a formidable host. But it is to be remembered that revelation actually increases these. It is just because we know so much of God that we feel them so keenly. I suppose the mysteries of the divine government trouble others outside the sphere of revelation but little. The darkness is made visible by the light.

3. Even in 'grace' God is hidden while revealed.

The Infinite and Eternal cannot be grasped by man.

The conception of infinity and eternity is given us by revelation, but it is not comprehended so that its contents are fully known. The words are known, but their full meaning is not, and no revelation can make them, known to finite intelligences.

God dwells in light inaccessible, which is darkness.

Revelation opens abysses down which we cannot look. It raises and leaves unsettled as many questions as it solves.

The telescope resolves many nebulae, but only to bring more unresolvable ones into the field of vision.

Now all this is but one side of the truth. There is a tendency in some minds to underrate what is plain because all is not plain. For some minds the obscure has a fascination, apart altogether from its nature, just because it is obscure. It is a noble emulation to press forward and 'still to be closing up what we know not with what we know.' But neither in science nor in religion shall we make progress if we do not take heed of the opposing errors of thinking that all is seen, and of thinking that what we have is valueless because there are gaps in it. The constellations are none the less bright nor immortal fires, though there be waste places in heaven where nothing but opaque blackness is seen. In these days it is especially needful to insist both on the incompleteness of all our religious knowledge, and to say that—

II. Notwithstanding all obscurity, God has amply revealed Himself.

Though God hides Himself, still there comes from heaven the voice—‘I have not spoken in secret,’ Now these words contain these thoughts—

1. That whatever darkness there may be, there is none due to the manner of the revelation.

God has not spoken in secret, in a corner. There are no arbitrary difficulties made or unnecessary darkness left in His revelation. *We* have no right to say that He has left difficulties to test our faith. *He* Himself has never said so. He deals with us in good faith, doing all that can be done to enlighten, regard being had to still loftier considerations, to the freedom of the human will, to the laws which He has Himself imposed on our nature, and the purposes for which we are here. It is very important to grasp this. We have been told as much as *can* be told. Contrast with such a revelation the cave-muttered oracles of heathenism and their paltering double sense. Be sure that when God speaks, He speaks clearly and to all, and that in Christianity there is no esoteric teaching for a few initiated only, while the multitude are put off with shows.

2. That whatever obscurity there may be, there is none which hides the divine invitation or Him from those who obey it.

‘I have never said . . . seek ye Me in vain.’ Much is obscure if speculative completeness is looked for, but the moral relations of God and man are not obscure.

All which the heart needs is made known. His revelation is clearly His seeking us, and His revelation is His gracious call to us to seek Him. He is ever found by those who seek. They have not to press through obscurities to find Him, but the desire to possess must precede possession in spiritual matters. He is no hidden God, lurking in obscurity and only to be found by painful search. They who ‘seek’ Him know where to find Him, and seek because they know.

3. That whatever may be obscure, the Revelation of righteousness is clear.

We have to face speculative difficulties in plenty, but the great fact remains that in Revelation steady light is focussed on the moral qualities of the divine Nature and especially on His righteousness.

And the revelation of the divine righteousness reaches its greatest brightness, as that of all the divine Nature does, in the Person and work of Jesus. Very significantly the idea of God’s righteousness is fully developed in the immediately subsequent context. There we find that attribute linked in close and harmonious conjunction with what shallower thought is apt to regard as being in antagonism to it. He declares Himself to be ‘a just (righteous) God and a Saviour.’ So then, if we would rightly conceive of His righteousness, we must give it a wider extension than that of retributive justice or cold, inflexible aloofness from sinners. It impels God to be man’s saviour. And with similar enlarging of popular conceptions there follows: ‘In the Lord is righteousness and strength,’ and therefore, ‘In the Lord shall

all the seed of Israel be justified (declared and made righteous) and shall glory'—then, the divine Righteousness is communicative.

All these thoughts, germinal in the prophet's words, are set in fullest light, and certified by the most heart-moving facts, in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. He 'declares at this time His righteousness, that He might Himself be righteous and the maker righteous of them that have faith in Jesus.' Whatever is dark, this is clear, that 'Jehovah our Righteousness' has come to us in His Son, in whom seeking Him we shall never seek in vain, but 'be found in Him, not having a righteousness of our own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.'

If the great purpose of revelation is to make us know that God loves us, and has given us His Son that in Him we may know Him and possess His Righteousness, difficulties and obscurities in its form or in its substance take a very different aspect. What need we more than that knowledge and possession? Be not robbed of them.

Many things are not written in the book of the divine Revelation, whether it be that of Nature, of human history, or of our own spirits, or even of the Gospel, but these are written that we may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and believing, may have life in His name.

A RIGHTEOUSNESS NEAR AND A SWIFT SALVATION

‘Hearken unto Me, ye stout-hearted, that are far from righteousness: I bring near My righteousness; it shall not be far off, and My salvation shall not tarry.’—[ISAIAH xlii. 12, 13.](#)

God has promised that He will dwell with him that is humble and of a contrite heart. Jesus has shed the oil of His benediction on the poor in spirit. It is the men who form the exact antithesis to these characters who are addressed here. The ‘stout-hearted’ are those who, being untouched in conscience and ignorant of their sin, are self-reliant and almost defiant before God. That temper is branded here, though, of course, there is a sense in which a stout heart is a priceless possession, but that sort of stoutness of heart is best secured by the contrite of heart. Those who are far from righteousness are those who are not only sinful in act, but do not desire to be otherwise, having no approximation or drawing towards a nobler life, by aspiration or effort.

To such men God speaks, as in the tone of a royal proclamation; and what should we expect to hear pealing from His lips? Words of rebuke, warning, condemnation? No; His voice is gentle and wooing, and does not threaten blows, but proffers blessings: ‘I will bring near My righteousness. It shall not be far off,’ though the stout-hearted maybe ‘far from’ it. Here we have a divine proclamation of a divine Love that will not let us away from its presence; of a divine Work for us that is finished without us; of an all-sufficient Gift to us.

I. A divine proclamation of a divine Love that will not let us away from its presence.

There is a great contest between God and man: man seeking to withdraw from God, and God following in patient, persistent love.

1. In general terms God keeps near us, however far away we go from Him.

Think of our forgetfulness of Him and His continual thought of us. Think of our alienated hearts and His unchanging love.

We cannot turn away His care, we cannot exhaust His compassion, we cannot alienate His heart. All men everywhere are objects of these, as in every corner of the world the sky is overhead, and all lands have sunshine.

What a picture of divine patience and placability that truth points for us! It shows the Father coming after His prodigal son, and so surpasses even the pearl of the parables.

2. The special reference to Christ’s work.

That work is the exhibition in manhood and to men of a perfect righteousness.

It is the implanting in the corrupt world of a new beginning. It is the clothing us with Christ’s righteousness, for which we are forgiven and in which we are sanctified.

So Christ’s work is God’s coming to bring near His righteousness, and now ‘it is nigh thee in thy mouth and in thy heart.’

II. A divine proclamation of a divine Work which is finished without us.

The divine righteousness and its consequence are here represented as being brought near while men are still 'stout-hearted.' We must feel the emphasis laid on 'I will bring near My righteousness,' and the impression of merciful speed given by 'My salvation shall not tarry.' The whole suggests such thoughts as these:—

The divine love is not drawn out by anything in us, but pours out on us, even while we are far off and indifferent to it. His bringing near of righteousness, and setting His salvation to run very swiftly side by side with it, originates in Himself. It is the self-impelled and self-fed flow of a fountain, and we need no pump or machinery to draw it forth.

The divine work is accomplished without man's co-operation.

'It is finished,' was Christ's dying cry. But what is finished?— Bringing the righteousness near. What still remains to be done?— Making it mine. And that is accomplished by faith.

It is mine if by faith I claim it as mine, and knit myself with Him who is righteousness and salvation for every man that they may be accessible to and possessed by any man.

A man may be far from righteousness though it is near him and all around him. Like Gideon's fleece, he may be dry when all is wet, or like some rock in a field, barren and sullen, while all around the corn is waving.

III. The proclamation of an all-sufficient Gift.

Righteousness, salvation, glory, are here brought together in significant sequence. They are but several names for the same divine gift, looked at from different angles. A diamond flashes varying prismatic hues from its different facets.

That encyclopaedical gift, which in regard to man considered as sinful brings pardon and a new nature 'in righteousness and holiness of truth,' brings deliverance from peril and from every form of evil and death, to him considered as exposed to consequences of sin both physical and moral, and a true though limited participation in the divine glory, even now, with the hope of entering into the blaze of it hereafter, to him as considered as made in the divine image and having lost it.

And all this wonderful triple hope, rapturous and impossible as it seems when we think of man as he is, and of each of ourselves as we each feel ourselves to be, is for us a sober certainty and a fact sufficiently accomplished, to give firm ground for our largest expectations if we hold fast by Jesus who brings that all-sufficient gift of God within reach of each of us. The divine patience and love follow us in all our wild wanderings, praying us 'with much entreaty that we should receive the gift.' Jesus, who is God's righteousness and love incarnate, beseeches us to take Him, and in Him righteousness, salvation, and glory.

A RIVER OF PEACE AND WAVES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

‘Oh that thou hadst hearkened to My commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea.’—**ISAIAH xlviii. 18.**

I. The Wonderful Thought of God here.

This is an exclamation of disappointment; of thwarted love. The good which He purposed has been missed by man’s fault, and He regards the faulty Israel with sorrow and pity as a would-be benefactor balked of a kind intention might do. O Jerusalem! ‘how often would I have gathered thee.’ ‘If thou hadst known . . . the things that belong unto thy peace!’

II. Man’s opposition to God’s loving purpose for us.

To have hearkened to His commandments would have enabled Him to let His kindness have its way.

It is not only our act contrary to God’s Law, but the source of that act in our antagonistic will, which fatally bars out the possibility of God’s intended good from us. It is ‘not hearkening’ which is the root of not doing.

That possibility of lifting up our puny wills against the all-sovereign, Infinite Will is the mystery of mysteries.

The fact that the mysterious possibility becomes an actuality in us is still more mysterious. If we could solve those two mysteries, we should be far on the way to solve all the mysteries of man’s relation to God, and God’s to man.

A will absolutely submitted to Him is His great ideal of human nature. And that ideal we all can thwart, and alas, alas! we all do. It is the deepest mystery; it is the blackest sin; it is the intensest folly.

Sin is negative as well as positive. Not to hearken is as bad as to act in dead opposition to.

III. The lost good.

The great purpose of the divine Commandment is to show us, for our own sakes, the path that leads to all blessedness.

Peace and Righteousness, or, in more modern words, all well-being and all goodness, are the sure results of taking God’s expressed Will as the guide of life.

These two are inseparable. Indeed they are one and the same fact of human experience, looked at from two points of view.

The force of the metaphor in both clauses is substantially the same. It suggests in both—Abundance—Continuity—Uninterrupted Succession. But regarded separately each has its own fair promise. ‘As a river’—flowing softly, not stagnant—that suggests the calm and gentle flow of a placid and untroubled stream refreshing and fertilising. ‘As waves of the sea,’ these suggest greater force than ‘river.’ The image speaks of a righteousness massive and having power and a resistless swing in it. It is the more striking because the waves of the sea are the ordinary emblem of rebellious power. But here they stand as emblem of the

strength of a submissive, not of a rebellious, will. In that obedience human nature rises to a higher type of strength than it ever attains while in opposition to the Source of all strength.

Contrast—‘Whose waters cast up mire and dirt.’

IV. The lost good regained.

God has yet a method to accomplish His loving desire. Even those who have not hearkened may receive through Christ the good which they have sinned away. In Him is peace; in Him is Righteousness, which comes from faith. ‘Hear, and your soul shall live.’

EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

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

ISAIAH AND JEREMIAH

Isaiah, Chaps. XLIX to End. Jeremiah.

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FEEDING IN THE WAYS

‘They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places.’—[ISAIAH xlix. 9](#).

This is part of the prophet’s glowing description of the return of the Captives, under the figure of a flock fed by a strong shepherd. We have often seen, I suppose, a flock of sheep driven along a road, some of them hastily trying to snatch a mouthful from the dusty grass by the wayside. Little can they get there; they have to wait until they reach some green pasture in which they can be folded. This flock shall ‘feed in the ways’; as they go they will find nourishment. That is not all; the top of the mountains is not the place where grass grows. *There* are bare, savage cliffs, from which every particle of soil has been washed by furious torrents, or the scanty vegetation has been burnt up by the fierce ‘sunbeams like swords.’ There the wild deer and the ravens live, the sheep feed down in the valleys. But ‘*their* pasture shall be in all high places.’ The literal rendering is even more emphatic: ‘Their pasture shall be in all *bare heights*,’ where a sudden verdure springs to feed them according to their need. Whilst, then, this prophecy is originally intended simply to suggest the abundant supplies that were to be provided for the band of exiles as they came back from Babylon, there lie in it great and blessed principles which belong to the Christian pilgrimage, and the flock that follows Christ.

They who follow Him, says my text, to begin with, shall find in the dusty paths of common life, and in all the smallnesses and distractions of daily duty, nourishment for their spirits. Do you remember what Jesus said? ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work.’ We, too, may have the same meat to eat which the world knows not of, and He will give that hidden manna to the combatant as well as ‘to him that overcometh.’ In the measure in which ‘we follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,’ in that measure do we find—like the stores of provisions that Arctic explorers come upon, *cached* for them—food in the wilderness, and nourishment for our highest life in our common work. That is a great promise, and it is a great duty.

It is a promise the fulfilment of which is plainly guaranteed by the very nature of the case. Religion is meant to direct conduct, and the smallest affairs of life are to come under its imperial control, and the only way by which a man can get any good out of his Christianity is by living it. It is when he sets to work on the principles of the Gospel that the Gospel proves itself to be a reality in his blessed experience. It is when he does the smallest duties from the great motives that these great motives are strengthened by exercise, as every motive is. If you wish to weaken the influence of any principle upon you, do not work it out, and it will wither and die. If a man would grasp the fulness of spiritual sustenance which lies in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, let him go to work on the basis of the Gospel, and he ‘shall feed in the ways,’ and common duties will minister strength to him instead of taking strength from him. We can make the smallest daily incidents subserve our growth and our spiritual

strength, because, if we thus do them, they will bring to us attestations of the reality of the faith by which we act on them. For convincing a man that a lifebuoy is reliable there is nothing like having had experience of its power to hold his head above the waves when he has been cast into them. *Live* your Christianity, and it will attest itself. There will come, besides that, the blessed memory of past times in which we trusted in the Lord and were lightened, we obeyed God and found His promises true, we risked all for God and found that we had all more abundantly. It is only an active Christian life that is a nourished and growing Christian life.

The food which God gives us is not only to be taken by faith, but it has to be made ours more abundantly by work. Saint Augustine said in another connection, 'Believe, and thou hast eaten.' Yes, that is blessedly true, but it needs to be supplemented by 'they shall feed *in the ways,*' and their work will bring them nourishment.

But this is a great duty as well as a great promise. How many of us Christian people have but little experience of getting nearer to God because of our daily occupations? To by far the larger number of us, in by far the greater space of time in our lives, our daily work is a distraction, and tends to obscure the face of God to us and to shut us out from many of the storehouses of sustenance by which a quiet, contemplative faith is refreshed. Therefore we need times of special prayer and remoteness from daily work; and there will be very little realisation of the nourishing power of common duties unless there is familiar to us also the entrance into the 'secret place of the Most High,' where He feeds His children on the bread of life.

We must not neglect either of these two ways by which our souls are fed, and we must ever remember that the reason why so many Christian people cannot set to their seal that this promise is true, lies mainly in this, that the ways on which they go are either not the ways that the Shepherd has walked in before them, or that they are trodden in forgetfulness of Him and without looking to His guidance. The work that is to minister to the Christian life must be work conformed to the Christian ideal, and if we fling ourselves into our secular business, as it is called—if you go to your counting-houses and shops, and I go to my desk and books, and forget the Shepherd—then there is no grass by the wayside for such sheep. But if we subject our wills to Him, and if in all that we do we are trying to refer to Him and are working in dependence on Him, and for Him, then the poorest work, the meanest, the most entirely secular, will be a source of Christian nourishment and blessing. We have to settle for ourselves whether we shall be distracted, torn asunder by pressure of cares and responsibilities and activities, or whether, far below the agitated surface which is ruffled by the winds, and borne along by the tidal wave, there will be a great central depth, still but not stagnant—whether we shall be fed, or starved in our Christian life, by the pressure of our worldly tasks. The choice is before us. 'They shall feed in the ways,' if the ways are Christ's ways, and He is at every step their Shepherd.

Further, my text suggests that for those who follow the Lamb there shall be greenness and pasture on the bare heights. Strip that part of our text of its metaphor, and it just comes to the blessed old thought, which I hope many of us have known to be a true one, that the times of sorrow are the times when a Christian may have the most of the presence and strength of God. 'In the days of famine they shall be satisfied,' and up among the most barren cliffs, where there is not a bite for any four-footed creature, they shall find springing grass and watered pastures. Our prophet puts the same thought, under a kindred though somewhat different metaphor, in another place in this book, where he says, 'I will open rivers in high places.' That is clean contrary to nature. The rivers do not run on the mountain-tops, but down in the low ground. But for us, as the darkness thickens, the pillar may glow the brighter; as the gloom increases, the glory may grow; the less of nutriment or refreshment earth affords, the more abundantly does God spread His stores before us, if we are wise enough to take them. It is an experience, I suppose, common to all devout men, that their times of most rapid growth were their times of trouble. In nature winter stops all vegetable life. In grace the growing time is the winter. They tell us that up in the Arctic regions the reindeer will scratch away the snow, and get at the succulent moss that lies beneath it. When that Shepherd, Who Himself has known sorrows, leads us up into those barren regions of perpetual cold and snow, He teaches us, too, how to brush it away, and find what we need buried and kept safe and warm beneath the white shroud. It is the prerogative of the Christian soul not to be without trouble, but to turn the trouble into nourishment, and to feed on the barest heights.

May I turn these latter words of our text a somewhat different way, attaching to them a meaning which does not belong to them, but by way of accommodation? If Christian people want to have the bread of God abundantly, they must climb. It is to those who live on the heights that provision comes according to their need. If you would have your Christian life starved, go down into the fertile valleys. Remember Abraham and Lot, and the choice which each made. The one said: 'I want cattle and wealth, and I am going down to Sodom. Never mind about the vices of the inhabitants. There is money to be made there.' Abraham said: 'I am going to stay up here on the heights, the breezy, barren heights,' and God stayed beside him. If we go down we starve our souls. If we desire them to be fat and flourishing, nourished with the hidden manna, then we must go up. 'Their pasture shall be in all high places.'

Before I finish, let me remind you of the application of the words of my text, which we owe to the New Testament. The context runs, as you will remember, 'they shall not hunger nor thirst, neither shall the heat nor the sun smite them. For He that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall He guide them.' And you remember the beautiful variation and deepening of this promise in that great saying which the Seer in the Apocalypse gives us, when he speaks of those 'who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,'

and are led 'by living fountains of water,' where 'God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.' So we are entitled to believe that on the loftiest heights, far above this valley of weeping, there shall be immortal food, and that on the high places of the mountains of God there shall be pasture that never withers. The prophet Ezekiel has a similar variation of my text, and transfers it from the captives on their march homewards, to the happy pilgrims who have reached home, when he says: 'I will bring them unto their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel'—when they have reached them at last after the weary march—'I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the mountains of Israel shall their fold be; there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel.'

THE MOUNTAIN ROAD

‘And I will make all My mountains a way, and My highways shall be exalted.’—[ISAIAH xlix. 11](#).

This grand prophecy is far too wide to be exhausted by the return of the exiles. There gleamed through it the wider redemption and the true return of the real captives. The previous promises all find their fulfilment in the experiences of the soul on its journey back to God. Here we have two characteristics of that journey.

I. The Path through the mountains.

‘My mountains.’ That is the claim that all the world is His; and also the revelation that He is the Lord of Providence. He makes our difficult and steep places. Submission comes with that thought, and even ‘for the strength of the hills we bless Thee.’ There are mountains which are not His but ours, artificial difficulties of our own creating.

1. Our way does lie over the mountains. There are difficulties. The Christian course is like a Roman road which never turned aside, but went straight up and on. So much the better. A keener air blows, bracing and health-giving, up there. Mosquitoes and malaria keep to the lower levels.

2. There is always a path over the mountains. Some way opens when we get close up, like a path through heather, which is not seen till reached. We walk by faith. We foolishly forebode and fancy that we cannot live if something happens, but there is no *cul de sac* in our paths if God’s mountain-way is our way, nor does the faint track ever die out if our faith is keen-sighted and docile.

II. The Pasture on the mountains—lit. ‘bare heights.’

Pastures in the East are down in bottoms, not, like ours, upon the hills. But this flock finds supplies on the barren hill-tops.

Sustenance in Sorrow and Loss.

1. Promise that whatever be our trials and losses we shall be taken care of. Not, perhaps, as we should have liked, nor as abundantly fed as down in the valleys, but still not left to starve. No carcasses strewed on the bleakest bit of road as one sees dead camels by the side of the tracks in the desert.

2. Promise of sustenance of a higher kind even in sorrow. The Alpine flora is specially beautiful, though minute. The blessings of affliction; the more intimate knowledge of His love, submission of will. ‘Out of the eater came forth meat.’

‘Passing through the valley of weeping they make it a well’; the tears shed in times of rightly borne sorrow are gathered into a reservoir from which refreshment, patience, trust and strength may be drawn in later days.

But the perfect fulfilment of the promise lies beyond this life. ‘On the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be,’ and they who have found pasture on the barren heights of earthly sorrow shall ‘summer high in bliss upon the hills of God,’ and shall at once both lie ‘for ever

in a good fold,' and 'follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,' and find fountains of living water bursting forth for ever on these fertile heights.

THE WRITING ON GOD'S HANDS

'Behold! I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands; thy walls are continually before Me.'—[ISAIAH xlix. 16](#).

In the preceding context we have the infinitely tender and beautiful words: 'Zion hath said, The Lord hath forsaken me. Can a woman forget her sucking child? . . . yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.' There is more than a mother's love in the Father's heart. But wonderful in their revelation of God, and mighty to strengthen, calm, and comfort, as these transcendent words are, those of my text, which follow them, do not fall beneath their loftiness. They are a singularly bold metaphor, drawn from the strange and half-savage custom, which lingers still among sailors and others, of having beloved names or other tokens of affection and remembrance indelibly inscribed on parts of the body. Sometimes worshippers had the marks of the god thus set on their flesh; here God writes on His hands the name of the city of His worshippers. And it is not its name only, but its very likeness that He stamps there, that He may ever look on it, as those who love bear with them a picture of one dear face. The prophecy goes on: 'Thy walls are continually before Me,' but in the prophet's time the walls were in ruins, and yet they are present to the divine mind.

I. Now, the first thought suggested by these great words is that here we have set forth for our strength and peace a divine remembrance, tender as—yea, more tender than—a mother's.

When Israel came out of Egypt, the Passover was instituted as 'a memorial unto all generations,' or, as the same idea is otherwise expressed, 'it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand.' Here God represents Himself as doing for Israel what He had bid Israel do for Him. They were, as it were, to write the supreme act of deliverance in the Exodus upon their hands, that it might never be forgotten. He writes Zion on His hands for the same purpose.

Now, of course, the text does not primarily refer to individuals, but to the community, whether Zion is understood, as the prophet understood the name, to be ancient Israel, or as the Christian Church. But the recognition of that fact should not be allowed to rob us of the preciousness of this text in its bearing on the individual. For God remembers the community, not as an abstraction or a generalised expression, but as the aggregate of all the individuals composing it. We lose sight of the particulars when we generalise. We cannot see the trees for the wood. We think of 'the Church,' and do not think of the thousands of men and women who make it up. We cannot discern the separate stars in the galaxy. But God's eye resolves what to us is a nebula, and to Him every single glittering point of light hangs rounded and separate in the heaven. Therefore this assurance of our text is to be taken by every single soul that loves God, and trusts Him through Jesus Christ, as belonging to it, as though there were not another creature on earth but itself.

‘The sun whose beams most glorious are,
Disdaineth no beholder.’

Its light floods the world, yet seems to go straight into the eyeball of every man that looks at it. And such is the divine love and remembrance. There is no jostling nor confusion in the wide space of the heart of God. They that go before shall not hinder them that come after. The hungry crowd sat down in companies on the green grass, and the first fifty, no doubt, were envied by the last of the hundred fifties that made up the five thousand, and wondered whether the five loaves and the two small fishes could go round, but the last fed full as did the first. The great promise of our text belongs to me and thee, and therefore belongs to us all.

That remembrance which each man may take for himself—and we are poor Christians if we do not live in its light—is infinitely tender. The echo of the music of the previous words still haunts the verse, and the remembrance promised in it is touched with more than a mother’s love. ‘I am poor and needy,’ says the Psalmist, ‘yet the Lord thinketh upon me.’ He might have said, ‘I am poor and needy, therefore the Lord thinketh upon me.’ That remembrance is in full activity when things are darkest with us. Israel said, ‘My Lord hath forgotten me,’ because at the point of view taken in the second half of Isaiah, it was captive in a far-off land. You and I sometimes are brought into circumstances in which we are ready to think ‘God has, somehow or other, left me, has forgotten me.’ Never! never! However mirk the night, however apparently solitary the way, however mysterious and insoluble the difficulties of our position, let us fall back on this, that the captive Israel was remembered by God, and let us be sure that no circumstances of our lives are so dark or mysterious as to warrant the faintest shadow of suspicion creeping over the brightness of our confidence in this great promise. His divine remembrance of each of His servants is certain.

But do not let us forget that it was a very sinful Zion that God thus remembered. It was because the nation had transgressed that they were captives, but their very captivity was a proof that they were not forgotten. The loving divine remembrance had to smite in order to prove that it was active. Let us neither be puzzled by our sorrows nor made less confident when we think of our sins. For there is no sin that is strong enough to chill the divine love, or to erase us from the divine remembrance. ‘Captive Israel! captive because sinful, I have graven *thee* on the palms of My hands.’

II. A second thought here is that the divine remembrance guides the divine action.

The palm of the hand is the seat of strength, the instrument of work; and so, if Zion’s name is written there, that means not only remembrance, but remembrance which is at the helm, as it were, which is moulding and directing all the work that is done by the hand that bears the name inscribed upon it. The thought is identical with the one which is suggested by part of the High Priest’s official dress, although there the thought has a different applic-

ation. He bore the names of the twelve tribes graven upon his shoulder, the seat of power, and upon his breastplate that lay above the heart, the home of love. God holds out the mighty Hand which works all things, and says to His children: 'Look, you are graven there'—at the very fountain-head, as it were, of the divine activity. Which, being turned into plain English, is just this, that for His Church as a whole, He does move amidst the affairs of nations. You remember the grand words of one of the Psalms,—'He reproveth kings for their sakes, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm.' It is no fanatical reading of the history of earthly politics and kingdoms, if we recognise that one of the most prominent reasons for the divine activities in moulding the kingdoms, setting up and casting down, is the advancement of the kingdom of heaven and the building of the City of God. 'I have graven thee on the palms of My hands'—and when the hands go to work, it is for the Zion whose likeness they bear.

But the same truth applies to us individually. 'All things work together'; they would not do so, unless there was one dominant Will which turned the chaos into a cosmos. 'All things work,' that is very plain. The tremendous activities round us both in Nature and in history are clear to us all. But if all things and events are co-operant, working into each other, and for one end, like the wheels of a well-constructed engine, then there must be an Engineer, and they work together because He is directing them. Thus, because my name is graven on the palms of the mighty Hand that doeth all things, therefore 'all things work together for my good.' If we could but carry that quiet conviction into all the mysteries, as they sometimes seem to be, of our daily lives, and interpret everything in the light of that great thought, how different all our days would be! How far above the petty anxieties and cares and troubles that gnaw away so much of our strength and joy; how serene, peaceful, lofty, submissive, would be our lives, and how in the darkest darkness there would be a great light, not only of hope for a distant future, but of confident assurance for the present. 'I have graven thee on the palms of My hands'—do Thou, then, as Thou wilt with me.

III. A last thought here is that the divine remembrance works all things, to realise a great ideal end, as yet unreachd.

'Thy walls are continually before Me.' When this prophecy was uttered the Israelites were in captivity, and the city was a wilderness, 'the holy and beautiful House'—as this very book says—'where the fathers praised Thee was burned with fire,' the walls were broken down, rubbish and solitude were there. Yet on the palms of God's hands were inscribed the walls which were nowhere else! They were 'before Him,' though Jerusalem was a ruin. What does that mean? It means that that divine remembrance sees 'things that are not, as though they were.' In the midst of the imperfect reality of the present condition of the Church as a whole, and of us, its actual components, it sees the ideal, the perfect vision of the perfect future, and 'all the wonder that shall be.' Zion may be desolate, but 'before Him' stands what will one day stand on the earth before all men, 'the new Jerusalem, coming down from

heaven,' having walls great and high, and its foundations garnished with all manner of precious stones. 'Thy walls are before Me,' though the ruins are there before men.

So, brethren, the most radiant optimism is the only fitting attitude for Christian people in looking into the future, either of the Church as a whole, or of themselves as individual members of it. God's hand is working for Zion and for me. It is guided by love that does not lose the individual in the mass, nor ever forgets any of its children, and it works towards the attainment of unattained perfection. 'This Man' does not 'begin to build and' prove 'not able to finish.'

So let us be sure that, if only we keep ourselves in the love, and continue in the grace of God, He will not slack nor stay His hand on which Zion is graven, until it has 'perfected that which concerneth us,' and fulfilled to each of us that 'which He has spoken to us of.'

I said at the beginning of these remarks that God did what He bids us do. God bids us do what He does. His name should be on our hands; that is to say, memory of Him, love of Him, regard to Him, confidence in Him should mould and guide all our activity, and the aim that we shall be builded up for a habitation of God through the Spirit should be the conscious aim of our lives, as it is the aim which He has in view in all His dealings with us. Our names on His hand; His name on our hands; so shall we be blessed.

THE SERVANT'S WORDS TO THE WEARY

'The Lord God hath given me the tongue of them that are taught, that I should know how to sustain with words him that is weary; he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as they that are taught.'—ISAIAH I. 4.

In [chapter xlix. 1-6](#), the beginning of the continuous section of which these verses are part, a transition is made from Israel as collectively the ideal servant of the Lord, to a personal Servant, whose office it is 'to bring Jacob again to Him.' We see the ideal in the very act of passing to its highest form, and that in which it is finally fulfilled in history, namely, by the person Jesus. That Jesus was 'Thy Holy Servant' was the earliest gospel preached by Peter and John before people and rulers. It is not the most vital conception of our Lord's nature and work. The prophet does not here pierce to the core, as in his fifty-third chapter with its vision of the Suffering Servant, but this is prelude to that, and the office assigned here to the Servant cannot be fully discharged without that ascribed to Him there, as the prophet begins to discern almost immediately. The text gives us a striking view of the purpose of Messiah's mission and of His training and preparation for it.

I. The purpose of Christ's mission.

There is a remarkable contrast between the stately prelude to the section of the prophecy in [chapter xlix.](#), and the ideal in this text. There the Servant calls the isles and the distant peoples to listen, and declares that His mouth is 'like a sharp sword'; here all that is keen and smiting in His word has softened into gentle whispers of comfort to sustain the weary.

A mission addressed to 'the weary' is addressed to every man, for who is not 'weighed upon with sore distress,' or loaded with the burden and the weight of tasks beyond his power or distasteful to his inclinations, or monotonous to nausea, or prolonged to exhaustion, or toiled at with little hope and less interest? Who is not weary of himself and of his load? What but universal weariness does the universal secret desire for rest betray? We are all 'pilgrims weary of time,' and some of us are weary of even prosperity, and some of us are worn out with work, and some of us buffeted to all but exhaustion by sorrow, and all of us long for rest, though many of us do not know where to look for it.

Jesus may have had this word in mind, when He called to Him all them 'that labour and are heavy laden.' At all events, the prophet's ideal and the evangelists' story accurately correspond. Christ's words have other characteristics, but are eminently words that sustain the weary and comfort the down-hearted. Who can ever calculate the new strength poured by them into fainting hearts and languid hands, the all but dead hopes that they have reanimated, the sorrows they have comforted, the wounds they have stanchd?

What a lesson here as to the noblest use of high endowments! What a contrast to the use that so many of those to whom God has given 'the tongue of them that are taught' make of their great gifts! Literature yields but few examples of great writers who have faithfully employed their powers for that purpose, which seems so humble and is so lofty, the help of

the weary, the comfort of the sad. Many pages in famous books would be cancelled if all that had been written without consideration for these classes were obliterated, as it will be one day.

But Christ not only speaks by outward words, but has other ways of lodging sustenance and comfort in souls than by vocables audible to the ear or visible to the eye on the page. 'The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life.' He spoke by His deeds on earth, and in one and the same set of facts, He 'began to do and to teach,' the doing being named first. He 'now speaketh from Heaven' by many an inward whisper, by the communication of His own Spirit, on Whom this very office of ministering sustenance and comfort is laid, and whose very name of the Comforter means One who by his being with a man strengthens him.

II. The training and preparation of the Messiah for His mission.

The Messiah is here represented as having the tongue of 'them that are taught,' and as having it, because morning by morning He has been wakened to hear God's lessons. He is thus God's scholar—a thought of which an unreflecting orthodoxy has been shy, but which it is necessary to admit unhesitatingly and ungrudgingly, if we would not reduce the manhood of Jesus to a mere phantasm. He Himself has said, 'As the Father taught Me, I speak these things.' With emphatic repetition, He was continually making that assertion, as, for instance, 'I have not spoken of Myself, but the Father which sent Me, He gave Me a commandment what I should say, and what I should speak . . . the things therefore which I speak, even as the Father hath said unto Me, so I speak.'

The Gospels tell us of the prayers of Jesus, and of rare occasions in which a voice from heaven spoke to Him. But while these are palpable instances of His communion with God, and precious tokens of His true brotherhood with us in the indispensable characteristics of the life of faith, they are but the salient points on which the light falls, and behind them, all unknown by us, stretches an unbroken chain of like acts of fellowship. In that subordination as of a scholar to teacher, both His divine and His human nature concurred, the former in filial submission, the latter in continual, truly human derivation and reception. The man Jesus was taught and, like the boy Jesus, 'increased in wisdom.'

But while He learned as truly as we learn from God, and exercised the same communion with the Father, the same submission to Him, which other men have to exercise, and called 'us brethren, saying, I will put my trust in Him,' the difference in degree between His close fellowship with God the Father, and our broken and always partial fellowship, between His completeness of reception of God's words and our imperfect comprehension, between His perfect reproduction of the words He had heard and our faint, and often mistaken echo of them, is so immense as to amount to a difference in kind. His unity of will and being with the Father ensured that all His words were God's. 'Never man spake like this man.' The man who speaks to us once for all God's words must be more than man. Other men, the highest,

give us fragments of that mighty voice; Jesus speaks its whole message, and nothing but its message. Of that perfect reproduction He is calmly conscious, and claims to give it, in words which are at once lowly and instinct with more than human authority: 'All things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you.' Who besides Him dare make such a claim? Who besides Him could make it without being met by incredulous scorn? His utterance of the Father's words was unmarred by defect on the one hand, and by additions on the other. It was like pure water which tastes of no soil. His soul was like an open vessel plunged in a stream, filled by the flow and giving forth again its whole contents.

That divine communication to Jesus was no mere impartation of abstractions or 'truths,' still less of the poor words of man's speech, but was the flowing into His spirit of the living Father by whom He lived. And it was unbroken. 'Morning by morning' it was going on. The line was continuous, whereas for the rest of us, at the best, it is a series of points more or less contiguous, but with dark spaces between. 'God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him.'

So, then, let us hold fast by Him, the Son in whom God has spoken to us, and to all voices without and within that would woo us to listen, let us answer with the only wise answer: 'To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.'

THE SERVANT'S OBEDIENCE

'I was not rebellious, neither turned away back'—[ISAIAH 1. 5](#).

I. The secret of Christ's life, filial obedience.

The fact is attested by Scripture. By His own words: 'My meat is to do the will of My Father'; 'For thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness'; 'I came down from heaven not to do My own will.' By His servant's words: 'Obedient unto death'; 'Made under the law'; 'He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.' It is involved in the belief of His righteous manhood. It is essential to true manhood. The highest ideal for humanity is conscious dependence on God, and the very definition of righteousness is conscious conformity to the Will of God. If Christ had done the noblest acts and yet had not always had this sense of being a servant, He would not have been pure and holy.

It is not inconsistent with His true Divinity. We stand afar off, but we can see this much.

The completeness of that obedience. It was continuous and it was entire.

The living heart of it: 'I delight to do Thy Will.' The Father's Will was not a force without, but Christ's whole being was conformed to it, and it was shrined within His heart and had become His choice and delight.

The expressions of His obedience were His perfect fulfilment of the divine commands, and His perfect endurance of the divine appointments.

Thus God's Will was the keynote, to which Christ's will struck the full chord.

II. The yet deeper mysteries which that perfect obedience discloses.

1. A sinless human life must be more than human. The contrast with all which we have known—the impossibility of retaining belief in the perfect obedience of Jesus unless we have underlying it the belief in His divinity. 'There is none good but one, that is God.'

2. The sinless human life suffers not for itself but for us. The combination of holiness and sorrow leads on to the mystery of atonement. The sinlessness is indispensable to the doctrine of His sacrificial death.

III. The glorious gifts which flow from that perfect obedience.

1. It gives us a living law to obey.

2. It gives us a transforming power to receive.

3. It gives us a perfect righteousness to trust to.

This perfect obedience may be ours. Being ours, our lives will be strong, free, peaceful.

That obedience becomes ours by faith, which leads to love, and love to the glad obedience of sons.

THE SERVANT'S VOLUNTARY SUFFERINGS

'I gave My back to the smiters, and My cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not My face from shame and spitting.'—ISAIAH I. 6.

Such words are not to be dealt with coldly. Unless they be grasped by the heart they are not grasped at all. We do not think of analysing in the presence of a great sorrow. There can be no greater dishonour to the name of Christ than an unemotional consideration of His sufferings for us. The hindrances to a due consideration of these are manifold; some arising from intellectual, and some from moral, causes. Most men have difficulty in vivifying any historical event so as to feel its reality. There is no nobler use of the historical imagination than to direct it to that great life and death on which the salvation of the world depends.

The prophet here has advanced from the first general conception of the Servant of the Lord as recipient of divine commission, and submissive to the divine voice, to thoughts of the sufferings which He would meet with on His path, and of how He bore them.

I. The sufferings of the Servant.

The minute particularity is very noteworthy, scourging, plucking the beard, shame, all sorts of taunts and buffets on the face, and the last indignity of spitting. Clearly, then, He is not only to suffer persecution, but is to be treated with insult and to endure that strange blending, so often seen, of grim infernal laughter with grim infernal fury, the hyena's laugh and its ferocity. Wherever it occurs, it implies not only fell hate and cruelty, but also contempt and a horrible delight in triumphing over an enemy. It is found in all corrupt periods, and especially in religious persecutions. Here it implies the rejection of the Servant.

The prophecy was literally fulfilled, but not in all its traits. This may give a hint as to the general interpretation of prophecy and may teach that external fulfilment only points to a deeper correspondence. The most salient instance is in Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem riding on an ass, which was but a finger-post to guide men's thoughts to His fulfilling the ideal of the Messianic King. And yet, the minute correspondences are worth noticing. What a strange, solemn glimpse they give into that awful divine omniscience, and into the mystery of the play of the vilest passions as being yet under control in their extremest rage!

We must note the remarkable prominence in the narratives of the Passion, of signs of contempt and mockery; Judas' kiss, the purple robe, the crown of thorns, 'wagging their heads,' 'let be, let Elias come,' etc.

Think of the exquisite pain of this to Christ. That He was sinless and full of love made it all the worse to bear. Not the physical pain, but the consciousness that He was encompassed by such an atmosphere of evil, was the sharpest pang. We should think with reverent sympathy of His perfect discernment of the sinful malignant hearts from which the sufferings came, of His pained and rejected love thrown back on itself, of His clear sight of what their heartless infliction of tortures would end in for the inflictors, of His true human feeling which shrank from being the object of contempt and execration.

II. His patient submission.

'I gave,'—purely voluntary. That word originally expressed the patient submission with which He endured at the moment, when the lash scored His back, but it may be widened out to express Christ's perfect voluntariness in all His passion. At any moment He could have abandoned His work if His filial obedience and His love to men had let Him do so. His would-be captors fell to the ground before one momentary flash of His majesty, and they could have laid no hand on Him, if His will had not consented to His capture. Fra Angelico has grasped the thought which the prophet here uttered, and which the evangelists emphasise, that all His suffering was voluntary, and that His love to us restrained His power, and led Him to the slaughter, silent as a sheep before her shearers. For he has portrayed the majestic figure seated in passive endurance, with eyes blindfolded but yet wide open behind the bandage, all-seeing, wistful, sad, and patient, while around are fragments of rods, and smiting hands, and a cruel face blowing spittle on the unshrinking cheeks. He seems to be saying: 'These things hast thou done, and I kept silence.' 'Thou couldst have no power at all against Me unless it were given thee.'

III. His submission to suffering in obedience to the Father's Will.

The context connects His opened ear and His not being rebellious with His giving His back to the smiters. That involves the idea that these indignities and insults were part of the divine counsel in reference to Him. That same combination of ideas is strongly presented in the early addresses of Peter, recorded in the first chapters of Acts, of which this is a specimen: 'Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye with wicked hands have crucified and slain.' The full significance of Christ's passion as that of the atoning sacrifice was not yet clear to the apostle, any more than the Servant's sufferings were to the prophet, but both prophet and apostle were carried on by fuller experience and reflection on what they already saw clearly, to discern the inwardness and depth of these. The one soon came to see that 'by His stripes we are healed,' and the other finally wrote: 'Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree.' And whoever deeply ponders the startling fact that 'it pleased the Lord to bruise Him,' sinless and ever obedient as He was, will be borne, sooner or later, into the full sunlight of the blessed belief that when Jesus suffered and died, 'He died for all.' His sufferings were those of a martyr for truth, who is willing to die rather than cease to witness for it; but they were more. They were the sufferings of a lover of mankind who will face the extremest wrong that can be inflicted, rather than abandon His mission; but they were more. They were not merely the penalty which He had to pay for faithfulness to His work; they were themselves the crown and climax of His work. The Son of Man came, indeed, 'not to be ministered to but to minister,' but that, taken alone, is but a maimed view of what He came for, and we must whole-heartedly go on to say as He said, 'and to give His life a ransom for many,' if we would know the whole truth as to the sufferings of Jesus.

Again, since Christ suffers according to the will of God, it is clear that all representations of the scope of His atoning death, which represent it as moving the will of the Father to love and pardon, are travesties of the truth and turn cause into effect. God does not love, because Jesus died, but Jesus died because God loved.

Further, it is to be noted that His sufferings are the great means by which He sustains the weary. The word to which His ears were opened, morning by morning, was the word to which He was docile when He gave His back to the smiters. It is His passion, regarded as the sacrifice for a world's sin, from which flow the most powerful stimulants to service and tonics for weary souls, the tenderest comfortings for sorrow. He sustains and comforts by the example of His life, but far more, and more sweetly, more mightily, by that which flows to us through His death. His sufferings are powerful to sustain, when thought of as our example, but they are a tenfold stronger source of patience and strength, when laid on our hearts as the price of our redemption. The Cross is, in all senses of the expression, the tree of life.

Wonder, reverence, love, gratitude, should well forth from our hearts, when we think of these cruel sufferings, but the deepest fountains in them will not be unsealed, unless we see in the suffering Servant the atoning Son.

THE SERVANT'S INFLEXIBLE RESOLVE

'For the Lord God will help Me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set My face like a flint.'—ISAIAH 1. 7.

What a striking contrast between the tone of these words and of the preceding! There all is gentleness, docility, still communion, submission, patient endurance. Here all is energy and determination, resistance and martial vigour. It is like the contrast between a priest and a warrior. And that gentleness is the parent of this boldness. The same Will which is all submission to God is all resistance in the face of hostile men. The utmost lowliness and the most resolved resistance to opposing forces are found in that prophetic image of the Servant of the Lord—even as they are found in the highest degree and most perfectly in Jesus Christ.

The sequence in this context is worth noting. We had first Christ's communion with God and communications from the Father; then the perfect submission of His Will; then that submission expressed in His voluntary sufferings; and now we have His immovable steadfastness of resistance to the temptation, which lay in these sufferings, to depart from His attitude of submission, and to abandon His work.

The former verse led us up to the verge of the great mystery of His sacrificial death. This gives us a glimpse into the depths of His human life, and shows Him to us as our example in all holy heroism.

I. The need which Christ felt to exercise firm resistance.

The words of the text are found almost reproduced in [Jeremiah i.](#) and [Ezekiel iii.](#) All prophets and servants of God have had thus to resist, and it would be superfluous to show how resistance to opposing influences is the condition of all noble life and of all true service.

But was it so with Him? The more accurate translation of the second clause of our text is to be noticed: 'Therefore I will not suffer Myself to be overcome by the shame.'

Then the shame had in it some tendency to divert Him from His course. Christ's humanity felt natural human shrinking from pain and suffering. It shrank from the contempt and mockery of those around Him, and did so with especial sensitiveness because of His pure and sinless nature, His yearning sympathy, the atmosphere of love in which He dwelt, His clear sight of the sin, and His prevision of the consequent sorrow. If so, His sufferings did appeal to His human nature and constituted a temptation.

At the beginning the Tempter addressed himself to natural desires to procure physical gratification (bread), and to the equally natural desire to avoid suffering and pain, and to secure His kingdom by an easier method ('All these will I give Thee, if—').

And the latter temptation attended Him all through His life, and was most insistent at its close. The shadow of the cross stretched along His path from its beginning. But it is to be remembered that he had not the same need of *self*-control which we have, in that His Will was not reluctant, and that no rebellious desires had escaped from its control and needed to be reduced to submission. 'I was not rebellious.' 'The spirit is willing but the flesh

is weak' was true in the fullest extent only of Him. So the context gives us His perfect submission of will, and yet the need to harden His face toward externals from which, instinctively and without breach of filial obedience, His sensitive nature recoiled. The reality of the temptation, the limits of its reach, His consciousness of it, and His immovable obedience and resistance, are all expressed in the deep and wonderful words, 'If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me, nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt.'

II. The perfect inflexible resolve.

'Face like a flint' seems to be quoted in [Luke ix. 51](#); 'Steadily set His face.' The whole story of the Gospels gives the one impression of a life steadfast in its great resolve. There are no traces of His ever faltering in His purpose, none of His ever suffering Himself to be diverted from it, no parentheses and no digressions. There are no blunders either. But what a contrast in this respect to all other lives! Mark's Gospel, which is eminently the gospel of the Servant, is full of energy and of this inflexible resolve, which speak in such sayings as 'I must be about My Father's business'; 'I must work the works of My Father while it is day.' That last journey, during which He 'steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem,' is but a type of the whole. Christ's life was a continuous or rather a continually repeated effort.

This inflexible resolve is associated in Him with characteristics not usually allied with it. The gentleness of Christ is so obvious in His character that little needs to be said to point it out. To the influence of His character more than to any other cause may be traced the change in the perspective, so to speak, of Virtue, which characterises modern notions of perfection as contrasted with antique ones. Contrast the Greek and Roman type with the mediaeval ascetic, or with the philanthropic type of modern times. Carlyle's ideal is retrograde and an anachronism. Women and patient sufferers find example in Him. But we have in Jesus Christ, too, the highest example of all the stronger and robuster virtues, the more distinctly heroic, masculine; and that not merely passive firmness of endurance such as an American Indian will show in torments, but active firmness which presses on to its goal, and, immovably resolute, will not be diverted by anything. In Him we see a resolved Will and a gentle loving Heart in perfect accord. That is a wonderful combination. We often find that such firmness is developed at the expense of indifference to other people. It is like a war chariot, or artillery train, that goes crashing across the field, though it be over shrieking men and broken bones, and the wheels splash in blood. Resolved firmness is often accompanied with self-absorption which makes it gloomy, and with narrow limitations. Such men gather all their powers together to secure a certain end, and do it by shutting the eyes of their mind to everything but the one object, like the painter, who blocks up his studio window to get a top light, or as a mad bull lowers his head and blindly rushes on.

There is none of all this in Christ's firmness. He was able at every moment to give His whole sympathy to all who needed it, to take in all that lay around Him, and His resolute concentration of Himself on His work made Him none the less perfect in all which goes to

make up complete manhood. Not only was Christ's firmness that of a fixed Will and a most loving Heart, like one of these 'rocking stones,' whose solid mass can be set vibrating by a poising bird, but the fixed Will came from the loving Heart. The very compassion and pity of His nature led to that resolved continuance in His path of redeeming love, though suffering and mockery waited for Him at each turn.

And so He is the Joshua, the Warrior-King, as well as the Priest. That Face, ever ready to kindle into pity, to melt into tenderness, to express every shade of tender feeling, was 'set as a flint.' That Eye, ever brimming with tears, was ever fixed on one goal. That Character is the type of all strength and of all gentleness.

III. The basis of Christ's fixed resolve in filial confidence.

'The Lord God will help Me.' So Christ lived by faith.

That faith led to this heroic resistance and immovable resolution.

That confidence of divine help was based upon consciousness of obedience.

It is most blessed for us to have Him as our example of faith and of brave opposition to all the antagonistic forces around us. But we need more than an example. He will but rebuke our wavering purposes of obedience, if He is no more than our pattern. Thank God, He is more, even our Fountain of Power, from Whom we can draw life akin to, because derived from, His own. In Him we can feel strength stealing into flaccid limbs, and gain 'the wrestling thews that throw the world.' If we are 'in Christ' and on the path of duty, we too may be able to set our faces as a flint, and to say truthfully: 'None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear to myself, that I may finish my course with joy.' And yet we may withal be gentle, and keep hearts 'open as day to melting charity,' and have leisure and sympathy to spare for every sorrow of others, and a hand to help and 'sustain him that is weary.'

THE SERVANT'S TRIUMPH

'He is near that justifieth Me; who will contend with Me? let us stand together: who is Mine adversary? let him come near to Me. 9. Behold, the Lord God will help Me; who is he that shall condemn Me? lo, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up.'—ISAIAH I. 8, 9.

We have reached the final words of this prophecy, and we hear in them a tone of lofty confidence and triumph. While the former ones sounded plaintive like soft flute music, this rings out clear like the note of a trumpet summoning to battle. The Servant of the Lord seems here to be eager for the conflict, not merely patient and enduring, not merely setting His face like a flint, but confidently challenging His adversaries, and daring them to the strife.

As for the form of the words, the image underlying the whole is that of a suit at law. It is noteworthy that since [Isaiah xli](#), this metaphor has run through the whole prophecy. The great controversy is God *versus* Idols. God appears at the bar of men, pleads His cause, calls His witnesses ([xliii. 9](#)). 'Let them' (*i.e.* idols) 'bring forth their witnesses that they may be justified.'

Possibly the form of the words here is owing to the dominance of that idea in the context, and implies nothing more than the general notion of opposition and victory. But it is at least worth remembering that in the life of Christ we have many instances in which the prophetic images were literally fulfilled even though their meaning was mainly symbolical: as *e.g.* the riding on the ass, the birth in Bethlehem, the silence before accusers, 'a bone of Him shall not be broken,' and in this very contest, 'shame and spitting.' So here there may be included a reference to that time when the hatred of opposition reached its highest point—in the sufferings and death of our Lord. And it is at least a remarkable coincidence that that highest point was reached in formal trials before the ecclesiastical and civil authorities, for the purpose of convicting Him, and that these processes as legal procedures broke down so signally.

Keeping up the metaphor, we mark here—

I. The Messiah's lofty challenge to His accusers. II. The Messiah's expectation of divine vindication and acquittal. III. The Messiah's confidence of ultimate triumph.

I. Messiah's lofty challenge to His accusers.

The 'justifying' which He expects may refer either to personal character or to official functional faithfulness. I think it refers to both, and that we have here, expressed in prophetic outline, not only the fact of Christ's sinlessness, but the fact of His consciousness of sinlessness.

The words are the strongest assertion of His absolute freedom from anything that an adversary could lay hold of on which to found a charge, and not merely so, but they also dare to assert that the unerring and all-penetrating eye of the Judge of all will look into His

heart, and find nothing there but the mirrored image of His own perfection. I do not need to dwell on the fact of Christ's sinlessness, that He is perfect manhood without stain, without defect. I have had occasion to touch upon that truth in a former sermon on 'I was not rebellious.' Here we have to do not so much with sinlessness as with the consciousness of sinlessness.

Now note that consciousness on Christ's part.

We have to reckon with the fact of it as expressed in His own words: 'I do always the things that please Him. Which of you convinceth Me of sin?' 'The Prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in Me.'

In Him there is the absence of all trace of sense of sin.

No prayer for forgiveness comes from His lips.

No penitence, no acknowledgment of even weakness is heard from Him. Even in His baptism, which for others was an acknowledgment of impurity, He puts His submission to the rite, not on the ground of needing to be washed from sin, but of 'fulfilling all righteousness.'

Now, unless Christ was sinless, what do we say of these assertions? 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us'—are we to apply that canon to Him when He stands before us and asks, 'Which of you convinceth Me of sin?' Surely it augurs small self-knowledge or a low moral standard if, from the lips of a religious teacher, there never comes one word to indicate that he has felt the hold of evil on him. I make bold to say that if Christ were not sinless, the Apostle Paul stood far above Him, with his 'of whom I am chief.' What difference would there be between Him and the Pharisees who called forth His bitterest words by this very absence in them of consciousness of sin: 'If ye were blind ye would have no sin, but now ye say, We see, therefore your sin remaineth.'

Singularly enough the world has accepted Him at His own estimate, and has felt that these lofty assertions of absolute perfection were borne out by His life, and were consistent with the utmost lowliness of heart.

As to the adversary's failure, I need only recall the close of His life, which is representative of the whole impression made on the world by Him. What a wonderful and singular concurrence of testimonies was borne to His pure and blameless life! After months of hatred and watching, even the rulers' lynx-eyed jealousy found nothing, and they had to fall back upon false witnesses. 'Hearest thou not how many things they witness against Thee?' He stood with unmoved silence, and the lies fell down dead at His feet. Had He answered, they would have been preserved and owed their immortality to the Gospels: He held His peace and they vanished. All attempts failed so signally that at the last they were fain, in well-simulated holy abhorrence, to base His condemnation on what He had said in their presence. 'How think ye, ye have heard the blasphemy?' So all that the adversary, raking through a life, could find, was that one word. That was His sin; in all else He was pure. Remember Pi-

late's acquittal: 'I find no fault in Him,' and his wife's warning, 'Have thou nothing to do with that just Person.' Think of Judas, 'I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.' Listen to the penitent thief's low voice gasping out in his pangs and almost collapse: 'This man hath done nothing amiss.' Listen to the Centurion telling the impression made even on his rough nature: 'Truly this was a righteous Man.'

These are the answers to the Servant's challenge, wrung from the lips of His adversaries; and they but represent the universal judgment of humanity.

There is one Man whose life has been without stain or spot, whose soul has never been crossed by a breath of passion, nor dimmed by a speck of sin, whose will has ever been filled with happy obedience, whose conscience has been undulled by evil and untaught to speak in condemnation, whose whole nature has been like some fair marble, pure in hue, perfect in form, and unstained to the very core. There is one Man who can front the most hostile scrutiny with the bold challenge, 'Which of you convinceth Me of sin?' and His very haters have to answer, 'I find no fault in Him,' while those that love Him rejoice to proclaim Him 'holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners.' There is one Man who can front the most rigid Law of Duty and say, 'I came not to destroy but to fulfil,' and the stony tables seem to glow with tender light, as of rocky cliffs in morning sunshine, attesting that He has indeed fulfilled all righteousness. There is one Man who can stand before God without repentance or confession, and whose claim 'I do always the things that please Him,' the awful voice from the opening heavens endorses, when it proclaims; 'This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.' The lowly Servant of God flings out His challenge to the universe: 'Who will contend with Me?' and that gage has lain in the lists for nineteen centuries unlifted.

II. The Messiah's expectation of divine vindication and acquittal.

Like many another man, Christ had to strengthen Himself against calumny and slander by turning to God, and finding comfort in the belief that there was One who would do Him right, and as throughout this context we have had the true humanity of our Lord in great prominence, it is worth while to dwell for a moment on that thought of His real sharing in the pain of misconstruction and groundless charges, and of His too having to say, as we have so often to say, 'Well, there is one who knows. Men may condemn but God will acquit.'

But there is something more than that here. The divine vindication and acquittal is not a mere hidden thought and judgment in the mind of God. It is a declaring and showing to be innocent, and that not by word but by deed. That expectation seemed to be annihilated and made ludicrous by His death. But the 'justifying' of which our text speaks takes place in Christ's resurrection and ascension.

'Manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit' (1 Timothy iii. 16). 'Declared to be the Son of God with power, . . . by the resurrection from the dead' (Rom. i. 4).

His death seems the entire abandonment of this holy and sinless man. It seems to demonstrate His claims to be madness, His hope to be futile, His promises to be wind. No

wonder that the sorrowing apostles wailed, 'We trusted that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel.' The death of Christ, if it were but a martyr's death, and if we had to believe that that frame had crumbled into dust, and that heart ceased for ever to beat, would not only destroy the worth of all that He spoke, but would be the saddest instance in all history of the irreversible sway that death wields over all mankind, and would deepen the darkness and sadden the gloom of the grave. True, there were not wanting even in His dying hours mysterious indications, such as His promise to the penitent thief. But these only make the disappointment the deeper, if there was nothing more after His death.

So Christ's justification is in His resurrection and ascension.

III. The Messiah's confidence of ultimate triumph.

In the last words of the text the adversaries are massed together. The confidence that the Lord God will help and justify leads to the conviction that all opposition to Him is futile and leads to destruction.

We see the historical fulfilment in the fate of the nation. 'His blood be upon us and upon our children.'

We have a truth applying universally that antagonism to Him is self-destructive.

Two forms of destruction are here named. There is a slow decay going on in the opponents and their opposition, as a garment waxing old, and there is a being fretted away by the imperceptible working of external causes, as by gnawing moths.

Applied to persons. To opposing systems.

How many antagonists the Gospel has had, and one after another has been antiquated, and their books are only known because fragments of them are preserved in Christian writings. Paganism is gone from Europe, and its idols are in our museums. Each generation has its own phase of opposition, which lasts for a little while. The mists round the sun melt, the clouds piled in the north, surging up to bury it beneath their banks, are dissipated. The sea roars and smashes on the cliffs, but it ebbs and calms. Some of us have seen more than one school of thought which came to the assault of Christianity, with colours flying and drums rattling, defeated utterly and forgotten, and so it will always be. One may be sure that each enemy in turn will descend to the oblivion that has already received so many, and can imagine these beaten foes rising from their seats to welcome the newcomer with the sad greeting: 'Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?'

We are 'justified' in His 'justification.'

The real connection between us and Christ by faith, makes our justification to be involved in His, so that it is no mere accommodation but a profound perception of the real relation between Christ and us, when Paul, in [Romans viii. 34](#), triumphantly claims the words of our text for Christ's disciples, and rings out their challenge on behalf of all believers: 'It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth?'

Do you trust in Christ? Then you too can dare to say: 'The Lord God will help me; who is he that shall condemn me?'

A CALL TO FAITH

‘Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.’—**ISAIAH 1. 10.**

The persons addressed in this call to faith are ‘those who fear the Lord,’ and ‘obey the voice of His Servant.’ In that collocation is implied that these two things are necessarily connected, so that obedience to Christ is the test of true religion, and the fear of the Lord does not exist where the word of the Son is neglected or rejected.

But besides that most fruitful and instructive juxtaposition, other important thoughts come into view here. The fact that the call to faith is addressed to those who are regarded as already fearing God suggests the need for renewed and constantly repeated acts of confidence, at every stage of the Christian life, and opens up the whole subject of the growth and progress of individual religion, as secured by the continuous exercise of faith. The call is addressed to all at every stage of advancement. Of course it is addressed also to those who are disobedient and rebellious. But that wider aspect of the merciful invitation does not come into view here.

But there is another clause in the description of the persons addressed, ‘Who walketh in darkness and hath no light.’ This is, no doubt, primarily a reference to the great sorrow that filled, like a gloomy thundercloud, the horizon of Jewish prophets, small and uninteresting as it seems to us, namely, the captivity of Israel and their expulsion from their land. The faithful remnant are not to escape their share in the national calamity. But while it lasts, they are to wait patiently on the Lord, and not to cast away their confidence, though all seems dark and dreary.

The exhortation thus regarded suggests the power and duty of faith even in times of disaster and sorrow. But another meaning has often been attached to these words, they have been lifted into another region, the spiritual, and have been supposed to refer to a state of feeling not unknown to devout hearts, in which the religious life is devoid of joy and peace. That is a phase of Christian experience, which meets any one who knows much of the workings of men’s hearts, and of his own, when faith is exercised with but little of the light of faith, and the fear of the Lord is cherished with but scant joy in the Lord. Now if it be remembered that such an application of the words is not their original purpose, there can be no harm in using them so. Indeed we may say that, as the words are perfectly general, they include a reference to all darkness of life or soul, however produced, whether it come from the night of sorrow falling on us from without, or from mists and gloom rising like heavy vapours from our own hearts. So considered, the text suggests the one remedy for all gloom and weakness in the spiritual life.

Thus, then, we have three different sets of circumstances in which faith is enforced as the source of true strength and our all-embracing duty. In outward sorrow and trial, trust;

in inward darkness and sadness, trust; in every stage of Christian progress, trust. Or I. Faith the light in the darkness of the world. II. Faith the light in the darkness of the soul. III. Faith the light in every stage of Christian progress.

I. Faith our light in the darkness of the world.

The mystery and standing problem of the Old Testament is the coexistence of goodness and sorrow, and the mystery still remains, and ever will remain, a fact. It is partially alleviated if we remember that one main purpose of all our sorrows is to lead us to this confidence.

1. The call to faith is the true voice of all our sorrows.

It seems easy to trust when all is bright, but really it is just as hard, only we can more easily deceive ourselves, when physical well-being makes us comfortable. We are less conscious of our own emptiness, we mask our poverty from ourselves, we do not seem to need God so much. But sorrow reveals our need to us. Other props are struck away, and it is either collapse or Him. We learn the vanity, the transiency, of all besides.

Sorrow reveals God, as the pillar of cloud glowed brighter when the evening fell. Sorrow is meant to awaken the powers that are apt to sleep in prosperity.

So the true voice of all our griefs is 'Come up hither.' They call us to trust, as nightfall calls us to light up our lamps. The snow keeps the hidden seeds warm; shepherds burn heather on the hillside that young grass may spring.

2. The call to faith echoes from the voice of the Servant.

Jesus in His darkness rested on God, and in all His sorrows was yet anointed with the oil of gladness. In every pang He has been before us. The rack is sanctified because He has been stretched upon it.

3. The substance of the call.

It is to *trust*, not to anything more. No attempts to stifle tears are required. There is no sin in sorrow. The emotions which we feel to God in bright days are not appropriate at such times. There are seasons in every life when all that we can say is, 'Truly this is a grief, and I will bear it.'

What then *is* required? Assurance of God's loving will sending sorrow. Assurance of God's strengthening presence in it, assurance of deliverance from it. These, not more, are required; these are the elements of the faith here called for.

Such faith may co-exist with the keenest sense of loss. The true attitude in sorrow may be gathered from Christ's at the grave of Lazarus, contrasted with the excessive mourning of the sisters, and the feigned grief of the Jews.

There are times when the most that we can do is to trust even in the great darkness, 'Though He slay me yet will I trust in Him.' Submissive silence is sometimes the most eloquent confession of faith. 'I was dumb, I opened not my mouth, because Thou didst it.'

4. The blessed results of such faith.

It is implied that we may find all that we need, and more, in God. Have we to mourn friends? 'In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne.' Have we lost wealth? We have in Him a treasure that moth or rust cannot touch. Are our hopes blasted? 'Happy is He . . . whose hope is in the Lord his God.' Is our health broken? 'I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance.' 'The Lord is able to give thee much more than these.'

How can we face the troubles of life without Him? God calls us when in darkness, and by the darkness, to trust in His name and stay ourselves on Him. Happy are we if we answer 'Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines . . . yet I will rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of my salvation.'

II. Faith, our light in the darkness of the soul.

No doubt there may be such a thing as true fear of God in the soul along with spiritual darkness, faith without the joy of faith. Now this condition seems contradictory of the very nature of the Christian life. For religion is union with God who is light, and if we walk in Him, we are in the light. How then can such experience be?

We must dismiss the notion of God's desertion of the trusting soul. He is always the same; He has 'never said to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain.' But while putting aside that false explanation, we can see how such darkness may be. If our religious life was in more vigorous exercise, more pure, perfect and continuous, there would be no separation of faith and the joy of faith. But we have not such unruffled, perfect, uninterrupted faith, and hence there may be, and often is, faith without much joy of faith. I would not say that such experience is always the fruit of sin. But certainly we are not to blame Him or to think of Him as breaking His promises, or departing from His nature. No principles, be they ever so firmly held, ever so undoubtedly received, ever so passionately embraced, exert their whole power equally at all moments in a life. There come times of languor when they seem to be mere words, dead commonplaces, as unlike their former selves as sapless winter boughs to their summer pride of leafy beauty. The same variation in our realising grasp affects the truths of the Gospel. Sometimes they seem but words, with all the life and power sucked out of them, pale shadows of themselves, or like the dried bed of a wady with blazing, white stones, where flashing water used to leap, and all the flowerets withered, which once bent their meek little heads to drink. No facts are always equally capable of exciting their correspondent emotions. Those which most closely affect our personal life, in which we find our deepest joys, are not always present in our minds, and when they are, do not always touch the springs of our feelings. No possessions are always equally precious to us. The rich man is not always conscious with equal satisfaction of his wealth. If, then, the way from the mind to the emotions is not always equally open, there is a reason why there may be faith without light of joy. If the thoughts are not always equally concentrated on the things which produce

joy, *there* is a reason why there may be the habit of fearing God, though there be not the present vigorous exercise of faith, and consequently but little light.

Another reason may lie in the disturbing and saddening influence of earthly cares and sorrows. There are all weathers in a year. And the highest hope and nearest possible approach to joy is sometimes 'Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness.' Our lives are sometimes like an Arctic winter in which for many days is no sun.

Another reason may be found in the very fact that we are apt to look impatiently for peace and joy, and to be more exercised with these than with that which produces them.

Another may be errors or mistakes about God and His Gospel.

Another may be absorption with our own sin instead of with Him. To all these add temperament, education, habit, example, influence of body on the mind, and of course also positive inconsistencies and a low tone of Christian life.

It is clear then that, if these be the causes of this state, the one cure for it is to exercise our faith more energetically.

Trust, do not look back. We are tempted to cast away our confidence and to say: What profit shall I have if I pray unto Him? But it is on looking onwards, not backwards, that safety lies.

Trust, do not think about your sins.

Trust, do not think so much about your joy.

It is in the occupation of heart and mind with Jesus that joy and peace come. To make them our direct aim is the way not to attain them. Though now there seems a long wintry interval between seed time and harvest, yet 'in due season we shall reap if we faint not.'

'In the fourth watch of the night Jesus came unto them.'

III. Faith our guiding light in every stage of Christian progress.

Those who already 'fear God' are in the text exhorted to trust.

In the most advanced Christian life there are temptations to abandon our confidence. We never on earth come to such a point as that, without effort, we are sure to continue in the way. True, habit is a wonderful ally of goodness, and it is a great thing to have it on our side, but all our lives long, there will be hindrances without and within which need effort and self-repression. On earth there is no time when it is safe for us to go unarmed. The force of gravitation acts however high we climb. Not till heaven is reached will 'love' be 'its own security,' and nature coincide with grace. And even in heaven faith 'abideth,' but there it will be without effort.

1. The most advanced Christian life needs a perpetual renewal and repetition of past acts of faith.

It cannot live on a past any more than the body can subsist on last year's food. The past is like the deep portions of coral reefs, a mere platform for the living present which shines on the surface of the sea, and grows. We must gather manna daily.

The life is continued by the same means as that by which it was begun. There is no new duty or method for the most advanced Christian; he has to do just what he has been doing for half a century. We cannot transcend the creatural position, we are ever dependent. 'To hoar hairs will I carry you.' The initial point is prolonged into a continuous line.

2. The most advanced and mature faith is capable of increase, in regard to its knowledge of its object, and in intensity, constancy, power. At first it may be a tremulous trust, afterwards it should become an assured confidence. At first it may be but a dim recognition, as in a glass darkly, of the great love which has redeemed us at a great price; afterwards it should become the clear vision of the trusted Friend and lifelong companion of our souls, who is all in all to us. At first it may be an interrupted hold, afterwards it should become such a grasp as the roots of a tree have on the soil. At first it may be a feeble power ruling over our rebel selves, like some king beleaguered in his capital, who has no sway beyond its walls, afterwards it should become a peaceful sovereign who guides and sways all the powers of the soul and outgoings of the life. At first it may be like a premature rose putting forth pale petals on an almost leafless bough, afterwards the whole tree should be blossomed over with fragrant flowers, the homes of light and sweetness. The highest faith may be heightened, and the spirits before the throne pray the prayer, 'Lord, increase our faith.'

For us all, then, the merciful voice of the servant of the Lord calls to His light. Our faith is our light in darkness, only as a window is the light of a house, or the eye, of the body, because it admits and discerns that true light. He calls us each from the darkness. Do not try to make fires for yourselves, ineffectual and transient, but look to Him, and you shall not walk in darkness, even amid the gloom of earth, but shall have light in your darkness, till the time come when, in a clearer heaven and a lighter air, 'Thy sun shall no more go down, neither shall thy moon withdraw itself, for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.'

DYING FIRES

‘Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that gird yourselves about with firebrands: walk ye in the flame of your fire, and among the brands that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow.’—[ISAIAH I. 11](#).

The scene brought before us in these words is that of a company of belated travellers in some desert, lighting a little fire that glimmers ineffectual in the darkness of the eerie waste. They huddle round its dying embers for a little warmth and company, and they hope it will scare wolf and jackal, but their fuel is all burned, and they have to go to sleep without its solace and security. The prophet’s imaginative picture is painted from life, and is a sad reality in the cases of all who seek to warm themselves at any fire that they kindle for themselves, apart from God.

I. A sad, true picture of human life.

It does not cover, nor is presented by the prophet as covering, all the facts of experience. Every man has his share of sunshine, but still it is true of all who are not living in dependence on and communion with God, that they are but travellers in the dark.

Scripture uses the image of darkness as symbolic of three sad facts of our experience: ignorance, sin, sorrow. Are not all these the characteristics of godless lives?

As for ignorance—a godless man has no key to the awful problems that front him. He knows not God, who is to him a dread, a name, a mystery. He knows not himself, the depths of his nature, its possibilities for good or evil, whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. He has no solution for the riddle of the universe. It is to him a chaos, and darkness is upon the face of the deep.

As to sin, the darkness of ignorance is largely due to the darkness of sin. In every heart comes sometimes the consciousness that it is thus darkened by sin. The sense of sin is with all men more or less—much perverted, often wrong in its judgments, feeble, easily silenced, but for all that it is there—and it is great part of the cold obstruction that shuts out the light. Sin weaves the pall that shrouds the world.

As for darkness of sorrow—we must beware that we do not exaggerate. God makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and there is gladness in every life, much that arises from fulfilled desires, from accomplished purposes, from gratified affections. But when all this has been freely admitted, still sadness crouches somewhere in all hearts, and over every life the storm sometimes stoops.

We need nothing beyond our own experience and the slightest knowledge of other hearts to know how shallow and one-sided a view of life that is which sees only the joy and forgets the sorrow, which ignores the night and thinks only of the day; which, looking out on nature, is blind to the pain and agony, the horror and the death, which are as real parts of it as brightness and beauty, love and life. Every little valley that lies in lovely loneliness has its scenes of desolation, and tempest has broken over the fairest scenes. Every river has

drowned its man. Over every inch of blue sky the thunder cloud has rolled. Every summer has its winter, every day its night, every life its death. All stars set, all moons wane. 'Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang' come after every leafy June.

Sorrow is as deeply embedded in the necessity and constitution of things as joy. 'God hath set one over against another, and hath made all things double.'

II. The vain attempts at light.

There is bitter irony in the prophet's description of the poor flickering spot of light in the black waste and of its swift dying out. The travellers without a watch-fire are defenceless from midnight prowlers. How full of solemn truth about godless lives the vivid outline picture is!

Men try to free themselves from the miseries of ignorance, sin, and sorrow.

Think of the insufficiency of all such attempts, the feeble flicker which glimmers for an hour, and then fuel fails and it goes out. Then the travellers can journey no further, but 'lie down in sorrow,' and without a watchfire they become a prey to all the beasts of the field. It is a little picture taken from the life.

It vividly paints how men *will* try to free themselves from the miseries of their condition, how insufficient all their attempts are, how transient the relief, and how bitter and black the end.

We may apply these thoughts to—

1. Men-made grounds of hope before God.
2. Men-made attempts to read the mysteries.

We do not say this of all human learning, but of that which, apart from God's revelation, deals with the subjects of that revelation.

3. Men-made efforts at self-reformation.
4. Men-made attempts at alleviating sorrow.

Scripture abounds in other metaphors for the same solemn spiritual facts as are set before us in this picture of the dying watchfire and the sad men watching its decline. Godless lives draw from broken cisterns out of which the water runs. They build with untempered mortar. They lean on broken reeds that wound the hand pressed on them. They spend money for that which is not bread. But all these metaphors put together do not tell all the vanity, disappointments, and final failure and ruin of such a life. That last glimpse given in the text of the sorrowful sleeper stretched by the black ashes, with darkness round and hopeless heaviness within, points to an issue too awful to be dwelt on by a preacher, and too awful not to be gravely considered by each of us for himself.

III. The light from God.

What would the dead fire and the ring of ashes on the sand matter when morning dawned? Jesus is our Sun. He rises, and the spectres of the night melt into thin air, and 'joy cometh in the morning.' He floods our ignorance with knowledge of the Father whose name

He declares, with knowledge of ourselves, of the world, of our destiny and our duty, our hopes and our home. He takes away the sin of the world. He gives the oil of joy for mourning. For every human necessity He is enough. Follow Him and your life's pilgrimage shall not be a midnight one, but accomplished in sunshine. 'I am the light of the world; he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.'

THE AWAKENING OF ZION

‘Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old.’—[ISAIAH li. 9.](#)

‘Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion.’—[ISAIAH lii. 1.](#)

Both these verses are, I think, to be regarded as spoken by one voice, that of the Servant of the Lord. His majestic figure, wrapped in a light veil of obscurity, fills the eye in all these later prophecies of Isaiah. It is sometimes clothed with divine power, sometimes girded with the towel of human weakness, sometimes appearing like the collective Israel, sometimes plainly a single person.

We have no difficulty in solving the riddle of the prophecy by the light of history. Our faith knows One who unites these diverse characteristics, being God and man, being the Saviour of the body, which is part of Himself and instinct with His life. If we may suppose that He speaks in both verses of the text, then, in the one, as priest and intercessor, He lifts the prayers of earth to heaven in His own holy hands—and in the other, as messenger and Word of God, He brings the answer and command of heaven to earth on His own authoritative lips—thus setting forth the deep mystery of His person and double office as mediator between man and God. But even if we put aside that thought, the correspondence and relation of the two passages remain the same. In any case they are intentionally parallel in form and connected in substance. The latter is the answer to the former. The cry of Zion is responded to by the call of God. The awaking of the arm of the Lord is followed by the awaking of the Church. He puts on strength in clothing us with His might, which becomes ours.

The mere juxtaposition of these verses suggests the point of view from which I wish to treat them on this occasion. I hope that the thoughts to which they lead may help to further that quickened earnestness and expectancy of blessing, without which Christian work is a toil and a failure.

We have here a common principle underlying both the clauses of our text, to which I must first briefly ask attention, namely—

I. The occurrence in the Church’s history of successive periods of energy and of languor.

It is freely admitted that such alternation is not the highest ideal of growth, either in the individual or in the community. Our Lord’s own parables set forth a more excellent way—the way of uninterrupted increase, whereof the type is the springing corn, which puts forth ‘first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear,’ and passes through all the stages from the tender green spikelets that gleam over the fields in the spring-tide to the yellow abundance of autumn, in one unbroken season of genial months. So would our growth be best, healthiest, happiest. So *might* our growth be, if the mysterious life in the seed met no checks. But, as a matter of fact, the Church has not thus grown. Rather at the best, its emblem is to be looked for, not in corn, but in the forest tree—the very rings in whose trunk tell of recurring seasons when the sap has risen at the call of spring, and sunk again before the

frowns of winter. I have not to do now with the causes of this. These will fall to be considered presently. Nor am I saying that such a manner of growth is inevitable. I am only pointing out a fact, capable of easy verification and familiar to us all. Our years have had summer and winter. The evening and the morning have completed all the days since the first.

We all know it only too well. In our own hearts we have known such times, when some cold clinging mist wrapped us round and hid all the heaven of God's love and the starry lights of His truth; when the visible was the only real, and He seemed far away and shadowy; when there was neither confidence in our belief, nor heat in our love, nor enthusiasm in our service; when the shackles of conventionalism bound our souls, and the fetters of the frost imprisoned all their springs. And we have seen a like palsy smite whole regions and ages of the Church of God, so that even the sensation of impotence was dead like all the rest, and the very tradition of spiritual power had faded away. I need not point to the signal historical examples of such times in the past. Remember England a hundred years ago—but what need to travel so far? May I venture to draw my example from nearer home, and ask, have we not been living in such an epoch? I beseech you, think whether the power which the Gospel preached by us wields on ourselves, on our churches, on the world, is what Christ meant it and fitted to exercise. Why, if we hold our own in respect to the material growth of our population, it is as much as we do. Where is the joyful buoyancy and expansive power with which the Gospel burst into the world? It looks like some stream that leaps from the hills, and at first hurries from cliff to cliff full of light and music, but flows slower and more sluggish as it advances, and at last almost stagnates in its flat marshes. Here we are with all our machinery, our culture, money, organisations—and the net result of it all at the year's end is but a poor handful of ears. 'Ye sow much and bring home little.' Well may we take up the wail of the old Psalm, 'We see not our signs. There is no more any prophet; neither is there any among us that knoweth how long—arise, O Lord, plead Thine own cause.'

If, then, there are such recurring seasons of languor, they must either go on deepening till sleep becomes death, or they must be broken by a new outburst of vigorous life. It would be better if we did not need the latter. The uninterrupted growth would be best; but if that has not been attained, then the ending of winter by spring, and the suppling of the dry branches, and the resumption of the arrested growth, is the next best, and the only alternative to rotting away.

And it is by such times that the Kingdom of Christ always has grown. Its history has been one of successive impulses gradually exhausted, as by friction and gravity, and mercifully repeated just at the moment when it was ceasing to advance and had begun to slide backwards. And in such a manner of progress, the Church's history has been in full analogy with that of all other forms of human association and activity. It is not in religion alone that there are 'revivals,' to use the word of which some people have such a dread. You see analogous phenomena in the field of literature, arts, social and political life. In them all, there come

times of awakened interest in long-neglected principles. Truths which for many years had been left to burn unheeded, save by a faithful few watchers of the beacon, flame up all at once as the guiding pillars of a nation's march, and a whole people strike their tents and follow where they lead. A mysterious quickening thrills through society. A contagion of enthusiasm spreads like fire, fusing all hearts in one. The air is electric with change. Some great advance is secured at a stride; and before and after that supreme effort are years of comparative quiescence; those before being times of preparation, those after being times of fruition and exhaustion—but slow and languid compared with the joyous energy of that moment. One day may be as a thousand years in the history of a people, and a nation may be born in a day.

So also is the history of the Church. And thank God it is so, for if it had not been for the dawning of these times of refreshing, the steady operation of the Church's worldliness would have killed it long ago.

Surely, dear brethren, we ought to desire such a merciful interruption of the sad continuity of our languor and decay. The surest sign of its coming would be a widespread desire and expectation of its coming, joined with a penitent consciousness of our heavy and sinful slumber. For we believe in a God who never sends mouths but He sends meat to fill them, and in whose merciful providence every desire is a prophecy of its own fruition. This attitude of quickened anticipation, diffusing itself silently through many hearts, is like the light air that springs up before sunrise, or like the solemn hush that holds all nature listening before the voice of the Lord in the thunder.

And another sign of its approach is the extremity of the need. 'If winter come, can spring be far behind?' For He who is always with Zion strikes in with His help when the want is at its sorest. His 'right early' is often the latest moment before destruction. And though we are all apt to exaggerate the urgency of the hour and the severity of *our* conflict, it certainly does seem that, whether we regard the languor of the Church or the strength of our adversaries, succour delayed a little longer would be succour too late. 'The tumult of those that rise up against Thee increaseth continually. It is time for Thee to work.'

The juxtaposition of these passages suggests for us—

II. The twofold explanation of these variations.

That bold metaphor of God's sleeping and waking is often found in Scripture, and generally expresses the contrast between the long years of patient forbearance, during which evil things and evil men go on their rebellious road unchecked but by Love, and the dread moment when some throne of iniquity, some Babylon cemented by blood, is smitten to the dust. Such is the original application of the expression here. But the contrast may fairly be widened beyond that specific form of it, and taken to express any apparent variations in the forth-putting of His power. The prophet carefully avoids seeming to suggest that there are changes in God Himself. It is not He but His arm, that is to say. His active energy, that is

invoked to awake. The captive Church prays that the dormant might which could so easily shiver her prison-house would flame forth into action.

We may, then, see here implied the cause of these alternations, of which we have been speaking, on its divine side, and then, in the corresponding verse addressed to the Church, the cause on the human side.

As to the former, it is true that God's arm sometimes slumbers, and is not clothed with power. There are, as a fact, apparent variations in the energy with which He works in the Church and in the world. And they are real variations, not merely apparent. But we have to distinguish between the power, and what Paul calls 'the might of the power.' The one is final, constant, unchangeable. It does not necessarily follow that the other is. The rate of operation, so to speak, and the amount of energy actually brought into play may vary, though the force remains the same.

It is clear from experience that there are these variations; and the only question with which we are concerned is, are they mere arbitrary jets and spurts of a divine power, sometimes gushing out in full flood, sometimes trickling in painful drops, at the unknown will of the unseen hand which controls the flow? Is the 'law of the Spirit of life' at all revealed to us; or are the reasons occult, if there be any reasons at all other than a mere will that it shall be so? Surely, whilst we never can know all the depths of His counsels and all the solemn concourse of reasons which, to speak in man's language, determine the energy of His manifested power, He has left us in no doubt that this is the weightiest part of the law which it follows—the might with which God works on the world through His Church varies according to the Church's receptiveness and faithfulness.

Our second text tells us that if God's arm seems to slumber and really does so, it is because Zion sleeps. In itself that immortal energy knows no variableness. 'He fainteth not, neither is weary.' 'The Lord's arm is not shortened that He cannot save.' 'He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.' But He works through us; and we have the solemn and awful power of checking the might which would flow through us; of restraining and limiting the Holy One of Israel. It avails nothing that the ocean stretches shoreless to the horizon; a jar can hold only a jarful. The receiver's capacity determines the amount received, and the receiver's desire determines his capacity. The law has ever been, 'according to your faith be it unto you.' God gives as much as we will, as much as we can hold, as much as we use, and far more than we deserve. As long as we will bring our vessels the golden oil will flow, and after the last is filled, there yet remains more that we might have had, if we could have held it, and might have held if we would. 'Ye are not straitened in Me, ye are straitened in yourselves.'

So, dear brethren, if we have to lament times of torpor and small success, let us be honest with ourselves, and recognise that all the blame lies with us. If God's arm seems to slumber, it is because we are asleep. His power is invariable, and the Gospel which is com-

mitted to our trust has lost none of its ancient power, whatsoever men may say. If there be variations, they cannot be traced to the divine element in the Church, which in itself is constant, but altogether to the human, which shifts and fluctuates, as we only too sadly know. The light in the beacon-tower is steady, and the same; but the beam it throws across the waters sometimes fades to a speck, and sometimes flames out clear and far across the heaving waves, according to the position of the glasses and shades around it. The sun pours out heat as profusely and as long at midwinter as on midsummer-day, and all the difference between the frost and darkness and glowing brightness and flowering life, is simply owing to the earth's place in its orbit and the angle at which the unalterable rays fall upon it. The changes are in the terrestrial sphere; the heavenly is fixed for ever the same.

May I not venture to point an earnest and solemn appeal with these truths? Has there not been poured over us the spirit of slumber? Does it not seem as if an opium sky had been raining soporifics on our heads? We have had but little experience of the might of God amongst us of late years, and we need not wonder at it. There is no occasion to look far for the reason. We have only to regard the low ebb to which religious life has been reduced amongst us to have it all and more than all accounted for. I fully admit that there has been plenty of activity, perhaps more than the amount of real life warrants, not a little liberality, and many virtues. But how languid and torpid the true Christian life has been! how little enthusiasm! how little depth of communion with God! how little unworldly elevation of soul! how little glow of love! An improvement in social position and circumstances, a freer blending with the national life, a full share of civic and political honours, a higher culture in our pulpits, fine chapels, and applauding congregations—are but poor substitutes for what many of us have lost in racing after them. We have the departed prophets' mantle, the outward resemblance to the fathers who have gone, but their fiery zeal has passed to heaven with them; and softer, weaker men, we stand timidly on the river's brink, invoking the Lord God of Elijah, and too often the flood that obeyed them has no ear for our feebler voice.

I speak to many who are in some sort representatives of the churches throughout the land, and they can tell whether my words are on the whole true or overstrained. We who labour in our great cities, what say we? If one of the number may speak for the rest, we have to acknowledge that commercial prosperity and business cares, the eagerness after pleasure and the exigencies of political strife, diffused doubt and widespread artistic and literary culture, are eating the very life out of thousands in our churches, and lowering their fervour till, like molten iron cooling in the air, what was once all glowing with ruddy heat is crusted over with foul black scoriae ever encroaching on the tiny central warmth. You from rural churches, what say you? Have you not to speak of deepening torpor settling down on quiet corners, of the passing away of grey heads which leave no successors, of growing difficulties and lessened power to meet them, that make you sometimes all but despair?

I am not flinging indiscriminate censures. I know that there are lights as well as shades in the picture. I am not flinging censures at all. But I am giving voice to the confessions of many hearts, that our consciousness of our blame may be deepened, and we may hasten back to that dear Lord whom we have left to serve alone, as His first disciples left Him once to agonise alone under the gnarled olives in Gethsemane, while they lay sleeping in the moonlight. Listen to His gentle rebuke, full of pain and surprised love, 'What, could ye not watch with Me one hour?' Listen to His warning call, loving as the kiss with which a mother wakes her child, 'Arise, let us be going'—and let us shake the spirit of slumber from our limbs, and serve Him as those unsleeping spirits do, who rest not day nor night from vision and work and praise.

III. The beginning of all awaking is the Church's earnest cry to God.

It is with us as with infants, the first sign of whose awaking is a cry. The mother's quick ear hears it through all the household noises, and the poor little troubled life that woke to a scared consciousness of loneliness and darkness, is taken up into tender arms, and comforted and calmed. So, when we dimly perceive how torpid we have been, and start to find that we have lost our Father's hand, the first instinct of that waking, which must needs be partly painful, is to call to Him, whose ear hears our feeble cry amid the sound of praise like the voice of many waters, that billows round His throne, and whose folding arms keep us 'as one whom his mother comforteth.' The beginning of all true awaking must needs be prayer.

For every such stirring of quickened religious life must needs have in it bitter penitence and pain at the discovery flashed upon us of the wretched deadness of our past—and, as we gaze like some wakened sleepwalker into the abyss where another step might have smashed us to atoms, a shuddering terror seizes us that must cry, 'Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.' And every such stirring of quickened life will have in it, too, desire for more of His grace, and confidence in His sure bestowal of it, which cannot but breathe itself in prayer.

Nor is Zion's cry to God only the beginning and sign of all true awaking: it is also the condition and indispensable precursor of all perfecting of recovery from spiritual languor.

I have already pointed out the relation between the waking of God and the waking of His Church, from which that necessarily follows. God's power flows into our weakness in the measure and on condition of our desires. We are sometimes told that we err in praying for the outpouring of His Holy Spirit, because ever since Pentecost His Church has had the gift. The objection alleges an unquestioned fact, but the conclusion drawn from it rests on an altogether false conception of the manner of that abiding gift. The Spirit of God, and the power which comes from Him, are not given as a purse of money might be put into a man's hand once and for all, but they are given in a continuous impartation and communication and are received and retained moment by moment, according to the energy of our desires and the faithfulness of our use. As well might we say, Why should I ask for natural life, I

received it half a century ago? Yes, and at every moment of that half-century I have continued to live, not because of a past gift, but because at each moment God is breathing into my nostrils the breath of life. So is it with the life which comes from His Spirit. It is maintained by constant efflux from the fountain of Life, by constant impartation of His quickening breath. And as He must continually impart, so must we continually receive, else we perish. Therefore, brethren, the first step towards awaking, and the condition of all true revival in our own souls and in our churches, is this earnest cry, 'Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord.

Thank God for the outpouring of a long unwonted spirit of prayer in many places. It is like the melting of the snows in the high Alps, at once the sign of spring and the cause of filling the stony river beds with flashing waters, that bring verdure and growth wherever they come. The winter has been long and hard. We have all to confess that we have been restraining prayer before God. Our work has been done with but little sense of our need of His blessing, with but little ardour of desire for His power. We have prayed lazily, scarcely believing that answers would come; we have not watched for the reply, but have been like some heartless marksman who draws his bow and does not care to look whether his arrow strikes the target. These mechanical words, these conventional petitions, these syllables winged by no real desire, inspired by no faith, these expressions of devotion, far too wide for their real contents, which rattle in them like a dried kernel in a nut, are these prayers? Is there any wonder that they have been dispersed in empty air, and that we have been put to shame before our enemies? Brethren in the ministry, do we need to be surprised at our fruitless work, when we think of our prayerless studies and of our faithless prayers? Let *us* remember that solemn word, 'The pastors have become brutish, and have not sought the Lord, therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered.' And let us all, brethren, betake ourselves, with penitence and lowly consciousness of our sore need, to prayer, earnest and importunate, believing and persistent, like this heaven-piercing cry which captive Israel sent up from her weary bondage.

Look at the passionate earnestness of it—expressed in the short, sharp cry, thrice repeated, as from one in mortal need; and see to it that our drowsy prayers be like it. Look at the grand confidence with which it founds itself on the past, recounting the mighty deeds of ancient days, and looking back, not for despair but for joyful confidence, to the generations of old; and let our faint-hearted faith be quickened by the example, to expect great things of God. The age of miracles is not gone. The mightiest manifestations of God's power in the spread of the Gospel in the past remain as patterns for His future. We have not to look back as from low-lying plains to the blue peaks on the horizon, across which the Church's path once lay, and sigh over the changed conditions of the journey. The highest watermark that the river in flood has ever reached will be reached and overpassed again, though to-day the waters may seem to have hopelessly subsided. Greater triumphs and deliverances shall

crown the future than have signalled the past. Let our faithful prayer base itself on the prophecies of history and on the unchangeableness of God.

Think, brethren, of the prayers of Christ. Even He, whose spirit needed not to be purged from stains or calmed from excitement, who was ever in His Father's house whilst He was about His Father's business, blending in one, action and contemplation, had need to pray. The moments of His life thus marked are very significant. When He began His ministry, the close of the first day of toil and wonders saw Him, far from gratitude and from want, in a desert place in prayer. When He would send forth His apostles, that great step in advance, in which lay the germ of so much, was preceded by solitary prayer. When the fickle crowd desired to make Him the centre of political revolution, He passed from their hands and beat back that earliest attempt to secularise His work, by prayer. When the seventy brought the first tidings of mighty works done in His name, He showed us how to repel the dangers of success, in that He thanked the Lord of heaven and earth who had revealed these things to babes. When He stood by the grave of Lazarus, the voice that waked the dead was preceded by the voice of prayer, as it ever must be. When He had said all that He could say to His disciples, He crowned all with His wonderful prayer for Himself, for them, and for us all. When the horror of great darkness fell upon His soul, the growing agony is marked by His more fervent prayer, so wondrously compact of shrinking fear and filial submission. When the cross was hid in the darkness of eclipse, the only words from the gloom were words of prayer. When, Godlike, He dismissed His spirit, manlike He commended it to His Father, and sent the prayer from His dying lips before Him to herald His coming into the unseen world. One instance remains, even more to our present purpose than all these—'It came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon Him.' Mighty mystery! In Him, too, the Son's desire is connected with the Father's gift, and the unmeasured possession of the Spirit was an answer to *His* prayer.

Then, brethren, let us lift our voices and our hearts. That which ascends as prayer descends as blessing, like the vapour that is drawn up by the kiss of the sun to fall in freshening rain. 'Call upon Me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and hidden things which thou knowest not.'

IV. The answering call from God to Zion.

Our truest prayers are but the echo of God's promises. God's best answers are the echo of our prayers. As in two mirrors set opposite to each other, the same image is repeated over and over again, the reflection of a reflection, so here, within the prayer, gleams an earlier promise, within the answer is mirrored the prayer.

And in that reverberation, and giving back to us our petition transformed into a command, we are not to see a dismissal of it as if we had misapprehended our true want. It is not tantamount to, Do not ask me to put on my strength, but array yourselves in your own.

The very opposite interpretation is the true one. The prayer of Zion is heard and answered. God awakes, and clothes Himself with might. Then, as some warrior king, himself roused from sleep and girded with flashing steel, bids the clarion sound through the grey twilight to summon the prostrate ranks that lie round his tent, so the sign of God's awaking and the first act of His conquering might is this trumpet call—'The night is far spent, the day is at hand, let us put off the works of darkness,'—the night gear that was fit for slumber—'and put on the armour of light,' the mail of purity that gleams and glitters even in the dim dawn. God's awaking is our awaking. He puts on strength by making us strong; for His arm works through us, clothing itself, as it were, with our arm of flesh, and perfecting itself even in our weakness.

Nor is it to be forgotten that this, like all God's commands, carries in its heart a promise. That earliest word of God's is the type of all His latter behests: 'Let there be light,' and the mighty syllables were creative and self-fulfilling. So ever, with Him, to enjoin and to bestow are one and the same, and His command is His conveyance of power. He rouses us by His summons, He clothes us with power in the very act of bidding us put it on. So He answers the Church's cry by stimulating us to quickened zeal, and making us more conscious of, and confident in, the strength which, in answer to our cry, He pours into our limbs.

But the main point which I would insist on in what remains of this sermon, is the practical discipline which this divine summons requires from us.

And first, let us remember that the chief means of quickened life and strength is deepened communion with Christ.

As we have been saying, our strength is ours by continual derivation from Him. It has no independent existence, any more than a sunbeam could have, severed from the sun. It is ours only in the sense that it flows through us, as a river through the land which it enriches. It is His whilst it is ours, it is ours when we know it to be His. Then, clearly, the first thing to do must be to keep the channels free by which it flows into our souls, and to maintain the connection with the great Fountainhead unimpaired. Put a dam across the stream, and the effect will be like the drying up of Jordan before Israel: 'the waters that were above rose up upon an heap, and the waters that were beneath failed and were cut off,' and the foul oozy bed was disclosed to the light of day. It is only by constant contact with Christ that we have any strength to put on.

That communion with Him is no mere idle or passive attitude, but the active employment of our whole nature with His truth, and with Him whom the truth reveals. The understanding must be brought into contact with the principles of His word, the heart must touch and beat against His heart, the will meekly lay its hand in His, the conscience draw at once its anodyne and its stimulus from His sacrifice, the passions know His finger on the reins, and follow, led in the silken leash of love. Then, if I may so say, Elisha's miracle will be repeated in nobler form, and from Himself, the Life thus touching all our being, life will flow into our deadness.

‘He put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and he stretched himself upon the child, and the flesh of the child waxed warm.’ So, dear brethren, all our practical duty is summed up in that one word, the measure of our obedience to which is the measure of all our strength—‘Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.’

Again, this summons calls us to the faithful use of the power which, on condition of that communion, we have.

There is no doubt a temptation, in all times like the present, to look for some new and extraordinary forms of blessing, and to substitute such expectation for present work with our present strength. There is nothing new to look for. There is no need to wait for anything more than we possess. Remember the homely old proverb, ‘You never know what you can do till you try,’ and though we are conscious of much unfitness, and would sometimes gladly wait till our limbs are stronger, let us brace ourselves for the work, assured that in it strength will be given to us that equals our desire. There is a wonderful power in honest work to develop latent energies and reveal a man to himself. I suppose, in most cases, no one is half so much surprised at a great man’s greatest deeds as he is himself. They say that there is dormant electric energy enough in a few raindrops to make a thunderstorm, and there is dormant spiritual force enough in the weakest of us to flash into beneficent light, and peal notes of awaking into many a deaf ear. The effort to serve your Lord will reveal to you strength that you know not. And it will increase the strength which it brings into play, as the used muscles grow like whipcord, and the practised fingers become deft at their task, and every faculty employed is increased, and every gift wrapped in a napkin melts like ice folded in a cloth, according to that solemn law, ‘To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.’

Then be sure that to its last particle you are using the strength you have, ere you complain of not having enough for your tasks. Take heed of the vagrant expectations that wait for they know not what, and the apparent prayers that are really substitutes for possible service. ‘Why liest thou on thy face? Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward.’

The Church’s resources are sufficient for the Church’s work, if the resources are used. We are tempted to doubt it, by reason of our experience of failure and our consciousness of weakness. We are more than ever tempted to doubt it to-day, when so many wise men are telling us that our Christ is a phantom, our God a stream of tendency, our Gospel a decaying error, our hope for the world a dream, and our work in the world done. We stand before our Master with doubtful hearts, and, as we look along the ranks sitting there on the green grass, and then at the poor provisions which make all our store, we are sometimes tempted almost to think that He errs when He says with that strange calmness of His, ‘They need not depart, give ye them to eat.’ But go out among the crowds and give confidently

what you have, and you will find that you have enough and to spare. If ever our stores seem inadequate, it is because they are reckoned up by sense, which takes cognizance of the visible, instead of by faith which beholds the real. Certainly five loaves and two small fishes are not enough, but are not five loaves and two small fishes and a miracle-working hand behind them, enough? It is poor calculation that leaves out Christ from the estimate of our forces. The weakest man and Jesus to back him are more than all antagonism, more than sufficient for all duty. Be not seduced into doubt of your power, or of your success, by others' sneers, or by your own faint-heartedness. The confidence of ability is ability. 'Screw your courage to the sticking place,' and you will *not* fail—and see to it that you use the resources you have, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 'Put on *thy* strength, O Zion.'

So, dear brethren, to gather all up in a sentence, let us confidently look for times of blessing, penitently acknowledge that our own faithlessness has hindered the arm of the Lord, earnestly beseech Him to come in His rejoicing strength, and, drawing ever fresh power from constant communion with our dear Lord, use it to its last drop for Him. Then, like the mortal leader of Israel, as he pondered doubtfully with sunken eyes on the hard task before his untrained host, we shall look up and be aware of the presence of the sworded angel, the immortal Captain of the host of the Lord, standing ready to save, 'putting on righteousness as a breastplate, an helmet of salvation on His head, and clad with zeal as a cloak.' From His lips, which give what they command, comes the call, 'Take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.' Harkening to His voice, the city of the strong ones shall be made an heap before our wondering ranks, and the land shall lie open to our conquering march.

Wheresoever *we* lift up the cry, 'Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord,' there follows, swift as the thunderclap on the lightning flash, the rousing summons, 'Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem!' Wheresoever it is obeyed there will follow in due time the joyful chorus, as in this context, 'Sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem; the Lord hath made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.'

A PARADOX OF SELLING AND BUYING

‘Ye have sold yourselves for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money.’—[ISAIAH lii. 3.](#)

THE first reference of these words is of course to the Captivity. They come in the midst of a grand prophecy of freedom, all full of leaping gladness and buoyant hope. The Seer speaks to the captives; they had ‘sold themselves for nought.’ What had they gained by their departure from God?—bondage. What had they won in exchange for their freedom?—only the hard service of Babylon. As Deuteronomy puts it: ‘Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness. . . by reason of the abundance of all things, therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies. . . in want of all things.’ A wise exchange! a good market they had brought their goods to! In striking ironical parallel the prophet goes on to say that so should they be redeemed. They had got nothing by bondage, they should give nothing for liberty. This text has its highest application in regard to our captivity and our redemption.

I. The reality of the captivity.

The true idea of bondage is that of coercion of will and conscience, the dominance and tyranny of what has no right to rule. So men are really in bondage when they think themselves most free. The only real slavery is that in which we are tied and bound by our own passions and lusts. ‘He that committeth sin is the slave of sin.’ He thinks himself master of himself and his actions, and boasts that he has broken away from the restraints of obedience, but really he has only exchanged masters. What a Master to reject—and what a master to prefer!

II. The voluntariness of the captivity.

‘Ye have sold *yourselves*,’ and become authors of your own bondage. No sin is forced upon any man, and no one is to blame for it but himself. The many excuses which people make to themselves are hollow. Now-a-days we hear a great deal of heredity, how a man is what his ancestors have made him, and of organisation, how a man is what his body makes him, and of environment, how a man is what his surroundings make him. There is much truth in all that, and men’s guilt is much diminished by circumstances, training, and temperament. The amount of responsibility is not for us to settle, in regard to others, or even in regard to ourselves. But all that does not touch the fact that we ourselves have sold ourselves. No false brethren have sold us as they did Joseph.

The strong tendency of human nature is always to throw the blame on some one else; God or the devil, the flesh or the world, it does not matter which. But it remains true that every man sinning is ‘drawn away of *his own* lust and enticed.’

After all, conscience witnesses to the truth, and by that mysterious sense of guilt and gnawing of remorse which is quite different from the sense of mistake, tears to tatters the sophistries. Nothing is more truly my own than my sin.

III. The profitlessness of the captivity.

‘For nought’; that is a picturesque way of putting the truth that all sinful life fails to satisfy a man. The meaning of one of the Hebrew words for sin is ‘missing the mark.’ It is a blunder as well as a crime. It is trying to draw water from broken cisterns. It is ‘as when a hungry man dreameth and behold he eateth, but he awaketh and his soul is empty.’ Sin buys men with fairy money, which looks like gold, but in the morning is found to be but a handful of yellow and faded leaves. ‘Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?’ It cannot but be so, for only God can satisfy a man, and only in doing His will are we sure of sowing seed which will yield us bread enough and to spare, and nothing but bread. In all other harvests, tares mingle and they yield poisoned flour. We never get what we aim at when we do wrong, for what we aim at is not the mere physical or other satisfaction which the temptation offers us, but rest of soul—and that we do *not* get. And we are sure to get something that we did not aim at or look for—a wounded conscience, a worsened nature, often hurts to health or reputation, and other consequent ills, that were carefully kept out of sight, while we were being seduced by the siren voice. The old story of the traitress, who bargained to let the enemies into the city, if they would give her ‘what they wore on their left arms,’ meaning bracelets, and was crushed to death under their shields heaped on her, is repeated in the experience of every man who listens to the ‘juggling fiends, who keep the word of promise to the ear, but break it to the hope.’ The truth of this is attested by a cloud of witnesses. Conscience and experience answer the question, ‘What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed?’ Wasted lives answer; tyrannous evil habits answer; diseased bodies, blighted reputations, bitter memories answer.

IV. The unbought freedom.

‘Ye shall be redeemed without money.’ You gained nothing by your bondage; you need give nothing for your emancipation. The original reference is, of course, to the great act of divine power which set these literal captives free, not for price nor reward. As in the Exodus from Egypt, so in that from Babylon, no ransom was paid, but a nation of bondsmen was set at liberty without war or compensation. That was a strange thing in history. The paradox of buying back without buying is a symbol of the Christian redemption.

(1) A price has been paid.

‘Ye were redeemed not with corruptible things as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.’ The New Testament idea of redemption, no doubt, has its roots in the Old Testament provisions for the Goel or kinsman redeemer, who was to procure the freedom of a kinsman. But whatever figurative elements may enter into it, its core is the ethical truth that Christ’s death is the means by which the bonds of sin are broken. There is much in the many-sided applications and powers of that Death which we do not know, but this is clear, that by it the power of sin is destroyed and the guilt of sin taken away.

(2) That price has been paid for all.

We have therefore nothing to pay. A slave cannot redeem himself, for all that he has is his master's already. So, no efforts of ours can set ourselves free from the 'cords of our sins.' Men try to bring something of their own. 'I do my best and God will have mercy.' We will bring our own penitence, efforts, good works, or rely on Church ordinances, or anything rather than sue *in forma pauperis*. How hard it is to get men to see that 'It is finished,' and to come and rest only on the mere mercy of God.

How do we ally ourselves with that completed work? By simple faith, of which an essential is the recognition that we have nothing and can do nothing.

Suppose an Israelite in Babylon who did not choose to avail himself of the offered freedom; he must die in bondage. So must we if we refuse to have eternal life as the gift of God. The prophet's paradoxical invitation, 'He that hath no money, come ye, buy. . . without money,' is easily solved. The price is to give up ourselves and forsake all self-willed striving after self-purchased freedom which is but subtler bondage. 'If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.' If not, then are ye slaves indeed, having 'sold yourselves for nought,' and declined to be 'redeemed without money.'

CLEAN CARRIERS

‘Be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord.’—ISAIAH lii. 11.

The context points to a great deliverance. It is a good example of the prophetic habit of casting prophecies of the future into the mould of the past. The features of the Exodus are repeated, but some of them are set aside. This deliverance, whatever it be, is to be after the pattern of that old story, but with very significant differences. Then, the departing Israelites had spoiled the Egyptians and come out, laden with silver and gold which had been poured into their hands; now there is to be no bringing out of anything which was tainted with the foulness of the land of captivity. Then the priests had borne the sacred vessels for sacrifice, now they are to exercise the same holy function, and for its discharge purity is demanded. Then, they had gone out in haste; now, there is to be no precipitate flight, but calmly, as those who are guided by God for their leader, and shielded from all pursuit by God as their rearward, the men of this new Exodus are to take their march from the new Egypt.

No doubt the nearest fulfilment is to be found in the Return from Babylon, and the narrative in Ezra may be taken as a remarkable parallel to the prophecy here. But the restriction to Babylon must seem impossible to any reader who interprets aright the significance of the context, and observes that our text follows the grand words of verse 10, and precedes the Messianic prophecy of [verse 13](#) and of [ch. liii](#). To such a reader the principle will not be doubtful according to which Egypt and Babylon are transparencies through which mightier forms shine, and a more wonderful and world-wide making bare of the arm of the Lord is seen. Christ’s great redemption is the highest interpretation of these words; and the trumpet-call of our text is addressed to all who have become partakers of it.

So Paul quotes the text in [2 Cor. vi. 17](#), blending with it other words which are gathered from more than one passage of Scripture. We may then take the whole as giving the laws of the new Exodus, and also as shadowing certain great peculiarities connected with it, by which it surpasses all the former deliverances.

I. The Pilgrims of this new Exodus.

A true Christian is a pilgrim, not only because he, like all men, is passing through a life which is transient, but because he is consciously detached from the Visible and Present, as a consequence of his conscious attachment to the Unseen and Eternal. What is said in Hebrews of Abraham is true of all inheritors of his faith: ‘dwelling in tabernacles, for he looked for the city.’

II. The priests.

Priests and Levites bore the sacred vessels. All Christians are priests. The only true priesthood is Christ’s, ours is derived from Him. In that universal priesthood of believers are included the privileges and obligations of a. Access to God—Communion.

b. Offering spiritual sacrifices. Service and self-surrender.

c. Mediation with men.

Proclamation. Intercession. Thus follows d. Bearing the holy vessels. A sacred deposit is entrusted to them—the honour and name of God; the treasure of the Gospel.

III. The separation that becomes pilgrims.

‘Come out and be ye separate.’ The very meaning of our Christian profession is separation. There is ludicrous inconsistency in saying that we are Christians and not being pilgrims. Of course, the separation is not to be worked out by mere external asceticism or withdrawal from the world. That has been so thoroughly preached and practised of late years that we much need the other side to be put. There should be some plain difference between the life of Christians and that of men whose portion is in this life. They should differ in the aspect under which all outward things are regarded.

To a Christian they are to be means to an end, and ever to be felt to be evanescent. They should differ in the motive for action, which should, for a Christian, ever be the love of God. They should differ in that a Christian abstains from much which non-Christians feel free to do, and often has to say, ‘So did not I, because of the fear of the Lord.’ He who marches light marches quickly and marches far; to bring the treasures of Egypt along with us, is apt to retard our steps.

IV. The purity that becomes priests.

The Levites would cleanse themselves before taking up the holy vessels. And for us, clean hands and a pure heart are essential. There is no communion with God without these; a small speck of dust in the eye blinds us. There is no sacrificial service without them. No efficient work among men can be done without them. One main cause of the weakness of our Christian testimony is the imperfection of character in the witnesses, which is more powerful than all talk and often neutralises much effort. Keen eyes are watching us.

The consciousness of our own impurity should send us to Jesus, with the prayer and the confidence, ‘Cleanse me and I shall be clean.’ ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.’ ‘He hath loosed us from our sins and made us kings and priests to God.’

MARCHING ORDERS

‘Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord. 12. For ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight: for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your reward.’—[ISAIAH lii. 11, 12.](#)

These ringing notes are parts of a highly poetic picture of that great deliverance which inspired this prophet’s most exalted strains. It is described with constant allusion to the first Exodus, but also with significant differences. Now no doubt the actual historical return of the Jews from the Babylonish captivity is the object that fills the foreground of this vision, but it by no means exhausts its significance. The restriction of the prophecy to that more immediate fulfilment may well seem impossible when we note that my text follows the grand promise that ‘all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God,’ and immediately precedes the Messianic prophecy of the fifty-third chapter. Egypt was transparent, and through it shone Babylon; Babylon was transparent, and through it shone Christ’s redemption. That was the real and highest fulfilment of the prophet’s anticipations, and the trumpet-calls of my text are addressed to all who have a share in it. We have, then, here, under highly metaphorical forms, the grand ideal of the Christian life; and I desire to note briefly its various features.

I. First, then, we have it set forth as a march of warrior priests.

Note that phrase—‘Ye that bear the vessels of the Lord.’ The returning exiles as a whole are so addressed, but the significance of the expression, and the precise metaphor which it is meant to convey, may be questionable. The word rendered ‘vessel’ is a wide expression, meaning any kind of equipment, and in other places of the Old Testament the whole phrase rendered here, ‘ye that bear the vessels,’ is translated ‘armour-bearers.’ Such an image would be quite congruous with the context here, in which warlike figures abound. And if so, the picture would be that of an army on the march, each man carrying some of the weapons of the great Captain and Leader. But perhaps the other explanation is more likely, which regards ‘the vessels of the Lord’ as being an allusion to the sacrificial and other implements of worship, which, in the first Exodus, the Levites carried on the march. And if that be the meaning, as seems more congruous with the command of purity which is deduced from the function of bearing the vessels, then the figure here, of course, is that of a company of priests. I venture to throw the two ideas together, and to say that we may here find an ideal of the Christian community as being a great company of warrior-priests on the march, guarding a sacred deposit which has been committed to their charge.

Look, then, at that combination in the true Christian character of the two apparently opposite ideas of warrior and priest. It suggests that all the life is to be conflict, and that all the conflict is to be worship; that everywhere, in the thick of the fight, we may still bear the remembrance of the ‘secret place of the most High.’ It suggests, too, that the warfare is

worship, that the offices of the priest and of the warrior are one and the same thing, and both consist in their mediating between man and God, bringing God in His Gospel to men, and bringing men through their faith to God. The combination suggests, likewise, how, in the true Christian character, there ought ever to be blended, in strange harmony, the virtues of the soldier and the qualities of the priest; compassion for the ignorant and them that are out of the way, with courage; meekness with strength; a quiet, placable heart hating strife, joined to a spirit that cheerily fronts every danger and is eager for the conflict in which evil is the foe and God the helper. The old Crusaders went to battle with the Cross on their hearts, and on their shoulders, and on the hilts of their swords; and we, too, in all our warfare, have to remember that its weapons are not carnal but spiritual, and that only then do we fight as the Captain of our salvation fought, when our arms are meekness and pity, and our warfare is waged in gentleness and love.

Note, further, that in this phrase we have the old, old metaphor of life as a march, but so modified as to lose all its melancholy and weariness and to become an elevating hope. The idea which runs through all poetry, of life as a journey, suggests effort, monotonous change, a uniform law of variety and transiency, struggle and weariness, but the Christian thought of life, while preserving the idea of change, modifies it into the blessed thought of progress. Life, if it is as Christ meant it to be, is a journey in the sense that it is a continuous effort, not unsuccessful, toward a clearly discerned goal, our eternal home. The Christian march is a march from slavery to freedom, and from a foreign land to our native soil.

Again, this metaphor suggests that this company of marching priests have in charge a sacred deposit. Paul speaks of the 'glorious Gospel which was committed to my trust.' 'That good thing which was committed unto thee by the Holy Ghost, keep.' The history of the return from Babylon in the Book of Ezra presents a remarkable parallel to the language of my text, for there we are told how, in the preparation for the march, the leader entrusted the sacred vessels of the temple, which the liberality of the heathen king had returned to him, to a group of Levites and priests, weighing them at the beginning, and bidding them keep them safe until they were weighed again in the courts of the Lord's house in Jerusalem.

And, in like manner, to us Christians is given the charge of God's great weapons of warfare, with which He contends with the wickedness of the world—viz. that great message of salvation through, and in, the Cross of Jesus Christ. And there are committed to us, further, to guard sedulously, and to keep bright and untarnished and undiminished in weight and worth, the precious treasures of the Christian life of communion with Him. And we may give another application to the figure and think of the solemn trust which is put into our hands, in the gift of our own selves, which we ourselves can either waste, and stain, and lose, or can guard and polish into vessels 'meet for the Master's use.'

Gathering, then, these ideas together, we take this as the ideal of the Christian community—a company of priests on the march, with a sacred deposit committed to their trust.

If we reflected more on such a conception of the Christian life, we should more earnestly hearken to, and more sedulously discharge, the commands that are built thereon. To these commands I now turn.

II. Note the separation that befits the marching company.

‘Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing, go ye out of the midst of her.’ In the historical fulfilment of my text, separation from Babylon was the preliminary of the march. Our task is not so simple; our separation from Babylon must be the constant accompaniment of our march. And day by day it has to be repeated, if we would lift a foot in advance upon the road. There is still a Babylon. The order in the midst of which we live is not organised on the fundamental laws of Christ’s Kingdom. And wherever there are men who seek to order their lives as Christ would have them to be ordered, the first necessity for them is, ‘Come out from amongst them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord.’ There is no need in this day to warn Christian people against an exaggerated interpretation of these commandments. I almost wish there were more need. We have been told so often, in late years, of how Christian men ought to mingle with all the affairs of life, and count nothing that is human foreign to themselves, that it seems to me there is vast need for a little emphasis being put on the other side of the truth, and for separation being insisted upon. Wherever there is a real grasp of Jesus Christ for a man’s own personal Saviour, and a true submission to Him as the Pattern and Guide of life, a broad line of demarcation between that man and the irreligious life round him will draw itself. If the heart have its tendrils twined round the Cross, it will have detached them from the world around. Separation by reason of an entirely different conception of life, separation because the present does not look to you as it looks to the men who see only it, separation because you and they have not only a different ideal and theory of life, but are living from different motives and for different ends and by different powers, will be the inevitable result of any real union with Jesus Christ. If I am joined to Him I am separated from the world; and detachment from it is the simple and necessary result of any real attachment to Him. There will always be a gulf in feeling, in purpose, in view, and therefore there will often have to be separation outward things. ‘So did not I because of the fear of the Lord’ will have to be said over and over again by any real and honest follower of the Master.

This separation will not only be the result of union with Jesus Christ, but it is the condition of all progress in our union with Him. We must be unmoored before we can advance. Many a caravan has broken down in African exploration for no other reason than because it was too well provided with equipments, and so collapsed of its own weight. Therefore, our prophet in the context says, ‘Touch no unclean thing.’ *There* is one of the differences between the new Exodus and the old. When Israel came out of Egypt they spoiled the Egyptians, and came away laden with gold and jewels; but it is dangerous work bringing anything away from Babylon with us. Its treasure has to be left if we would march close be-

hind our Lord and Master. We must touch 'no unclean thing,' because our hands are to be filled with the 'vessels of the Lord.' I am preaching no impossible asceticism, no misanthropical withdrawal from the duties of life, and the obligations that we owe to society. God's world is a good one; man's world is a bad one. It is man's world that we have to leave, but the lofties, sanctity requires no abstention from anything that God has ordained.

Now, dear friends, I venture to think that this message is one that we all dreadfully need to-day. There are a great many Christians, so-called, in this generation, who seem to think that the main object they should have in view is to obliterate the distinction between themselves and the world of ungodly men, and in occupation and amusements to be as like people that have no religion as they possibly can manage. So they get credit for being 'liberal' Christians, and praise from quarters whose praise is censure, and whose approval ought to make a Christian man very uncomfortable. Better by far the narrowest Puritanism—I was going to say better by far monkish austerities—than a Christianity which knows no self-denial, which is perfectly at home in an irreligious atmosphere, and which resents the exhortation to separation, because it would fain keep the things that it is bidden to drop. God's reiteration of the text through Paul to the Church in luxurious, corrupt, wealthy Corinth is a gospel for this day for English Christians, 'Come out from among them, and I will receive you.'

III. Further, note the purity which becomes the bearers of the vessels of the Lord.

'Be ye clean.' The priest's hands must be pure, which figure, being translated, is that transparent purity of conduct and character is demanded from all Christian men who profess to bear God's sacred deposit. You cannot carry it unless your hands are clean, for all the gifts that God gives us glide from our grasp if our hands be stained. Monkish legends tell of sacred pictures and vessels which, when an impure touch was laid upon them, refused to be lifted from their place, and grew there, as rooted, in spite of all efforts to move them. Whoever seeks to hold the gifts of God in His Gospel in dirty hands will fail miserably in the attempt; and all the joy and peace of communion, the assurance of God's love, and the calm hope of immortal life will vanish as a soap bubble, grasped by a child, turns into a drop of foul water on its palm, if we try to hold them in foul hands. Be clean, or you cannot bear the vessels of the Lord.

And further, remember that no priestly service nor any successful warfare for Jesus Christ is possible, except on the same condition. One sin, as well as one sinner, destroys much good, and a little inconsistency on the part of us professing Christians neutralises all the efforts that we may ever try to put forth for Him. Logic requires that God's vessels should be carried with clean hands. God requires it, men require it, and have a right to require it. The mightiest witness for Him is the witness of a pure life, and if we go about the world professing to be His messengers, and carrying His epistle in our dirty fingers, the soiled thumb-mark upon it will prevent men from caring for the message; and the Word will be

despised because of the unworthiness of its bearers. 'Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord.'

IV. Lastly, notice the leisurely confidence which should mark the march that is guarded by God. 'Ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight, for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your reward.'

This is partly an analogy and partly a contrast with the story of the first Exodus. The unusual word translated 'with haste' is employed in the Pentateuch to describe the hurry and bustle, not altogether due to the urgency of the Egyptians, but partly also to the terror of Israel, with which that first flight was conducted. And, says my text, in this new coming out of bondage there shall be no need for tremor or perturbation, lending wings to any man's feet; but, with quiet deliberation, like that with which Peter was brought out of his dungeon, because God knew that He could bring him out safely, the new Exodus shall be carried on.

'He that believeth shall not make haste.' Why should he? There is no need for a Christian man ever to be flurried, or to lose his self-command, or ever to be in an undignified and unheroic hurry. His march should be unceasing, swift, but calm and equable, as the motions of the planets, unhasting and unresting.

There is a very good reason why we need not be in any haste due to alarm. For, as in the first Exodus, the guiding pillar led the march, and sometimes, when there were foes behind, as at the Red Sea, shifted its place to the rear, so 'the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rereward.' He besets us behind and before, going in front to be our Guide, and in the rear for our protection, gathering up the stragglers, so that there shall not be 'a hoof left behind,' and putting a wall of iron between us and the swarms of hovering enemies that hang on our march. Thus encircled by God, we shall be safe. Christ fulfils what the prophet pledged God to do; for He goes before us, the Pattern, the Captain of our salvation, the Forerunner, 'the Breaker is gone up before them'; and He comes behind us to guard us from evil; for He is 'the *Alpha* and *Omega*, the beginning and the ending, the Almighty.'

Dear brethren, life for us all must be a weary pilgrimage. We cannot alter that. It is the lot of every son of man. But we have the power of either making it a dreary, solitary tramp over an undefended desert, to end in the great darkness, or else of making it a march in which the twin sisters Joy and Peace shall lead us forth, and go out with us, and the other pair of angel-forms, 'Goodness and Mercy,' shall follow us all the days of our lives. We may make it a journey with Jesus for Guide and Companion, to Jesus as our Home. 'The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads.'

THE ARM OF THE LORD

‘To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?’—[ISAIAH liii 1](#).

In the second Isaiah there are numerous references to ‘the arm of the Lord.’ It is a natural symbol of the active energy of Jehovah, and is analogous to the other symbol of ‘the Face of Jehovah,’ which is also found in this book, in so far as it emphasises the notion of power in manifestation, though ‘the Face’ has a wider range and may be explained as equivalent to that part of the divine Nature which is turned to men. The latter symbol will then be substantially parallel with ‘the Name.’ But there are traces of a tendency to conceive of ‘the arm of the Lord’ as personified, for instance, where we read ([ch. lxiii. 12](#)) that Jehovah ‘caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses.’ Moses was not the true leader, but was himself led and sustained by the divine Power, dimly conceived as a person, ever by his side to sustain and direct. There seems to be a similar imperfect consciousness of personification in the words of the text, especially when taken in their close connection with the immediately following prophecy of the suffering servant. It would be doing violence to the gradual development of Revelation, like tearing asunder the just-opening petals of a rose, to read into this question of the sad prophet full-blown Christian truth, but it would be missing a clear anticipation of that truth to fail to recognise the forecasting of it that is here.

I. We have here a prophetic forecast that the arm of the Lord is a person.

The strict monotheism of the Old Testament does not preclude some very remarkable phenomena in its modes of conception and speech as to the divine Nature. We hear of the ‘angel of His face,’ and again of ‘the angel in whom is His Name.’ We hear of ‘the angel’ to whom divine worship is addressed and who speaks, as we may say, in a divine dialect and does divine acts. We meet, too, with the personification of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs, to which are ascribed characteristics and are attributed acts scarcely distinguishable from divine, and eminently associated in the creative work. Our text points in the same direction as these representations. They all tend in the direction of preparing for the full Christian truth of the personal ‘Power of God.’ What was shown by glimpses ‘at sundry times and in divers manners,’ with many gaps in the showing and much left all unshown, is perfectly revealed in the Son. The New Testament, by its teaching as to ‘the Eternal Word,’ endorses, clears, and expands all these earlier dimmer adumbrations. That Word is the agent of the divine energy, and the conception of power as being exercised by the Word is even loftier than that of it as put forth by ‘the arm,’ by as much as intelligent and intelligible utterance is more spiritual and higher than force of muscle. The apostolic designation of Jesus as ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’ blends the two ideas of these two symbols. The conception of Jesus Christ as the arm of the Lord, when united with that of the Eternal Word, points to a threefold sphere and manner of His operations, as the personal manifestation of the active power of God. In the beginning, the arm of the Lord stretched out the

heavens as a tent to dwell in, and without Him 'was not anything made that was made.' In His Incarnation, He carried into execution all God's purposes and fulfilled His whole will. From His throne He wields divine power, and rules the universe. 'The help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself,' and He works in the midst of humanity that redeeming work which none but He can effect.

II. We have here a prophetic paradox that the mightiest revelation of the arm of the Lord is in weakness.

The words of the text stand in closest connection with the great picture of the Suffering Servant which follows, and the pathetic figure portrayed there is the revealing of the arm of the Lord. The close bringing together of the ideas of majesty and power and of humiliation, suffering, and weakness, would be a paradox to the first hearers of the prophecy. Its solution lies in the historical manifestation of Jesus. Looking on Him, we see that the growing up of that root out of a dry ground was the revelation of the great power of God. In Jesus' lowly humanity God's power is made perfect in man's weakness, in another and not less true sense than that in which the apostle spoke. There we see divine power in its noblest form, in its grandest operation, in its widest sweep, in its loftiest purpose. That humble man, lowly and poor, despised and rejected in life, hanging faint and pallid on the Roman cross, and dying in the dark, seems a strange manifestation of the 'glory' of God, but the Cross is indeed His throne, and sublime as are the other forms in which Omnipotence clothes itself, this is, to human eyes and hearts, the highest of them all. In Jesus the arm of the Lord is revealed in its grandest operation. Creation and the continual sustaining of a universe are great, but redemption is greater. It is infinitely more to say, 'He giveth power to the faint,' than to say, 'For that He is strong in might, not one faileth,' and to principalities and powers in heavenly places who have gazed on the grand operations of divine power for ages, new lessons of what it can effect are taught by the redemption of sinful men. The divine power that is enshrined in Jesus' weakness is power in its widest sweep, for it is to every one that believeth, and in its loftiest purpose, for it is 'unto salvation.'

III. We have here a prophetic lament that the power revealed to all is unseen by many.

The text is a wail over darkened eyes, blind at noonday. The prophet's radiant anticipations of the Servant's exaltation, and of God's holy arm being made bare in the eyes of all nations, are clouded over by the thought of the incredulity of the multitude to 'our report.' Jehovah had indeed 'made bare His arm,' as a warrior throws back his loose robe, when he would strike. But what was the use of that, if dull eyes would not look? The 'report' had been loudly proclaimed, but what was the use of that, if ears were obstinately stopped? Alas, alas! nothing that God can do secures that men shall see what He shows, or listen to what He speaks. The mystery of mysteries is that men can, the tragedy of tragedies is that they will, make any possible revelation of none effect, so far as they are concerned.

The Arm is revealed, but only by those who have 'believed our report' does the prophet deem it to be actually beheld. Faith is the individual condition on which the perfected revelation becomes a revelation to me. The 'salvation of our God' is shown in splendour to 'all the ends of the earth,' but only they who exercise faith in Jesus, who is the power of God, will see that far-shining light. If we are not of those who 'believe the report,' we shall, notwithstanding that 'He hath made bare His holy arm,' be of those who grope at noonday as in the dark.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT—I

‘For He grew up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. 3. He was despised, and rejected of men, a Man of Sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.’—ISAIAH liii, 2, 3.

To hold fast the fulfilment of this prophecy of the Suffering Servant in Jesus it is not necessary to deny its reference to Israel. Just as offices, institutions, and persons in it were prophetic, and by their failures to realise to the full their own *role*, no less than by their partial presentation of it, pointed onwards to Him, in whom their idea would finally take form and substance, so this great picture of God’s Servant, which was but imperfectly reproduced even by the Israel within Israel, stood on the prophet’s page a fair though sad dream, with nothing corresponding to it in the region of reality and history, till He came and lived and suffered.

If we venture to make it the theme of a short series of sermons, our object is simply to endeavour to bring out clearly the features of the wonderful portrait. If they are fully apprehended, it seems to us that the question of who is the original of the picture answers itself. We must note that the whole is introduced by a ‘For,’ that is to say, that it is all explanatory of the unbelief and blindness to the revealed arm of the Lord, which the prophet has just been lamenting. This close connection with the preceding words accounts for the striking way in which the description of the person of the Servant is here blended with, or interrupted by, that of the manner in which he was treated.

I. The Servant’s lowly origin and growth.

‘He *grew*,’—not ‘*shall* grow.’ The whole is cast into the form of history, and to begin the description with a future tense is not only an error in grammar but gratuitously introduces an incongruity. The word rendered ‘tender plant’ means a sucker, and ‘root’ probably would more properly be taken as a shoot from a root, the tree having been felled, and nothing left but the stump. There is here, then, at the outset, an unmistakable reference to the prophecy in [ch. xi. 1](#), which is Messianic prophecy, and therefore there is a presumption that this too has a Messianic reference. In the original passage the stump or ‘stock’ is explained as being the humiliated house of David, and it is only following the indications supplied by the fact of the second Isaiah’s quotation of the first, if we take the implication in his words to be the same. Royal descent, but from a royal house fallen on evil days, is the plain meaning here.

And the eclipse of its glory is further brought out in that not only does the shoot spring from a tree, all whose leafy honours have long been lopped away, but which is ‘in a dry ground.’ Surely we do not force a profounder meaning than is legitimate into this feature of the picture when we think of the Carpenter’s Son ‘of the house and lineage of David,’ of the Son of God ‘who was found in fashion as a man,’ of Him who was born in a stable, and

grew up in a tiny village hidden away among the hills of Galilee, who, as it were, stole into the world 'not with observation,' and opened out, as He grew, the wondrous blossom of a perfect humanity such as had never before been evolved from any root, nor grown on the most sedulously cultured plant. Is this part of the prophet's ideal realised in any of the other suggested realisations of it?

But there is still another point in regard to the origin and growth of the lowly shoot from the felled stump—it is 'before Him.' Then the unnoticed growth is noticed by Jehovah, and, though cared for by no others, is cared for, tended, and guarded, by Him.

II. The Servant's unattractive form.

Naturally a shoot springing in a dry ground would show but little beauty of foliage or flower. It would be starved and colourless beside the gaudy growths in fertile, well-watered gardens. But that unattractiveness is not absolute or real; it is only 'that *we* should desire Him.' We are but poor judges of true 'form or comeliness,' and what is lustrous with perfect beauty in God's eyes may be, and generally is, plain and dowdy in men's. Our tastes are debased. Flaunting vulgarities and self-assertive ugliness captivate vulgar eyes, to which the serene beauties of mere goodness seem insipid. Cockatoos charm savages to whom the iridescent neck of a dove has no charms. Surely this part of the description fits Jesus as it does no other. The entire absence of outward show, or of all that pleases the spoiled tastes of sinful men, need not be dwelt on. No doubt the world has slowly come to recognise in Him the moral ideal, a perfect man, but He has been educating it for nineteen hundred years to get it up to that point, and the educational process is very far from complete. The real desire of most men is for something much more pungent and dashing than Jesus' meek wisdom and stainless purity, which breed in them ennui rather than longing. 'Not this man but Barabbas,' was the approximate realisation of the Jewish ideal then; not this man but—some type or other of a less oppressive perfection, and that calls for less effort to imitate it, is the world's real cry still. Pilate's scornfully wondering question: Art *Thou*—such a poor-looking creature—the King of the Jews? is very much of a piece with the world's question still: Art Thou the perfect instance of manhood? Art Thou the highest revelation of God?

III. The Servant's reception by men.

The two preceding characteristics naturally result in this third. For lowliness of condition and lack of qualities appealing to men's false ideals will certainly lead to being 'despised and rejected.' The latter expression is probably better taken, as in the margin of the Rev. Ver. as 'forsaken.' But whichever meaning is adopted, what an Iliad of woes is condensed into these two words! 'The spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes,' the loneliness of one who, in all the crowd descries none to trust—these are the wages that the world ever gives to its noblest, who live but to help it and be misunderstood by it, and as these are the wages of all who with self-devotion would serve God by serving the world for its good, they were paid in largest measure to '*the* Servant of the Lord.' His claims were ridiculed, His words of wisdom

thrown back on Himself; none were so poor but could afford to despise Him as lower than they, His love was repulsed, surely He drank the bitterest cup of contempt. All His life He walked in the solitude of uncomprehended aims, and at His hour of extremest need appealed in vain for a little solace of companionship, and was deserted by those whom He trusted most. His was a lifelong martyrdom inflicted by men. His was a lifelong solitude which was most utter at the last. And He brought it all on Himself because He *would* be God's Servant in being men's Saviour.

IV. The Servant's sorrow of heart.

The remarkable expression 'acquainted with grief' seems to carry an allusion to the previous clause, in which men are spoken of as despising and rejecting the Servant. They left Him alone, and His only companion was 'grief—a grim associate to walk at a man's side all his days! It is to be noted that the word rendered 'grief' is literally sickness. That description of mental or spiritual sorrows under the imagery of bodily sicknesses is intensified in the subsequent terrible picture of Him as one from whom men hide their faces with disgust at His hideous appearance, caused by disease. Possibly the meaning may rather be that He hides His face, as lepers had to do.

Now probably the 'sorrows' touched on at this point are to be distinguished from those which subsequently are spoken of in terms of such poignancy as laid on the Servant by God. Here the prophet is thinking rather of those which fell on Him by reason of men's rejection and desertion. We shall not rightly estimate the sorrowfulness of Christ's sorrows, unless we bring to our meditations on them the other thought of His joys. How great these were we can judge, when we remember that He told the disciples that by His joy remaining in them their joy would be full. As much joy then as human nature was capable of from perfect purity, filial obedience, trust, and unbroken communion with God, so much was Jesus' permanent experience. The golden cup of His pure nature was ever full to the brim with the richest wine of joy. And that constant experience of gladness in the Father and in Himself made more painful the sorrows which He encountered, like a biting wind shrieking round Him, whenever He passed out from fellowship with God in the stillness of His soul into the contemptuous and hostile world. His spirit carrying with it the still atmosphere of the Holy Place, would feel more keenly than any other would have done the jarring tumult of the crowds, and would know a sharper pain when met with greetings in which was no kindness. Jesus was sinless, His sympathy with all sorrow was thereby rendered abnormally keen, and He made others' griefs His own with an identification born of a sympathy which the most compassionate cannot attain. The greater the love, the greater the sorrow of the loving heart when its love is spurned. The intenser the yearning for companionship, the sharper the pang when it is repulsed. The more one longs to bless, the more one suffers when his blessings are flung off. Jesus was the most sensitive, the most sympathetic, the most loving soul that ever dwelt in flesh. He saw, as none other has ever seen, man's miseries. He experienced, as

none else has ever experienced, man's ingratitude, and, therefore, though God, even His God, 'anointed Him with the oil of gladness above His fellows,' He was 'a Man of Sorrows,' and grief was His companion during all His life's course.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT—II

‘Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 5. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. 6. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid (made to light) on Him the iniquity of us all.’—[ISAIAH liii. 4-6](#).

The note struck lightly in the close of the preceding paragraph becomes dominant here. One notes the accumulation of expressions for suffering, crowded into these verses—griefs, sorrows, wounded, bruised, smitten, chastisement, stripes. One notes that the cause of all this multiform infliction is given with like emphasis of reiteration—our griefs, our sorrows, and that these afflictions are invested with a still more tragic and mysterious aspect, by being traced to our transgressions, our iniquities. Finally, the deepest word of all is spoken when the whole mystery of the servant’s sufferings is referred to Jehovah’s making the universal iniquity to lie, like a crushing burden, on Him.

I. The Burdened Servant.

It is to be kept in view that the ‘griefs’ which the servant is here described as bearing are literally ‘sicknesses,’ and that, similarly, the ‘sorrows’ may be diseases. Matthew in his quotation of the verse ([viii. 17](#)) takes the words to refer to bodily ailments, and finds their ‘fulfilment’ in Christ’s miracles of healing. And that interpretation is part of the whole truth, for Hebrew thought drew no such sharp line of distinction between diseases of the body and those of the soul as we are accustomed to draw. All sickness was taken to be the consequence of sin, and the intimate connection between the two was, as it were, set forth for all forms of bodily disease by the elaborate treatment prescribed for leprosy, as pre-eminently fitted to stand as type of the whole. But the fulfilment through the miracles is but a parable of the deeper fulfilment in regard to the more virulent and deadly diseases of the soul. Sin is the sickness, as it is also the grief, which most afflicts humanity. Of the two words expressing the Servant’s taking their burden on His shoulders, the former implies not only the taking of it but the bearing of it away, and the latter emphasises the weight of the load.

Following Matthew’s lead, we may regard Christ’s miracles of healing as one form of His fulfilment of the prophecy, in which the principles that shape all the forms are at work, and which, therefore, may stand as a kind of pictorial illustration of the way in which He bears and bears away the heavier burden of sin. And one point which comes out clearly is that, in these acts of healing, He felt the weight of the affliction that He took away. Even in that region, the condition of ability to remove it, was identifying Himself with the sorrow. Did He not ‘sigh and look up’ in silent appeal to heaven before He could say, Ephphatha? Did He not groan in Himself before He sent the voice into the tomb which the dead heard? His miracles were not easy, though He had all power, for He felt all that the sufferers felt,

by the identifying power of the unparalleled sympathy of a pure nature. In that region His pain on account of the sufferers stood in vital relation with His power to end their sufferings. The load must gall His shoulders, ere He could bear it away from theirs.

But the same principles as apply to these deeds of mercy done on diseases apply to all His deeds of deliverance from sorrow and from sin. In Him is set forth in highest fashion the condition of all brotherly help and alleviation. Whoever would lighten a brother's load must stoop his own shoulders to carry it. And whilst there is an element in our Lord's sufferings, as the text passes on to say, which is not explained by the analogy with what is required from all human succourers and healers, the extent to which the lower experience of such corresponds with His unique work should always be made prominent in our devout meditations.

II. The Servant's sufferings in their reason, their intensity, and their issue.

The same measure that was meted out to Job by his so-called friends was measured to the servant, and at the Impulse of the same heartless doctrinal prepossession. He must have been had to suffer so much; that is the rough and ready verdict of the self-righteous. With crashing emphasis, that complacent explanation of the Servant's sufferings and their own prosperity is shivered to atoms, by the statement of the true reason for both the one and the other. You thought that He was afflicted because He was bad and you were spared because you were good—no, He was afflicted because *you* were bad, and you were spared because He was afflicted.

The reason for the Servant's sufferings was 'our transgressions.' More is suggested now than sympathetic identification with others' sorrows. This is an actual bearing of the consequences of sins which He had not committed, and that not merely as an innocent man may be overwhelmed by the flood of evil which has been let loose by others' sins to sweep over the earth. The blow that wounds Him is struck directly and solely at Him. He is not entangled in a widespread calamity, but is the only victim. It is pre-supposed that all transgression leads to wounds and bruises; but the transgressions are done by us, and the wounds and bruises fall on Him. Can the idea of vicarious suffering be more plainly set forth?

The intensity of the Servant's sufferings is brought home to our hearts by the accumulation of epithets, to which reference has already been made. He was 'wounded' as one who is pierced by a sharp sword; 'bruised' as one who is stoned to death; beaten and with livid weales on His flesh. A background of unnamed persecutors is dimly seen. The description moves altogether in the region of physical violence, and that violence is more than symbol.

It is no mere coincidence that the story of the Passion reproduces so many of the details of the prophecy, for, although the fulfilment of the latter does not depend on such coincidences, they are not to be passed by as of no importance. Former generations made too much of the physical sufferings of Jesus; is not this generation in danger of making too little of them?

The issue of the Servant's sufferings is presented in a startling paradox. His bruises and weales are the causes of our being healed. His chastisement brings our peace. Surely it is very hard work, and needs much forcing of words and much determination not to see what is set forth in as plain light as can be conceived, to strike the idea of atonement out of this prophecy. It says as emphatically as words can say, that we have by our sins deserved stripes, that the Servant bears the stripes which we have deserved, and that therefore we do not bear them.

III. The deepest ground of the Servant's sufferings.

The sad picture of humanity painted in that simile of a scattered flock lays stress on the universality of transgression, on its divisive effect, on the solitude of sin, and on its essential characteristic as being self-willed rejection of control. But the isolation caused by transgression is blessedly counteracted by the concentration of the sin of all on the Servant. Men fighting for their own hand, and living at their own pleasure, are working to the disruption of all sweet bonds of fellowship. But God, in knitting together all the black burdens into one, and loading the Servant with that tremendous weight, is preparing for the establishment of a more blessed unity, in experience of the healing brought about by His sufferings.

Can one man's 'iniquity,' as distinguished from the consequences of iniquity, be made to press upon any other? It is a familiar and not very profound objection to the Christian Atonement that guilt cannot be transferred. True, but in the first place, Christ's nature stands in vital relations to every man, of such intimacy that what is impossible between two of us is not impossible between Christ and any one of us; and, secondly, much in His life, and still more in His passion, is unintelligible unless the black mass of the world's sin was heaped upon Him, to His own consciousness. In that dread cry, wrung from Him as He hung there in the dark, the consciousnesses of possessing God and of having lost Him are blended inextricably and inexplicably. The only approach to an explanation of it is that then the world's sin was felt by Him, in all its terrible mass and blackness, coming between Him and God, even as our own sins come, separating us from God. That grim burden not only came on Him, but was *laid* on Him by God. The same idea is expressed by the prophet in that awful representation and by Jesus in that as awful cry, 'Why hast Thou *forsaken* Me?'

The prophet constructs no theory of Atonement. But no language could be chosen that would more plainly set forth the fact of Atonement. And it is to be observed that, so far as this prophecy is concerned, the Servant's sole form of service is to suffer. He is not a teacher, an example, or a benefactor, in any of the other ways in which men need help. His work is to bear our griefs and be bruised for our healing.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT—III.

‘He was oppressed, yet He humbled Himself and opened not His mouth; as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before her shearers is dumb; yea, He opened not His mouth. 8. By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who among them considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living? for the transgression of my people was He stricken. 9. And they made His grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death; although He had done no violence, neither was any deceit in His mouth’—[ISAIAH liii, 7-9. R. V.](#)

In this section of the prophecy we pass from contemplating the sufferings inflicted on the Servant to the attitude of Himself and of His contemporaries towards these, His patience and their blindness. To these is added a remarkable reference to His burial, which strikes one at first sight as interrupting the continuity of the prophecy, but on fuller consideration assumes great significance.

I. The unresisting endurance of the Servant.

The Revised Version’s rendering of the first clause is preferable to that of the Authorised Version. ‘Afflicted’ would be little better than tautology, but ‘humbled Himself’ strikes the keynote of the verse, which dwells not on the Servant’s afflictions, but on His bearing under them. Similarly, the pathetic imagery of the lamb led and the sheep dumb gives the same double representation, first of the indignities, and next of His demeanour in enduring them, as is conveyed in ‘He was oppressed, yet He humbled Himself.’ Unremonstrating, unresisting endurance, then, is the point emphasised in the lovely metaphor.

We recall the fact that this emphatically reduplicated phrase ‘opened not His mouth’ was verbally fulfilled in our Lord’s silence before each of the three authorities to whom He was presented, before the Jewish rulers, before Pilate, and before Herod. Only when adjured by the living God and when silence would have been tantamount to withdrawal of His claims, did He speak before the Sanhedrin. Only when silence would have been taken as disowning His Kingship, did He speak before Pilate. And Herod, who had no right to question Him, received no answer at all. Jesus’ lips were opened in witness but never in complaint or remonstrance. No doubt, the prophecy would have been as really fulfilled though there had been no such majestic silences, for its substance is patient endurance, not mere abstinence from speech. Still, as with other events in His life, the verbal correspondence with prophetic details may help, and be meant to help, to bring out more clearly, for purblind eyes, the true fulfilment. So we may meditate on the wonder and the beauty of that picture which the evangelists draw, and which the world has recognised, with whatever differences as to its interpretation, as the most perfect, pathetic, and majestic picture of meek endurance that has ever been painted.

But we gather only the most superficial of its lessons, if that is all that we find to say about it. For the main point for us to lay to heart is not merely the fact of that silent submis-

sion, but the motive which led to it. He opened not His mouth, because He willingly embraced the Cross, and He willingly embraced the Cross because He loved the Father and would do His will, because He loved the world and would be its Saviour,

That touching imagery of the dumb lamb has manifold felicities and significances beyond serving to figure meekness. And we are not forcing unintended meanings into a mere piece of poetic imagination when we note how remarkably the metaphor links on to that of strayed sheep in the preceding verse, or when we venture to recall John Baptist's first proclamation of the Lamb of God, and Peter's quotation of this very prophecy, and the continual recurrence in the Apocalypse of the name of The Lamb as *the* title of honour of 'Him who sitteth on the throne.' A kind of nimbus or aureole shines round the humble figure as drawn by the prophet.

II. The misunderstood end of the Servant's life.

The difficult expressions of [verse 8](#) are rendered in the Revised Version with clearness and so as to yield a profound meaning. We may note that here, for the first time, is spoken out that end to which all the preceding description of sufferings has been leading up, and yet it is spoken with a kind of solemn reticence, very impressive. The Servant is 'taken away,' 'cut off,' 'stricken.' Not yet is the grim word 'death' plainly uttered; that comes in the next verse, only after the Servant's death is supposed to be past. The three words suggest, at all events, though in half-veiled language, violence and suddenness in the Servant's fate. Who were the agents who took Him, cut Him off and struck Him, is left in impressive obscurity. But the fact that His death was a judicial murder is set in clear light. Whether we read 'By' or 'From—oppression and judgment He was taken away,' the forms of law are represented as wrested to bring about flagrant injustice. And, if it were my object now to defend the Messianic interpretation, one might ask where any facts corresponding to this element in the picture are to be found in regard to either the national Israel, or the Israel within the nation.

That unjust death by illegal violence under the mask of law was, further, wholly misunderstood by 'His generation.' We need not do more than remark in a sentence how that feature corresponds with the facts in regard to Jesus, and ask whether it does so on any other theory of 'fulfilment.' Neither friends nor foes had even the faintest conception of what the death of Jesus was or was to effect. And it is worth while to dwell for a moment on this, because we are often told that there is no trace of the doctrine of an atoning sacrifice in the Gospels, and the inference is drawn that it was an afterthought of the apostles, and therefore to be set aside as an excrescence on Christianity according to Christ. The silence of Jesus on that subject is exaggerated; but certainly no thought of His being the Sacrifice for the sins of the world was in the minds of the sad watchers by the Cross, nor for many a day thereafter. Is it not worth noting that precisely such a blindness to the meaning of His death had been prophesied eight hundred years before?

But the reason why this feature is introduced seems mainly to be to underscore the lesson, that those who exercised the violence which hurried the Servant from the land of the living were blind instruments of a higher power. And may we not also see in it a suggestion of the great solitude of sorrow in which the Servant was to die, even as He had lived in it? Misapprehended and despised He lived, misapprehended He died. Jesus was the loneliest man that ever breathed human breath. He gave up His breath in a more awful solitude than ever isolated any other dying man. Utterly solitary, He died that none of us need ever face death alone.

III. The Servant's Grave.

Following on the mystery of the uncomprehended death comes the enigma of the burial. The words are an enigma, but they seem meaningless on any hypothesis but the Messianic one. As they stand, they assert that unnamed persons gave Him a grave with the wicked, as they would do by putting Him to death under strained forms of law, and that then, somehow, the criminal destined to be buried with other criminals in a dishonoured grave was laid in a tomb with the rich. It seems a singularly minute trait to find place in such a prophecy. The remarks already made as to similar minute correspondences in details of the prophecy with purely external facts in Christ's life need not be repeated now. One does not see that it is a self-evident axiom needing only to be enunciated in order to be accepted, that such minute prophecies are beneath the dignity of revelation. It might rather seem that, as one element in prophecy, they are eminently valuable. The smaller the detail, the more remarkable the prevision and the more striking the fulfilment. For a keen-sighted man may forecast tendencies and go far to anticipate events on the large scale, but only God can foresee trifles. The difficulty in which this prediction of the Servant's grave being 'with the rich' places those who reject the Messianic reference of the prophecy to our Lord may be measured by the desperate attempts to evade it by suggesting other readings, or by making 'rich' to be synonymous with 'wicked.' The words as they stand have a clear and worthy meaning on one interpretation, and we even venture to say, on one interpretation only, namely, that they refer to the reverent laying of the body of the Lord in the new tomb belonging to 'a certain rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph.'

If in the latter clause of [verse 9](#) we render 'Because' rather than 'Although,' we get the thought that the burial was a sign that the Servant, slain as a criminal, yet was not a criminal. The criminals were either left unburied or disgraced by promiscuous interment in an unclean place. But that body reverently bedewed with tears, wrapped in fine linen clean and white, softly laid down by loving hands, watched by love stronger than death, lay in fitting repose as the corpse of a King till He came forth as a Conqueror. So once more the dominant note is struck, and this part of the prophecy closes with the emphatic repetition of the sinlessness of the Suffering Servant, which makes His sufferings a deep and bewildering mystery, unless they were endured because of 'our transgressions.'

THE SUFFERING SERVANT—IV

‘It pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief: when Thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.’—[ISAIAH liii. 10](#).

We have seen a distinct progress of thought in the preceding verses. There was first the outline of the sorrows and rejection of the Servant; second, the profound explanation of these as being for us; third, the sufferings, death and burial of the Servant.

We have followed Him to the grave. What more can there be to be said? Whether the Servant of the Lord be an individual or a collective or an ideal, surely all fitness of metaphor, all reality of fact would require that His work should be represented as ending with His life, and that what might follow His burial should be the influence of His memory, the continued operation of the principles He had set agoing and so on, but nothing more.

Now observe that, however we may explain the fact, this is the fact to be explained, that there is a whole section, this closing one, devoted to the celebration of His work after His death and burial, and, still more remarkable, that the prophecy says nothing about His activity on the world till *after* death. In all the former portion there is not a syllable about His doing anything, only about His suffering; and then when He is dead He begins to work. That is the subject of these last three verses, and it would be proper to take them all for our consideration now, but for two reasons, one, because of their great fulness and importance, and one because, as you will observe, the two latter verses are a direct address of God’s concerning the Servant. The prophetic words, spoken as in his own person, end with [verse 10](#), and, catching up their representations, expanding, defining, glorifying them, comes the solemn thunder of the voice of God. I now deal only with the prophet’s vision of the work of the Servant of the Lord.

One other preliminary remark is that the work of the Servant after death is described in these verses with constant and very emphatic reference to His previous sufferings. The closeness of connection between these two is thus thrown into great prominence.

I. The mystery of God’s treatment of the sinless Servant.

The first clause is to be read in immediate connection with the preceding verse. The Servant was of absolute sinlessness, and yet the Divine Hand crushed and bruised Him. Certainly, if we think of the vehemence of prophetic rebukes, and of the standing doctrine of the Old Testament that Israel was punished for its sin, we shall be slow to believe that this picture of the Sinless One, smitten for the sins of others, can have reference to the nation in any of its parts, or to any one man. However other poetry may lament over innocent sufferers, the Old Testament always takes the ground: ‘Our iniquities, like the wind, have carried us away.’ But mark that here, however understood, the prophet paints a figure so sinless that God’s bruising Him is an outstanding wonder and riddle, only to be solved by regarding these bruises as the stripes by which our sins were healed, and by noting that ‘the

pleasure of the Lord' is carried on through Him, after and through His death. What conceivable application have such representations except to Jesus? We note, then, here:—

1. The solemn truth that His sufferings were divinely inflicted. That is a truth complementary to the other views in the prophecy, according to which these sufferings are variously regarded as either inflicted by men ('By oppression and judgment He was taken away') or drawn on Him by His own sacrificial act ('His soul shall make an offering for sin'). It was the divine counsel that used men as its instruments, though they were none the less guilty. The hands that 'crucified and slew' were no less 'the hands of lawless men,' because it was 'the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God' that 'delivered Him up.'

But a still deeper thought is in these words. For we can scarcely avoid seeing in them a glimpse into that dim region of eclipse and agony of soul from which, as from a cave of darkness, issued that last cry: 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani?' The bruises inflicted by the God, who made to meet on Him the iniquities of us all, were infinitely more severe than the weales of the soldiers' rods, or the wounds of the nails that pierced His hands and feet.

2. The staggering mystery of His sinlessness and sufferings.

The world has been full from of old of stories of goodness tortured and evil exalted, which have drawn tears and softened hearts, but which have also bewildered men who would fain believe in a righteous Governor and loving Father. But none of these have cast so black a shadow of suspicion on the government of the world by a good God as does the fate of Jesus, unless it is read in the light of this prophecy. Standing at the cross, faith in God's goodness and providence can scarcely survive, unless it rises to be faith in the atoning sacrifice of Him who was wounded there for our transgressions.

II. The Servant's work in His sufferings.

The margin of the Revised Version gives the best rendering—'His soul shall make an offering for sin.' The word employed for 'offering' means a trespass offering, and carries us at once back to the sacrificial system. The trespass offering was distinguished from other offerings. The central idea of it seems to have been to represent sin or guilt as *debt*, and the sacrifice as making compensation. We must keep in view the variety of ideas embodied in His sacrifice, and how all correspond to realities in our wants and spiritual experience.

Now there are three points here:—

a. The representation that Christ's death is a sacrifice. Clearly connecting with whole Mosaic system—and that in the sense of a trespass offering. Christ seems to quote this verse in [John x. 15](#), when He speaks of laying down His life, and when He declares that He came to 'give His life a *ransom* for many.' At any rate here is the great word, sacrifice, proclaimed for the first time in connection with Messiah. Here the prophet interprets the meaning of all the types and shadows of the law.

That sacrificial system bore witness to deep wants of men's souls, and prophesied of One in whom these were all met and satisfied.

b. His voluntary surrender.

He is sacrifice, but He is Priest also. His soul makes the offering, and His soul is the offering and offers itself in concurrence with the Divine Will. It is difficult and necessary to keep that double aspect in view, and never to think of Jesus as an unwilling Victim, nor of God as angry and needing to be appeased by blood.

c. The thought that the true meaning of His sufferings is only reached when we contemplate the effects that have flowed from them. The pleasure of the Lord in bruising Him is a mystery until we see how pleasure of the Lord prospers in the hand of the Crucified.

III. The work of the Servant after death.

Surely this paradox, so baldly stated, is meant to be an enigma to startle and to rouse curiosity. This dead Servant is to see of the travail of His soul, and to prolong His days. All the interpretations of this chapter which refuse to see Jesus in it shiver on this rock. What a contrast there is between platitudes about the spirit of the nation rising transformed from its grave of captivity (which was only very partially the case), and the historical fulfilment in Jesus Christ! Here, at any rate, hundreds of years before His Resurrection, is a word that seems to point to such a fact, and to me it appears that all fair interpretation is on the side of the Messianic reference.

Note the singularity of special points.

a. Having died, the Servant sees His offspring.

The sacrifice of Christ is the great power which draws men to Him, and moves to repentance, faith, love. His death was the communication of life. Nowhere else in the world's history is the teacher's death the beginning of His gathering of pupils, and not only has the dead Servant children, but He *sees* them. That representation is expressive of the mutual intercourse, strange and deep, whereby we feel that He is truly with us, 'Jesus Christ, whom having not seen we love.'

b. Having died, the Servant prolongs His days.

He lives a continuous life, without an end, for ever. The best commentary is the word which John heard, as he felt the hand of the Christ laid on his prostrate form: 'I became dead, and lo, I am alive for evermore.'

c. Having died, the Servant carries into effect the divine purposes.

'Prosper' implies progressive advancement. Christ's Sacrifice carried out the divine pleasure, and by His Sacrifice the divine pleasure is further carried out.

If Christ is the means of carrying out the divine purpose, consider what this implies of divinity in His nature, of correspondence between His will and the divine.

But Jesus not only carries into effect the divine purpose as a consequence of a past act, but by His present energy this dead man is a living power in the world today. Is He not?

The sole explanation of the vitality of Christianity, and the sole reason which makes its message a gospel to any soul, is Christ's death for the world and present life in the world.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT—V

‘He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied: by His knowledge shall My righteous servant justify many; and He shall bear their iniquities’—ISAIAH liii. 11.

These are all but the closing words of this great prophecy, and are the fitting crown of all that has gone before. We have been listening to the voice of a member of the race to whom the Servant of the Lord belonged, whether we limit that to the Jewish people or include in it all humanity. That voice has been confessing for the speaker and his brethren their common misapprehensions of the Servant, their blindness to the meaning of His sufferings and the mystery of His death. It has been proclaiming the true significance of these as now he had learned them, and has in [verse 10](#) touched the mystery of the reward and triumph of the Servant.

That note of His glory and coronation is caught up in the two closing verses, which, in substance, are the continuation of the idea of [verse 10](#). But this identity of substance makes the variety of form the more emphatic. Observe the ‘My Servant’ of [verse 11](#), and the ‘I will divide’ of [verse 12](#). These oblige us to take this as the voice of God. The confession and belief of earth is hushed, that the recognition and the reward of the Servant may be declared from heaven. An added solemnity is thus given to the words, and the prophecy comes round again to the keynote on which it started in [chapter lii, 13](#), ‘My Servant.’ Notice, too, how the same characteristic is here as in [verse 10](#)—that the recapitulation of the sufferings is almost equally prominent with the description of the reward. The two are so woven together that no power can part them. We may take these two verses as setting forth mainly two things—the divine promise that the Servant shall give righteousness to many, and the divine promise that the Servant shall conquer many for Himself.

As to the exposition, ‘of here is probably casual, not partitive, as the Authorised Version has it; ‘travail’ is not to be understood in the sense of childbirth, but of toil and suffering; ‘soul’ is equivalent to *life*. This fruit of His soul’s travail is further defined in the words which follow. The great result which will be beheld by Him and will fill and content His heart is that ‘by His knowledge He shall justify many.’ ‘By His knowledge’ certainly means, by the knowledge of Him on the part of others. The phrase might be taken either objectively or subjectively, but it seems to me that only the former yields an adequate sense. ‘My righteous servant’ is scarcely emphatic enough. The words in the original stand in an unusual order, which might be represented by ‘the righteous one, My servant,’ and is intended to put emphasis on the Servant’s righteousness, as well as to suggest the connection between His righteousness and His ‘justifying,’ in virtue of His being righteous. ‘Justify’ is an unusual form, and means to procure for, or impart righteousness to. ‘The many’ has stress on the article, and is the antithesis not to *all*, but to *few*. We might render it ‘the masses,’ an indefinite expression, which if not declaring universality, approaches very near to it, as in [Romans v. 19](#) and [Matthew xxvi. 28](#). ‘He shall bear,’ a future referring to the Servant in a state of ex-

altation, and pointing to His continuous work after death. This bearing is the root of our righteousness.

We may put the thoughts here in a definite order.

I. The great work which the Servant carries on.

It consists in giving or imparting righteousness. It seems to me that it is out of place to be too narrow here in interpreting so as to draw distinctions between righteousness imparted and righteousness bestowed. We should rather take the general idea of *making righteous*, making, in fact, like Himself. Note that this is the work which is Christ's characteristic one. All thoughts of His blessings to the world which omit that are imperfect.

II. The preparation for that making of us righteous.

The roots of our being made righteous by the righteous Servant are found in His bearing our sins. His sin-bearing work is basis of our righteousness. Christ justifies men by giving to them His own righteousness, and taking in turn their sins on Himself that He may expiate them.

Not only 'did He bear our sins in His own body on the tree,' but He *will* bear them in His exaltation to the Throne, and only because He continuously and eternally does so are we justified on earth and shall we be sanctified in heaven.

III. The condition on which He imparts righteousness.

'His knowledge,' which is to be taken in the profound Biblical sense as including not only understanding but experience also.

Parallels are found in 'This is life eternal to know Thee' ([John xvii. 3](#)), and in 'That I may know Him' ([Phil. iii. 10](#)). So this prophecy comes very near to the New Testament proclamation of righteousness by faith.

IV. The grand sweep of the Servant's work.

'The many' is indefinite, and its very indefiniteness approximates it to universality. A shadowy vision of a great multitude that no man can number stretches out, as to the horizon, before the prophet. How many they are he knows not. He knows that they are numerous enough to 'satisfy' the Servant for all His sufferings. He knows, too, that there is no limit to the happy crowd except that which is set by the necessary condition of joining the bands of 'the justified'—namely, 'the knowledge of Him.' They who receive the benefits which the Servant has died and will live to bring cannot be few; they may be all. If any are shut out, they are self-excluded.

V. The Servant's satisfaction.

It may be that the word employed means 'full,' rather than 'content,' but the latter idea can scarcely be altogether absent from it. We have, then, the great hope that the Servant, gazing on the results of His sufferings, will be content, content to have borne them, content with what they have effected.

'The glory dies not and the grief is past.'

And the 'grief has had for fruit not only 'glory' gathering round the thorn-pierced head, but reflected glory shining on the brows of 'the many,' whom He has justified and sanctified by their experience of Him and His power. The creative week ended with the 'rest' of the Creator, not because His energy was tired and needed repose, but because He had fully carried out His purpose, and saw the perfected idea embodied in a creation that was 'very good.' The redemptive work ends with the Servant's satisfied contemplation of the many whom He has made like Himself, His better creation.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT—VI

‘Therefore will I divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong; because He hath poured out His soul unto death: and was numbered with the transgressors; and He bare the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.’—[ISAIAH liii. 12](#).

The first clause of this verse is somewhat difficult. There are two ways of understanding it. One is that adopted in A. V., according to which the suffering Servant is represented as equal to the greatest conquerors. He is to be as gloriously successful in His victory as they have been in theirs. But there are two very strong objections to this rendering—first, that it takes ‘the many’ in the sense of *mighty*, thus obscuring the identity of the expression here and in the previous verse and in the end of this verse; and secondly, that it gives a very feeble and frigid ending to the prophecy. It does not seem a worthy close simply to say that the Servant is to be like a Cyrus or a Nebuchadnezzar in His conquests.

The other rendering, though there are some difficulties, is to be preferred. According to it ‘the many’ and ‘the strong’ are themselves the prey or spoil. The words might be read, ‘I will apportion to Him the many, and He shall apportion to Himself the strong ones.’

This retains the same meaning of ‘many’ for the same expression throughout the context, and is a worthy ending to the prophecy. The force of the clause is then to represent the suffering Servant as a conqueror, leading back from His conquests a long train of captives, a rich booty.

Notice some points about this closing metaphor.

Mark its singular contrast to the tone of the rest of the prophecy. Note the lowliness, the suffering, the minor key of it all, and then, all at once, the leap up to rapture and triumph. The special form of the metaphor strikes one as singular. Nothing in the preceding context even remotely suggests it. Even the previous clause about ‘making the many righteous’ does not do much to prepare the way for it. Whatever be our explanation of the words, it must be one that does full justice to this metaphor, and presents some conquering power or person, whose victories are brilliant and real enough to be worthy to stand at the close of such a prophecy. We must keep in mind, too, what has been remarked on the two previous verses, that this victorious campaign and growing conquest is achieved after the Servant is dead. That is a paradox. And note that the strength of language representing His activity can scarcely be reconciled with the idea that it is only the post-mortem influence of His life which is meant.

Note, too, the singular blending of God’s power and the Servant’s own activity in the winning of this extended sovereignty. Side by side the two are put. The same verb is used in order to emphasise the intended parallel. ‘I will divide,’ ‘He shall divide.’ I will give Him—He shall conquer for Himself. Remember the intense vehemence with which the Old Testament guards the absolute supremacy of divine power, and how strongly it always puts

the thought that God is everything and man nothing. Look at the contrast of the tone when a human conqueror, whose conquests are the result of God's providence, is addressed ([xlv. 1-3](#)). There is an entire suppression of his personality, not a word about his bravery, his military genius, or anything in him. It is all *I, I, I*. Remember how, in [chapter x.](#), one of the sins for which the Assyrian is to be destroyed is precisely that he thought of his victories as due to his own strength and wisdom. So he is indignantly reminded that he is only 'a staff in Mine hand,' the axe with which God hewed the nations, whereas here the voice of God Himself speaks, and gives a strange place beside Himself to the will and power of this Conqueror. This feature of the prophecy should be accounted for in any satisfactory interpretation.

Note, too, the wide sweep of the Servant's dominion, which carries us back to the beginning of this prophecy in [chapter lii. 15](#), where we hear of the Servant as 'sprinkling' (or startling) many nations, and the 'kings' is parallel with the 'strong' in this verse. No bounds are assigned to the Servant's conquests, which are, if not declared to be universal, at least indefinitely extended and striding on to world-wide empire.

These points are plainly here. I do not dilate upon them. But I ask whether any of the interpretations of these words, except one, gives adequate force to them? Is there anything in the history of the restored exiles which corresponds to this picture? Even if you admit the violent hypothesis that there was a better part of the nation, so good that the national sorrows had no chastisement for them, and the other violent hypothesis that the devoutest among the exiles suffered most, and the other that the death and burial and resurrection of the Servant only mean the reformation wrought on Israel by captivity. What is there in the history of Israel which can be pointed at as the conquest of the world? Was the nation that bore the yokes of a Ptolemy, an Antiochus, a Herod, a Caesar, the fulfiller of this dream of world-conquest? There is only one thing which can be called the Jew conquering the world. It is that which, as I believe, is meant here, viz. Christ's conquest. Apart from that, I know of nothing which would not be ludicrously disproportionate if it were alleged as fulfilment of this glowing prophecy.

This prophetic picture is at least four hundred years before Christ, by the admission of those who bring it lowest down, in their eagerness to get rid of prophecy. The life of Christ does correspond to it, in such a way that, clause by clause, it reads as if it were quite as much a history of Jesus as a prophecy of the Servant. This certainly is an extraordinary coincidence if it be not a prophecy. And there is really no argument against the Messianic interpretation, except dogmatic prejudice—'there cannot be prophecy.'

No straining is needed in order to fit this great prophetic picture of the world-Conqueror to Jesus. Even that, at first sight incongruous, picture of a victor leading long lines of captives, such as we see on Assyrian slabs and Egyptian paintings, is historically true of Him who 'leads captivity captive,' and is, through the ages, winning ever fresh victories, and leading

His enemies, turned into lovers, in His triumphal progress. He, and He only, really owns men. His slaves have made real self-surrenders to Him. Other conquerors may imprison or load with irons or deport to other lands, but they are only lords of bodies. Jesus' chains are silken, and bind hearts that are proud of their bonds. He carries off His free prisoners 'from the power of darkness' into His kingdom of light. His slaves rejoice to say, 'I am not my own,' and he only truly possesses himself who has given himself away to the Conquering Christ. For all these centuries He has been conquering hearts, enthralling and thereby liberating wills, making Himself the life of lives. There is nothing else the least like the bond between Jesus and millions who never saw him. Who among all the leaders of thought or religious teachers has been able to impress his personality on others and to dominate them in the fashion that Jesus has done and is doing to-day? How has He done this thing, which no other man has been able in the least to do? What is His charm, the secret of His power? The prophet has no doubt what it is, and unfolds it to us with a significant 'For.' We turn, then, to the prophetic explanation of that worldwide empire and note—

II. The foundation of the Servant's dominion.

That explanation is given in four clauses which fall into two pairs. They remarkably revert to the thought of the Servant's sufferings, but in how different a tone these are now spoken of, when they are no longer regarded as the results of man's blind failure to see His beauty, or as inflicted by the mysterious 'pleasure of Jehovah,' but as the causes of His triumph! Echoes of both the two first clauses are heard from the lips of Jesus. As He passed beneath the tremulous shadow of the olives of Gethsemane, He appealed for the companionship of the three, by an all but solitary revelation of His weakness and sorrow, 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; abide ye here and watch with Me.' And even more distinctly did He lay His hand on this prophecy when He ended all His words in the upper room with "This which is written must be fulfilled in Me, And He was reckoned with "transgressors." May we not claim Jesus as endorsing the Messianic interpretation of this prophecy? He gazed on the portrait painted ages before that night of sorrow, and saw in it His own likeness, and said, That is meant for Me. Some of us feel that, *kenosis* or no *kenosis*, He is the best judge of who is the original of the prophet's portrait.

The two final clauses are separated from the preceding by the emphatic introduction of the pronominal nominative, and cohere closely as gathering up for the last time all the description of the Servant, and as laying broad and firm the basis of His dominion, in the two great facts which sum up His office and between them stretch over the past and the future. 'He bare the sin of many, and maketh intercession for the transgressors.' The former of these two clauses brings up the pathetic picture of the scapegoat who 'bore upon him all their iniquities into a solitary land.' The Servant conquers hearts because He bears upon Him the grim burden which a mightier hand than Aaron's has made to meet on His head, and because He bears it away. The ancient ceremony, and the prophet's transference of the

words describing it to his picture of the Servant who was to be King, floated before John the Baptist, when he pointed his brown, thin finger at Jesus and cried: 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' The goat had borne the sins of one nation; the prophet had extended the Servant's ministry indefinitely, so as to include unnumbered 'many'; John spoke the universal word, 'the world.' So the circles widened.

But it is not enough to bear away sins. We need continuous help in the present. Our daily struggles, our ever-felt weakness, all the ills that flesh is heir to, cry aloud for a mightier than we to be at our sides. So on the Servant's bearing the sins of the many there follows a continuous act of priestly intercession, in which, not merely by prayer, but by meritorious and prevailing intervention, He makes His own the cause of the many whose sins He has borne.

On these two acts His dominion rests. Sacrifice and Intercession are the foundations of His throne.

The empire of men's hearts falls to Him because of what He has done and is doing for them. He who is to possess us absolutely must give Himself to us utterly. The empire falls to Him who supplies men's deepest need. He who can take away men's sins rules. He who can effectually undertake men's cause will be their King.

If Jesus is or does anything less or else, He will not rule men for ever. If He is but a Teacher and a Guide, oblivion, which shrouds all, will sooner or later wrap Him in its misty folds. That His name should so long have resisted its influence is due altogether to men having believed Him to be something else. He will exercise an everlasting dominion only if He have brought in an everlasting righteousness. He will sit King for ever, if and only if He is a priest for ever. All other rule is transient.

A remarkable characteristic of this entire prophecy is the frequent repetition of expressions conveying the idea of sufferings borne for others. In one form or another that thought occurs, as we reckon, eleven times, and it is especially frequent in the last verses of the chapter. Why this perpetual harking back to that one aspect? It is to be further noticed that throughout there is no hint of any other kind of work which this Servant had to do. He fulfils His service to God and man by being bruised for men's iniquities. He came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and the chief form of His ministry was that He gave His life a ransom for the many. He came not to preach a gospel, but to die that there might be a gospel to preach. The Cross is the centre of His work, and by it He becomes the Centre of the world.

Look once more at the sorrowful, august figure that rose before the prophet's eye—with its strange blending of sinlessness and sorrow, God's approval and God's chastisement, rejection and rule, death and life, abject humiliation and absolute dominion. Listen to the last echoes of the prophet's voice as it dies on our ear—'He bore the sins of the many.' And then hearken how eight hundred years after another voice takes up the echoes—but instead of pointing away down the centuries, points to One at his side, and cries, 'Behold the Lamb of

God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’ Look at that life, that death, that grave, that resurrection, that growing dominion, that inexhaustible intercession—and say, ‘Of whom speaketh the prophet this?’

May we all be able to answer with clear confidence, ‘These things saith Esaias when he saw *His* glory and spake of *Him*.’ May we all take up the ancient confession: ‘Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed.’

THE PASSING AND THE PERMANENT

‘For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.’—[ISAIAH liv, 10](#).

There is something of music in the very sound of these words. The stately march of the grand English translation lends itself with wonderful beauty to the melody of Isaiah’s words. But the thought that lies below them, sweeping as it does through the whole creation, and parting all things into the transient and eternal, the mortal and immortal, is still greater than the music of the words. These are removed; this abides. And the thing in God which abides is all-gentle tenderness, that strange love mightier than all the powers of Deity beside, permanent with the permanence of His changeless heart. The mountains shall depart, the emblems of eternity shall crumble and change and pass, and the hills be removed; but this immortal, impalpable, and, in some men’s minds, fantastic and unreal something, ‘My loving kindness and the covenant of My peace,’ shall outlast them all. And this great promise is stamped with the sign manual of Heaven, being spoken by the Lord that hath mercy on thee.’

So then, dear friends, I think I shall most reverentially deal with these words if I handle them in the simplest possible way, and think, first of all, of that great antithesis that is set before us here—what passes and what abides; and, secondly, draw two or three plain, homely lessons and applications from the thoughts thus suggested.

I. First, then, we have to deal with the contrast between the apparently enduring which passes, and that which truly abides.

‘The mountains depart, the hills remove, My loving-kindness shall not depart, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed.’ Let me then say a word or two about that first thought—‘the mountains shall depart.’ There they tower over the plains, looking down upon the flat valley beneath as they did when the prophet spoke. The eternal buttresses of the hills stand to the eyes of the fleeting generations as emblems of permanence, and yet winter storms and summer heats, and the slow processes of decay which we call the gnawing of time, are ever working upon them, and changing their forms, and at last they shall pass. Modern science, whilst it has all but incalculably enlarged our conceptions of the duration of the material universe, emphasises, as faith alone never could, the thought of the ultimate perishing of this material world. For geology tells us that ‘where rears the cliff there rolled the sea,’ that through the cycles of the shifting history of the world there have been elevations and depressions so that the ancient hills in many places are the newest of all things, and the world’s form has changed many and many a time since first it circled as a planet. And researches into the ultimate constitution of matter have taught us to think of solids and liquids and gases, as being an infinite multitude of atoms all in rapid motion with inconceivable velocity, and have shown us the very atoms in the act of breaking up. So that the old guess

of the infancy of physical science which divined that 'all things are in a state of flux' is confirmed by its last utterances. Science prophesies too, and bids us expect that the earth shall one day become, like some of the stars, a burnt out mass of uniform temperature, incapable of change or of sustaining life, and shall end by falling into the diminished sun, and so the old word will be fulfilled that 'the earth and the works that are therein shall be burnt up.' None should be able to utter the words of my text, 'The mountains shall depart and the hills be removed,' with such emphasis of certitude as the present students of physical science.

But our text does not stop there. It brings into view the transiency of the transient, in order to throw into greater relief and prominence the perpetuity of the abiding. If we had nothing abiding beyond this perishable material universe, it would indeed be misery to exist. Life would be not only insignificant but wretched, and a ghastly irony, a meaningless, aimless ripple on the surface of that silent, shoreless sea. The great 'But' of this text lifts the oppression from humanity with which the one-sided truth of the passing of all the Visible loads it.

And so turn for a moment to the other side of this great text. There stands out above all that is mortal, which, although it counts its existence by millenniums, is but for an instant, visible to the eye of faith, the Great Spirit who moves all the material universe, Himself unmoved, and lives undiminished by creation, and undiminished if creation were swept out of existence. Let that which may pass, pass; let that which can perish, perish; let the mountains crumble and the hills melt away; beyond the smoke and conflagration, and rising high above destruction and chaos, stands the calm throne of God, with a loving Heart upon it, with a council of peace and purpose of mercy for you and for me, the creatures of a day indeed, but who are to live when the days shall cease to be. 'My kindness!' What a wonderful word that is, so far above all the cold delusion of so-called theism! 'My kindness!' the tender-heartedness of an infinite love, the abounding favour of the Father of my spirit, His gentle goodness bending down to me, His tenderness round about me, eternal love that never can die; the thing that lasts in the universe is His kindness, which continues from everlasting to everlasting. What a revelation of God! Oh, dear friends, if only our hearts could open to the full acceptance of that thought, sorrow and care and anxiety, and every other form of trouble, would fade away and we should be at rest. The infinite, undying, imperishable love of God is mine. Older than the mountains, deeper than their roots, wider than the heavens, and stronger than all my sin, is the love that grasps me and keeps me and will not let me go, and lavishes its tenderness upon me, and beseeches me, and pleads with me, and woos me, and rebukes me, and corrects me when I need, and sent His Son to die for me. 'My kindness shall not depart from thee.'

But even that great conception does not exhaust the encouragement which the prophet has to give to souls weighed upon with the transiency of the material. He speaks of 'the covenant of My peace.' We are to think of this great, tender, changeless love of God, which underlies all things and towers above all things, which overlaps them all and fills eternity,

as being placed, so to speak, under the guarantee of a solemn obligation. God's covenant is a great thought of Scripture which we far too little apprehend in the depth and power of its meaning. His covenant with you and me, poor creatures, is this, 'I promise that My love shall never leave thee.' He makes Himself a constitutional monarch, so to speak, giving us a plighted word to which we can appeal and go to Him and say, 'There, that is the charter given by Thyself, given irrevocably for ever, and I hold Thee to it. Fulfil it, O Thou God of Truth.'

'My covenant of peace.' Dear friends, the prophet spoke a deeper thing than he knew when he uttered these words. Let me remind you of the large meaning which the New Testament puts into them. 'Now the God of Peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, through the blood of the everlasting Covenant, make us perfect in every good work, to do His will.' God has bound Himself by His promise to give you and me the peace that belongs to His own nature, and that covenant is sealed to us in the blood of Jesus Christ upon the Cross, and so we sinful men, with all the burden of our evil upon us, with all our sins known to us, with all our manifest failings and infirmities, can turn to Him and say, 'Thou hast pledged Thyself to forgive and accept, and that covenant is made sure to me because Thy Son hath died, and I come and ask Thee to fulfil it.' And be sure of this, that no poor creature upon earth, however lame his hand, who puts out that hand to grasp that peaceful covenant—that new covenant in the blood of Christ—can plead in vain.

My brother, have you done that? Have you entered into this covenant of peace with God—peace in believing, peace by the blood of Christ, peace that fills a new heart, peace that rules amidst all the perturbations and disappointments of life? Then you may be sure that that covenant will stand for evermore, though the mountains depart and the hills be removed.

II. Now turn with me to a few practical lessons which we may gather from these great contrasts here, between the perishable mortal and the immortal divine love.

Surely the first plain one is a warning against fastening our love, our hope, or our trust on these transient things.

What folly it is for a man to risk his peace and the strength and the joy of his life upon things that crumble and change, when all the while there is lying before him open for his entrance, and wooing him to come into the eternal home of his spirit, this covenant! Here are we, from day to day, plunged into these passing vanities, and always tempted to think that they are the true abiding things, and it needs great discipline and watchfulness to live the better life. There is nothing that will help us to do it like a firm grasp of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Then we can hold these mortal joys with a loose hand, knowing that they are only for a little time, and feeling that they are passing whilst we look at them, and are changing like the scenery in the sky on a summer's night, with its cliffs and hills in the clouds,

even while we gaze. Where there was a mountain a moment ago up there, there is now a depression, and the world and everything in it lasts very little longer than these. It is only a film on the surface of the great sea of eternity—there is no reality about it. It is but a dream—a vision, slipping, slipping, slipping away, and you and I slipping along with it. How foolishly, how obstinately, we all cling to it, though even the very grasp of our hands tends to make it pass away, as the children coming in from the fields with their store of buttercups and daisies in their hot hands, which by their very clutch hasten the withering. And that is just our position. We have them for a brief moment, and they all perish in the using. Oh, brother, have you set your heart on that which is not, when all the while there, longing to bless and love us, stands the Eternal God, with His unchanging love and faithful covenant of His perpetual peace? Surely it were wiser—wiser, to put it on the lowest ground—to seek the things that are above, and, knowing as we do that the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, so make our portion the kindness which shall not depart, and seek our share in the peace that shall not pass away.

But there is another lesson to be put in the same simple fashion. Surely we ought to use thoughts like these of my text in order to stay the soul in seasons which come to every one sometimes, when we are made painfully conscious of the transiency of this Present. Meditative hours come to us all—moments when perhaps some strain of music gives us back childhood's days; when perhaps some perfume of a flower reminds us of long-vanished gardens and hands that have crumbled into dust; when some touch of a sunset sky, or some word of a book, or some providence of our lives, comes upon the heart and mind, reminding us how everything is passing. You have all had these thoughts. Some of us stifle them—they are not pleasant to many of us; some of us brood over them unwholesomely, and that is not wise; but the best use of them is to bear us onward into the peaceful region where we clasp to our troubled hearts that which cannot go. If any of us are making experience to-day of earthly change, if any of us have hearts heavy with earthly losses, if any of us are bending under the weight of that awful law, that everything becomes part and parcel of that dreadful past, if any of us are looking at our empty hands and saying, 'They have taken away my god and what have I more?' let us listen to the better voice that says, 'My kindness shall not depart from thee, and so, whatever goes, thou canst not be desolate if thou hast Me.'

And then, still further, let me remind you that this same thought may avail to give to us hopes of years as immortal as itself. We do not belong to the mountains and hills that shall depart, or to the order of things to which they belong. There is coming a very solemn day, I believe, not by any mere processes of natural decay as I take it, but by the action of God Himself, the Judge that 'day of the Lord that shall come as a thief in the night'—when the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed, and the throne of judgment shall be set, and you and I will be there. My brother, lay your hand on that covenant of peace which is made for us all in Christ Jesus the Lord, and then 'calm as the summer's ocean we shall

be, and all the wreck of nature' cannot disturb us, for we shall abide unshaken as the throne of God. The mountains may pass, the hills be removed, but herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of 'judgment,' for that kindness shall not depart from us, and God's gentle tenderness is eternal as Himself. Then we shall not depart from it either, and we are immortal as the tenderness that encloses us. God's endless love must have undying creatures on whom to pour itself out, and if to-day I possess—as we all may possess in however feeble a measure—some sips and prelibations of that great flood of love that is in God, I can look unblanched right into the eyes of death and say, 'Thou hast no power at all over me, I am eternal because the God that loves me is so, and since He hath loved me with an everlasting love, His loving-kindness shall not depart from me. Therefore, seeing that all these things shall be dissolved, I know that I have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, and because He lives I shall live also.' The hope that is built upon the eternal love of God in Christ is the true guarantee to me of immortal existence, and this hope is ours if, and only if, we come into the covenant—the covenant of peace. God says, 'I will love thee, I will bless thee, I will keep thee, I will pardon thee, I will save thee, I will glorify thee, and there is My bond on that Cross, the new covenant in His blood.' Close with the covenant that God is ready to make with you, and then 'life and death, principalities and powers, things present and things to come, height and depth, and every other creature shall be impotent to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

THE CALL TO THE THIRSTY

‘Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto Me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. 3. Incline your ear, and come unto Me, hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David. 4. Behold, I have given him for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people. 5. Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for He hath glorified thee. 6. Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near: 7. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. 8. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. 9. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. 10. For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: 11. So shall My word be that goeth forth out of My mouth: it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. 12. For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. 13. Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.’—[ISAIAH lv. 1-13](#).

The call to partake of the blessings of the Messianic salvation worthily follows the great prophecy of the suffering Servant. No doubt the immediate application of this chapter is to the exiled nation, who in it are summoned from their vain attempts to find satisfaction in the material prosperity realised in exile, and to make the only true blessedness their own by obedience to God’s voice. But if ever the prophet spoke to the world he does so here. It is no unwarranted spiritualising of his invitation which hears in it the voice which invites all mankind to share the blessings of the gospel feast.

The glorious words need little exposition. What we have to do is to see that they do not fall on our ears in vain. They may be roughly divided into two sections—the invitation to the feast, with the promises to the obedient Israel ([verses 1-5](#)), and the summons to the necessary preparation for the feast, namely, repentance, with the reason for its necessity, and the encouragements to it in the might of God’s faithful promises ([verses 6-13](#)).

I. Whose voice sounds so beseechingly and welcoming in this great call, which rings out to all thirsty souls? If we note the 'Me' and 'I' which follow, we shall hear God Himself thus taking the office of summoner to His own feast. By whatever media the gospel call reaches us, it is in reality God's own voice to our hearts, and that makes the responsibility of hearing more tremendous, and the folly of refusing more inexcusable.

Who are invited? There are but two conditions expressed in [verse 1](#), and these are fulfilled in every soul. All are summoned who are thirsty and penniless. If we have in our souls desires that all the broken cisterns of earth can never slake—and we all have these—and if we have nothing by which we can procure what will still the gnawing hunger and burning thirst of our souls—and none of us has—then we are included in the call. Universal as are the craving for blessedness and the powerlessness to satisfy it, are the adaptation and destination of the gospel.

What is offered? Water, wine, milk—all the beverages of a simple civilisation, differing in their operation, but all precious to a thirsty palate. Water revives, wine gladdens and in-spirits, milk nourishes. All that any man needs or desires is to be found in Christ. We shall not understand the nature of the feast unless we remember that He Himself is the 'gift of God.' What these three draughts mean is best perceived when we listen to Him saying, in a plain quotation of this call, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' Nothing short of Himself can satisfy the thirst of one soul, much less of all the thirsty. Like the flow from the magic fountain of the legend, Jesus becomes to each what each most desires.

How does He become ours? The paradox of buying with what is not money is meant, by its very appearance of contradiction, to put in strongest fashion that the possession of Him depends on nothing in us but the sense of need and the willingness to accept. We buy Christ when we part with self, which is all that we have, in order to win Him. We must be full of conscious emptiness and desire, if we are to be filled with His fulness. Jesus interpreted the meaning of 'come to the waters' when He said, 'He that cometh to Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst.' Faith is coming, faith is drinking, faith is buying.

The universal call, with its clear setting forth of blessing and conditions of possessing, is followed by a pleading remonstrance as to the folly of lavishing effort and money on what is not bread. It is strange that men will cheerfully take more pains to continue thirsty than to accept the satisfaction which God provides. They toil and continue unsatisfied. Experience does not teach them, and all the while the one real good is waiting to be theirs for nothing.

'Tis heaven alone that is given away;
'Tis only God may be had for the asking.'

Christ goes a-begging, and we spend our strength in vain toil to acquire what we turn away from when it is offered us in Him. When the great Father offers bread for nothing, we will not have it, but we are ready to give any price for a stone. It is not the wickedness, but the folly, of unbelief, which is the marvel.

The contrast between the heavy price at which men buy hunger, and the easy rate at which they may have full satisfaction, is further set forth by the call to 'incline the ear,' which is all that is needed in order that life and nourishment which delights the soul may be ours. 'Hearken, and eat' is equivalent to 'Hearken, and ye shall eat.' The real 'good' for man is only to be found in listening to and obeying the divine voice, whether it sound in invitation, promise, or command. The true life of the soul lies in that listening receptiveness which takes for one's own God's great gift of Christ, and yields glad obedience to His every word.

The exiled Israel was promised an 'everlasting covenant' as the result of their acceptance of the invitation; and we know whose blood it is that has sealed the new covenant, which abides as long as Christ's fulness and men's need shall last. That covenant, of which we seldom hear in Isaiah, but which fills a prominent place in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, is further explained as being 'the sure mercies of David.' This phrase and its context are difficult, but the general meaning is clear. The great promises of God's unfailing mercy, made to the historical founder of the royal house, shall be transferred and continued, with inviolable faithfulness, to those who drink of the gift of God.

This parallel between the great King and the whole mass of the true Israel is further set forth in [verses 4 and 5](#). Each begins with 'Behold,' and the similar form indicates similarity in contents. The son of Jesse was in some degree God's witness to the heathen nations, as is expressed in several psalms; and, what he was imperfectly, the ransomed Israel would be to the world. The office of the Christian Church is to draw nations that it knew not, to follow in the blessed path, in which it has found satisfaction and the dawns of a more than natural glory transfiguring it. They who have themselves drunk of the unfailing fountain in Christ are thereby fitted and called to cry to others, 'Come ye to the waters.' Experience of Christ's preciousness, and of the rest of soul which comes from partaking of His salvation, impels and obliges to call others to share the bliss.

II. The second part of the chapter begins with an urgent call to repentance, based upon the difference between God's ways and man's, and on the certainty that the divine promises will be fulfilled. The summons in [verses 6 and 7](#) is first couched in most general terms, which are then more closely defined. To 'seek the Lord' is to direct conduct and heart to obtain possession of God as one's own. Of that seeking, the chief element is calling upon Him; since such is His desire to be found of us that it only needs our asking in order to receive. As surely as the mother hears her child's cry, so surely does He catch the faintest voice addressed to Him. But, men being what they are, a change of ways and of their root in thoughts is indispensable. Seeking which is not accompanied by forsaking self and an evil past is no

genuine seeking, and will end in no finding. But this forsaking is only one side of true repentance; the other is return to God, as is expressed in the New Testament word for it, which implies a change of mind, purpose, and conduct. The faces which were turned earthward and averted from God are to be turned God-ward and diverted from earth. Whosoever thus seeks may be confident of finding and of abundant pardon. The belief in God's loving forgivingness is the strongest motive to repentance, and the most melting argument to listen to the call to seek Him. But there is another motive of a more awful kind; namely, the consideration that the period of mercy is limited, and that a time may come, and that soon, when God no longer 'may be found' nor 'is near.'

The need for such a radical change in conduct and mind is further enforced, in [verses 8 and 9](#), by the emphatic statement of present discord between the exiled Israel and God. Mark that the deepest seat of the discord is first dealt with, and then the manifestation of it in active life. Mark also that the order of comparison is inverted in the two successive clauses in [verse 8](#). God's thoughts have not entered into Israel's mind and become theirs. The 'thinkings' not being regulated according to God's truth, nor the desires and sentiments brought into accord with His will and mind, a contrariety of 'ways' must follow, and the paths which men choose for themselves cannot run parallel with God's, nor be pleasing to Him. Therefore the stringent urgency of the call to forsake 'the crooked, wandering ways in which we live,' and to come back to the path of righteousness which is traced by God for our feet.

But divergence which necessitates repentance is not the only relation between our ways and God's. There is elevation, transcendence, like that of the eternal heavens, high, boundless, the home of light, the storehouse of beneficent influences which fertilise. If we think of the dreary, flat plains where the exiles were, and the magnificent sweep of the sky over them, we shall feel the beauty of the figure. If 'My thoughts are not your thoughts' was all that was to be said, repentance would be of little use, and there would be little to encourage to it; but if God's thoughts of love and ways of blessing arch themselves above our low lives as the sky bends, pitying and bestowing, above squalor, barrenness, and darkness, then penitence is not in vain, and the low earth may be visited with gifts from the highest heaven.

The certainty that such gifts will be bestowed is the last thought of this magnificent summons. The prophet dilates on that assurance to the end of the chapter. He seems to catch fire, as it were, from the introduction of that grand figure of the lofty heavens domed above the flat earth. In effect, what he says is: They are high and inaccessible, but think what pours down from them, and how all fertility depends on their gifts of rain and snow, and how the moisture which they drop is turned into 'seed to the sower, and bread to the eater.' Thinking of that continuous benefaction and miracle, we should see in it a symbol of the better gifts from the higher heavens. So does God's word come down from His throne. So does it turn barrenness into nodding harvest. So does it quicken undreamed of powers of

fruitfulness in human nature and among the forces of the world. So does it supply nourishment for hungry souls, and germs which shall bear fruit in coming years. No complicated machinery nor the most careful culture can work what the gentle dropping rain effects. There is mightier force in it than in many thunder-clouds. The gospel does with ease and in silence what nothing else can do. It makes barren souls fruitful in all good works, and in all happiness worthy of men. Therefore the summons to drink of the springing fountain and to turn from evil ways and thoughts is recommended by the assurance that God's word is faithful, and all His promises firm.

The final verses ([verses 12, 13](#)) give the glowing picture of the return from exile amid the jubilation of a transformed world, as the strongest motive to the obedient hearkening to God's voice, to which the chapter has summoned, and as the great instance of God's keeping His word.

The flight from Egypt was 'in haste' ([Deut. xvi. 3](#)); but this shall be a triumphal exodus, without conflict or alarms. All nature shall participate in the joy. Mountains and hills shall raise the shrill note of rejoicing, and the trees wave their branches, as if clapping hands in delight. This is more than mere poetic rhetoric. A redeemed humanity implies a glorified world. Nature has been involved in the consequences of sin, and will share in the results of redemption, and have some humble reflected light from 'the liberty of the glory of the sons of God.'

The fulfilment of this final promise is not yet. All earlier returns of the exiled Israel from the Babylon of their bondage to God and the city of God, such as the historical one which the prophet foretold, and the spiritual one which is repeated age by age in the history of the Christian Church and of single penitent souls, point on to that last triumphant day when 'the ransomed of the Lord shall return,' and the world be transfigured to match the glory that they inherit. That fair world without poison or offence, and the nations of the saved who inhabit its peaceful spaces, shall be, in the fullest stretch of the words, 'to the Lord for a name, and for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.' The redemption of man and his establishing amid the felicities of a state correspondent to His God-given glory shall be to all eternity and to all possible creations the highest evidence of what God is, and His token to all beings.

THE GREAT PROCLAMATION

‘Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.’—[ISAIAH lv. 1](#).

The meaning of the word *preach* is ‘proclaim like a herald’; or, what is perhaps more familiar to most of us, like a town-crier; with a loud voice, clearly and plainly delivering the message. Now, there are other notions of a sermon than that; and there is other work which ministers have to do, of an educational kind. But my business now is to preach. We have ventured to ask others than the members of our own congregation to join us in this service; and I should be ashamed of myself, and have good reason to be so, if I had asked you to come to hear me talk, or to entertain you with more or less eloquent and thoughtful discourses. There is a time for everything; and what this is the time for is to ring out like a bellman the message which I believe God has given me for you. It cannot but suffer in passing through human lips; but I pray that my poor words may not be all unworthy of its stringency, and of the greatness of its blessing. My text is God’s proclamation, and all that the best of us can do is but to reiterate that, more feebly alas, but still earnestly.

Suppose there was an advertisement in to-morrow morning’s papers that any one that liked to go to a certain place might get a fortune for going, what a *queue* of waiting suppliants there would be at the door! Here is God’s greatest gift going a-begging; and there are no doubt some among you who listen to my text with only the thought, ‘Oh, the old threadbare story is what we have been asked to come and hear!’ Brethren, have you taken the offer? If not, it needs to be pressed upon you once more. So my purpose in this sermon is a very simple one. I wish, as a brother to a brother, to put before you these three things: to whom this offer is made; what it consists of; and how it may be ours.

I. To whom this offer is made.

It is to every one thirsty and penniless. That is a melancholy combination, to be needing something infinitely, and to have not a farthing to get it with. But that is the condition in which we all stand, in regard to the highest and best things. This invitation of my text is as universal as if it had stopped with its third word. ‘Ho, every one’ would have been no broader than is the offer as it stands. For the characteristics named are those which belong, necessarily and universally, to human experience. If my text had said, ‘Ho, every one that breathes human breath,’ it would not have more completely covered the whole race, and enfolded thee and me, and all our brethren, in the amplitude of its promise, than it does when it sets up as the sole qualifications thirst and penury—that we infinitely need, and that we are absolutely unable to acquire, the blessings that it offers.

‘Every one that thirsteth’—that means desire. Yes; but it means need also. And what is every man but a great bundle of yearnings and necessities? None of us carry within ourselves

that which suffices for ourselves. We are all dependent upon external things for being and for wellbeing.

There are thirsts which infallibly point to their true objects. If a man is hungry he knows that it is food that he wants. And just as the necessities of the animal life are incapable of being misunderstood, and the objects which will satisfy them incapable of being confused or mistaken, so there are other nobler thirsts, which, in like manner, work automatically, and point to the thing that they need. We have social instincts; we need love; we need friendship; we need somebody to lean upon; we thirst for some heart to rest our heads upon, for hands to clasp ours; and we know where the creatures and the objects are that will satisfy these desires. And there are the higher thirsts of the spirit, that 'follows knowledge, like a sinking star, beyond the furthest bounds of human thought'; and a man knows where and how to gratify the impulse that drives him to seek after the many forms of knowledge and wisdom.

But besides all these, besides sense, besides affection, besides emotions, besides the intellectual spur of which we are all more or less conscious, there come in a whole set of other thirsts that do not in themselves carry the intimation of the place where they can be slaked. And so you get men restless, as some of you are; always dissatisfied, as some of you are; feeling that there is something wanting, yet not knowing what, as some of you are. You remember the old story in the *Arabian Nights*, of the man who had a grand palace, and lived in it quite contentedly, until some one told him that it needed a roc's egg hanging from the roof to make it complete, and he did not know where to get that, and was miserable accordingly. We build our houses, we fancy that we are satisfied; and then there comes the stinging thought that it is not all complete yet, and we go groping, groping in the dark, to find out where the lacking thing is. Shipwrecked sailors sometimes, in their desperation, drink salt water, and that makes them thirstier than ever, and brings on madness and death. Some publicans drug the vile liquors which they sell, so that they increase thirst. We may make no mistake about how to satisfy the desires of sense or of earthly affections; we may be quite certain that 'money answereth all things,' and that it is good to get on in business in Manchester; or may have found a pure and enduring satisfaction in study and in books—yet we have thirsts that some of us know not where to satisfy; and so we have parched lips and swollen tongues, and raging desire that earth can give nothing to fill.

My brother, do you know what it is that you want?

It is God. Nothing else, nothing less. 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.' The man that knows what it is of which he is in such sore need, is blessed. The man who only feels dimly that he needs something, and does not know that it is God whom he does need, is condemned to wander in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is, and where his heart gapes, parched and cracked like the soil upon which he treads. Understand your thirst. Interpret your desires aright. Open your eyes to your need; and be sure of this, that mountains

of money and the clearest insight into intellectual problems, and fame, and love, and wife, and children, and a happy home, and abundance of all things that you can desire, will leave a central aching emptiness that nothing and no person but God can ever fill. Oh, that we all knew what these yearnings of our hearts mean!

Aye! but there are *dormant* thirsts too. It is no proof of superiority that a savage has fewer wants than you and I have, for the want is the open mouth into which supply comes. And it is no proof that you have not, deep in your nature, desires which, unless they are satisfied, will prevent your being blessed, that these desires are all unconscious to yourselves. The business of us preachers is, very largely, to get the people who will listen to us, to recognise the fact that they do want things which they do not wish; and that, for the perfection of their natures, the cherishing of noble longings and thirstings is needful, and that to be without this sense of need is to be without one of the loftiest prerogatives of humanity.

Some of you do not wish forgiveness. Many of you would much rather not have holiness. You do not want to have God. The promises of the Gospel go clean over your heads, and are as impotent to influence you as the wind whistling through a keyhole, because you have never been aware of the wants to which these promises correspond, and do not understand what it is that you truly require.

And yet there is no desire—that is to say, consciousness of necessities—so dormant but that its being un-gratified makes a man restless. You do not wish forgiveness, but you will never be happy till you get it. You do not wish to be good and true and holy men, but you will never be blessed till you are. You do not want to have God, some of you, but you will be restless till you find Him. You fancy you wish heaven when you are dead; you do not want it while you are living. But until your earthly life is like the life of Jesus Christ in heaven, though in an inferior degree, whilst it is on earth, you will never be at rest. You are thirsty enough after these things to be ill at ease without them, when you bethink yourselves and pass out of the region of mere mechanical and habitual existence; but until you get these things that you do not desire, be sure of this: that you will be tortured with vain unrest, and will find that the satisfactions which you do seek turn to ashes in your mouth. ‘Bread of deceit,’ says the Book, ‘is sweet to a man.’ The writer meant by that that there were people to whom it was pleasant to tell profitable lies. But we might widen the meaning, and say that all these lower satisfactions, apart from the loftier ones of forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation with God, the conscious possession of Him, a well-grounded hope of immortality, the power to live a noble life and to look forward to a glorious heaven, are ‘bread of deceit,’ which promises nourishment and does not give it, but breaks the teeth that try to masticate it; ‘it turneth to gravel.’

‘Ho, every one that thirsteth.’ That designation includes us all. ‘And he that hath no money.’ Who has any? Notice that the persons represented in our text as penniless are, in the next verse, remonstrated with for spending ‘money.’ So then the penniless man had

some pence away in some corner of his pocket which he could spend. He had the money that would buy shams, 'that which is not bread' but a stone though it looks like a loaf, but he had no money for the true food. Which being translated out of parable into fact, is simply this, that our efforts may and do win for us the lower satisfactions which meet our transitory and superficial necessities, but that no effort of ours can secure for us the loftier blessings which slake the diviner thirsts of immortal souls. A man lands in a far country with English shillings in his pocket, but he finds that no coins go there but thalers, or francs, or dollars, or the like; and his money is only current in his own land, and he must have it changed before he can make his purchases. So though he has a pocketful of it he may as well be penniless.

And, in like fashion, you and I, with all our strenuous efforts, which we are bound to make, and which there is joy in making, after these lower good things that correspond to our efforts, find that we have no coinage that will buy the good things of the kingdom of heaven, without which we faint and die. For them our efforts are useless. Can a man by his penitence, by his tears, by his amendment, make it possible for the consequences of his past to be obliterated, or all changed in their character into fatherly chastisement? No! A thousand times, no! The superficial notions of Christianity, which are only too common amongst both educated and uneducated, may say to a man, 'You need no divine intervention, if only you will get up from the dust, and do your best to keep up when you are up.' But those who realise more deeply what the significance of sin is, and what the eternal operation of its consequences upon the soul is, and what the awful majesty of a divine righteousness is, learn that the man who has sinned can, by nothing that he can do, obliterate that awful fact, or reduce it to insignificance, in regard to the divine relations to him. It is only God who can do that. We have no money.

So we stand thirsty and penniless—a desperate condition! Ay! brother, it *is* desperate, and it is the condition of every one of us. I wish I could turn the generalities of my text into the individuality of a personal address. I wish I could bring its wide-flowing beneficence to a sharp point that might touch your conscience, heart, and will. I cannot do that; you must do it for yourself.

'Ho, every one that thirsteth.' Will you pause for a moment, and say to yourself, 'That is I?' 'And he that hath no money'—that is I. 'Come ye to the waters'—that is I. The proclamation is for thine ear and for thy heart; and the gift is for thy hand and thy lips.

II. In what this offer consists.

They tell an old story about the rejoicings at the coronation of some great king, when there was set up in the market-place a triple fountain, from each of whose three lips flowed a different kind of rare liquor which any man who chose to bring a pitcher might fill it with, at his choice. Notice my text, 'come ye to the *waters*' . . . 'buy *wine* and *milk*.' The great fountain is set up in the market-place of the world, and every man may come; and whichever of this glorious triad of effluents he needs most, there his lip may glue itself and there it may

drink, be it 'water' that refreshes, or 'wine' that gladdens, or 'milk' that nourishes. They are all contained in this one great gift that flows out from the deep heart of God to the thirsty lips of parched humanity.

And what is that gift? Well, we may say, salvation; or we may use many other words to define the nature of the gifts. I venture to take a shorter one, and say, it means Christ. He, and not merely some truth about Him and His work; He Himself, in the fulness of His being, in the all-sufficiency of His love, in the reality of His presence, in the power of His sacrifice, in the daily derivation, into the heart that waits upon Him, of His life and His spirit, He is the all-sufficient supply of every thirst of every human soul. Do we want happiness? Christ gives us His joy, abiding and full, and not as the world gives. Do we want love? He gathers us to His heart, in which 'there is no variableness, neither shadow cast by turning,' and binds us to Himself by bonds that death, the separator, vainly attempts to untie, and which no unworthiness, ingratitude or coldness of ours will ever be able to unloose. Do we want wisdom? He will dwell with us as our light. Do our hearts yearn for companionship? With Him we shall never be solitary. Do we long for a bright hope which shall light up the dark future, and spread a rainbow span over the great gorge and gulf of death? Jesus Christ spans the void, and gives us unfailing and undecieving hope. For everything that you and I need here or yonder, in heart, in will, in practical life, Jesus Christ Himself is the all-sufficient supply.

'My life in death, my all in all.' What is offered in Him may be described by all the glorious and blessed names which men have invented to designate the various aspects of the Good. These are the goodly pearls that men seek, but there is one of great price which is worth them all, and gathers into itself all their clouded and fragmentary splendours. Christ is all, and the soul that has Him shall never thirst.

'Thou of life the fountain art,
Freely let me take of Thee.'

III. Lastly, how do we obtain the offered gifts?

The paradox of my text needs little explanation, 'Buy without money and without price.' The contradiction on the surface is but intended to make emphatic this blessed truth, which I pray may reach your memories and hearts, that the only conditions are a sense of need, and a willingness to take—nothing less and nothing more. We must recognise our penury and must abandon self, and put away all ideas of having a finger in our own salvation, and be willing—which, strangely and sadly enough, many of us are not—to be under obligations to God's unhelped and undeserved love for all.

Cheap things are seldom valued. Ask a high price and people think that the commodity is precious. A man goes into a fair, for a wager, and he carries with him a tray full of gold watches and offers to sell them for a farthing apiece, and nobody will buy them. It does not,

I hope, degrade the subject, if I say Jesus Christ comes into the market-place of the world with His hands full of the gifts which His pierced hands have bought, that He may give them away. He says, 'Will you take them?' And you, and you, and you, pass by on the other side, and go away to another merchant, and buy dearly things that are not worth the having.

'My father, my father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it?' Would you not? Swing at the end of a pole, with hooks in your back; measure all the way from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas, lying down on your face and rising at each length; do a hundred things which heathens and Roman Catholics and unspiritual Protestants think to be the way to get salvation; deny yourselves things that you would like to do; do things that you do not want to do; give money that you would like to keep; avoid habits that are very sweet, go to church or chapel when you have no heart for worship; and so try to balance the account. If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, thou wouldst have done it. How much rather when he says, 'Wash, and be clean.' 'Nothing in my heart I bring.' You do *not* bring anything. 'Simply to Thy Cross I cling.' Do you? Do you? Jesus Christ catches up the 'comes' of my text, and He says, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' Brethren, I lay it on your hearts and consciences to answer Him—never mind about me—to answer *Him*: 'Sir, give me this water that I thirst not.'

GOD'S WAYS AND MAN'S

'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. 9. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.'—ISAIAH lv. 8, 9.

Scripture gives us no revelations concerning God merely in order that we may know about Him. These words are grand poetry and noble theology, but they are meant practically and in fiery earnestness. The 'for' at the beginning of each clause points us back to the previous statement, and both of the verses of our text are in different ways its foundation. And what has preceded is this: 'Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, for He will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.' That is why the prophet dilates upon the difference between the 'thoughts' and the 'ways' of God and of men.

If we look at these two verses a little more closely we shall perceive that they by no means cover the same ground nor suggest the same idea as to the relationship between God's 'ways' and 'thoughts' and ours. The former of them speaks of unlikeness and opposition, the latter of elevation and superiority; the former of them is the basis of an indictment and an exhortation, the latter is the basis of an encouragement and a promise. The former of them is the reason why 'the wicked' and 'unrighteous man' ought to and must 'turn' from 'his ways' and 'thoughts,' the latter of them is the reason why, 'turning,' he may be sure that the Lord 'will abundantly pardon.'

And so we have here two things to consider in reference to the relation between the divine purposes and acts and man's purposes and acts. First, the antagonism, and the indictment and exhortation that are based upon that; second, the analogy but superiority, and the exhortation and hope that are built upon that. Let me deal, then, with these separately.

I. We have here an unlikeness declared, and upon that is rested an appeal.

Notice the remarkable order and alternation of pronouns in the first verse. 'My thoughts are not *your* thoughts,' saith the Lord. The things that God thinks and purposes are not the things that man thinks and purposes, and therefore, because the thoughts are different, the outcomes of them in deeds are divergent. God's 'ways' are His acts, the manner and course of His working considered as a path on which He moves, and on which, in some sense, we can also journey. Our 'ways'—our manner of life—are not parallel with His, as they should be.

But that opposition is expressed with a remarkable variation. Observe the change of pronouns in the two clauses. First, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts'—you have not taken My truth into your minds, nor My purposes into your wills; you do not think God's thoughts. Therefore—'*your* ways (instead of 'My,' as we should have expected, to keep the regularity of the parallelism) are not My ways'—I repudiate and abjure your conduct and condemn it utterly.

Now, of course, in this charge of man's unlikeness to God, there is no contradiction of, nor reference to, man's natural constitution, in which there are, at one and the same time, the likeness of the child with the parent and the unlikeness between the creature and the Creator. If our thoughts were not in a measure like God's thoughts, we should know nothing about Him. If our thoughts were not like God's thoughts, we should have no standard for life or thinking. Righteousness and beauty and truth and goodness are the same things in heaven and earth, and alike in God and man. We are made after His image, poor creatures though we be; and though there must ever be a gulf of unlikeness, which we cannot bridge, between the thoughts of Him whose knowledge has no growth nor uncertainty, whose wisdom is infinite and all whose nature is boundless light, and our knowledge, and must ever be a gulf between the workings and ways of Him who works without effort, and knows neither weariness nor limitation, and our work, so often foiled, so always toilsome, yet in all the unlikeness there is (and no man can denude himself of it) a likeness to the Father. For the image in which God made man at the beginning is not an image that it is in the power of men to cast away, and in the worst of his corruptions and the widest of his departures he still bears upon him the signs of likeness 'to Him that created him.' The coin is rusty, battered, defaced; but still legible are the head and the writing. 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' Render unto God the things that are declared to be God's, because they bear His likeness and are stamped with His signature.

But that very necessary and natural likeness between God and man makes more solemnly sinful the voluntary unlikeness which we have brought upon ourselves. If there were no analogy, there could be no contrast. If God and man were utterly unlike, then there would be no evil in our unlikeness and no need for our repentance.

The true state for each of us is that we should, as the great astronomer said he had done in regard to his own science, 'think God's thoughts after Him,' and have our minds filled with His truth and our wills all harmonised with His purposes, and that we should thus make our ways to run parallel with the ways of God. The blessedness, the peace, the true manhood of a man, are that his ways and thoughts should be like God's. And so my text comes with its indictment—You who by nature were formed in His image, you to whom it is open to sympathise with His designs, to harmonise your wills with His will, and to bring all the dark and crooked ways in which you walk into full parallelism with His way—you have departed into darkness of unlikeness, and in thought and in ways are the opposites of God.

Mark how wonderfully, in the simple language of my text, deep truths about this sin of ours are conveyed. Notice its growth and order. It begins with a heart and mind that do not take in God's thoughts, truths, purposes, desires, and then the alienated will and the darkened understanding and the conscience which has closed itself against His imperative voice issue afterwards in conduct which He cannot accept as in any way corresponding with His. First

comes the thought unreceptive of God's thought, and then follow ways contrary to God's ways.

Notice the profound truth here in regard to the essential and deepest evil of all our evil. 'Your thoughts'; 'your ways,'—self-dependence and self-confidence are the master-evils of humanity. And every sin is at bottom the result of saying—'I will not conform myself to God, but I am going to please myself, and take my own way.' My own way is never God's way; my own way is always the devil's way. And the root of all sin lies in these two strong, simple words, 'Your thoughts not Mine; your ways not Mine.'

Notice, too, how there are suggested the misery and retribution of this unlikeness. 'If you will not make My thoughts your thoughts, I shall not take your ways as My ways. I will leave you to them.' 'You will be filled with the fruit of your own devices. I shall not incorporate your actions into My great scheme and purpose.' Men

'Would not know His ways,
And He has left them to their own.'

So here we have the solemn indictment brought by God's own voice against us all. The criminality of our unlikeness to Him rests upon our original likeness.

The unlikeness roots itself in thought, and blossoms in the poisonous flower of God-displeasing acts. It brings down upon our heads the solemn retribution of separation from Him, and being filled with the fruit of our own devices. Such is the indictment brought against every soul of man upon the earth, and there is built upon it the call to repentance and change, 'let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts.' The question rises in many a heart, 'How am I to forsake these paths on which my feet have so longed walked?' And if I do, what about all the years behind me, full of wild wanderings and thoughts in all of which God was not?

II. The second verse of our text meets that despairing question. It proclaims the elevation of God's ways and thoughts above ours, and thereon bases the assurance of pardon.

The relation is not only one of unlikeness and opposition, but it is also one of analogy and superiority. The former clause began with thoughts which are the parents of ways, and, as befits the all-seeing Judge, laid bare first the hidden discord of man's heart and will, ere it pointed to the manifest antagonism of his doings. This clause begins with God's ways, from which alone men can reach the knowledge of His thoughts. The first follows the order of God's knowledge of man; the second, that of man's knowledge of God.

It is a wonderful and beautiful turn which the prophet here gives to the thought of the transcendent elevation of God. The heavens are the very type of the unattainable; and to say that they are 'higher than the earth' seems, at first sight, to be but to say, 'No man hath ascended into the heavens,' and you sinful men must grovel here down upon your plain,

whilst they are far above, out of your reach. But the heavens bend. They are an arch, and not a straight line. They touch the horizon; and there come from them the sweet influences of sunshine and of rain, of dew and of blessing, which bring fertility. So they are not only far and unattainable, but friendly and beneficent, and communicative of good. Like them, in true analogy but yet infinite superiority to the best and noblest in man, is the boundless mercy of our pardoning God:

‘The glorious sky, embracing all,
Is like its Maker’s love,
Wherewith encompassed, great and small
In peace and order move.’

‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways.’ *The special ‘thought’ and ‘way’ which is meant here is God’s thought and way about sin. There are three points here on which I would touch for a moment. First, God’s way of dealing with sin is lifted up above all human example. There is such a thing as pardoning mercy amongst men. It is a faint analogy of, as it is an offshoot from, the divine pardon, but all the forgivingness of the most placable and long-suffering and gladly pardoning of men is but as earth to heaven compared with the greatness of His. Our forgiveness has its limitations. We sometimes cannot pardon as freely as we thought, because there blends with our indignation against evil a passionate personal sense of wrong done to us which we cannot get rid of, and that disturbs the freeness and the joyfulness of many a human pardon. But God’s pardon is undisturbed and hindered by any sense of personal resentment, though sin is an offense against Him, and in its freeness, its fulness, its frequency, and its sovereign power to melt away that which it forgives, it towers above the loftiest of earth’s beauties of forgiveness, as the starry heavens do above the flat plain.*

God’s pardon is above all human example, even though, having once been received by us, it ought to become for us the pattern by which we shape and regulate our own lives. Nothing of which we have any experience in ourselves or in others is more than as a drop to the ocean compared with the absolute fulness and perfect freeness and unwearied frequency of His forgiveness. ‘He will abundantly pardon.’ He will multiply pardon. ‘With Him there is plenteous redemption.’ We think we have stretched the elasticity of long suffering and forgiveness further than we might have been reasonably expected to do if seven times we forgive the erring brother, but God’s measure of pardon is seventy times seven, two perfectnesses multiplied into themselves perfectly; for the measure of His forgiveness is boundless, and there is no searching of the depths of His pardoning mercy. You cannot weary Him out, you cannot exhaust it. It is full at the end as at the beginning; and after all its gifts still it remains true, ‘With Him is the multiplying of redemption.’

Again, God's way of dealing with sin surpasses all our thought. All religion has been pressed with this problem, how to harmonise the perfect rectitude of the divine nature and the solemn claims of law with forgiveness. All religions have borne witness to the fact that men are dimly aware of the discord and dissonance between themselves and the divine thoughts and ways; and a thousand altars proclaim to us how they have felt that something must be done in order that forgiveness might be possible to an all-righteous and Sovereign Judge. The Jew knew that God was a pardoning God, but to him that fact stood as needing much explanation and much light to be thrown upon its relations with the solemn law under which he lived. We have Jesus Christ. The mystery of forgiveness is solved, in so far as it is capable of solution, in Him and in Him alone. His death somewhat explains how God is just and the Justifier of him that believeth. High above man's thoughts this great central mystery of the Gospel rises, that with God there is forgiveness and with God there is perfect righteousness. The Cross as the basis of pardon is the central mystery of revelation; and it is not to be expected that our theories shall be able to sound the depths of that great act of the divine love. Perhaps our plummetts do not go to the bottom of the bottomless after all; but is it needful that we should have gone to the rim of the heavens, and round about it on the outside, before we rejoice in the sunshine? Is it needful that we should have traversed the abysses of the heavens, and passed from star to star and told their numbers, before we can say that they are bright, or before we can walk in their light? We do not need to understand the 'how' in order to be sure of the fact that Christ's death is our forgiveness. Do not be in such a hurry as some people are nowadays, to declare that the doctrine of the Cross is contrary to man's conceptions. It *surpasses* them, and the very fact that it surpasses ought to stop us from pronouncing that it *contradicts*. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My thoughts higher than your thoughts.'

Lastly, we are taught here that God's way of dealing with sin is the very highest point of His self-revelation. There are many glories of the divine nature set forth in all His ways, but the loftiest of them all is this, that He can neutralise and destroy the fact of man's transgressing, wiping it out by pardon; and in the very act of pardon reconstituting in purity, and with a heart for all holiness, the sinful men whom He forgives. This is the shining apex of all that He has done, rising above creation and every other 'way' of His, as high as the loftiest heavens are above the earth.

Therefore, have a care of all forms of Christianity which do not put God's pardoning mercy in the foreground. They are maimed, and in them mist and cloud have covered with a roof of doleful grey the low-lying earth, and separated it from the highest heavens. The true glory of the revelation of God gathers round that central Cross; and there, in that Man dying upon it in the dark—the sacrifice for a world's sin—is the loftiest, most heavenly revelation of the all-revealing God. Strike out the Cross from Christianity, or weaken its aspect as a message of forgiveness and redemption, and you have quenched its brightest

light, and dragged it down to be but a little higher, if any, than many another scheme of other moralists, philosophers, poets, and religious teachers. The distinctive glory of Christianity is this—it tells us how God sweeps away sin.

And so my last thought is that, if we desire to see up on the highest heavens of God's character, we must go down into the depths of the consciousness of our own sin, and learn first, how unlike our ways and thoughts are to God, ere we can understand how high above us, and yet beneficently arching over us, are His ways and thoughts to us. We lie beneath the heavens like some foul bog full of black ooze, rotten earth and putrid water, where there is nothing green or fair. But the promise of the bending heavens, with their sweet influences, declares the possibility of reclaiming even that waste, and making it rejoice and blossom as the rose. Spread yourselves out, dear friends, in lowly submission and penitent acknowledgment beneath the all-vivifying mercy of that shining heaven of God's pardon; and then the old promise will be fulfilled in you: 'Truth shall spring out of the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven; yea, the Lord shall give that which is good, and our land'—barren and poisoned as it has been— responding to the skyey influences, 'shall yield her increase.'

WE SURE OF TO-MORROW? A NEW YEAR'S SERMON

'To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.'—[ISAIAH lvi. 12](#).

These words, as they stand, are the call of boon companions to new revelry. They are part of the prophet's picture of a corrupt age when the men of influence and position had thrown away their sense of duty, and had given themselves over, as aristocracies and plutocracies are ever tempted to do, to mere luxury and good living. They are summoning one another to their coarse orgies. The roystering speaker says, 'Do not be afraid to drink; the cellar will hold out. To-day's carouse will not empty it; there will be enough for to-morrow.' He forgets to-morrow's headaches; he forgets that on some tomorrow the wine will be finished; he forgets that the fingers of a hand may write the doom of the rioters on the very walls of the banqueting chamber.

What have such words, the very motto of insolent presumption and short-sighted animalism, to do with New Year's thoughts? Only this, that base and foolish as they are on such lips, it is possible to lift them from the mud, and take them as the utterance of a lofty and calm hope which will not be disappointed, and of a firm and lowly resolve which may ennoble life. Like a great many other sayings, they may fit the mouth either of a sot or of a saint. All depends on what the things are which we are thinking about when we use them. There are things about which it is absurd and worse than absurd to say this, and there are things about which it is the soberest truth to say it. So looking forward into the merciful darkness of another year, we may regard these words as either the expressions of hopes which it is folly to cherish, or of hopes that it is reasonable to entertain.

I. This expectation, if directed to any outward things, is an illusion and a dream.

These coarse revellers into whose lips our text is put only meant by it to brave the future and defy to-morrow in the riot of their drunkenness. They show us the vulgarest, lowest form which the expectation can take, a form which I need say nothing about now.

But I may just note in passing that to look forward principally as anticipating pleasure or enjoyment is a very poor and unworthy thing. We weaken and lower every day, if we use our faculty of hope mainly to paint the future as a scene of delights and satisfactions. We spoil to-day by thinking how we can turn it to the account of pleasure. We spoil to-morrow before it comes, and hurt ourselves, if we are more engaged with fancying how it will minister to our joy, than how we can make it minister to our duty. It is base and foolish to be forecasting our pleasures; the true temper is to be forecasting our work.

But, leaving that consideration, let us notice how useless such anticipation, and how mad such confidence, as that expressed in the text is, if directed to anything short of God.

We are so constituted as that we grow into a persuasion that what has been will be, and yet we can give no sufficient reason to ourselves of why we expect it. 'The uniformity of the course of nature is the corner-stone, not only of physical science, but, in a more homely form, of the wisdom which grows with experience, We all believe that the sun will rise to-

morrow because it rose to-day, and on all the yesterdays. But there was a today which had no yesterday, and there will be a to-day which will have no to-morrow. The sun will rise for the last time. The uniformity had a beginning and will have an end.

So, even as an axiom of thought, the anticipation that things will continue as they have been because they have been, seems to rest on an insufficient basis. How much more so, as to our own little lives and their surroundings! There the only thing which we may be quite sure of about to-morrow is that it will not be 'as this day.' Even for those of us who may have reached, for example, the level plateau of middle life, where our position and tasks are pretty well fixed, and we have little more to expect than the monotonous repetition of the same duties recurring at the same hour every day—even for such each day has its own distinctive character. Like a flock of sheep they seem all alike, but each, on closer inspection, reveals a physiognomy of its own. There will be so many small changes that even the same duties or enjoyments will not be quite the same, and even if the outward things remained absolutely unaltered, we who meet them are not the same. Little variations in mood and tone, diminished zest here, weakened power there, other thoughts breaking in, and over and above all the slow, silent change wrought on us by growing years, make the perfect reproduction of any past impossible. So, however familiar may be the road which we have to traverse, however uneventfully the same our days may sometimes for long spaces in our lives seem to be, though to ourselves often our day's work may appear as a mill-horse round, yet in deepest truth, if we take into account the whole sum of the minute changes in it and in us, it may be said of each step of our journey, 'Ye have not passed this way heretofore.'

But, besides all this, we know that these breathing-times when 'we have no changes,' are but pauses in the storm, landing-places in the ascent, the interspaces between the shocks. However hope may tempt us to dream that the future is like the present, a deeper wisdom lies in all our souls which says 'No.' Drunken bravery may front that darkness with such words as these of our text, but the least serious spirit, in its most joyous moods, never quite succeeds in forgetting the solemn probabilities, possibilities, and certainties which lodge in the unknown future. So to a wise man it is ever a sobering exercise to look forward, and we shall be nearest the truth if we take due account, as we do today, of the undoubted fact that the only thing certain about to-morrow is that it will not be as this day.

There are the great changes which come to some one every day, which may come to any of us any day, which will come to all of us some day. Some of us will die this year; on a day in our new diaries some of us will make no entry, for we shall be gone. Some of us will be smitten down by illness; some of us will lose our dearest; some of us will lose fortune. Which of us it is to be, and where within these twelve months the blow is to fall, are mercifully hidden. The only thing that we certainly know is that these arrows will fly. The thing we do not know is whose heart they will pierce. This makes the gaze into the darkness grave and solemn. There is ever something of dread in Hope's blue eyes.

True, the ministry of change is blessed and helpful; true, the darkness which hides the future is merciful and needful, if the present is not to be marred. But helpful and merciful as they are, they invest the unknown to-morrow with a solemn power which it is good, though sobering, for us to feel, and they silence on every lip but that of riot and foolhardy debauchery the presumptuous words, 'To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.'

II. But yet there is a possibility of so using the words as to make them the utterance of a sober certainty which will not be put to shame.

So long as our hope and anticipations creep along the low levels of earth, and are concerned with external and creatural good, their language can never rise beyond, 'To-morrow *may* be as this day.' Oftenest they reach only to the height of the wistful wish, 'May it be as this day!' But there is no need for our being tortured with such slippery possibilities. We may send out our hope like Noah's dove, not to hover restlessly over a heaving ocean of change, but to light on firm, solid certainty, and fold its wearied wings there. Forecasting is ever close by foreboding. Hope is interwoven with fear, the golden threads of the weft crossing the dark ones of the warp, and the whole texture gleaming bright or glooming black according to the angle at which it is seen. So is it always until we turn our hope away from earth to God, and fill the future with the light of His presence and the certainty of His truth. Then the mists and doubts roll away; we get above the region of 'perhaps' into that of 'surely'; the future is as certain as the past, hope as assured of its facts as memory, prophecy as veracious as history.

Looking forward, then, let us not occupy ourselves with visions which we know may or may not come true. Let us not feed ourselves with illusions which may make the reality, when it comes to shatter them, yet harder to bear. But let us make God in Christ our hope, and pass from peradventures to certitudes; from 'To-morrow may he as this day—would that it might,' to 'It shall be, it shall be, for God is my expectation and my hope.' We have an unchanging and an inexhaustible God, and He is the true guarantee of the future for us. The more we accustom ourselves to think of Him as shaping all that is contingent and changeful in the nearest and in the remotest to-morrow, and as being Himself the immutable portion of our souls, the calmer will be our outlook into the darkness, and the more bright will be the clear light of certainty which burns for us in it.

To-day's wealth may be to-morrow's poverty, to-day's health to-morrow's sickness, to-day's happy companionship of love to-morrow's aching solitude of heart, but to-day's God will be to-morrow's God, to-day's Christ will be to-morrow's Christ. Other fountains may dry up in heat or freeze in winter, but this knows no change, 'in summer and winter it shall be.' Other fountains may sink low in their basins after much drawing, but this is ever full, and after a thousand generations have drawn from it, its stream is broad and deep as ever. Other springs may be left behind on the march, and the wells and palm-trees of each Elim

on our road may be succeeded by a dry and thirsty land where no water is, but this spring follows us all through the wilderness, and makes music and spreads freshness ever by our path. We can forecast nothing beside; we can be sure of this, that God will be with us in all the days that lie before us. What may be round the next headland we know not; but this we know, that the same sunshine will make a broadening path across the waters right to where we rock on the unknown sea, and the same unmoving mighty star will burn for our guidance. So we may let the waves and currents roll as they list—or rather as He wills, and be little concerned about the incidents or the companions of our voyage, since He is with us. We can front the unknown to-morrow, even when we most keenly feel how solemn and sad are the things it may bring.

‘It can bring with it nothing
But He will bear us through.’

If only our hearts be fixed on God and we are feeding our minds and wills on Him, His truth and His will, then we may be quite certain that, whatever goes, our truest riches will abide, and whoever leaves our little company of loved ones, our best Friend will not go away. Therefore, lifting our hopes beyond the low levels of earth, and making our anticipations of the future the reflection of the brightness of God thrown on that else blank curtain, we may turn into the worthy utterance of sober and saintly faith, the folly of the riotous sensualist when he said, ‘To-morrow shall be as this day.’

The past is the mirror of the future for the Christian; we look back on all the great deeds of old by which God has redeemed and helped souls that cried to Him, and we find in them the eternal laws of His working. They are all true for to-day as they were at first; they remain true forever. The whole history of the past belongs to us, and avails for our present and for our future. ‘As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of our God.’

To-day’s experience runs on the same lines as the stories of the ‘years of old,’ which are ‘the years of the right hand of the Most High.’ Experience is ever the parent of hope, and the latter can only build with the bricks which the former gives. So the Christian has to lay hold on all that God’s mercy has done in the ages that are gone by, and because He is a ‘faithful Creator’ to transmute history into prophecy, and triumph in that ‘the God of Jacob is our refuge.’

Nor only does the record of what He has been to others come in to bring material for our forecast of the future, but also the remembrance of what He has been to ourselves. Has He been with us in six troubles? We may be sure He will not abandon us at the seventh. He is not in the way of beginning to build and leaving His work unfinished. Remember what He has been to you, and rejoice that there has been one thing in your lives which, you may be sure, will always be there. Feed your certain hopes for to-morrow on thankful remem-

branches of many a yesterday. 'Forget not the works of God,' that you may 'set your hopes on God.' Let our anticipations base themselves on memory, and utter themselves in the prayer, 'Thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.' Then the assurance that He whom we know to be good and wise and strong will shape the future, and Himself be the Future for us, will take all the fear out of that forward gaze, will condense our light and unsubstantial hopes into solid realities, and set before us an endless line of days, in each of which we may gain more of Him whose face has brightened the past and will brighten the future, till days shall end and time open into eternity.

III. Looked at in another aspect, these words may be taken as the vow of a firm and lowly resolve.

There is a future which we can but very slightly influence, and the less we look at that the better every way. But there is also a future which we can mould as we wish—the future of our own characters, the only future which is really ours at all—and the more clearly we set it before ourselves and make up our minds as to whither we wish it to be tending, the better. In that region, it is eminently true that 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.' The law of continuity shapes our moral and spiritual characters. What I am to-day, I shall increasingly be to-morrow. The awful power of habit solidifies actions into customs, and prolongs the reverberation of every note once sounded, along the vaulted roof of the chamber where we live. To-day is the child of yesterday and the parent of to-morrow.

That solemn certainty of the continuance and increase of moral and spiritual characteristics works in both good and bad, but with a difference. To secure its full blessing in the gradual development of the germs of good, there must be constant effort and tenacious resolution. So many foes beset the springing of the good seed in our hearts—what with the flying flocks of light-winged fugitive thoughts ever ready to swoop down as soon as the sower's back is turned and snatch it away, what with the hardness of the rock which the roots soon encounter, what with the thick-sown and quick-springing thorns—that if we trust to the natural laws of growth and neglect careful husbandry, we may sow much but we shall gather little. But to inherit the full consequences of that same law working in the growth and development of the evil in us, nothing is needed but carelessness.

Leave it alone for a year or two and the 'fruitful field will be a forest,' a jungle of matted weeds, with a straggling blossom where cultivation had once been.

But if humbly we resolve and earnestly toil, looking for His help, we may venture to hope that our characters will grow in goodness and in likeness to our dear Lord, that we shall not cast away our confidence nor make shipwreck of our faith, that each new day shall find in us a deeper love, a perfecter consecration, a more joyful service, and that so, in all the beauties of the Christian soul and in all the blessings of the Christian life, 'to-morrow

shall be as this day, and much more abundant.' 'To him that hath shall be given.' 'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more until the noontide of the day.'

So we may look forward undismayed, and while we recognise the darkness that wraps to-morrow in regard to all mundane affairs, may feed our fortitude and fasten our confidence on the double certainties that we shall have God and more of God for our treasure, that we shall have likeness to Him and more of likeness in our characters. Fleeting moments may come and go. The uncertain days may exercise their various ministry of giving and taking away, but whether they plant or root up our earthly props, whether they build or destroy our earthly houses, they will increase our riches in the heavens, and give us fuller possession of deeper draughts from the inexhaustible fountain of living waters.

How dreadfully that same law of the continuity and development of character works in some men there is no need now to dwell upon. By slow, imperceptible, certain degrees the evil gains upon them. Yesterday's sin smooths the path for to-day's. The temptation once yielded to gains power. The crack in the embankment which lets a drop or two ooze through is soon a great hole which lets in a flood. It is easier to find a man who has never done a wrong thing than to find a man who has done it only once. Peter denied his Lord thrice, and each time more easily than the previous time. So, before we know it, the thin gossamer threads of single actions are twisted into a rope of habit, and we are 'tied with the cords of our sins.' Let no man say, 'Just for once I may venture on evil; so far I will go and no farther.' Nay, 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.'

How important, then, the smallest acts become when we think of them as thus influencing character! The microscopic creatures, thousands of which will go into a square inch, make the great white cliffs that beetle over the wildest sea and front the storm. So, permanent and solid character is built up out of trivial actions, and this is the solemn aspect of our passing days, that they are making *us*.

We might well tremble before such a thought, which would be dreadful to the best of us, if it were not for pardoning mercy and renewing grace. The law of reaping what we have sown, or of continuing as we have begun, may be modified as far as our sins and failures are concerned. The entail may be cut off, and to-morrow need not inherit to-day's guilt, nor to-day's habits. The past may be all blotted out through the mercy of God in Christ. No debt need be carried forward to another page of the book of our lives, for Christ has given Himself for us, and He speaks to us all—'Thy sins be forgiven thee.' No evil habit need continue its dominion over us, nor are we obliged to carry on the bad tradition of wrongdoing into a future day, for Christ lives, and 'if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away, all things are become new.'

So then, brethren, let us humbly take the confidence which these words may be used to express, and as we stand on the threshold of a new year and wait for the curtain to be drawn, let us print deep on our hearts the uncertainty of our hold of all things here, nor seek to

build nor anchor on these, but lift our thoughts to Him, who will bless the future as He has blessed the past, and will even enlarge the gifts of His love and the help of His right hand. Let us hope for ourselves not the continuance or increase of outward good, but the growth of our souls in all things lovely and of good report, the daily advance in the love and likeness of our Lord.

So each day, each succeeding wave of the ocean of time shall cast up treasures for us as it breaks at our feet. As we grow in years, we shall grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, until the day comes when we shall exchange earth for heaven. That will be the sublimest application of this text, when, dying, we can calmly be sure that though to-day be on this side and to-morrow on the other bank of the black river, there will be no break in the continuity, but only an infinite growth in our life, and heaven's to-morrow shall be as earth's to-day, and much more abundant.

FLIMSY GARMENTS

‘Their webs shall not become garments.’—ISAIAH lix. 6.

‘I counsel thee to buy of me . . . white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear.’—REV. iii. 18.

The force of these words of the prophet is very obvious. He has been pouring out swift, indignant denunciation on the evil-doers in Israel; and, says he, ‘they hatch cockatrice’s eggs and spin spiders’ webs,’ pointing, as I suppose, to the patient perseverance, worthy of a better cause, which bad men will exercise in working out their plans. Then with a flash of bitter irony, led on by his imagination to say more than he had meant, he adds this scathing parenthesis, as if he said, ‘Yes, they spin spiders’ webs, elaborate toil and creeping contrivance, and what comes of it all! The flimsy foul thing is swept away by God’s besom sooner or later. A web indeed! but they will never make a garment out of it. It looks like cloth, but it is useless.’ That is the old lesson that all sin is profitless and comes to nothing.

I venture to connect with that strongly figurative declaration of the essential futility of godless living, our second text, in which Jesus uses a similar figure to express one aspect of His gifts to the believing soul. He is ready to clothe it, so that ‘being clothed, it will not be found naked.’

I. Sin clothes no man even here.

Notice in passing what a hint there is of the toil and trouble that men are so willing to take in a wrong course. Hatching and spinning both suggest protracted, sedulous labour. And then the issue of it all is— *nothing*.

Take the plainest illustrations of this truth first—the breach of common laws of morality, the indulgence, for instance, in dissipation. A man gets a certain coarse delight out of it, but what does he get besides? A weakened body, a tyrannous craving, ruined prospects, oftenest poverty and shame, the loss of self-respect and love; of moral excellences, of tastes for what is better. He is not a beast, and he cannot live for pure animalism without injuring himself.

Then take actual breaches of human laws. How seldom these ‘pay,’ even in the lowest sense. Thieves are always poor. The same experience of futility dogs all coarse and palpable breaches of morality. It is always true that ‘He that breaketh a hedge, a serpent shall bite him.’

The reasons are not far to seek. This is, on the whole, God’s world, a world of retribution. Things are, on the whole, on the side of goodness. God is in the world, and that is an element not to be left out in the calculation. Society is on the side of goodness to a large extent. The constitution of a man’s own soul, which God made, works in the same direction. Young men who are trembling on the verge of youthful yieldings to passion, are tempted to fancy that they can sow sin and not reap suffering or harm. Would that they settled it in their thoughts that he who fires a fuse must expect an explosion!

But the same rule applies to every godless form of life. Take our Manchester temptation, money or success in business. Take ambition. Take culture, literary fame. Take love and friendship. What do they all come to, if godless? I do not point to the many failures, but suppose success: would that make you a happy man? If you won what you wanted, would it be enough? What 'garments' for your conscience, for your sense of sin, for your infinite longings would success in any godless course provide? You would have what you wanted, and what would it bring with it? Cares and troubles and swift satiety, and not seldom incapacity to enjoy what you had won with so much toil. If you gained the prize, you would find clinging to it something that you did not bargain for, and that took most of the dazzle away from it.

II. The rags are all stripped off some day.

Death is a becoming naked as to the body, and as to all the occupations that terminate with bodily life. It necessarily involves the loss of possessions, the cessation of activities, the stripping off of self-deceptions, and exposure to the gaze of the Judge, without defence. The godless soul will 'be found naked' and ashamed. All 'works of darkness,' laden with rich blossom or juicy fruit though they have seemed to be, will then be seen to be in tragic truth 'fruitless.' A life's spinning and weaving, and not a rag to cover the toiler after all! Is that 'productive labour'?

III. Christ will clothe you.

'White raiment.' Pure character. Covering before the Judge. Festal robe of Victory.

'Buy'—how? By giving up self.

THE SUNLIT CHURCH

‘Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. 2. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. 3. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.’—[ISAIAH lx. 1-3](#).

The personation of Israel as a woman runs through the whole of this second portion of Isaiah’s prophecy. We see her thrown on the earth a mourning mother, a shackled captive. We hear her summoned once and again to awake, to arise, to shake herself from the dust, to loose the bands of her neck. These summonses are prophecies of the impending Messianic deliverance. The same circle of truths, in a somewhat different aspect, is presented in the verses before us. The prophet sees the earth wrapped in a funeral pall of darkness, and a beam of more than natural light falling on one prostrate form. The old story is repeated, Zion stands in the light, while Egypt cowers in gloom. The light which shines upon her is ‘the Glory of the Lord,’ the ancient brightness that dwelt between the cherubim within the veil in the secret place of the Most High, and is now come out into the open world to envelop the desolate captive. Thus touched by the light she becomes light, and in her turn is bidden to shine. There is a very remarkable correspondence reiterated in my text between the illuminating God and the illuminated Zion. The word for shine is connected with the word for light, and might fairly be rendered ‘lighten,’ or ‘be light.’ Twice the phrase ‘thy light’ is employed; once to mean the light which is thine because it shines on thee; once to mean the light which is thine because it shines from thee. The other word, three times repeated, for *rising*, is the technical word which expresses the sunrise, and it is applied both to the flashing glory that falls upon Zion and to the light that gleams from her. Touched by the sun, she becomes a sun, and blazes in her heaven in a splendour that draws men’s hearts. So, then, if that be the fair analysis of the words before us, they present to us some thoughts bearing on the Missionary work of the Church, and I gather them all up in three—the fact, the ringing summons, and the confident promise.

I. Now, as to the fact.

Beneath the poetry of my text there lie very definite conceptions of a very solemn and grave character, and these conceptions are the foundation of the ringing summons that follows, and which reposes upon a double basis—viz. ‘for thy light is come,’ and ‘for darkness covers the earth.’ There is a double element in the representation. We have a darkened earth, and a sunlit and a sunlike church; and unless we hold these two convictions—both of them—in firm grasp, and that not merely as convictions that influence our understanding, but as ever present forces acting on our emotions, our consciences, our wills, we shall not do the work which God has set us to do in the world. I need not dwell long on the former of these, or speak of that funeral pall that wraps the whole earth. Only remember that it is no darkness that came from His hand who forms the light and creates darkness, but is like

the smoke that lies over our great cities—the work of many an earth-born fire, whose half-consumed foulness hides the sun from us. If we take the sulphureous and smoky pall that wraps the earth, and analyse its contents, they are these: the darkness of ignorance, the darkness of sorrow, the darkness of sin. Of ignorance; for throughout the wide regions that lie beneath that covering spread over all nations is there any certitude about God, about man, about morals, about responsibilities, about eternity? Peradventures, guesses, dreams, precious fragments of truth, twisted in with the worst of lies, noble aspirations side by side with bestial representations—these are the things on which our brethren repose, or try to repose. We do not forget that light which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world.

We do not forget, of course, that everywhere there are feelings after Him, and everywhere there are gleams and glimpses of a vanishing light, else life were impossible; but oh, dear brethren, let us not forget either that the people sit in darkness of ignorance, which is the saddest darkness that can afflict men.

And it is a darkness of sorrow, for all the ills that flesh is heir to press, unalleviated and unsustained by any known helper in the heavens, upon millions of our fellows. They stand, as the great German poet describes himself as standing, in one of the most pathetic of his lyrics, before the marble image of the fair goddess, who has pity on her face and beauty raying from her limbs, but she has no arms. So tears fall undried. The light-hearted savage is a fiction. What a heavy gloom lies upon his past and his present, which darkens into an impenetrable mist that wraps and hides the future!

And the darkness is a darkness of sin as well as of sorrow and of ignorance. On that point I need not dwell. We all believe that all have ‘sinned and come short of the glory of God,’ and we all believe that idolatry, as we see it, and as it is wrought out, is an ally of impurity and of sin. The process is this: men make gods in their own image, and the gods make devils of the men. ‘They that make them are like unto them, so is every one that trusteth in them.’ We need no other principle than that to account for the degradation of heathenism and for the obscenities and foul transgression within the very courts of the temple.

Now, dear friends, that I may not dwell too long upon the A B C of our belief, let me urge you in one sentence to be on your guard against present-day tendencies which weaken the force of this solemn, tragical conviction as to the realities of heathendom. The new science of comparative religion has done much for us. I am not saying one word against this pursuit, or the conclusions which are drawn from it. But I pray you to remember that the underlying truths buried beneath the system that any men hold as their religion are one thing, and the practical working of that system, as we see it in daily life, is altogether another. The actual character of heathenism is not to be learned from the sacred books of all nations and the precious gleams of wisdom and feeling after the Divine which we recognise in man. As a simple matter of fact, all over the world the religion of heathen nations is a mass of obscenity, intertwined so closely with nobler thoughts that the two seem to be inseparable. Unalleviated

sorrows, hideous foulnesses, a gross ignorance covering all the most important realities for men—these are the facts with which we have to grapple. Do not let us forget them.

And on the other side, remember the contrasted picture here of the sunlit and sunny church. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of my text. 'We behold His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.' If you and I are Christians, we are bound to believe in Him as the exclusive source of certainty. We hear from Him no peradventure, but His word is, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you,' and on that word we rest all our knowledge of God, of duty, of man, and of the future. Instead of fears, doubt, perhapses, we have a living Christ and His rock-word. And in Him is all joy, and in Him is the cleansing from all sin. And this threefold radiance, into which the one pure light may be analysed, falls upon us. It falls all over the world as well; but they into whose hearts it has come, they whose faces are turned to it, they receive it in a sense in which the unreceptive and unresponsive darkness of the world does not. The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness will have none of it, and so it is darkness yet. The light shineth upon us, and if by His mercy we have opened our hearts to it, then, according to the profound teaching of this context, we are not only a sun-lighted but a sunlike Church, and to us the commandment comes, 'Arise, shine, for thy light is come,' and has turned thy poor darkness into a sun too.

If we have the light we shall be light. That is but putting in a picturesque form the very central truth of Christianity. The last word of the gospel is transformation. We become like Him if we live near Him, and the end for which the Master became like unto us in His incarnation and passion was that we might become like to Him by the reception of His very own life unto our souls. Light makes many a surface on which it falls flash, but in the optics of earth it is the rays which are not absorbed that are reflected; but in this loftier region the illumination is not superficial but inward, and it is the light which is swallowed up within us that then comes forth from us. Christ will dwell in our hearts, and we shall be like some poor little diamond-shaped pane of glass in a cottage window which, when the sun smites it, is visible over miles of the plain. If that sun falls upon us, its image will be mirrored in our hearts and flashing in our lives. The clouds that lie over the sunset, though in themselves they be but poor, grey, and moist vapour, when smitten by its beneficent radiance, become not unworthy ministers and attendants upon its glory. So, my brethren, it may be with us, for Christ comes to be our light, Because He is in us and with us we are changed into His likeness, and the names that are most appropriate to Him He shares with us. Is He the 'Son'?—we are sons. Is He 'the Light of the world'? His own lips tell us, 'Ye are the light of the world.' Is He the Christ? The Psalm says: 'Touch not my Christs, and do My prophets no harm.' Critics have quarrelled over these last chapters of the Book of Isaiah, as to whom the servant of the Lord is; whether he is the personal or collective Israel, whether he is Christ or His Church. Let us take the lesson that He and we are so united that His office that made

the union possible, wherein He was sacrificed on the Cross for us all—belongs by derivation to His servants, and that He, the Sun of Righteousness, moves in the heavens circled by many another sun.

So, dear friends, these two convictions of these two facts, the dark earth, the sunlit, sunlike church, lie at the basis of all our missionary work. If once we begin to doubt about them, if once we begin to think that men have got a good deal of light already, and can do very well without much more, or if we at all are hesitant about our possession of the light, and the certitudes and the joys that are in it, then good-bye to our missionary zeal. We shall soon begin to ask the question, ‘To what purpose is this waste?’—though the lips that first asked it, by the bye, did not much recommend it—and shall consider that money and resources and precious lives are too precious to be thrown away thus. But if we rightly appreciate the force of these twin principles, then we shall be ready to listen to the ringing summons.

II. We have here, in the second place, based upon these two facts, the summons to the Church. ‘Shine, for thy light is come.’ If we *have* light, we *are* light. If we are light, we shall shine; but the shining is not altogether spontaneous and effortless. Stars do not need to be bidden to shine nor candles either; but *we* need the exhortation, because there are many things that dim the brilliance of our light and interfere with its streaming forth. True, the property of light is to shine, but we can rob the inward light of its beams. The silent witness of a Christian life transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ is, perhaps, the best contribution that any of us can make to the spread of His kingdom. It is with us as it is with the great lights in the heavens. ‘There is no speech nor language; their voice is not heard,’ yet, ‘their line has gone through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.’ So we may quietly ray out the light in us and witness the transforming power of our Master by the transparent purity of our lives. But the command suggests likewise effort, and that effort must be in the direction of the specific vocal proclamation of His name.

I take both these methods of fulfilling the command into my view, in the further remarks that I make, and I put that which I have to say upon this into three sentences: if we are light, we shall be able to shine; if we are light, we are bound to shine; if we are light, we shall wish to shine. We shall be able to shine. And man can manifest what he is unless he is a coward. Any man can talk about the things that are interesting to him if only they are interesting to him. Any man that has Jesus Christ can say so; and perhaps the utterance of the simple personal conviction is the best method of proclaiming His name. All other things are superfluous. They are good when they come, they may be done without. Learning, eloquence, and the like of these, are the adornments of the lamp, but it does not matter whether the lamp be a gorgeous affair of gilt and crystal, or whether it be a poor piece of block tin; the main question is: are there wick and oil in it? The pitcher may be gold and silver, or costly china, or it may be a poor potsherd. Never mind. If there is water in it, it will be precious

to a thirsty lip. And so, dear brethren, I press this upon you: every Christian man has the power, if he is a Christian, to proclaim his Master, and if he has the Light he will be able to show it. I pause for a moment to say that this suggests for us the condition of all faithful and effectual witness for Jesus Christ. Cultivate understanding and all other faculties as much as you like: but oh! you Christian ministers, as well as others in less official and public positions, remember this: the fitness to impart is to possess, and that being taken for granted, the main thing is secured. As long as the electric light is in contact with the battery, so long does it burn. Electricians have been trying during the past few years to make accumulators, things in which they can store the influence and put it away in a corner and use it so that the light need not be in connection with the battery; and they have not succeeded—at least it is only a very partial success. You and I cannot start accumulators. Let us remember that personal contact with Jesus is power, and only that personal contact is so. Arise, shine! but if thou hast gone out of the light, thou wilt shine no more.

But again, if we are light we are bound to shine. That is an obvious principle. The capacity to shine is the obligation to shine, for we are all knit together by such mystical cords in this strange brotherhood of humanity that every one of us holds his possession as trust property for the use and behoof of others, and in the present case that which we have received, and the price at which we have received it, give an edge to the keenness of the obligation, and add a new grip to the stringency of the command. It is because Christ has given Himself thus to us that the possession of Him binds us to the imitation of His example, and the impartation of Him to all our brethren. The obligation lies at our doors, and cannot be delegated or devolved.

If we have light, we shall wish to shine. What shall we say about the Christian people who never really had such a wish? God forbid that I should say they have no light; but this I will say, it burns very dimly. Dear brethren, there is no better test of the depth and the purity of our personal attachment to, and possession of, our Master than the impulse that will spring from them to communicate Him to others. 'Necessity is laid upon me, yea, woe is me if I preach not.' That should be the word of every one of us, and it will be so in the measure in which we ourselves have thoroughly laid hold of Jesus Christ. 'This is a day of good tidings, and we cannot hold our peace,' said the handful of lepers in the camp. 'If we are silent some mischief will come to us.' 'Thy word, when I shut it up in my bones and said, I will speak no more in Thy name, was like a fire, and was weary of forbearing and could not stay.' Brother, do you know anything of the divine necessity to share your blessing with the men around you? Did you ever feel what it was to carry a burden of the Lord that drove you to speech, and left you no rest until you had done what it impelled you to do? If not, I beseech you to ask yourselves whether you cannot get nearer to the sun than away out there on the very edge of its system, receiving so few of its beams, and these so impotent that they can scarcely do more than melt the surface of the thick-ribbed ice that warps your spirit. If

we are light we shall be enabled, we shall be bound, we shall wish, to shine. Christian men and women, is this true of you?

III. Lastly, notice here the confident promise.

‘The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.’ If we have the light we shall be light; if we are light we shall shine, and if we shine we shall attract. Certainly men and women with the light of Christ in them will draw others to them, just as many an eye that cannot look undazzled upon the sun can look upon it mirrored upon some polished surface. A painter will fling upon his canvas a scene that you and I, with our purblind eyes, have looked at hundreds of times, and seen no beauty; but when we gaze on the picture, then we know how fair it is. There is an attractive power in the light of Christ shining from the face of a man. Of course, we have to moderate our expectations. We have to remember that whilst it is true that some men will come to the light, it is also true that some men ‘love the darkness, and will not come to the light because their deeds are evil’; and we have to remember that we have no right to anticipate rapid results. ‘An inheritance may be begotten hastily at the beginning, but the end thereof shall not be blessed,’ said the wise man; and the history of the Christian Church in many of its missionary operations is a sad commentary upon the saying. We must remember that we cannot estimate how long the preparation for a change, which will be developed swiftly, may be. The sun on autumn mornings shines upon the fog; and the people below, because there is a fog, do not know that it is shining; but it is doing its work on the upper layer all the while, and at length eats its way through the fleecy obstruction, which then swiftly disappears. That must be a very, very long day of which the morning twilight has been nineteen hundred years. Therefore, although the vision tarries, we may fall back with unswerving confidence on these words of my text—‘The Gentiles shall come to the brightness of thy rising.’

But after all this has been said, are you satisfied with the rate of progress, are you satisfied with the swiftness of the fulfilment of such hopes? Whose fault is it that the rate of progress is what it is? Yours and mine and our predecessors’. There is such a thing as ‘hasting the day of the Lord,’ and there is such a thing as protracting the time of waiting. Dear brethren, the secret of our slow growth at home and abroad lies in my text. Fulfil the conditions and you will get the result; but if you are not shining by a light which is Christ’s light, who promised that *it* would have attraction or draw men to it? A great deal of the work of the Christian Church—but do not let us hide ourselves in the generality of that word—a great deal of *our* work is artificial light, brewed out of retorts, and smelling sulphureous; and a great deal more of it is the phosphorescence that glimmers above decay. If the Christian Church has ceased in any measure, or in any of its members, to be able to attract by the exhibition of its light, let the Christian Church sit down and bethink itself of the sort of light it gives, and perhaps it will find a reason for its failure. It is Christ, the holy Christ, the loving

Christ, the Christ in us making us wise and gentle, it is the Christ manifested by word and by work, who will draw the nations to Him.

So, men and brethren, do you keep near your Master and live close by His side till you are drenched and saturated with His glory, and all your cold vapours turned into visible divinity and manifested Jesus. Keep near to Him. As long as a bit of scrap-iron touches a magnet, *it* is a magnet: as soon as the contact is broken it ceases to attract. If you live in the full sunshine of Christ and have Him, not merely playing upon the surface of your mind, but sinking deep down into it and transforming your whole being, then some men will, as they look at you, be filled with strange longings, and will say: 'Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.' So may you and I live, like the morning star, which, from its serene altitudes, touched into radiance by the sun unseen from the darkened plains, prophesies its rising to a sleeping world, and is content to be lost in the lustre of that unsetting Light!

WALLS AND GATES

‘Thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise’—[ISAIAH lx. 18](#).

The prophet reaches the height of eloquence in his magnificent picture of the restored Jerusalem, ‘the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.’ To him the city stands for the embodiment of the nation, and his vision of the future is moulded by his knowledge of the past. Israel and Jerusalem were to him the embodiments of the divine idea of God’s dwelling with men, and of a society founded on the presence of God in its midst. We are not forcing meanings on his words which they will not bear, when we see in the society of men redeemed by Christ the perfect embodiment of his vision. Nor is the prophet of the New Testament doing so when he casts his vision of the future which is to follow Resurrection and Judgment into a like form, and shows us the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.

The end of the world’s history is to be, not a garden but a city, a visible community, bound together because God dwells in it, and yet not having lost the blessed characteristics of the Garden from which man set out on his long and devious march.

The Christian form of the prophet’s vision is the Christian Society, and in that society, each individual member possesses his own portion of the common blessings, so that the great words of this text have a personal as well as a general application. We shall best bring out their rich contents by simply taking them as they stand, and considering what is promised by the two eloquent metaphors, which liken salvation to the walls and praise to the gates of the City of God.

I. Salvation is to be the city’s wall.

Another prophet foretold that the returning exiles would dwell in a Jerusalem that had no walls, ‘for I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about’; and Isaiah sang, ‘We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.’ There is no need for material defences for the community or the individual whom God defends. Would that the Church had lived up to the height of that great thought! Would that we each believed it true in regard to our own lives! There are three ways in which this promise may be viewed. We may think of ‘salvation’ as meaning God’s purpose to save. And then the comfort and sense of security will be derived from the thought that what He intends He performs, and that nothing can traverse that purpose except our own rebellions self-will. They whom God designs to keep are kept; they whom God wills to save are saved, unless they oppose His will, which opposition is in itself to be lost, and leads to ultimate and irreparable loss.

We may think of salvation as an actually begun work. Then the comfort and sense of security will be derived from that great work by which salvation has begun to be ours. The work of Christ keeps us from all danger, and no foes can make a breach in that wall, nor reach those who stand safe behind its strong towers.

We may think of salvation as a personal experience, and then the comfort and sense of security will be derived from that blessed consciousness of possessing in some measure at

least the spirit, not of bondage, but of a son. The consciousness of having 'salvation' is our best defence against spiritual foes and our best shield against temporal calamities.

It is good for us to live by faith, to be thrown back on our unseen protector, to feel with the psalmist, 'Thou, Lord, makest me to dwell in safety, though alone,' and to see the wall great and high that is drawn round our defenceless tent pitched on the sands of the flat desert.

II. Praise is to be the city's gate.

As to the Church, this prophecy anticipates the Apostle's teaching that the whole divine work of Redemption, from its fore-ordination before the foundation of the world, to its application to each sinful soul, is 'to the end that we should be unto the praise of His glory' or, as he elsewhere expands and enriches the expression, 'to the praise of the glory of His grace.'

We are 'secretaries of His praise.' A gate is that by which the safe inhabitants go out into the region beyond, and the outgoings of the active life of every Christian should be such as to make manifest the blessings that he enjoys within the shelter of the city's walls. Only if our hidden life is blessed with a begun salvation will our outward life be vocal with the music of praise. The gate will be praise if, and only if, the wall is salvation.

And praise is the gate by which we should go out into the world, even when the world into which we go is dark and the ways rough and hard. If we have the warm glow of a realised salvation in our hearts, sorrows that are but for a moment will not silence the voice of praise, though they may cast it into a minor key. The praise that rises from a sad heart is yet more melodious in God's ear than that which carols when all things go well. The bird that sings in a darkened cage makes music to its owner. 'Songs in the night' have a singular pathos and thrill the listeners. When we 'take the cup of salvation' and call on the name of the Lord, we shall offer to Him the sacrifices of thanksgiving, though He may recall some of the precious gifts that He gave. For He never takes away the wall of salvation which He has built around us, and as long as that wall stands, its gates will be praise. Submission, recognition of His will, and even 'silence because Thou didst it,' are praise to His ear.

THE JOY-BRINGER

‘To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.’—ISAIAH lxi. 3.

In the little synagogue of Nazareth Jesus began His ministry by laying His hand upon this great prophecy and saying, ‘It is Mine! I have fulfilled it.’ The prophet had been painting the ideal Messianic Deliverer, with special reference to the return from the Babylonian captivity. That was ‘the liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound,’ and about which he was thinking. But no external deliverance of that sort could meet the needs, nor satisfy the aspirations, of a soul that knows itself and its circumstances. Isaiah, or the man who goes by his name, spoke greater things than he knew. I am not going to enter upon questions of interpretation; but I may say, that no conception of Jewish prophecy can hold its ground which is not framed in the light of that great saying in the synagogue of Nazareth. So, then, we have here the ‘Man of Sorrows,’ as this very prophet calls Him in another place, presenting Himself as the Transformer of sorrow and the Bringer of joy, in regard to infinitely deeper griefs than those which sprang in the heart of the nation because of the historical captivity.

There is another beautiful thing in our text, which comes out more distinctly if we follow the Revised Version, and read ‘to give unto them a *garland* for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.’ There we have two contrasted pictures suggested: one of a mourner with grey ashes strewed upon his dishevelled locks, and his spirit clothed in gloom like a black robe; and to him there comes One who, with gentle hand, smoothes the ashes out of his hair, trains a garland round his brow, anoints his head with oil, and, stripping off the trappings of woe, casts about him a bright robe fit for a guest at a festival. That is the miracle that Jesus Christ can do for every one, and is ready to do for us, if we will let Him. Let us look at this wonderful transformation, and at the way by which it is effected.

The first point I would make is that—

I. Jesus Christ is the Joy-bringer to men because He is the Redeemer of men.

Remember that in the original application of my text to the deliverance from captivity, this gift of joy and change of sorrow into gladness was no independent and second bestowment, but was simply the issue of the one that preceded it, viz., the gift of liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that were bound. The gladness was a gladness that welled up in the heart of the captives set free, and coming out from the gloom of the Babylonian dungeon into the sunshine of God’s favour, with their faces set towards Zion ‘with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads.’

Now you have only to keep firm hold of this connection between these two thoughts to come to the crown and centre-point of this great prophecy, as far as it applies to us, and that is that it is Christ as the Emancipator, Christ as the Deliverer, Christ as He who brings

us out of the prison of bondage of the tyranny of sin, who is the great Joy-Giver. For there is no real, deep, fundamental and impregnable gladness possible to a man until his relations to God have been rectified, and until, with these rectified relations, with the consciousness of forgiveness and the divine love nestling warm at his heart, he has turned himself away from his dread and his sin, and has recognised in his Father God 'the gladness of his joy.'

Of course, there are many of us who feel that life is sufficiently comfortable and moderately happy, or at least quite tolerable, without any kind of reference to God at all. And in this day of growing materialism, and growing consequent indifference to the deepest needs of the spirit and the claims of religion, more and more men are finding, or fancying that they find, that they can rub along somehow, and have a fair share of gladness and satisfaction, without any need for a redeeming gospel and a forgiving Christ. But about all that kind of surface-joy the old words are true, 'even in laughter the heart is sorrowful,' and hosts of us are satisfied with joys which Jesus has no part in bringing, simply because our truest self has never once awakened. When it does—and perhaps it will do so with some of you, like the sleeping giant that is fabled to lie beneath the volcano whose sunny slopes are smiling with flowers—then you will find out that no one can bring real joy who does not take away guilt and sin.

Jesus Christ is the Joy-bringer, because Jesus Christ is the Emancipator. And true gladness is the gladness that springs from the conscious possession of liberty from the captivity which holds men slaves to evil and to their worst selves. Brethren, let us not fancy that these surface-joys are the joys adequate to a human spirit. They are ignoble, and they are infinitely foolish, because a touch of an awakened conscience, a stirring of one's deeper self, can scatter them all to pieces. So then, that is my first thought.

Let us suggest a second, that—

II. Jesus Christ transforms sorrow because He transforms the mourner.

In my text, all that this Joy-bringer and Transmuter of grief into its opposite is represented as doing is on the man who feels the sorrow. And although, as I have said, the text, in its original position, is simply a deduction from the previous great prophecy which did point to a change of circumstances, and although Jesus does bring the 'joy of salvation' by a great change in a man's relations, yet in regard to the ordinary sorrows of life, He affects these not so much by an operation upon our circumstances as by an operation upon ourselves, and transforms sorrow and brings gladness, because He transforms the man who endures it. The landscape remains the same, the difference is in the colour of the glass through which we look at it. Instead of having it presented through some black and smoked medium, we see it through what the painter calls a 'Claude Lorraine' glass, tinged golden, and which throws its own lovely light upon all that it shows us. It is possible—the eye that looks being purged and cleansed, so as to see more clearly—that the facts remaining identical, their whole aspect and bearing may be altered, and that which was felt, and rightly

felt, to be painful and provocative of sadness and gloom, may change its character and beget a solemn joy. It would be but a small thing to transform the conditions; it is far better and higher to transform us. We all need, and some of us, I have no doubt, do especially need, to remember that the Lord who brings this sudden transformation for us, does so by His operation within us, and, therefore, to that operation we should willingly yield ourselves.

How does He do this? One answer to that question is—by giving to the man with ashes on his head and gloom wrapped about his spirit, sources of joy, if he will use them, altogether independent of external circumstances.’ Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, and there be no fruit in the vine . . . yet will I rejoice in the Lord.’ And every Christian man, especially when days are dark and clouds are gathering, has it open to him, and is bound to use the possibility, to turn away his mind from the external occasions of sadness, and fix it on the changeless reason for deep and unchanging joy—the sweet presence, the strong love, the sustaining hand, the infinite wisdom, of his Father God.

Brethren, “the paradox of the Christian life” is, ‘as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.’ Christ calls for no hypocritical insensibility to ‘the ills that flesh is heir to.’ He has sanctioned by His example the tears that flow when death hurts loving hearts. He commanded the women of Jerusalem to ‘weep for themselves and for their children.’ He means that we should feel the full bitterness and pain of sorrows which will not be medicinal unless they are bitter, and will not be curative unless they cut deep. But He also means that whilst thus we suffer as men, in the depths of our own hearts we should, at the same time, be turning away from the sufferings and their cause, and fixing our hearts, quiet even then amidst the distractions, upon God Himself. Ah! it is hard to do, and because we do not do it, the promise that He will turn the sorrow into joy often seems to be a vain word for us.

It is not ours to rejoice as the world does, nor is it ours to sorrow as those who have no hope, or as those who have no God with them. But the two opposite emotions may, to a large extent, be harmonised and co-existent in a Christian heart, and, since they can be, they should be. The Christian in sorrow should be as an island set in some stormy sea, with wild waves breaking against its black, rocky coast, and the wind howling around it, but in the centre of it there is a deep and shady dell ‘that heareth not the loud winds when they call,’ and where not a leaf is moved by the tempest. In a like depth of calm and central tranquillity it is possible for us to live, even while the storm hurtles its loudest on the outermost coasts of our being; ‘as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,’ because the Joy-bringer has opened for us sources of gladness independent of externals.

And then there is another way by which, for us, if we will use our privileges, the sorrows of life may be transmuted, because we, contemplating them, have come to a changed understanding of their meaning. That is, after all, the secret charm to be commended to us at all times, but to be commended to us most when our hearts are heavy and the days are dark around us. We shall never understand life if we class its diverse events simply under the two

opposite categories of good— evil; prosperity—adversity; gains—losses; fulfilled expectations— disappointed hopes, Put them all together under one class—discipline and education; means for growth; means for Christlikeness. When we have found out, what it takes a long while for us to learn, that the lancet and the bandage are for the same purpose, and that opposite weathers conspire to the same end, that of the harvest, the sting is out of the sorrow, the poison is wiped off the arrow. We can have, if not a solemn joy, at least a patient acquiescence, in the diversities of operation, when we learn that the same hand is working in all for the same end, and that all that contributes to that end is good.

Here we may suggest a third way by which a transformation wrought upon ourselves transforms the aspect of our sorrows, and that is, that possessing independent sources of joy, and having come to learn the educational aspect of all adversity, we hereby are brought by Jesus Christ Himself to the position of submission. And that is the most potent talisman to transform mourning into praise. An accepted grief is a conquered grief; a conquered grief will very soon be a comforted grief; and a comforted grief is a joy. By all these means Jesus Christ, here and now, is transmuting the lead and iron of our griefs into the gold of a not ignoble nor transient gladness.

And may I say one last word? My text suggests not only these two points to which I have already referred—viz. that Jesus Christ is the Joy-bringer because He is the Emancipator, and that He transforms sorrow by transforming the mourner—but, lastly, that III. Jesus gives joy after sorrow.

‘Nevertheless, afterward’ is a great word of glowing encouragement for all sad hearts. ‘Fools and children,’ says the old proverb, ‘should not see half-done work’; at least, they should not judge it. When the ploughshare goes deep into the brown, frosty ground, the work is only begun. The earth may seem to be scarped and hurt, and, if one might say, to bleed, but in six months’ time ‘you scarce can see’ the soil for waving corn. Yes; and sorrow, as some of us could witness, is the forecast of purest joy. I have no doubt that there are men and women here who could say, ‘I never knew the power of God, and the blessedness of Christ as a Saviour, until I was in deep affliction, and when everything else went dark, then in His light I saw light.’ Do not some of you know the experience? and might we not all know it? and why do we not know it?

Jesus Christ, even here and now, gives these blessed results of our sorrows, if they are taken to the right place, and borne in right fashion. For it is they ‘that mourn in Zion’ that He thus blesses. There are some of us, I fear, whose only resource in trouble is to fling ourselves into some work, or some dissipation. There are people who try to work away their griefs, as well as people who try feverishly to drink them away. And there are some of us whose only resource for deliverance from our sorrows is that, after the wound has bled all it can, it stops bleeding, and the grief simply dies by lapse of time and for want of fuel. An

affliction wasted is the worst of all waste. But if we carry our grief into the sanctuary, then, here and now, it will change its aspect and become a solemn joy.

I say nothing about the ultimate result where every sorrow rightly borne shall be represented in the future life by some stage in grace or glory, where every tear shall be crystallised, if I might say so, into a flashing diamond, which flings off the reflection of the divine light, where 'there shall be no sorrow nor sighing, nor any more pain, for the former things are passed away.' When the lesson has been learned, God burns the rod.

But, brethren, there is another sadder transformation. I have been speaking about the transformation of sorrow into joy. There is also the transformation of joy into sorrow. I spoke a little while ago about the 'laughter' in which the heart is 'sorrowful,' and the writer from whom I quoted the words goes on to say, 'The end of that mirth is heaviness.' 'Thereof cometh in the end despondency and madness.' I saw, on a hilltop, a black circle among the grass and heather. There had been a bonfire there on Coronation Night, and it had all died down, and that was the end—a hideous ring of scorched barrenness amidst the verdure. Take care that your gladnesses do not die down like that, but that they are pure, and being pure are undying. Union with Jesus Christ makes sorrow light, and secures that it shall merge at last into 'joy unspeakable and full of joy.' I believe that separation from Christ makes joy shallow, and makes it certain that at last, instead of a garland, shall be ashes on the head, and that, instead of a festal robe, the spirit shall be wrapped in a garment of heaviness.

THE HEAVENLY WORKERS AND THE EARTHLY WATCHERS

‘For Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest . . . I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give Him no rest’—[ISAIAH lxii. 1, 6, 7.](#)

Two remarks of an expository nature will prepare the way for the consideration of these words. The first is that the speaker is the personal Messiah. The second half of Isaiah’s prophecies forms one great whole, which might be called The Book of the Servant of the Lord. One majestic figure stands forth on its pages with ever-growing clearness of outline and form. The language in which He is described fluctuates at first between the collective Israel and the one Person who is to be all that the nation had failed to attain. But even near the beginning of the prophecy we read of ‘My servant whom I uphold,’ whose voice is to be low and soft, and whose meek persistence is not to fail till He have ‘set judgment in the earth.’ And as we advance the reference to the nation becomes less and less possible, and the recognition of the person more and more imperative. At first the music of the prophetic song seems to move uncertainly amid sweet sounds, from which the true theme by degrees emerges, and thenceforward recurs over and over again with deeper, louder harmonies clustering about it, till it swells into the grandeur of the choral close.

In the chapter before our text we read, ‘The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek.’ Throughout the remainder of the prophecy, with the exception of one section which contains the prayer of the desolate Israel, this same person continues to speak; and who he is was taught in the synagogue of Nazareth. Whilst the preceding chapter, then, brings in Christ as proclaiming the great work of deliverance for which He is anointed of God, the following chapter presents Him as ‘treading the wine-press alone,’ which is a symbol of the future judgment by the glorified Saviour. Between these two prophecies of the earthly life and of the still future judicial energy, this chapter of our text lies, referring, as I take it, to the period between these two—that is, to all the ages of the Church’s development on earth. For these Christ here promises His continual activity, and His continual bestowment of grace to His servants who watch the walls of His Jerusalem.

The second point to be noticed is the remarkable parallelism in the expressions selected as the text: ‘I will not hold *My* peace’; the watchmen ‘shall never hold *their* peace.’ And His command to them is literally, ‘Ye that remind Jehovah—no *rest* (or silence) to you, and give not *rest* to Him.’

So we have here Christ, the Church, and God all represented as unceasingly occupied in the one great work of establishing ‘Zion’ as the centre of light, salvation, and righteousness for the whole world. The consideration of these three perpetual activities may open for us some great truths and stimulating lessons.

I. First, then, The glorified Christ is constantly working for His Church.

We are too apt to regard our Lord's real work as all lying in the past, and, from the very greatness of our estimate of what He has done, to forget the true importance of what He evermore does. 'Christ that died' is the central object of trust and contemplation for devout souls—and that often to the partial hiding of Christ that is 'risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.' But Scripture sets forth the present glorious life of our ascended Lord under two contrasted and harmonious aspects—as being rest, and as being continuous activity in the midst of rest. He was 'received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.' In that session on the throne manifold and mighty truths are expressed. It proclaims the full accomplishment of all the purposes of His earthly ministry; it emphasises the triumphant completion of His redeeming work by His death; it proclaims the majesty of His nature, which returns to the 'glory which He had with the Father before the world was'; it shows to the world, as on some coronation day, its King on His throne, girded with power and holding the far-reaching sceptre of the universe; it prophesies for men, in spite of all present sin and degradation, a share in the dominion which manhood has in Christ attained, for though we see not yet all things put under Him, we see Jesus crowned with glory and honour. It prophesies, too, His final victory over all that sets itself in unavailing antagonism to His love. It points us backward to an historical fact as the basis of all our hopes for ourselves and for our fellows, giving us the assurance that the world's deliverance will come from the slow operation of the forces already lodged in its history by Christ's finished work. It points us forwards to a future as the goal of all these hopes, giving us that confidence of victory which He has who, having kindled the fire on earth, henceforward sits at God's right hand, waiting in the calm and sublime patience of conscious omnipotence and clear foreknowledge 'until His enemies become His footstool.'

But whilst on the one side Christ rests as from a perfected work which needs no addition nor repetition, on the other He 'rests not day nor night.' And this aspect of His present state is as distinctly set forth in Scripture as that is. Indeed the words already quoted as embodying the former phase contain the latter also. For is not 'the right hand of God' the operative energy of the divine nature? And is not 'sitting at the right hand of God' equivalent to possessing and wielding that unwearied, measureless power? Are there not blended together in this pregnant phrase the ideas of profoundest calm and of intensest action, that being expressed by the attitude, and this by the locality? Therefore does the evangelist who uses the expression expand it into words which wonderfully close his gospel, with the same representation of Christ's swift and constant activity as he had been all along pointing out as characterising His life on earth. 'They went forth,' says he, 'and preached everywhere'—so far the contrast between the Lord seated in the heavens and His wandering servants fighting on earth is sharp and almost harsh. But the next words tone it down, and weave the two apparently discordant halves of the picture into a whole: 'the Lord *working* with them.' Yes!

in all His rest He is full of work, in all their toils He shares, in all their journeys His presence goes beside them. Whatever they do is His deed, and the help that is done upon the earth He doeth it all Himself.

Is not this blessed conviction of Christ's continuous operation in and for His Church that which underlies, as has often been pointed out, the language of the introduction to the Acts of the Apostles, where mention is made of the former treatise that told 'all which Jesus began both to do and teach'? The gospel records the beginning, the Book of the Acts the continuance; it is one biography in two volumes. Being yet present with them He spoke and acted. Being exalted He 'speaketh from heaven,' and from the throne carries on the endless series of His works of power and healing. The whole history is shaped by the same conviction. Everywhere 'the Lord' is the true actor, the source of all the life which is in the Church, the arranger of all the providences which affect its progress. The Lord adds to the Church daily. His name works miracles. To the Lord believers are added. His angel, His Spirit, bring messages to His servants. He appears to Paul, and speaks to Ananias. The Gentiles turn to the Lord because the hand of the Lord is with the preachers. The Lord calls Paul to carry the gospel to Macedonia. The Lord opens the heart of Lydia, and so throughout. Not 'the Acts of the Apostles,' but 'the Acts of the Lord in and by His servants,' is the accurate title of this book. The vision which flashed angel radiance on the face, and beamed with divine comfort into the heart, of Stephen, was a momentary revelation of an abiding reality, and completes the representation of the Saviour throned beside Almighty power. He beheld his Lord, not seated, as if careless or resting, while His servant's need was so sore, but as if risen with intent to help, and ready to defend—'*standing* on the right hand of God.'

And when once again the heavens opened to the rapt eyes of John in Patmos, the Lord whom he beheld was not only revealed as glorified in the lustre of the inaccessible light, but as actively sustaining and guiding the human reflectors of it. He 'holdeth the seven stars in His right hand,' and '*walketh* in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.'

Not otherwise does my text represent the present relation of Christ to His Church. It speaks of a continuous forth-putting of power, which it is, perhaps, not over-fanciful to regard as dimly set forth here in a twofold form—namely, work and word. At all events, that division stands out clearly on the pages of the New Testament, which ever holds forth the double truth of our Lord's constant action on, in, through, and for His Zion, and of our High Priest's constant intercession.

'I will not rest.' Through all the ages His power is in exercise. He inspires in good men all their wisdom, and every grace of life and character. He uses them as His weapons in the contest of His love with the world's hatred; but the hand that forged, and tempered, and sharpened the blade is that which smites with it; and the axe must not boast itself against him that heweth. He, the Lord of lords, orders providences, and shapes the course of the world for that Church which is His witness: 'Yea, He reproveth kings for their sake, saying,

Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm.' The ancient legend which told how, on many a well-fought field, the ranks of Rome discerned through the battle-dust the gleaming weapons and white steeds of the Great Twin Brethren far in front of the solid legions, is true in loftier sense in our Holy War. We may still see the vision which the leader of Israel saw of old, the man with the drawn sword in his hand, and hear the majestic word, 'As Captain of the Lord's host am I now come.' The Word of God, with vesture dipped in blood, with eyes alit with His flaming love, with the many crowns of unlimited sovereignty upon His head, rides at the head of the armies of heaven; 'and in righteousness doth He judge and make war.' For the single soul struggling with daily tasks and petty cares, His help is near and real, as for the widest work of the collective whole. He sends none of us tasks in which He has no share. The word of this Master is never 'Go,' but 'Come.' He unites Himself with all our sorrows, with all our efforts. 'The Lord also working with them' is a description of all the labours of Christian men, be they great or small.

Nor is this all. There still remains the wonderful truth of His continuous intercession for us. In its widest meaning that word expresses the whole of the manifold ways by which Christ undertakes and maintains our cause. But the narrower signification of prayer on our behalf is applicable, and is in Scripture applied, to our Lord. As on earth, the climax of all His intercourse with His disciples was that deep yet simple prayer which forms the Holy of Holies of John's Gospel, so in heaven His loftiest office for us is set forth under the figure of His intercession. Before the Throne stands the slain Lamb, and therefore do the elders in the outer circle bring acceptable praises. Within the veil stands the Priest, with the names of the tribes blazing on the breastplate and on the shoulders of His robes, near the seat of love, near the arm of power. And whatever difficulty may surround that idea of Christ's priestly intercession, this at all events is implied in it, that the mighty work which He accomplished on earth is ever present to the divine mind as the ground of our acceptance and the channel of our blessings; and this further, that the utterance of Christ's will is ever in harmony with the divine purpose. Therefore His prayer has in it a strange tone of majesty, and, if we may so say, of command, as of one who knows that He is ever heard: '*I will* that they whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am.'

The instinct of the Church has, from of old, laid hold of an event in His earthly life to shadow forth this great truth, and has bid us see a pledge and a symbol of it in that scene on the Lake of Galilee: the disciples toiling in the sudden storm, the poor little barque tossing on the waters tinged by the wan moon, the spray dashing over the wearied rowers. They seem alone, but up yonder, in some hidden cleft of the hills, their Master looks down on all the weltering storm, and lifts His voice in prayer. Then when the need is sorest, and the hope least, He comes across the waves, making their surges His pavement, and using all opposition as the means of His approach, and His presence brings calmness, and immediately they are at the land.

So we have not only to look back to the Cross, but up to the Throne. From the Cross we hear a voice, 'It is finished.' From the Throne a voice, 'For Zion's sake I will not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest.'

II. Secondly, Christ's servants on earth derive from Him a like perpetual activity for the same object.

The Lord, who in the former portion of these verses declares His own purpose of unwearyed action for Zion, associates with Himself in the latter portion the watchmen, whom He appoints and endows for functions in some measure resembling His own, and exercised with constancy derived from Him. 'I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night.' On the promise follows, as ever, a command (for all divine gifts involve the responsibility of their use, and it is not His wont either to bestow without requiring, or to require before bestowing), 'Ye that remind Jehovah, keep not silence.'

There is distinctly traceable before a reference to a two-fold form of occupation devolving on these Christ-sent servants. They are watchmen, and they are also God's remembrancers. In the one capacity as in the other, their voices are to be always heard. The former metaphor is common in the Old Testament, as a designation of the prophetic office, but, in the accordance with the genius of the New Testament, as expressed on Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out on the lowly as well as on the high, on the young as on the old, and all prophesied, it may be fairly extended to designated not to some selected few, but the whole mass of Christian people. The watchman's office falls to be done by all who see the coming peril, and have a tongue to echo it forth. The remembrancer's priestly office belongs to every member of Christ's priestly kingdom, the lowest and least of whom has the privilege of unrestrained entry into God's presence-chamber, and the power of blessing the world by faithful prayer. What should we think of a citizen in a beleaguered city, who saw enemy mounting the very ramparts, and gave no alarm because that was the sentry's business? In such extremity every man is a soldier, and women and children can at least keep watch and raise shrill cries of warning. The gifts, then, here promised, and the duties that flow from them, are not the prerogatives or the tasks of any class or order, but the heritage and the burden of the Lord to every member of His Church.

Our voices should ever be heard on earth. A solemn message is committed to us, by the very fact of our belief in Jesus Christ and His work. With that faith come responsibilities of which no Christian can denude himself. To warn the wicked man to turn from His wickedness; to blow the trumpet when we see the sword coming; to catch ever gleaming on the horizon, like the spears of an army through the dust of the march, the outriders and advance-guard of the coming of Him whose coming is life or death to all, and to lift up our voices with strength and say, 'Behold your God'; to peal into the ears of men, sunken in earthliness and dreaming of safety, the cry which may startle and save; to ring out in glad

tones to all who wearily ask, 'Watchman, what of the night? will the night soon pass?' the answer which the slow dawning east has breathed into our else stony lips, 'The morning cometh'; to proclaim Christ, who came once to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, who comes ever, through the ages, to bless and uphold the righteousness which He loves and to destroy the iniquity which He hates, who will come at the last to judge the world—this is the never-ending task of the watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem. The New Testament calls it 'preaching,' proclaiming as a herald does. And both metaphors carry one common lesson of the manner in which the work should be done. With clear loud voice, with earnestness and decision, with faithfulness and self-oblivion, forgetting himself in his message, must the herald sound out the will of his King, the largess of his Lord. And the watchman who stands on his watch-tower whole nights, and sees foemen creeping through the gloom, or fire bursting out among the straw-roofed cottages within the walls, shouts with all his might the short, sharp alarm, that wakes the sleepers to whom slumber were death. Let us ponder the pattern.

Our voices should ever be heard in heaven. They who trust God remind Him of His promises by their very faith; it is a mute appeal to His faithful love, which He cannot but answer. And, beyond that, their prayers come up for a memorial before God, and have as real an effect in furthering Christ's kingdom on earth as is exercised by their entreaties and proclamations to men.

How distinctly these words of our text define the region within which our prayers should ever move, and the limits which bound their efficacy! They *remind* God. Then the truest prayer is that which bases itself on God's uttered will, and the desires which are born of our own fancies or heated enthusiasms have no power with Him. The prayer that prevails is a reflected promise. Our office in prayer is but to receive on our hearts the bright rays of His word, and to flash them back from the polished surface to the heaven from whence they came.

These two forms of action ought to be inseparable. Each, if genuine, will drive us to the other, for who could fling himself into the watchman's work, with all its solemn consequences, knowing how weak his voice was, and how deaf the ears that should hear, unless he could bring God's might to his help? and who could honestly remind God of His promises and forget his own responsibilities? Prayerless work will soon slacken, and never bear fruit; idle prayer is worse than idle. You cannot part them if you would. How much of the busy occupation which is called 'Christian work' is detected to be spurious by this simple test! How much so-called prayer is reduced by it to mere noise, no better than the blaring trumpet or the hollow drum!

The power for both is derived from Christ. He sets the watchmen; He commands the remembrancers. From Him flows the power, from His good Spirit comes the desire, to proclaim the message. That message is the story of His life and death. But for what He does

and is we should have nothing to say; but for His gift we should have no power to say it; but for His influence we should have no will to say it. He commands and fits us to be intercessors, for His mighty work brings us near to God; He opens for us access with confidence to God. He inspires our prayers. He 'hath made us priests to God.'

And, as the Christian power of discharging these twofold duties is drawn from Christ, so our pattern is His manner of discharging them, and the condition of receiving the power is to abide in Him. He proposes Himself as our Example. He calls us to no labours which He has not Himself shared, nor to any earnestness or continuance in prayer which He has not Himself shown forth. This Master works in front of His men. The farmer that goes first among all the sowers, and heads the line of reapers in the yellowing harvest-field, may well have diligent servants. Our Master 'went forth, weeping, bearing precious seed,' and has left it in our hands to sow in all furrows. Our Master is the Lord of the harvest, and has borne the heat of the day before His servants. Look at the amount of work, actual hard work, compressed into these three short years of His ministry. Take the records of the words He spake on that last day of His public teaching, and see what unwearied toil they represent. Ponder upon that life till you catch the spirit which breathed through it all, and, like Him, embrace gladly the welcome necessity of labour for God, under the sense of a vocation conferred upon you, and of the short space within which your service must be condensed. 'I must work the work of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.'

Christ asks no romantic impossibilities from us, but He does ask a continuous, systematic discharge of the duties which depend on our relation to the world, and on our relation to Him. Let it be our life's work to show forth His praise; let the very atmosphere in which we move and have our being be prayer. Let two great currents set ever through our days, which two, like the great movements in the ocean of the air, are but the upper and under halves of the one movement—that beneath with constant energy of desire rushing in from the cold poles to be warmed and expanded at the tropics, where the all-moving sun pours his directest rays; that above charged with rich gifts from the Lord of light, glowing with heat drawn from Him, and made diffusive by His touch, spreading itself out beneficent and life-bringing into all colder lands, swathing the world in soft, warm folds, and turning the polar ice into sweet waters.

In the tabernacle of Israel stood two great emblems of the functions of God's people, which embodied these two sides of the Christian life. Day by day, there ascended from the altar of incense the sweet odour, which symbolised the fragrance of prayer as it wreathes itself upwards to the heavens. Night by night, as darkness fell on the desert and the camp, there shone through the gloom the hospitable light of the great golden candlestick with its seven lamps, whose steady rays outburned the stars that paled with the morning. Side by

side they proclaimed to Israel its destiny to be the light of the world, to be a kingdom of priests.

The offices and the honour have passed over to us, and we shall fall beneath our obligations unless we let our light shine constantly before men, and let our voice rise like a fountain night and day' before God— even as He did who, when every man went to his own house, went alone to the Mount of Olives, and in the morning, when every man returned to his daily task, went into the Temple and taught. By His example, by His gifts, by the motive of His love, our resting, working Lord says to each of us, 'Ye that remind God, keep not silence.' Let us answer, 'For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest.'

III. Finally, The constant activity of the servants of Christ will secure the constant operation of God's power.

'Give Him no rest': let there be no cessation to Him. These are bold words, which many people would not have been slow to rebuke if they had been anywhere else than in the Bible. Those who remind God are not to suffer Him to be still. The prophet believes that they can regulate the flow of divine energy, can stir up the strength of the Lord.

It is easy to puzzle ourselves with insoluble questions about the co-operation of God's power and man's; but practically, is it not true that God reaches His end, of the establishment of Zion, through the Church? He has not barely willed that the world should be saved, nor barely that it should be saved through Christ, nor barely that it should be saved through the knowledge of Christ; but His will is that the world shall be saved, by faith in the person and work of Christ, proclaimed as a gospel by men who believe it. And, as a matter of fact, is it not true that the energy with which God's power in the gospel manifests itself depends on the zeal and activity and prayerfulness of the Church? The great reservoir is always full—full to the brim; however much may be drawn from it, the water sinks not a hairsbreadth; but the bore of the pipe and the power of the pumping-engine determine the rate at which the stream flows from it. 'He could there do no mighty works because of their unbelief.' The obstruction of indifference dammed back the water of life. The city perishes for thirst if the long line of aqueduct that strides across the plain towards the home of the mountain torrents be ruinous, broken down, choked with rubbish.

God is always the same—equally near, equally strong, equally gracious. But our possession of His grace, and the impartation of His grace through us to others, vary, because our faith, our earnestness, our desires, vary. True, these no doubt are also His gifts and His working, and nothing that we say now touches in the least on the great truth that God is the sole originator of all good in man; but while believing that, as no less sure in itself than blessed in its message of confidence and consolation to us, we also have to remember, 'If any man open the door, I will come in to him.' We may have as much of God as we want, as much as we can hold, far more than we deserve. And if ever the victorious power of His

Church seems to be almost paling to defeat, and His servants to be working no deliverance upon the earth, the cause is not to be found in Him who is 'without variableness,' nor in His gifts, which are 'without repentance,' but solely in us, who let go our hold of the Eternal Might. No ebb withdraws the waters of that great ocean; and if sometimes there be sand and ooze where once the flashing flood brought life and motion, it is because careless warders have shut the sea-gates.

An awful responsibility lies on us. We can resist and refuse, or we can open our hearts and draw into ourselves His strength. We can bring into operation those energies which act through faithful men faithfully proclaiming the faithful saying; or we can limit the Holy One of Israel. 'Why could not we cast him out?' 'Because of your unbelief.'

With what grand confidence, then, may the weakest of us go to his task. We have a right to feel that in all our labour God works with us; that, in all our words for Him, it is not we that speak, but the Spirit of our Father that speaks in us; that if humbly and prayerfully, with self-distrust and resolute effort to crucify our own intrusive individuality, we wait for Him to enshrine Himself within us, strength will come to us, drawn from the deep fountains of God, and we too shall be able to say, 'Not I, but the grace of God in me.'

How this sublime confidence should tell on our characters, destroying all self-confidence, repressing all pride, calming all impatience, brightening all despondency, and ever stirring us anew to deeds worthy of the 'exceeding greatness of the power which worketh in us'—I can only suggest.

On all sides motives for strenuous toil press in upon us—chiefly those great examples which we have now been contemplating. But, besides these, there are other forms of activity which may point the same lesson. Look at the energy *around* us. We live in a busy time. Life goes swiftly in all regions. Men seem to be burning away faster than ever before, in an atmosphere of pure oxygen. Do we work as hard for God as the world does for itself? Look at the energy *beneath* us: how evil in every form is active; how lies and half-truths propagate themselves quick as the blight on a rose-tree; how profligacy, and crime, and all the devil's angels are busy on his errands. If *we* are sitting drowsy by our camp-fires, the enemy is on the alert. You can hear the tramp of their legions and the rumble of their artillery through the night as they march to their posts on the field. It is no time for God's sentinels to nod. If they sleep, the adversary does not, but glides in the congenial darkness, sowing his baleful tares. Do we work as hard for God as the emissaries of evil do for their master? Look at the energy *above* us. On the throne of the universe is the immortal Power who slumbereth not nor sleepeth. Before the altar of the heavens is the Priest of the world, the Lord of His Church, 'who ever liveth to make intercession for us.' Round Him stand perfected spirits, the watchmen on the walls of the New Jerusalem, who 'rest not day and night, saying, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.' From His presence come, filling the air with the rustle of their swift wings and the light of their flame-faces, the ministering spirits who evermore 'do

His commandments, hearkening to the voice of His word.' And we, Christian brethren, where are we in all this magnificent concurrence of activity, for purposes which ought to be dear to our hearts as they are to the heart of God? Do we work for Him as He and all that are with Him do? Is His will done by us on earth, as it is heaven?

Alas! alas! have we not all been like those three apostles whose eyes were heavy with sleep even while the Lord was wrestling with the tempter under the gnarled olives in the pale moonlight of Gethsemane? Let us arouse ourselves from our sloth. Let us lift up our cry to God: 'Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord, as in the ancient days in the generations of old'; and the answer shall sound from the heavens to us as it did to the prophet, an echo of his prayer turned into a command, 'Awake, awake, put on *thy* strength, O Zion.'

MIGHTY TO SAVE

‘Mighty to save.’—[ISAIAH lxiii. 1.](#)

We have here a singularly vivid and dramatic prophecy, thrown into the form of a dialogue between the prophet and a stranger whom he sees from afar striding along from the mountains of Edom, with elastic step, and dyed garments. The prophet does not recognise him, and asks who he is. The Unknown answers, ‘I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save.’ Another question follows, seeking explanation of the splashed crimson garments of the stranger, and its answer tells of a tremendous act of retributive destruction which he has recently launched at the nations hostile to ‘My redeemed.’

Now we note that this prophecy follows, both in the order of the book and in the evolution of events, on those in [chapter lxi.](#), which referred to our Lord’s work on earth, and in [chapter lxii.](#), which has for part of its theme His intercession in heaven. And we are entitled to take the view that the place as well as the substance of this prophecy referred to the solemn act of final Judgment in which the returning Lord will manifest Himself. Very significant is it that the prophet does not recognise in this Conqueror, with blood-bespattered robes, the meek sufferer of [chapter liii.](#), or Him who in [chapter lxi.](#) came to bind up the broken-hearted. And very instructive is it that the title in our text comes from the stranger’s own lips, as relevant to the tremendous act of judgment from which He is seen returning. The title might seem rather to look back to the former manifestation of Him as bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows. It does indeed, thank God, look back to that never-to-be-forgotten miracle of mercy and power, but it also brings within the sweep of His saving might the judgment still to come.

I. The mighty Saviour as made known in the past and present.

We think much of the meek and gentle side of Christ’s character. Perhaps we do not think enough of the strength of it. We trace His great sacrifice to His love, and we can never sufficiently adore that incomparable manifestation of a love deeper than our plummet can fathom. But probably we do not sufficiently realise what gigantic strength went to the completion of that sacrifice. We know the solemn imagining of a great artist who has painted a colossal Death overbearing the weak resistance of a puny Love; but here love is the giant, and his sovereign command brings Death obedient to it, to do his work. Yes, that weak man hanging on the Cross is therein revealed as ‘the power of God.’ Strange clothing of weakness which yet cannot hide the mighty limbs that wear it!

And if we think of our Lord’s life we see the same combination of gentleness and power. His very name rings with memories of the captain whose one commanded duty was to ‘be strong and of a good courage.’

In Him was all strength of manhood—inflexible, iron will, unchanging purpose, strength from consecration, strength from righteousness. In Him was the heroism of prophets and martyrs in supreme degree.

In Him was the strength of indwelling Divinity. He fought and conquered all man's enemies, routed sin, and triumphed over Death.

In the Cross we see divine power in operation in its noblest form, in its intensest energy, in its widest sweep, in its most magnificent result. He is able to save, to save all, to save any.

He is mighty to save, and is able to save unto the uttermost, because He lives for ever, and His power is eternal as Himself.

II. The mighty Saviour as to be manifested in the future.

Clearly the imagery of the context describes a tremendous act of judgment. And as clearly the Apocalyptic Seer understood this prophecy as not only pointing to Christ, but as to be fulfilled in the final act of judgment. He quotes its words when he paints his magnificent vision of the Conqueror riding forth on his white horse, with garments sprinkled with blood and treading the 'winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.' And the vision is interpreted unmistakably when we read that, though this Conqueror had a name unknown to any but Himself, 'His name is called the Word of God.' So the unity of person in the Word made flesh who dwelt among us, full of grace and of this Mighty One girt for battle, is taught.

Keeping fast hold of this clue, the contrast between the characteristics of the historical Jesus and of the rider on the white horse becomes solemn and full of warning. And the contrast between the errand of the historical Jesus and that of the Conqueror bids us ponder on the possibilities that may sleep in perfect love. We have to widen our conceptions, if we have thought of our Jesus only as love, and have thought of love as shallow, as most men do. We are sometimes told that these two pictures, that of the Christ of the Gospels and that of the Christ of the Apocalypse, are incapable of being fused together in one original. But they can be stereoscoped, if we may say so. And they must be, if we are ever to understand the greatness of His love or the terribleness of His judgments. 'The wrath of the Lamb' sounds an impossibility, but if we ponder it, we shall find depths of graciousness as well as of awe in it.

Let us learn that the righteous Judge is logically and chronologically the completion of the picture of the merciful Saviour. In this age there is a tendency to treat sin with too much pity and too little condemnation. And there is not a sufficiently firm grasp of the truth that divine love must be in irreconcilable antagonism with human sin, and can do nothing but chastise and smite it.

III. The saving purpose of even that destructive might.

Through the whole Old Testament runs the longing that God would 'awake' to smite evil.

The tragedy of the drowned hosts in the Red Sea, and Miriam and her maidens standing with their timbrels and shrill song of triumph on the bank, is a prophecy of what shall be. 'Ye shall have a song as in the night a holy feast is kept, and gladness of heart as when one

goeth with a pipe to come unto the mountain of the Lord.' And at the thought of that solemn act of judgment they who love the Judge, and have long known Him, 'may lift up their heads' in the confidence that 'their redemption draweth nigh.' That is the last, and in some sense the mightiest, greatest act by which He shows Himself 'mighty to save His redeemed.'

So we may, like the prophet, see that swift form striding nearer and nearer, but, unlike the prophet, we need not to ask, 'Who is this that cometh?' for we have known Him from of old, and we remember the voice that said, 'This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.' 'Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness before Him in the day of judgment.'

THE WINEPRESS AND ITS TREADER

‘Wherefore art thou red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the winefat? I have trodden the winepress alone.’—ISAIAH lxiii. 2, 3.

The structure of these closing chapters is chronological, and this is the final scene. What follows is epilogue. The reference of this magnificent imagery to the sufferings of Jesus is a complete misapprehension. These sufferings were dealt with once for all in [chapter liii.](#), and it is Messiah triumphant who has filled the prophet’s vision since then.

I. The treading of the winepress.

The nations are flung into the press, as ripe grapes. The picture is plainly a figure of some tremendous judgment in which the powers that oppose the majestic march of the triumphant Messiah will be crushed and trampled to ruin. They are trodden ‘in Mine anger, and their life-blood is sprinkled on My garments.’ It is He who crushes, not He who is crushed. The winepress which He treads is the ‘winepress of the wrath of Almighty God,’ and His treading of it is His executing of God’s judgments on those whose antagonism to Him and to His ‘redeemed’ has brought them within their sweep. The prophetic imagination kindles and casts its thought into that terrible picture, which some fastidious people would think coarse, of a peasant standing up to his knees in a vat heaped with purple clusters, and fiercely trampling them down, while the red juice splashes upon his girt-up clothes.

The prophet does not date his vision. It has been realised many a time, and will be many a time still. Wherever opposition to Christ and His kingdom has reached ripeness, wherever antagonistic tendencies have borne fruit which has matured, the winepress is set up and the treading begins. ‘Wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.’ ‘Immediately he putteth in the sickle because the harvest is done.’ The judgments tarry long, and Christ’s servants, oppressed or hard pressed, get impatient, and cry ‘How long, O Lord, dost Thou not judge? It is time for Thee to work.’ But long patience precedes the divine awaking, for it is not God’s way nor Christ’s to cut down even a cumbering tree, until the possibility of its bearing fruit is plainly ended, and the last use that He makes of anything is to burn it. The repeated settings up of Christ’s winepress have all been one in principle, and they all point onwards to a final one. There have been many ‘days of the Lord,’ and if men were wise and ‘observed these things,’—which most of them are not,—they would see that these lesser ‘days’ made a ‘final great and terrible day of the Lord’ supremely probable, and in perfect analogy with all that experience and history have testified as to the method of the divine government.

Surely it is strange that the groundless expectation of the unbroken continuance of the present order should be so strong that many should utterly ignore the truth taught by such teachers as these, and reiterated by science, which declares that the physical universe had a beginning and will have an end, and confirmed by Jesus Himself. There will come a to-morrow when the sun will *not* rise. There will come a to-morrow which will be ‘*the day of*

the Lord,' of which all these earlier and partial epochs of judgment were but precursors and prophets.

II. The Treader of the Winepress.

The context clearly shows that, in the prophet's view, the suffering Messiah in His exalted royalty is the agent of this, as of all divine acts. He is clothed with majesty, and it is 'in His hand,' or through His agency, that all 'the pleasure of the Lord' is brought to pass. The contrast with the figure in [chap. liii.](#) is ever to be kept in view. The lowliness, the weales and bruises, the form without comeliness are gone, and for these we see a conqueror, glorious in apparel and striding onwards in conscious strength.

But the access of majesty does not imply the putting off of lowliness and meekness. There is much that is severe and terrible in the figure that rises here before the prophet's vision, but both aspects equally belong to the glorified Christ, and that duality in His character makes each element more impressive. His long-suffering mercy and more than human tenderness do not hamper His arm when it is bared to smite; His judicial severity does not dam up the flow of His mercy and tenderness. When He was on earth, He wept over Jerusalem, but His tears did not hinder His pronouncing woe on the city. His love leads Him to warn before He smites, but it does not contradict His threatenings, nor augur our impunity. Nay rather, love compels Him to smite. And, more terrible still, it is His very love that smites most severely hearts that have rejected it and learn their folly and sin too late.

III. Why the winepress is trodden.

The context tells us. The triumphant figure, seen by the prophet striding onwards from Edom, answers the question as to His identity with, 'I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save.' Then the treading of the winepress, from which He is represented as coming, is regarded as an exemplification of both these characteristics. It is a great act of righteousness. It is a great act of salvation. Similarly, He is represented as having been moved to that destructive judgment by the 'vengeance' that burned in His heart, and by His seeing that there were none to help His 'redeemed.'

So, then, the destructive act is a manifestation of Righteousness, which in such a connection means retributive justice. Awe-inspiring as it may be, the thunderstorm brings relief to a world sweltering in a stagnant atmosphere, and each blinding flash freshens the air. 'When the wicked perish, there is shouting.' The destruction of some hoary evil that has long afflicted humanity and blocked the progress of the kingdom which is 'righteousness and peace and joy,' is a good. Christ's 'terrible things' are all 'in righteousness,' and meant to set Him forth as 'the confidence of all the ends of the earth.' To clear His character and government from all suspicion of moral indifference, to demonstrate by facts which the blindest can see, that it is not all the same to Him whether men are good or bad, to write in great letters which, like the capitals on a map, stretch across a whole land, 'The Judge of all

the earth shall do right'—surely these are worthy ends to move even the loving Christ to tread the winepress.

Further, His destructive judgments, however terrible, will always be accurately measured by righteousness. They are not outbursts of feeling; they are in exact correspondence with the evils that bring them down. The lava flows according to its own density and the lie of the land which it covers. These judgments are deformed by no undue severity; no base elements of temper, no errors as to the degree of criminality mar them. They are calm and absolutely accurate judgments of Him who is not only just but Justice.

But the context further teaches us that the true point of view from which to regard Christ's treading of the winepress is to think of it as redemptive and contributory to the salvation of 'My redeemed.' Therefore there follows immediately on this picture of the conqueror treading the peoples in His fury and pouring their life-blood on the earth, the song of the delivered. Up through the troubled air, heavy with thunder-clouds, soars their praise, as a lark might rise and pour its strains above a volcano in eruption—'I will mention the loving kindness of the Lord, and the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord hath bestowed on us and the great goodness toward the house of Israel which He hath bestowed on them, according to His mercies, and according to the multitude of His loving kindnesses.' Pharaoh is drowned in the Red Sea; Miriam and her maidens on the bank clash their cymbals, and lift shrill voices in their triumphant hymn. Babylon sinks like a millstone in the great waters—'and I heard as it were a great voice of a great multitude in heaven saying, Hallelujah; salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and righteous are His judgments.' The innermost impulse of judgment is love.

THE SYMPATHY OF GOD

‘In all their afflictions He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them’—[ISAIAH lxiii. 9](#).

I. The wonderful glimpse opened here into the heart of God.

It is not necessary to touch upon the difference between the text and margin of the Revised Version, or to enter on the reason for preferring the former. And what a deep and wonderful thought that is, of divine sympathy with human sorrow! We feel that this transcends the prevalent tone of the Old Testament. It is made the more striking by reason of the other sides of the divine nature which the Old Testament gives so strongly; as, for instance, the unapproachable elevation and absolute sovereignty of God, and the retributive righteousness of God.

Affliction is His chastisement, and is ever righteously inflicted. But here is something more, tender and strange. Sympathy is a necessary part of love. There is no true affection which does not put itself in the place and share the sorrows of its objects. And His sympathy is none the less because He inflicts the sorrow. These afflictions wherein He too was afflicted, were sent by Him. Like an earthly father who suffers more than the child whom he chastises, the Heavenly Father feels the strokes that He inflicts.

That sympathy is consistent with the blessedness of God. Even in the pain of our human sympathy there is a kind of joy, and we may be sure that in His nature there is nothing else.

Contrast with other thoughts about God.

The vague agnosticism of the present day, which knows only a dim Something of which we can predicate nothing.

The God of the philosophers—whom we are bidden to think of as passionless and unemotional. No wave of feeling ever ripples that tideless sea. The attribute of infinitude or sovereign completeness is dwelt on with such emphasis as to obscure all the rest.

The gods of men’s own creation are careless in their happiness, and cruel in their vengeance. But here is a God for all the weary and the sorrowful. What a thought for us in our own burdened days!

II. The mystery of the divine salvation.

Of course the salvation here spoken of is the deliverance from Egyptian bondage. This is a summary of the Exodus. But we must mark well that significant expression, ‘the angel of His face’ or ‘presence.’ We can only attempt a partial and bald enumeration of some of the very remarkable references to that mysterious person, ‘the angel of the Lord’ or ‘of the presence.’ The dying Jacob ascribed his being ‘redeemed from all evil’ to ‘the Angel,’ and invoked his blessing on ‘the lads.’ ‘The angel of the Lord’ appeared to Moses out of the midst of the burning bush. On Sinai, Jehovah promised to send an ‘angel’ in whom was His own name, before the people. The promise was renewed after Israel’s sin and repentance, and was then given in the form, ‘My presence shall go with thee.’ Joshua saw a man with a drawn

sword in his hand, who declared himself to be the Captain of the Lord's host. 'The angel of the Lord' appeared to Manoah and his wife, withheld his name from them because it was 'wonderful' or 'secret,' accepted their sacrifice, and went up to heaven in its flame. Wherefore Manoah said, 'We have seen God.' Long after these early visions, a psalmist knows himself safe because 'the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him.' Hosea, looking back on the story of Jacob's wrestling at Peniel, says, first, that 'he had power with God, yea, he had power over the *angel*,' and then goes on to say that 'there He spake with us, even *Jehovah*.' And Malachi, on the last verge of Old Testament prophecy, goes furthest of all in seeming to run together the conceptions of Jehovah and the Angel of Jehovah, for he says, 'The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple; and the angel of the covenant . . . behold, *he* cometh.' From this imperfect *resume*, we see that there appears in the earliest as in the latest books of the Old Testament, a person distinguished from the hosts of angels, identified in a very remarkable manner with Jehovah, by alternation of names, in attributes and offices, and in receiving worship, and being the organ of His revelation. That special relation to the divine revelation is expressed by both the representation that 'Jehovah's name is in him,' and by the designation in our text, 'the angel of His presence,' or literally, 'of His face.' For 'name' and 'face' are in so far synonymous that they mean the side of the divine nature which is turned to the world.

For the present I go no further than this. It is clear, then, that our text is at all events remarkable, in that it ascribes to this 'angel of His presence' the praise of Jehovah's saving work. The loving heart, afflicted in all their afflictions, sends forth the messenger of His face, and by Him is salvation wrought. The whole sum of the deliverance of Israel in the past is attributed to Him. Surely this must have been felt by a devout Jew to conceal some great mystery.

III. The crowning revelation both of the heart of God and of His saving power.

(a) Jesus Christ is the true 'angel of the face.'

I do not need to enter on the question of whether in the Old Testament the angel of the Covenant was indeed a pre-manifestation of the eternal Son. I am disposed to answer it in the affirmative. But be that as it may, all that was spoken of the angel is true of Him. God's name is in Him, and that not in fragments or half-syllables but complete. The face of God looks lovingly on men in Him, so that Jesus could declare, 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.' His presence brings God's presence, and He can venture to say, 'We will come and make our abode with Him.' He is the agent of the divine salvation.

The identity and the difference are here in their highest form.

(b) The mystery of God's sharing our sorrows is explained in Him.

We may find a difficulty in the thought of a suffering and sympathising God. But if we believe that 'My name is in Him,' then the sympathy and gentleness of Jesus is the compassion

of God. This is a true revelation. So tears at the grave sighs in healing, and all the sorrows which He bore are an unveiling of the heart of God.

That sharing our sorrows is the very heart of His work. We might almost say that He became man in order to increase His power of sympathy, as a prince might temporarily become a pauper. But certainly He became man that He might bear our burdens. 'Himself took our infirmities.' 'Forasmuch as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He himself also likewise took part of the same.'

The atoning death is the climax of Christ's being afflicted with our afflictions. His priestly sympathy flows out now and for ever to us all.

So complete is His unity with God, that He works the salvation which is God's, and that God's name is in Him. So complete is His union with us, that our sorrows touch Him and His life becomes ours. 'Ye have done it unto Me.' 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?'

For us in all our troubles there are no darker rooms than Christ has been in before us. We are like prisoners put in the same cell as some great martyr. He drank the cup, and we can put the rim to our lips at the place that His lips have touched. But not only may we have our sufferings lightened by the thought that He has borne the same, and that we know the 'fellowship of Christ's sufferings,' but we have the further alleviation of being sure that He makes our afflictions His by perfect sympathy, and, still more wonderful and blessed, that there is such unity of life and sensation between the Head and the members that our afflictions *are* His, and are not merely made so.

'Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Saviour is not by;
Think not thou canst shed a tear
And thy Saviour is not near.'

Do not front the world alone. *In* all our afflictions He is with us; *out* of them all He saves.

HOW TO MEET GOD

‘Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember Thee in Thy ways.’—[ISAIAH lxiv. 5](#).

The prophet here shows us how there is a great staircase which we ourselves build, which leads straight from earth to heaven, and how we can secure that we shall meet with God and God with us. ‘Isaiah’ is often called the evangelical prophet. He is so, not only because of his predictions of the suffering Servant of Jehovah which are ‘fulfilled’ in Christ, but because his conceptions of the religious life tremble on the very verge of the full-orbed teaching of the New Testament. In these ancient words of my text, in very different phrasology indeed, we see a strikingly accurate and full anticipation of the very central teaching of Paul and his brother apostles, as to the way by which God and man come into union with one another. ‘Thou meetest him that rejoiceth’; that joy is to be manifested by ‘working righteousness,’ but the joy which is the parent of righteousness is the child of something else—‘those that remember Thee in Thy ways.’ If we ponder these words, and carefully mark their relation to each other, we may discern, as it were, a great staircase with three flights in it, and at the top God’s face.

We have to begin with the last clause of our text—‘Thou meetest him . . . that remembers Thee in Thy ways.’

The first stage on the road which will bring any man into, and keep any man in, contact with God, and loving fellowship with Him, is the contemplation of His character as it is made known to us by His acts. God, like man, is known by His ‘fruits.’ You cannot get at a clear conception of God by speculation, or by thinking about Him or about what He is in Himself. Lay hold of the clue of His acts, and it leads you straight into His heart. But the act of acts, in which the whole Godhead concurs, in which all its depths and preciousness are concentrated, like wine in a golden cup, is the incarnation and life and death of Jesus Christ our Lord. There, and not in the thoughts of our own hearts nor the tremors of our own consciences, nor in the enigmatical witness of Providence—which is enigmatical until it is interpreted in the light of the Incarnation and the Crucifixion—there we see most clearly the ‘ways’ of God, the beaten, trodden path by which He is wont to come forth out of the thick darkness into which no speculation can peer an inch, and walk amongst men. The cross of Christ, and, subordinately, His other dealings with us, as interpreted thereby, is the ‘way of the Lord,’ from everlasting to everlasting. And it is by a loving gaze upon that ‘way’ that we learn to know Him for what He is. It is there, and there only, that the thick darkness passes into glorious light. It is at that point alone that the closed circle of the Infinite nature of Deity opens so as that a man can press into the very centre of the glory, and feel himself at home in the blaze. It is ‘those that remember Thee in Thy ways,’ and especially in that way of righteousness and peace, the way of the cross—it is they who have built the first flight

of the solemn staircase that leads up from the lownesses and darkneses of earth into the loftinesses and lights of heaven.

But note that word ‘Remember,’ for it suggests the warning that such contemplation of the ways of the Lord will not be realised by us without effort. We shall forget, assuredly, unless we earnestly try to ‘remember.’ There are so many things within us to draw us away, the duties, and the joys, and the sorrows of life so insist upon having a place in our hearts and thoughts, that assuredly, unless by resolute effort, frequently repeated, we clear a space in this crowded and chattering market-place, where we can stand and gaze on the white summits far beyond the bustling crowd, we shall never see them, though they are visible from every place. Unless you try to remember, you will certainly forget.

Many voices preach to-day many duties for Christians. Let me plead for times of quiet, for times of ‘doing’ nothing, for fruitful times of growth, for times when we turn all the rout and rabble of earthly things, and even the solemn company of pressing duties, out of our hearts and thoughts, and shut up ourselves alone with God. Be sure you will never build even the first step of the staircase unless you know what it is to go into the secret place of the Most High, and, alone with God, to summon to ‘the sessions of sweet, silent thought’ His ways, and especially Him who is ‘the Way,’ both of God to us, and of us to God.

Now, the second flight of this great staircase is pointed out in the first clause of my text: ‘Thou meetest him that rejoiceth.’

That meditative remembrance of the ways of God will be the parent of holy joy which will bring God near to our heart. Alas! it is too often the very opposite of true that men’s joys are such as to bring God to them. The excitement, and often the impure elements, that mingle with what the world calls ‘joy,’ are such as to shut Him out from us. But there is a gladness which comes from the contemplation of Him as He is, and as He is known by His ‘ways’ to be, which brings us very near to God, and God very near to us. It is that joy which was spoken of in an earlier part of this context: ‘I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, My soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation.’ Here, then, is the second stage—gladness, deep, pure, based upon the contemplation of God’s character as manifested in His work. I do not think that the ordinary type of modern Christianity is half joyful enough. And I think that we have largely lost the very thought that gladness is a plain Christian *duty*, to be striven after in the appropriate manner which my text suggests, and certainly to be secured if we seek it in the right way. We all know how outward cares, and petty annoyances, and crushing sorrows, and daily anxieties, and the tear and wear of work, and our own restlessness and ungovernableness, and the faults that still haunt our lives, and sometimes make us feel as if our Christianity was all a sham—how all these things are at enmity with joy in God. But in face of them all, I would echo the old grand words of the epistle of gladness written by the apostle in prison, and within hail of his death: ‘Rejoice in the Lord alway, and again I say rejoice.’ Recognise it as your duty to

be glad, and if it is hard to be so, ask yourselves whether you are doing what will make you so, remembering "Thee in Thy ways." That is the second flight of the staircase.

The third stage is working righteousness because of such joy. "Thou meetest him that rejoiceth, and '—because he does—'worketh righteousness.' Every master knows how much more work can be got out of a servant who works with a cheery heart than out of one that is driven reluctantly to his task. You remember our Lord's parable where He traces idleness to fear: 'I knew thee that thou wast an austere man, gathering where thou didst not strew, and I was afraid, and I went and hid thy talent.' No work was got out of that servant because there was no joy in him. The opposite state of mind—diligence in righteous work, inspired by gladness which in its turn is inspired by the remembrance of God's ways—is the mark of a true servant of God. The prophet's words have the germ of the full New Testament doctrine that the first step to all practical obedience and righteous living is the recognition of the great truth of Christ's death for us on the Cross; that the second step is the acceptance of that great work, and the gladness that comes from the assurance of forgiveness and acceptance with God, and that the issue of both these things, the preached gospel and the faith that grasps it and the love by which the faith is followed, is obedience, instinct with willingness and buoyant with joyfulness, and therefore tending to be perfect in degree and in kind. The work that is worth doing, the work which God regards as 'righteous,' comes, and comes only, from the motives of 'remembering Thee in Thy ways,' and rejoicing because we do remember.

And the gladness which is wholesome and blessed, and is 'joy in the Lord,' will manifest itself by efflorescing into all holiness and all loftiness and largeness of obedience. You may try to frighten men into righteousness, you will never succeed. You may try to coerce their wills, and your strongest bands will be broken as the iron chains were by the demoniac. But put upon them the silken leash of love, and you may lead them where you will. You cannot grow grapes on an iceberg, and you cannot get works of righteousness out of a man that has a dread of God at the back of his heart, killing all its joy. But let the spring sunshine come, and then all the frost-bound earth opens and softens, and the tender green spikelets push themselves up through the brown soil, and in due time come 'the blade, and the ear, and the full corn in the ear.' Isaiah anticipated Paul when he said, "Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness."

Lastly, we have the landing-place to which the stair leads. God comes to such a man. He meets him indeed at all the stages, for there is a blessed communion with God, that springs immediately from remembering Him in His ways, and a still more blessed one that springs from rejoicing in His felt friendship and Fatherhood, and a yet more blessed one that comes from practical righteousness. For if there is anything that breaks our communion with God, it is that there linger in our lives evils which make it impossible for God and us to come close together. The thinnest film of a non-conductor will stop the flow of the

strongest electric current, and an almost imperceptible film of self-will and evil, dropped between oneself and God, will make a barrier impermeable except by that divine Spirit who worketh upon a man's heart and who may thin away the film through his repentance, and then the Father and the prodigal embrace. 'Thou meetest him,' not only 'that worketh righteousness,' but that hates his sin.

Only remember, if there is the practice of evil, there cannot be the sunshine of the Presence of God. But remember, too, that the commonest, homeliest, smallest, most secular tasks may become the very highest steps of the staircase that brings us into His Presence. If we go about our daily work, however wearisome and vulgar and commonplace it often seems to us, and make it a work of righteousness resting on the joy of salvation, and that reposing on the contemplation of God as He is revealed in Jesus Christ, our daily work may bring us as close to God as if we dwelt in the secret place of the Most High, and the market and the shop may be a temple where we meet with Him.

Dear brethren, there are two kinds of meeting God: 'Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness,' and that is blessed, as when Christ met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. There is another kind of meeting with God. 'Who, making war, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?'

'THE GOD OF THE AMEN'

'He who blesseth himself in the earth shall bless himself in the God of truth; and he that sweareth in the earth shall swear by the God of truth.'—ISAIAH lxv. 16.

The full beauty and significance of these remarkable words are only reached when we attend to the literal rendering of a part of them which is obscured in our version. As they stand in the original they have, in both cases, instead of the vague expression, 'The God of truth,' the singularly picturesque one, 'The God of the Amen.'

I. Note the meaning of the name. Now, *Amen* is an adjective, which means literally firm, true, reliable, or the like. And, as we know, its liturgical use is that, in the olden time, and to some extent in the present time, it was the habit of the listening people to utter it at the close of prayer or praise. But besides this use at the end of some one else's statement, which the sayer of the 'Amen' confirms by its utterance, we also find it used at the beginning of a statement, by the speaker, in order to confirm his own utterance by it.

And these two uses of the expression reposing on its plain meaning, in the first instance signifying, 'I tell you that it is so'; and in the second instance signifying, 'So may it be!' or, 'So we believe it is,' underlie this grand title which God takes to Himself here, 'the God of the Amen,' both His Amen and ours. So that the thought opens up very beautifully and simply into these two, His truth and our faith.

First, it emphasises the absolute truthfulness of every word that comes from His lips. There is implied in the title that He really *has* spoken, and declared to man something of His will, something of His nature, something of His purposes, something of our destiny. And now He puts, as it were, the broad seal upon the charter and says, 'Amen! Verily it is so, and My word of Revelation is no man's imagination, and My word of command is the absolute unveiling of human duty and human perfectness, and My word of promise is that upon which a man may rest all his weight and be safe for ever.' God's word is 'Amen!' man's word is 'perhaps.' For in regard to the foundation truths of man's belief and experience and need, no human tongue can venture to utter its own asseverations with nothing behind them but itself, and expect men to accept them; but that is exactly what God does, and alone has the right to do. His word absolutely, and through and through, in every fibre of it, is reliable and true.

Now do not forget that there was one who came to us and said, 'Amen! Amen! I say unto you.' Jesus Christ, in all His deep and wonderful utterances, arrogated to Himself the right which God here declares to be exclusively His, and He said, 'I too have, and I too exercise, the right and the authority to lay My utterances down before you, and expect you to take them because of nothing else than because I say them.' God is the God of the Amen! The last book of Scripture, when it draws back the curtain from the mysteries of the glorified session of Jesus Christ at the right hand of God, makes Him say to us, 'These things saith

the Amen!' And if you want to know what that means, its explanation follows in the next clause, 'the faithful and true witness.'

But then, on the other hand, necessarily involved in this title, though capable of being separately considered, is not only the absolute truthfulness of the divine word, but also the thorough-going reliance, on our parts, which that word expects and demands. God's 'Amen,' and 'Verily,' of confirmation, should ever cause the 'Amen' of acceptance and assent to leap from our lips. If He begins with that mighty word, so soon as the solemn voice has ceased its echo should rise from our hearts. The city that cares for the charter which its King has given it will prepare a fitting, golden receptacle in which to treasure it. And the men who believe that God in very deed has spoken laws that illuminate, and commandments that guide, and promises that calm and strengthen and fulfil themselves, will surely prepare in their hearts an appropriate receptacle for those precious and infallible words. God's truth has corresponding to it our trust. God's faithfulness demands, and is only adequately met by, our faith. If He gives us the sure foundation to build upon, it will be a shame for us to bring wood, hay, stubble, and build these upon the Rock of Ages. The building should correspond with its foundation, and the faith which grasps the sure word should have in it something of the unchangeableness and certainty and absoluteness of that word which it grasps. If His revelation of Himself is certain, you and I ought to be certain of His revelation of Himself. Our certitude should correspond to its certainty.

Ah! my friend, what a miserable contrast there is between the firm, unshaken, solid security of the divine word upon which we say that we trust, and the poor, feeble, broken trust which we build upon it. 'Let not that man think that He shall receive anything of the Lord'; but let us expect, as well as 'ask, in faith, nothing wavering'; and let our 'Amen!' ring out in answer to God's.

The Apostle Paul has a striking echo of the words of my text in the second Epistle to the Corinthians: 'All the promises of God in Him are yea! and through Him also is the Amen!' The assent, full, swift, frank—the assent of the believing heart to the great word of God comes through the same channel, and reaches God by the same way, as God's word on which it builds comes to us. The 'God of the Amen,' in both senses of the word, is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the seal as well as the substance of the divine promises, and whose voice in us is the answer to, and the grasp of, the promises of which He is the substance and soul.

II. Now notice, next, how this God of the Amen is, by reason of that very characteristic, the source of all blessing.

'He who blesseth himself in the earth shall bless himself in the God of Truth.' That phrase of *blessing oneself in*, which is a frequent Old Testament expression, is roughly equivalent to invoking, and therefore receiving, blessing from. You find it, for instance, in the seventy-second Psalm, in that grand burst which closes one of the books of the Psalter

and hails the coming of the Messianic times, of which my text also is a prediction. 'Men shall be blessed in Him,' or rather, 'shall bless themselves in Him,' which is a declaration, that all needful benediction shall come down upon humanity through the coming Messias, as well as that men shall recognise in that Messias the source of all their blessing and good. So the text declares that, in those days that are yet to come, the whole earth shall be filled with men whose eyes have been purged from ignorance and sin, and from the illusions of sense and the fascinations of folly, and who have learned that only in the God of the Amen is the blessing of their life to be found.

Of course it is so. For only on Him can I lean all my weight and be sure that the stay will not give. All other bridges across the great abysses which we have to traverse or be lost in them, are like those snow-cornices upon some Alp, which may break when the climber is on the very middle of them, and let him down into blackness out of which he will never struggle. There is only one path clear across the deepest gulf, which we poor pilgrims can tread with absolute safety that it will never yield beneath our feet. My brother! there is one support that is safe, and one stay upon which a man can lean his whole weight and be sure that the staff will never either break or pierce his palm, and that is the faithful God, in whose realm are no disappointments, amongst whose trusters are no heart-broken and deceived men, but who gives bountifully, and over and above all that we are able to ask or think. They who have made experience, as we have all made experience, of the insufficiency of earthly utterances, of the doubtfulness of the clearest words of men, of the possible incapacity of the most loving, to be what they pledge themselves to be, and of the certainty that even if they are so for a while they cannot be so always—have surely learned one half, at least, of the lesson that life is meant to teach us; and it is our own fault if we have not bettered it with the better half, having uncoiled the tendrils of our hearts from the rotten props round which they have been too apt to twine themselves, and wreathed them about the pillars of the eternal throne, which can never shake nor fail. 'He that blesseth himself in the earth shall bless himself—unless he is a fool—in the God of the Amen!' and not in the *man* of the 'peradventure.'

III. Lastly, note how the God of the Amen should be the pattern of His servants.

'He that sweareth in the earth shall swear by the God of truth,' or, 'of the Amen.' The prophet deduces from the name the solemn thought that those who truly feel its significance will shape *their* words accordingly, and act and speak so that they shall not fear to call His pure eyes to witness that there are neither, hypocrisy, nor insincerity, nor vacillation, nor the 'hidden things of dishonesty' nor any of the skulking meannesses of craft and self-seeking in them. 'I swear by the God of the Amen, and call Thy faithfulness to witness that I am trying to be like Thee,' that is what we ought to do if we call ourselves Christians. If we have any hold at all of Him, and of His love, and of the greatness and majesty of His faithfulness, we shall try to make our poor little lives, in such measure as the dewdrops may be like the

sun, radiant like His, and of the same shape as His, for the dewdrop and the sun are both of them spheres. That is exactly what the apostle does, in that same chapter in 2 Cor., to which I already referred. He takes these very thoughts of my text, and in their double aspect too, and says, 'Just because God is faithful, do you Corinthians think that, when I told you that I was coming to see you, I did not mean it?' He brings the greatest thought that He can find about God and God's truth, down to the settlement of this very little matter, the vindication of Himself from the charge, on the one hand, of facile and inconsiderate vacillation, and, on the other hand, of insincerity. So, we may say, the greatest thoughts should regulate the smallest acts. Though our maps be but a quarter of an inch to a hundred miles, let us see that they are drawn to scale. Let us see that He is our Pattern; and that the truthfulness, the simplicity, and faithfulness, which we rest upon as the very foundation of our intellectual as well as our moral and religious being, are, in our measure, copied in ourselves. 'As God is faithful,' said Paul, 'our word to you was not yea! and nay!' And they who are trusting to the God of the Amen! will live in all simplicity and godly sincerity; their yea will be yea, and their nay, nay.

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

GOD'S LAWSUIT

'Wherefore I will yet plead with you, saith the Lord, and with your children's children will I plead.'—[JER. ii. 9](#).

Point out that 'plead' is a forensic term. There is a great lawsuit in which God is plaintiff and men defendants. The word is frequent in Isaiah.

I. The reason for God's pleading.

The cause—'wherefore.' Our transgression does not make Him turn away from us. It does profoundly modify the whole relation between us. It does give an aspect of antagonism to His dealings.

II. The manner.

The whole history of the world and of each individual. All outward providences. All the voice of Conscience. Christ. Spirit, who convinces the world of Sin.

III. The purpose.

Wholly our being drawn from our evil. The purely reformatory character of all punishment here. The sole object to win us back to Himself. He conquers in this lawsuit when we come to love Him.

IV. The patience.

That merciful pleading—'I will yet'—runs on through all sin, and is only made more earnest by deepening hostility. After rejections still lingers. Extends over a thousand generations. Is exercised even where He foresees failure.

STIFF-NECKED IDOLATERS AND PLIABLE CHRISTIANS

‘Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? but My people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit.’—[JER. ii. 11.](#)

The obstinacy of the adherents of idolatry is in striking contrast with Israel’s continual tendency to forsake Jehovah. It reads a scarcely less forcible lesson to many nominal and even to some real Christians.

I. That contrast carries with it a disclosure of the respective origins of the two kinds of Religion.

The strangeness of the contrasted conduct is intensified when we take into account the tremendous contrast between the two Objects of worship. Israel’s God was Israel’s ‘Glory’; the idol-worshipper bowed down before ‘that which doth not profit,’ and yet no experience of God could bind His fickle worshippers to Him, and no experience of the impotence of the idol could shake its votaries’ devotion. They cried and were not heard. They toiled and had no results. They broke their teeth on ‘that which is not bread,’ and filled their mouths with gritty ashes that mocked them with a semblance of nourishment and left them with empty stomachs and excoriated gums, yet by some strange hallucination they clung to ‘vanities,’ while Israel was always hankering after opportunity to desert Jehovah. The stage of civilisation partly accounts for the strange fascination of idolatry over the Israelites. But the deeper solution lies in the fact that the one religion rises from the hearts of men, corresponds to their moral condition, and is largely moulded by their lower nature; while the other is from above, corresponds, indeed, with the best and deepest longings and needs of souls, but contravenes many of their most clamant wishes, and necessarily sets before them a standard high and difficult to reach. Men make their gods in their own image, and are conscious of no rebuke nor stimulus to loftier living when they gaze on them. The God of Revelation bids men remake themselves in His image, and that command requires endless effort. The average man has to put a strain on his intellect in order to rise to the apprehension of God, and a still more unwelcome strain on his moral nature to rise to the imitation of God. No wonder, then, if the dwellers on the low levels should cleave to them, and the pilgrims to the heights should often weary of their toil and be distressed with the difficulty of breathing the thin air up there, and should give up climbing and drop down to the flats once more.

II. That contrast carries with it a rebuke.

Many voices echo the prophet’s contrast nowadays. Our travelling countrymen, especially those of them who have no great love for earnest religion, are in the habit of drawing disparaging contrasts between Buddhists, Brahmins, Mohammedans, any worshippers of other gods and Christians. One may not uncharitably suspect that a more earnest Christianity would not please these critics much better than does the tepid sort, and that the pictures they draw both of heathenism and of Christianity are coloured by their likes and dislikes.

But it is well to learn from an enemy, and caricatures may often be useful in calling attention to features which would escape notice but for exaggeration. So we may profit by even the ill-natured and distorted likenesses of ourselves as contrasted with the adherents of other religions which so many 'liberal-minded' writers of travels delight to supply.

Think, then, of the rebuke which the obstinate adherence of idolaters to their idols gives to the slack hold which so many professing Christians have on their religion.

Think of the way in which these lower religions pervade the whole life of their worshippers, and of how partial is the sway over a little territory of life and conduct which Christianity has in many of its adherents. The absorption in worship shown by Mohammedans, who will spread their prayer carpets anywhere and perform their drill of prayers without embarrassment or distraction in the sight of a crowd, or the rapt 'devotion' of fakirs, are held up as a rebuke to us 'Christians' who are ashamed to be caught praying. One may observe, in mitigation, that the worship which is of the heart is naturally more sensitive to surrounding distractions than that which is a matter of posturing and repetition by rote. But there still remains substance enough in the contrast to point a sharp arrow of rebuke.

And there is no denying that in these 'heathen' religions, religion is intertwined with every act of life in a fashion which may well put to shame many of us. Remember how Paul had to deal at length with the duty of the Corinthians in view of the way in which every meal was a sacrifice to some god, and how the same permeation of life with religion is found in all these 'false faiths.' The octopus has coiled its tentacles round the whole body of its victim. Bad and sad and mad as idolatry is, it reads a rebuke to many of us, who keep life and religion quite apart, and lock up our Christianity in our pews with our prayer-books and hymnaries.

Think of the material sacrifices made by idolaters, in costly offerings, in painful self-tortures, and in many other ways, and the niggardliness and self-indulgence of so many so-called Christians.

III. The contrast suggests the greatness of the power which can overcome even such obstinate adherence to idols.

There is one, and only one, solvent for that rock-like obstinacy—the Gospel. The other religions have seldom attempted to encroach on each other's territory, and where they have, their instrument of conversion has generally been the sword. The Gospel has met and mastered them all. It, and it only, has had power to draw men to itself out of every faith. The ancient gods who bewitched Israel, the gods of Greece, the gods of our own ancestors, the gods of the islands of the South Seas, lie huddled together, in undistinguished heaps, like corpses on a battlefield, and the deities of India and the East are wounded and slowly bleeding out their lives. 'Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth, the idols are upon the beasts,' all packed up, as it were, and ready to be carried off.

The rate of progress in dethroning them varies with the varying national conditions. It is easier to cut a tunnel through chalk than through quartz.

IV. That contrast carries with it a call for Christian effort to spread the conquering Gospel.

FOUNTAIN AND CISTERNS

‘They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water’—JER. ii. 13.

The proclivity of the Jews to idolatry is an outstanding fact all through their history. That persistent national tendency surely compels us to recognise a divine inspiration as the source of the prophetic teaching and of the lofty spiritual theology of the Old Testament, which were in sharpest unlikeness and opposition to the whole trend of the people’s thoughts.

It is this apostasy which is referred to here. The false gods made by men are the broken cisterns. But the text embodies a general truth.

I. The irksomeness of a godless life.

The contrast is between the springing fountain, there in the desert, with the lush green herbage round about, where a man has only to stoop and drink, and the painful hewing of cisterns.

This emblem of the fountain beautifully suggests the great thought of God’s own loving will as the self-originated impulse by which He pours out all good. Apart from all our efforts, the precious gift is provided for us. Our relation is only that of receivers.

We have the contrast with this in the laborious toils to which they condemn themselves who seek for created sources of good. ‘Hewn out cisterns’—think of a man who, with a fountain springing in his courtyard, should leave it and go to dig in the arid desert, or to hew the live rock in hopes to gain water. It was already springing and sparkling before him. The conduct of men, when they leave God and seek for other delights, is like digging a canal alongside a navigable river. They condemn themselves to a laborious and quite superfluous task. The true way to get is to take.

Illustrations in religion. Think of the toil and pains spent in idolatry and in corrupt forms of Christianity.

Illustrations in common life. Your toils—aye, and even your pleasures—how much of them is laboriously digging for the water which all the while is flowing at your side.

II. The hopelessness of a godless life.

The contrast further is between living waters and broken cisterns. God is the fountain of living waters; in other words, in fellowship with God there is full satisfaction for all the capacities and desires of the soul; heart—conscience—will—understanding—hope and fear.

The contrast of the empty cisterns. What a deep thought that with all their work men only make ‘cisterns,’ *i.e.* they only provide circumstances which *could hold* delights, but cannot secure that water should be in them! The men-made cisterns must be God-filled, if filled at all. The true joys from earthly things belong to him who has made God his portion.

Further, they are ‘broken cisterns,’ and all have in them some flaw or crack out of which the water runs. That is a vivid metaphor for the fragmentary satisfaction which all earthly good gives, leaving a deep yearning unstilled. And it is temporary as well as partial. ‘He that

drinketh of this water shall thirst again'—nay, even as with those who indulge in intoxicating drinks, the appetite increases while the power of the draught to satisfy it diminishes. But the crack in the cistern points further to the uncertain tenure of all earthly goods and the certain leaving of them all.

All godless life is a grand mistake.

III. The crime of a godless life.

It is right to seek for happiness. It is sin to go away from God. You are thereby not merely flinging away your chances, but are transgressing against your sacred obligations. Our text is not only a remonstrance on the grounds of prudence, showing God-neglecting men that they are foolish, but it is an appeal to conscience, convincing them that they are sinful. God loves us and cares for us. We are bound to Him by ties which do not depend on our own volition. And so there is punishment for the sin, and the evils experienced in a godless life are penal as well as natural.

We recall the New Testament modification of this metaphor, 'The water that I shall give him shall be *in* him a fountain of water.' Arabs in desert round dried—up springs. Hagar. Shipwrecked sailors on a reef. Christ opens 'rivers in the wilderness and streams in the desert.'

FORSAKING JEHOVAH

‘Know therefore, and see, that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that My fear is not in thee, saith the Lord God of hosts.’—[JER. ii. 19](#).

Of course the original reference is to national apostasy, which was aggravated by the national covenant, and avenged by national disasters, which are interpreted and urged by the prophet as God’s merciful pleading with men. But the text is true in reference to individuals.

I. The universal indictment.

This is not so much a charge of isolated overt acts, as of departure from God. That departure, itself a sin, is the fountain of all other sins. Every act which is morally wrong is religiously a departure from God; it could not be done, unless heart and will had moved away from their allegiance to Him. So the solemn mystery of right and wrong becomes yet more solemn, when our personal relation to the personal God is brought in.

Then—consider what this forsaking is—at bottom aversion of will, or rather of the whole nature, from Him.

How strange and awful is that power which a creature possesses of closing his heart against God, and setting up a quasi-independence!

How universal it is—appeal to each man’s own consciousness.

II. The special aggravation.

‘*Thy God*’—the original reference is to Israel, whom God had taken for His and to whom He had given Himself as theirs, by His choice from of old, by redemption from Egypt, by covenant, and by centuries of blessings. But the designation is true in regard to God and each of us. It points to the personal relation which we each sustain to Him, and so is a pathetic appeal to affection and gratitude.

III. The bitter fruit.

‘6 Evil’ may express rather the moral character of forsaking God, while ‘bitter’ expresses rather the consequences of it, which are sorrows.

So the prophet appeals to experience. As the Psalmist confidently invites to ‘taste and see that God is good,’ so Jeremiah boldly bids the apostates know and see that departing is bitter.

It is so, for it leaves the soul unsatisfied.

It leads to remorse.

It drags after it manifold bitter fruits. ‘The wages of sin is death.’

Sin without consequent sorrow is an impossibility if there is a God.

IV. The loving appeal.

The text is not denunciation, but tender, though indignant, pleading, in hope of winning back the wanderers. The prophet has just been pointing to the sorrowful results which necessarily follow on the nation’s apostasy, and tells Israel that its own wickedness shall correct

it, and then, in the text, he beseeches them not to be blind to the meaning of their miseries, but to let these teach them how sinful and how sorrowful their apostasy is. Men's sorrows are a mystery, but that sinners should not have sorrows were a sadder mystery still. And God pleads with us all not to lose the good of our experiences of the bitterness of sin by our levity or our blindness to their meaning. By His providences, by His Spirit working on us, by the plain teachings and loving pleadings of His word, He is ever striving to open our eyes that we may see Good and Evil, and recognise that all Good is bound up for us with cleaving to God, and all Evil with departing from Him. When we turn our backs on Him we are full front with the deformed figure of Evil; when we turn away from it, we are face to face with Him, and in Him, with all Good.

A COLLOQUY BETWEEN A PENITENT AND GOD

‘A voice was heard upon the high places, weeping and supplications of the children of Israel: for they have perverted their way, and they have forgotten the Lord their God. Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto Thee; for Thou art the Lord our God.’—[JER. iii. 21, 22](#).

We have here a brief dramatic dialogue. First is heard a voice from the bare heights, the sobs and cries of penitence, produced by the prophet’s earnest remonstrance. The penitent soul is absorbed in the thought of its own evil. Its sin stands clear before it. Israel sees its sin in its two forms. ‘They have perverted their way,’ or have led a wrong outward life of action, and the reason is that ‘they have forgotten God,’ or have been guilty of inward alienation and departure from Him. Here is the consciousness of sin in its essential character, and that produces godly sorrow. The distinction between mere remorse and repentance is here already, in the ‘weeping and supplication.’

I. So we have here a consciousness of sin in its true nature, as embracing both deeds and heart, as originating in departure from God, and manifested in perverted conduct.

Further, we have here sorrow. There may be consciousness of sin in its true nature without any sorrow of heart. It is fatal when a man looks upon his evil, gets a more or less clear sight of it, and is not sorry and penitent. It is conceivable that there should be perfect knowledge of sin and perfect insensibility in regard to it.

A sinful man’s true mood should be sorrow—not flinging the blame on others, or on fate, or circumstances; not regarding his sin as misfortune or as inevitable or as disease.

Conscience is meant to produce that consciousness and that sorrow: but conscience may be dulled or silenced. It cannot be anyhow induced to call evil good, but it may be mistaken in what is evil. The gnomon is true, but a veil of cloud may be drawn over the sky.

Further, we have here supplication. These two former may both be experienced, without this third. There may be consciousness of sin and sorrow which lead to no blessing. ‘My bones waxed old through my roaring.’ Sorrow after a godly sort may be hindered by false notions of God’s great love, or by false notions of what a man ought to do when he finds he has gone wrong. It may be hindered by cleaving, subtle love of sin, or by self-trust. But where all these have been overcome there is true repentance.

II. The loving divine answer.

Another ear than the prophet’s has heard the plaint from the bare heights. Many a frenzied shriek had gone up from these shrines of idolatrous worship, and as with Baal’s prophets, it had brought no answer, nor had there been any that regarded. But this weeping reaches the ear that is never closed. Contrast with [verse 23](#): ‘Truly in vain is the help that is looked for from the hills, the shouting (of idol-worshippers) on the mountains.’

The instantaneousness of God's answer is very beautiful. It is like the action of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who saw his repentant boy afar off and ran and kissed him.

There seems to be, in both the invitation to return and in the promise to hear the backslidings, a quotation from [Hosea xiv. \(1-4\)](#). We see here how God meets the penitent with a love that recognises all his sin and yet is love. It is not rebuke or reproach that lies in that designation, 'backsliding children.' It is tenderest mercy that lets us see that He knows exactly what we are, and yet promises His love and forgiveness. He loves us sinners with a love that beckons us back to Himself, with a love that promises healing. The truth which should be taken into the mind and heart of the man conscious of sin is God's knowledge of it all already and yet His undiminished love, God's welcome of him back, God's ready pardon. All this is true for the world in Christ, and is true for every individual soul.

The answer and the invitation here are immediate.

There is often a long period of painful struggle. It looks as if the answer were not immediate. But that is because we do not listen to it.

III. The happy response of the returning soul.

That too is immediate. The soul believes God's promises. It recognises God's claim. It returns to Him. We are attracted by His grace. The sunflower turns to the sun. The penitent is not driven only, but drawn — God's own loving self-revelation in Christ is His true power. 'I, if I am lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.'

The consciousness of sin remains and is even deepened (subsequent verses), and yet is different. A light of hope is in it. The very sense of sin brings us to Him, to hide our faces on His heart like a child in its mother's lap.

This response of the soul may be instantaneous. If it is not immediate, it too probably will never be at all.

A QUESTION FOR THE BEGINNING

‘What will ye do in the end?’—[JER. v. 31](#).

I find that I preached to the young from this text just thirty years since—nearly a generation ago. How few of my then congregation are here to-night! how changed they and I are! and how much nearer the close we have drifted! How many of the young men and women of that evening have gone to meet the end, and how many of them have wrecked their lives because they would not face and answer this question!

Ah, dear young friends, if I could bring some of the living and some of the dead, and set them to witness here instead of me, they would burn in on you, as my poor words never can do, the insanity of living without a satisfactory and sufficient reply to the question of my text, ‘What will ye do in the end?’

In its original application these words referred to a condition of religious and moral corruption in which a whole nation was involved. The men that should have spoken for God were ‘prophesying lies.’ The priests connived at profitable falsehoods because by these their rule was confirmed. And the deluded populace, as is always the case, preferred smooth falsehoods to stern truths. So the prophet turns round indignantly, and asks what can be the end of such a welter and carnival of vice and immorality, and beseeches his contemporaries to mend their ways by bethinking themselves of what their course led to.

But we may dismiss the immediate application of the words for the sake of looking at the general principle which underlies them. It is a very familiar and well-worn one. It is simply this, that a large part of the wise conduct of life depends on grave consideration of consequences. It is a sharp-pointed question, that pricks many a bubble, and brings much wisdom down into the category of folly. There would be less misery in the world, and fewer fair young lives cast away upon grim rocks, if the question of my text were oftener asked and answered.

I. I note, first, that here is a question which every wise man will ask himself.

I do not mean to say that the consideration of consequences is the highest guide, nor that it is always a sufficient one; nor that it is, by any means, in every case, an easily applied one. For we can all conceive of circumstances in which it is the plainest duty to take a certain course of action, knowing that, as far as this life is concerned, it will bring down disaster and ruin. Do right! and face *any* results therefrom. He who is always forecasting possible issues has a very leaden rule of conduct, and will be so afraid of results that he will not dare to move; and his creeping prudence will often turn out to be the truest imprudence.

But whilst all that is true, and many deductions must be made from the principle which I have laid down, that the consideration of circumstances is a good guide in life, yet there are regions in which the question comes home with direct and illuminating force. Let me just illustrate one or two of these.

Take the lower application of the question to nearer ends in life. Now this awful life that we live is so strangely concatenated of causes and effects, and each little deed drags after it such a train of eternal and ever-widening consequences, that a man must be an idiot if he never looks an inch beyond his nose to see the bearing of his actions. I believe that, in the long-run, and in the general, condition is the result of character and of conduct; and that, whatsoever deductions may be necessary, yet, speaking generally, and for the most part, men are the architects of their own condition, and that they make the houses that they dwell in to fit the convolutions of the body that dwells within them. And, that being so, it being certain that 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,' and that no deed, be it ever so small, be it ever so evanescent, be it ever so entirely confined within our own inward nature, and never travelling out into visibility in what men call actions—that every one of such produces an eternal, though it may be an all but imperceptible effect, upon ourselves; oh, surely there can be nothing more ridiculous than that a man should refrain from forecasting the issue of his conduct, and saying to himself? 'What am I to do in the end?'

If you would only do that in regard to hosts of things in your daily life you *could* not be the men and women that you are. If the lazy student would only bring clearly before his mind the examination-room, and the unanswerable paper, and the bitter mortification when the pass-list comes out and his name is not there, he would not trifle and dawdle and seek all manner of diversions as he does, but he would bind himself to his desk and his task. If the young man who begins to tamper with purity, and in the midst of the temptations of a great city to gratify the lust of the eye and the lust of the flesh, because he is away from the shelter of his father's house, and the rebuke of his mother's purity, could see, as the older of us have seen, men with their bones full of the iniquity of their youth, or drifted away from the city to die, down in the country like a rat in a hole, do you think the temptations of the streets and low places of amusement would not be stripped of their fascination? If the man beginning to drink were to say to himself, 'What am I to do in the end?' when the craving becomes physical, and volition is suspended, and anything is sacrificed in order to still the domineering devil within, do you think he would begin? I do not believe that all sin comes from ignorance, but sure I am that if the sinful man saw what the end is he would, in nine cases out of ten, be held back. 'What will ye do in the end?' Use that question, dear friends, as the Ithuriel spear which will touch the squatting tempter at your ear, and there will start up, in its own shape, the fiend.

But the main application that I would ask you to make of the words of my text is in reference to the final end, the passing from life. Death, the end, is likewise Death, the beginning. If it were an absolute end, as coarse infidelity pretends to believe it is, then, of course, such a question as my text would have no kind of relevance. 'What will ye do in the end?' 'Nothing! for I shall be nothing. I shall just go back to the nonentity that I was. I do not need to trouble myself.' Ah, but Janus has two faces, one turned to the present and one to the

future. His temple has two gates, one which admits from this lower level, and one, at the back, which launches us out on to the higher level. The end is a beginning, and the beginning is retribution. The end of sowing is the beginning of harvest. The man finishes his work and commences to live on his wages. The brewing is over, and the drinking of the brewst commences.

And so, brother, 'What will ye do in the end—which is not an end, but which is a beginning? Surely every wise man will take that question into consideration. Surely, if it be true that we all of us are silently drifting to that one little gateway through which we have to pass one by one, and then find ourselves in a region all full of consequences of the present, he has a good claim to be counted a prince of fools who 'jumps the life to come,' and, in all his calculations of consequences, which he applies wisely and prudently to the trifles of the present, forgets to ask himself, 'And, after all that is done, what shall I do then?' You remember the question in the old ballad:

“What good came of it at last? . . .
'Nay, that I cannot tell,' quoth he;
But 'twas a famous victory.”

Ay, but what came of it at the last? Oh brother, that one question, pushed to its issues, condemns the wisdom of this world as folly, and pulverises into nothingness millions of active lives and successful schemes. What then? What then? 'I have much goods laid up for many years.' Well and good, what then? 'I will say to my soul, Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.' Yes, what then? 'This night thy soul shall be required of thee.' He never thought of that! And so his epitaph was 'Thou fool!'

II. So, secondly, mark, here is a question which a great many of us never think about.

I do not mean, now, so much in reference to the nearer ends compassed in this life, though even in regard to them it is only too true; I mean rather in regard to that great and solemn issue to which we are all tending. But in regard of both, it seems to me one of the strangest things in all the world that men should be content so commonly to be ignorant of what they perfectly well know, and never to give attention to that of which, should they bethink themselves, they are absolutely certain.

'What will ye do in the end?' Why! half of us put away that question with the thought in our minds, if not expressed, at least most operative, 'There is not going to be any end; and it is always going to be just like what it is to-day.' Did you ever think that there is no good ground for being sure that the sun will rise to-morrow; that it rose for the first time once; that there will come a day when it will rise for the last time? The uniformity of Nature may be a postulate, but you cannot find any logical basis for it. Or, to come down from heights of that sort, have you ever laid to heart, brother, that the only unchangeable thing

in this world is change, and the only thing certain, that there is no continuance of anything; and that, therefore, you and I are bound, if we are wise, to look that fact in the face, and not to allow ourselves to be befooled by the difficulty of imagining that things will ever be different from what they are? Oh! many of us— I was going to say most of men, I do not know that it would be an exaggeration—are like the careless inhabitants of some of those sunny, volcanic isles in the Eastern Ocean, where Nature is prodigally luxuriant and all things are fair, but every fifty years or so there comes a roar and the island shakes, and half of it, perhaps, is overwhelmed, and the lava flows down and destroys gleaming houses and smiling fields, and heaven is darkened with ashes, and then everything goes on as before, and people live as if it was never going to happen again, though every morning, when they go out, they see the cone towering above their houses, and the thin column of smoke, pale against the blue sky.

It is not altogether sinful or bad that we should live, to some extent, under the illusion of a fixity and a perpetuity which has no real existence, for it helps to concentrate effort and to consolidate habit, and to make life possible. But for men to live, as so many of us do, never thinking of what is more certain than anything else about us, that we shall slide out of this world, and find ourselves in another, is surely not the part of wisdom.

Another reason why so many of us shirk this question is the lamentable want of the habit of living by principle and reflection. Most men never see their life steadily, and see it whole. They live from hand to mouth, they are driven this way and that way; they adapt means to ends in regard to business or the like, but in the formation of their character, and in the moulding of their whole being, crowds of them live a purely mechanical, instinctive, unreflective life. There is nothing more deplorable than the small extent to which reflection and volition really shape the lives of the bulk of mankind. Most of us take our cue from our circumstances, letting them dominate us. They tell us that in Nature there is such a thing as protective mimicry, as it is called—animals having the power—some of them to a much larger extent than others—of changing their hues in order to match the gravel of the stream in which they swim or the leaves of the trees on which they feed. That is like what a great many of us do. Put us into a place where certain forms of frivolity or vice are common, and we go in for them. Take us away from these and we change our hue to something a little whiter. But all through we never know what it is to put forth a good solid force of resistance and to say, 'No! I will not!' or, what is sometimes quite as hard to say, 'Yes! though,' as Luther said in his strong way, 'there were as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the housetops, I will!' If people would live more by reflection and by the power of a resisting will, this question of my text would come oftener to them.

And there is another cause that I must touch on for one moment, why so many people neglect this question, and that is because they are uneasily conscious that they durst not face it. I know of no stranger power than that by which men can ignore unwelcome questions;

and I know of nothing more tragical than the fact that they choose to exercise the power. What would you think of a man who never took stock because he knew that he was insolvent, and yet did not want to know it? And what do you think of yourselves if, knowing that the thought of passing into that solemn eternity is anything but a cheering one, and that you have to pass thither, you never turn your head to look at it? Ah, brother, if it be true that this question of my text is unpleasant to you to hear put, be sure that that is the strongest reason why you should put it.

III. Thirdly, here is a question especially directed to you young folk.

It is so because you are specially tempted to forget it. It may seem as if there were no people in the world that had less need to be appealed to, as I have been appealing to you, by motives drawn from the end of life, than you who are only standing at its beginning. But it is not so. An old rabbi was once asked by his pupil when he should fulfil a certain precept of the law, and the answer was, 'The day before you die.' 'But,' said the disciple, 'I may die to-morrow.' 'Then,' said the master, 'do it to-day.' And so I say to you, do not make sure that the beginning at which you stand is separated by a long tract of years from the end to which you go. It may be, but it may not be. I know that arguments pleading with men to be Christians, and drawn from the consideration of a future life, are not fashionable nowadays, but I am persuaded that that preaching of the Gospel is seriously defective, and will be lamentably ineffective, which ignores this altogether. And, therefore, dear friends, I say to you that, although in all human probability a stretch of years may lie between you and the end of life, the question of my text is one specially adapted to you.

And it is so because, with your buoyancy, with your necessarily limited experience, with the small accumulation of results that you have already in your possession, and with the tendencies of your age to live rather by impulse than by reflection, you are specially tempted to forget the solemn significance of this interrogation. And it is a question especially for you, because you have special advantages in the matter of putting it. We older people are all fixed and fossils, as you are very fond of telling us. The iron has cooled and gone into rigid shapes with us. It is all fluent with you. You may become pretty nearly what you like. I do not mean in regard to circumstances: other considerations come in to determine these; but circumstances are second, character is first; and I do say, in regard to character, you young folk have all but infinite possibilities before you; and, I repeat, may become almost anything that you set yourselves to be. You have no long, weary trail of failures behind you, depressing and seeming to bring an entail of like failure with them for the future. You have not yet acquired habits—those awful things that may be our worst foes or our best friends—you have not yet acquired habits that almost smother the power of reform and change. You have, perhaps, years before you in which you may practise the lessons of wisdom and self-restraint which this question fairly fronted would bring. And so I lay it on your hearts, dear young friends. I have little hope of the old people. I do not despair of any, God forbid! but the fact

remains that the most of the men who have done anything for God and the world worth doing have been under the influence of Christian principle in their early days. And from fifteen to one or two and twenty is the period in which you get the set which, in all likelihood, you will retain through eternity. So, 'What will ye do in the end?' Answer the question whilst yet it is possible to answer it, with a stretch of years before you in which you may work out the conclusions to which the answer brings.

IV. And that leads me to say, last of all, and but a word, that here is a question which Jesus Christ alone enables a man to answer with calm confidence.

As I have said, the end is a beginning; the passage from life is the entrance on a progressive and eternal state of retribution. And Jesus Christ tells us two other things. He tells us that that state has two parts; that in one there is union with Him, life, blessedness for ever; and that in the other there is darkness, separation from Him, death, and misery. These are the facts, as revealed by the incarnate Word of God, on which answers to this question must be shaped.

'What will ye do in the end?' If I am trusting to Him; if I have brought my poor, weak nature and sinful soul to Him, and cast them upon His merciful sacrifice and mighty intercession and life-giving Spirit, then I can say: 'As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness.' Ay, and what about those who do not take Him for their Prince and their Saviour? 'What will ye do in the end?' When life's illusions are over, when all its bubbles are burst, when conscience awakes, and when you stand to give an account of yourself to God, 'What will ye do in the end' which is a beginning? 'Can thy heart endure and thy hand be strong in the day that I shall deal with thee?' Oh brother, do not turn away from that Christ who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending! If you will cleave to Him, then you may let the years and weeks slip away without regret; and whether the close be far off or near, death will be robbed of all its terrors, and the future so filled with blessedness, that of you the wise man's paradox will be true: 'Better is the end of a thing than the beginning, and the day of death than the day of birth.'

POSSESSING AND POSSESSED

‘The portion of Jacob is not like them—for He is the former of all things: and Israel is the tribe of His inheritance. The Lord of Hosts is His name.’—*JER. x. 16, R.V.*

Here we have set forth a reciprocal possession. We possess God, He possesses us. We are His inheritance, He is our portion. I am His; He is mine.

This mutual ownership is the very living centre of all religion. Without it there is no relation of any depth between God and us. How much profounder such a conception is than the shallow notions about religion which so many men have! It is not a round of observance; not a painful effort at obedience, not a dim reverence for some vague supernatural, not a far-off bowing before Omnipotence, not the mere acceptance of a creed, but a life in which God and the soul blend in the intimacies of mutual possession.

I. The mutual possession.

God is our portion.

That thought presupposes the possibility of our possessing God. It presupposes the fact that He has given Himself to us, and the answering fact that we have taken Him for ours.

We are God’s inheritance.

We give ourselves to Him—we do so where we apprehend that He has given Himself to us; it is His giving love that moves men to yield themselves to God. He takes us for His. What a wonderful thought that He delights in possessing us! The all-sufficiency of our portion is guaranteed because He is ‘the former of all things.’ The safety of His inheritance is secured because ‘the Lord of Hosts is His name.’ And that name accentuates the wonder that He to whom all the ordered armies of the universe submit and belong should still take us for His inheritance.

Mark the contrast of this true possession with the false and merely external possessions of the world. Those outward things which a man has stand in no real relation with him. They fade and fleet away, or have to be left, and, even while they last, are not his in any real sense. Only what has indissolubly entered into, and become one with, our very selves is truly ours.

Our possession of God suggests a view of our blessedness and our obligation. It secures blessedness—for we have in Him an all-sufficient object and a treasure for all our nature. It imposes the obligation to let our whole nature feed upon, and be filled by, Him, to see that the temple where He dwells is clean, and not to fling away our treasure.

His possession of us suggests a corresponding view of our blessedness and our obligation.

We are His—as slaves are their owners’ property. So we are bound to submission of will. To be owned by God is an honour. The slave’s goods and chattels belong to the master.

His possession of us binds us to consecrate ourselves, and so to glorify Him in ‘body and spirit which are His.’

It ensures our safety. How constantly this calming thought is dwelt on in Scripture—that they who belong to Him need fear nothing. ‘Fear not, I have called thee by thy name, thou art Mine.’ God does not hold His possessions with so slack a grasp as to lose them or to suffer them to be wrenched away. A psalmist rose to the hope of immortality by meditating on what was involved in his being God’s possession here and now. He was sure that even Death’s bony fingers could not keep their hold on him, and so he sang, ‘Thou wilt not suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption.’ The seal on the foundation of God which guarantees its standing sure is, ‘The Lord knoweth them that are His.’ ‘They shall be Mine in the day that I do make, even a peculiar treasure,’ is His own assurance, on which resting, a trembling soul may ‘have boldness in the day of judgment.’

II. The human response by which God becomes ours and we His.

That response is first the act of faith, which is an act of both reason and will, and then the act of love and self-surrender which follows faith, and then the continuous acts of communion and consecration.

All must commence with recognition of His free gift of Himself to us in Christ. We come empty-handed. That gift recognised and accepted moves us to give ourselves to Him. When we give ourselves to Him we find that we possess Him.

Further, there must be continuous communion. This mutual possession depends on our occupation of mind and heart with Him. We possess Him and are possessed by Him, when our wills are kept in harmony with, and submission to, Him, when our thoughts are occupied with Him and His truth, when our affections rest in Him, when our desires go out to Him, when our hopes are centred in Him, when our practical life is devoted to Him.

III. The blessedness of this mutual possession.

To possess God is to have an all-sufficient object for all our nature. He who has God for his very own has the fountain of life in himself, has the spring of living water, as it were, in his own courtyard, and needs not to go elsewhere to draw. He need fear no loss, for his wealth is so engrained in the very substance of his being that nothing can rob him of it but himself, and that whilst he lasts it will last with, because in, him.

How marvellous that into the narrow room of one poor soul He should come whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain! Solomon said, ‘How much less this house which I have built,’—well may we say the same of our little hearts. But He can compress Himself into that small compass and expand His abode by dwelling in it.

Nor is the blessedness of being possessed by Him less than the blessedness of possessing Him. For so long as we own ourselves we are burdens to ourselves, and we only own ourselves truly when we give ourselves away utterly. Earthly love, with its blessed mysteries of mutual possession, teaches us that. But all its depth and joy are as nothing when set beside the liberty, the glad peace, the assured possession of our enriched selves, which are ours when

we give ourselves wholly to God, and so for the first time are truly lords of ourselves, and find ourselves by losing ourselves in Him.

Nor need we fear to say that God, too, delights in that mutual possession, for the very essence of love is the desire to impart itself, and He is love supreme and perfect. Therefore is He glad when we let Him give Himself to us, and moved by 'the mercies of God, yield ourselves to Him a sacrifice of a sweet smell, acceptable to God.'

CALMS AND CRISES

‘If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and though in a land of peace thou art secure, yet how wilt thou do in the pride of Jordan?’—*JER. xii. 5, R.V.*

The prophet has been complaining of his persecutors. The divine answer is here, reproving his impatience, and giving him to understand that harder trials are in store for him.

Both clauses mean substantially the same thing, and are of a parabolic nature. The one adduces the metaphor of a race: ‘Footmen have beaten you, have they? Then how will you run with cavalry?’ The other is more clear in the Revised Version rendering: ‘Though in a land of peace you are secure, what will you do in Jordan when it swells?’ The ‘swelling of Jordan’ is a figure for extreme danger.

The questions may be taken as referring to our own lives. Note how the one refers more to strength for duties, the other to peace and safety in dangers. They both recognise that life has great alternations as to the magnitude of its tasks and trials, and they call on experience to answer the question whether we are ready for times of stress and peril.

I. Think of what may come to us.

We all have had the experience of how in our lives there are long stretches of uneventful days, and then, generally without warning, some crisis is sprung on us, which demands quite a different order of qualities to cope with it. Our typhoons generally come without any warning from a falling barometer.

We may at any moment be confronted with some hard duty which will task our utmost energy.

We may at any moment be plunged in some great calamity to which the quiet course of our lives for years will be as the still flow of the river between smiling lawns is to the dash and fierce currents of the rapids in a grim canyon.

The tasks that may come on us and the tasks that must come, the dangers that may beset us and the dangers that must envelop us, the possibilities that lie hidden in the future, and the certainties that we know to be shrouded there, should surely sometimes occupy a wise man’s thoughts. It is but living in a fool’s paradise to soothe ourselves with the assurance which a moment’s thought will shatter: ‘To-morrow shall be as this day.’ We shall not always have the easy competition with footmen; there will some time come a call to strain our muscles to keep up with the gallop of cavalry. We shall have to struggle to keep our feet in the swelling of Jordan, and must not expect to have a continual leisurely life in ‘a land of peace.’

II. Think of what experience tells us as to our power to meet these crises.

The footmen have wearied you. The small tasks have been more than your patience and strength could manage. No doubt great exigencies often call forth great powers that were

dormant in the humdrum of ordinary life. But the man who knows himself best will be the most ready to shrink with distrust from the dread possibilities of duty.

If we think of the 'footmen' with whom we have contended as representing the smaller faults that we have tried to overcome, does our success in conquering some small bad habit, some 'little sin,' encourage the hope that we could keep our footing when some great temptation of a lifetime came down on us with a rush like the charge of a battalion of horsemen? Or, if we cast our eyes forward to the calamities that lie still 'on the knees of the gods' for us, do we feel ready to meet the hours of desolating disaster, the 'hour of death and the day of judgment'? Even in a land of peace we have all had alarms, perturbations, and defeats enough, and our security has been at the mercy of marauders so often that if we are wise, and take due heed of what experience has to say to us of our reserve of force, we shall not be hopeful of keeping our footing in the whirling currents of a river in full flood.

III. Think of the power that will fit us for all crises.

With the power of Jesus in our spirits we shall never have to attempt a duty for which we are not strengthened, nor to front a danger from and in which He will not defend us. With His life in us we shall be ready for the long hours of uneventful, unexciting duties, and for the short spurts that make exacting calls on us. We 'shall run and not be weary; we shall walk and not faint.' If we live in Jesus we shall always be in 'a land of peace,' and no 'plague shall come nigh our dwelling.' Even when the soles of our feet rest in the waters of Jordan, the waters of Jordan shall be cut off, and we shall pass over on dry ground into the land of peace, where they that would swallow us up shall be far away for ever.

AN IMPOSSIBILITY MADE POSSIBLE

‘Can the Ethiopian change his skin?’—[JER. xiii. 23](#).

‘If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.’—[2 COR. v. 17](#).

‘Behold, I make all things new.’—[REV. xxi. 5](#).

Put these three texts together. The first is a despairing question to which experience gives only too sad and decisive a negative answer. It is the answer of many people who tell us that character must be eternal, and of many a baffled man who says, ‘It is of no use—I have tried and can do nothing.’ The second text is the grand Christian answer, full of confidence. It was spoken by one who had no superficial estimate of the evil, but who had known in himself the power of Christ to revolutionise a life, and make a man love all he had hated, and hate all he had loved, and fling away all he had treasured. The last text predicts the completion of the renovating process lying far ahead, but as certain as sunrise.

I. The unchangeableness of character, especially of faults.

We note the picturesque rhetorical question here. They were occasionally accustomed to see the dark-skinned, Ethiopian, whether we suppose that these were true negroes from Southern Egypt or dark Arabs, and now and then leopards came up from the thickets on the Jordan, or from the hills of the southern wilderness about the Dead Sea. The black hue of the man, the dark spots that starred the skin of the fierce beast, are fitting emblems of the evil that dyes and speckles the soul. Whether it wraps the whole character in black, or whether it only spots it here and there with tawny yellow, it is ineradicable; and a man can no more change his character once formed than a negro can cast his skin, or a leopard whiten out the spots on his hide.

Now we do not need to assert that a man has no power of self-improvement or reformation. The exhortations of the prophet to repentance and to cleansing imply that he has. If he has not, then it is no blame to him that he does not mend. Experience shows that we have a very considerable power of such a kind. It is a pity that some Christian teachers speak in exaggerated terms about the impossibility of such self-improvement.

But it is very difficult.

Note the great antagonist as set forth here—Habit, that solemn and mystical power. We do not know all the ways in which it operates, but one chief way is through physical cravings set up. It is strange how much easier a second time is than a first, especially in regard to evil acts. The hedge once broken down, it is very easy to get through it again. If one drop of water has percolated through the dyke, there will be a roaring torrent soon. There is all the difference between once and never; there is small difference between once and twice. By habit we come to do things mechanically and without effort, and we all like that. One solitary footfall across the snow soon becomes a beaten way. As in the banyan-tree, each branch becomes a root. All life is held together by cords of custom which enable us to reserve con-

scious effort and intelligence for greater moments. Habit tends to weigh upon us with a pressure 'heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.' But also it is the ally of good.

The change to good is further made difficult because liking too often goes with evil, and good is only won by effort. It is a proof of man's corruption that if left alone, evil in some form or other springs spontaneously, and that the opposite good is hard to win. Uncultivated soil bears thistles and weeds. Anything can roll downhill. It is always the least trouble to go on as we have been going.

Further, the change is made difficult because custom blinds judgment and conscience. People accustomed to a vitiated atmosphere are not aware of its foulness.

How long it takes a nation, for instance, to awake to consciousness of some national crime, even when the nation is 'Christian'! And how men get perfectly sophisticated as to their own sins, and have all manner of euphemisms for them!

Further, how hard it is to put energy into a will that has been enfeebled by long compliance. Like prisoners brought out of the Bastille.

So if we put all these reasons together, no wonder that such reformation is rare.

I do not dwell on the point that it must necessarily be confined within very narrow limits. I appeal to experience. You have tried to cure some trivial habit. You know what a task that has been—how often you thought that you had conquered, and then found that all had to be done over again. How much more is this the case in this greater work! Often the efforts to break off evil habits have the same effect as the struggles of cattle mired in a bog, who sink the deeper for plunging. The sad cry of many a foiled wrestler with his own evil is, 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' We do not wish to exaggerate, but simply to put it that experience shows that for men in general, custom and inclination and indolence and the lack of adequate motive weigh so heavily that a thorough abandonment of evil, much more a hearty practice of good, are not to be looked for when once a character has been formed. So you young people, take care. And all of us listen to—

II. The great hope for individual renewal.

The second text sets forth a possibility of entire individual renewal, and does so by a strong metaphor.

'If any man be in Christ he is a new creature,' or as the words might be rendered, 'there is a new creation,' and not only is he renewed, but all things are become new. He is a new Adam in a new world.

Now (a) let us beware of exaggeration about this matter. There are often things said about the effects of conversion which are very far in advance of reality, and give a handle to caricature. The great law of continuity runs on through the change of conversion. Take a man who has been the slave of some sin. The evil will not cease to tempt, nor will the effects of the past on character be annihilated. 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,'

remains true. In many ways there will be permanent consequences. There will remain the scars of old wounds; old sores will be ready to burst forth afresh. The great outlines of character do remain.

(b) What is the condition of renewal?

'If any man be in Christ'—how distinctly that implies something more than human in Paul's conception of Christ. It implies personal union with Him, so that He is the very element or atmosphere in which we live. And that union is brought about by faith in Him.

(c) How does such a state of union with Christ make a man over again?

It gives a new aim and centre for our lives. Then we live not unto ourselves; then everything is different and looks so, for the centre is shifted. That union introduces a constant reference to Him and contemplation of His death for us, it leads to self-abnegation.

It puts all life under the influence of a new love. 'The love of Christ constraineth.' As is a man's love, so is his life. The mightiest devolution is to excite a new love, by which old loves and tastes are expelled. 'A new affection' has 'expulsive power,' as the new sap rising in the springtime pushes off the lingering withered leaves. So union with Him meets the difficulty arising from inclination still hankering after evil. It lifts life into a higher level where the noxious creatures that were proper to the swamps cannot live. The new love gives a new and mighty motive for obedience.

That union breaks the terrible chain that binds us to the past. 'All died.' The past is broken as much as if we were dead. It is broken by the great act of forgiveness. Sin holds men by making them feel as if what has been must be—an awful entail of evil. In Christ we die to former self.

That union brings a new divine power to work in us. 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.'

It sets us in a new world which yet is the old. All things are changed if we are changed. They are the same old things, but seen in a new light, used for new purposes, disclosing new relations and powers. Earth becomes a school and discipline for heaven. The world is different to a blind man when cured, or to a deaf one,—there are new sights for the one, new sounds for the other.

All this is true in the measure in which we live in union with Christ.

So no man need despair, nor think, 'I cannot mend now.' You may have tried and been defeated a thousand times. But still victory is possible, not without effort and sore conflict, but still possible. There is hope for all, and hope for ME.

III. The completion in a perfectly renewed creation.

The renovation here is only partial. Its very incompleteness is prophetic. If there be this new life in us, it obviously has not reached its fulness here, and it is obviously not manifested here for all that even here it is.

It is like some exotic that does not show its true beauty in our greenhouses. The life of a Christian on earth is a prophecy by both its greatness and its smallness, by both its glory and its shame, by both its brightness and its spots. It cannot be that there is always to be this disproportion between aspiration and performance, between willing and doing. Here the most perfect career is like a half-lighted street, with long gaps between the lamps.

The surroundings here are uncongenial to the new creatures. 'Foxes have holes'—all creatures are fitted for their environment; only man, and eminently renewed man, wanders as a pilgrim, not in his home. The present frame of things is for discipline. The schooling over, we burn the rod. So we look for an external order in full correspondence with the new nature.

And Christ throned 'makes all things new.' How far the old is renewed we cannot tell, and we need not ask. Enough that there shall be a universe in perfect harmony with the completely renewed nature, that we shall find a home where all things will serve and help and gladden and further us, where the outward will no more distract and clog the spirit.

Brethren, let that mighty love constrain you; and look to Christ to renew you. Whatever your old self may have been, you may bury it deep in His grave, and rise with Him to newness of life. Then you may walk in this old world, new creatures in Christ Jesus, looking for the blessed hope of entire renewal into the perfect likeness of Him, the perfect man, in a perfect world, where all old sorrows and sins have passed away and He has made all things new. Through eternity, new joys, new knowledge, new progress, new likeness, new service will be ours— and not one leaf shall ever wither in the amaranthine crown, nor 'the cup of blessing' ever become empty or flat and stale. Eternity will be but a continual renewal and a progressive increase of ever fresh and ever familiar treasures. The new and the old will be one.

Begin with trusting to Him to help you to change a deeper blackness than that of the Ethiopian's skin, and to erase firier spots than stain the tawny leopard's hide, and He will make you a new man, and set you in His own time in a 'new heaven and earth, where dwelleth righteousness.'

TRIUMPHANT PRAYER

‘O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do Thou it for Thy name’s sake: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against Thee. 8. O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest Thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night? 9. Why shouldest Thou be as a man astonished, as a mighty man that cannot save? yet Thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us, and we are called by Thy name; leave us not.’—*JER. xiv. 7-9.*

My purpose now carries me very far away from the immediate occasion of these words; yet I cannot refrain from a passing reference to the wonderful pathos and picturesque power with which the long-forgotten calamity that evoked them is portrayed in the context. A terrible drought has fallen upon the land, and the prophet’s picture of it is, if one might say so, like some of Dante’s in its realism, in its tenderness, and in its terror. In the presence of a common calamity all distinctions of class have vanished, and the nobles send their little ones to the well, and they come back with empty vessels and drooping heads instead of with the gladness that used to be heard in the place of drawing of water. The ploughmen are standing among the cracked furrows, gazing with despair on the brown chapped earth, and in the field the very dumb creatures are sharing in the common sorrow, and the imperious law of self-preservation overpowers and crushes the maternal instincts. ‘Yea, the hind also calved in the field, and forsook it, because there was no grass.’ And on every little hilltop where cooler air might be found, the once untamable wild asses are standing with open nostrils panting for the breeze, their filmy eyes failing them, gazing for the rain that will not come. And then, from contemplating all that sorrow, the prophet turns to God with a wondrous burst of strangely blended confidence and abasement, penitence and trust, and fuses together the acknowledgment of sin and reliance upon the established and perpetual relation between Israel and God, pleading with Him about His judgments, presenting before Him the mysterious contradiction that such a calamity should fall on those with whom God dwelt, and casting himself lowly before the throne, and pleading the ancient name: ‘Do Thou it! Leave us not.’

It is to the wonderful fulness and richness of this prayer that I ask your attention in these few remarks. Expositors have differed as to whether the drought that forms its basis was a literal one, or is the prophet’s way of putting the sore calamities that had fallen on Israel. Be that as it may, I need not remind you how often in Scripture that metaphor of the ‘rain that cometh down from heaven and watereth the earth’ is the symbol for God’s divine gift of His Spirit, and how, on the other hand, the picture of the ‘dry and thirsty land where no water is’ is the appropriate figure for the condition of the soul or of the Church void of the divine presence. And I think I shall not mistake if I say that though we have much to make us thankful, yet you and I, dear brethren, and all our Churches and congregations, are suffering under this drought, and the merciful ‘rain, wherewith Thou dost confirm Thine in-

heritance when it is weary' has not yet come as we would have it. May we find in these words some gospel for the day that may help us to come to the temper of mind into which there shall descend the showers to 'make soft the earth and bless the springing thereof!'

Glancing over these clauses, then, and trying to put them into something like order for our purpose, there are four things that I would have you note. The first is the mysterious contradiction between the ideal Israel and the actual state of things; the second is the earnest inquiry as to the cause; the third the penitent confession of our sinfulness; and the last, the triumphant confidence of believing prayer.

I. First of all, then, look at the illustration given to us by these words of the mysterious contradiction between the ideal of Israel and the actual condition of things.

Recur, for the sake of illustration, to the historical event upon which our text is based. The old prophet had said, 'The Lord thy God giveth thee a good land, a land full of brooks and water, rivers and depths, a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack anything in it'; and the startling fact is, that these men saw around them a land full of misery for want of that very gift which had been promised. The ancient charter of Israel's existence was that God should dwell in the midst of them, and what was it that they beheld? 'As things are,' says the prophet, 'it looks as if that perennial presence which Thou hast promised had been changed into visits, short and far between. Why shouldst Thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man, that turneth aside to tarry for a night?'

Now, I suppose there are two ideas intended to be conveyed—the brief, transitory, interrupted visits, with long, dreary stretches of absence between them; and the indifference of the visitant, as a man who pitches his tent in some little village to-night cares very little about the people that he never saw before this afternoon's march, and will never see after to-morrow morning. And not only is it so, but, instead of the perpetual energy of this divine aid that had been promised to Israel, as things are now, it looks as if He was a mighty man astonished, a hero that cannot save—some warrior stricken by panic fear into a paralysis of all his strength—a Samson with his locks shorn. The ideal had been so great—perpetual gifts, perpetual presence, perpetual energy; the reality is chapped ground and parched places, occasional visitations, like vanishing gleams of sunshine in a winter's day, and a paralysis, as it would appear, of all the ancient might.

Dear Christian friends, am I exaggerating, or dealing only with one set of phenomena, and forgetting the counterpoising ones on the other side, when I say, Change the name, and the story is told about us? God be thanked we have much that shows us that He has not left us, but yet, when we think of what we are, and of what God has promised that we should be, surely we must confess that there is the most sad, and, but for one reason, the most mysterious contradiction between the divine ideal and the actual facts of the case. Need we go further to learn what God meant His Church to be, than the last words that Jesus Christ

said to us—‘Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world’? Need we go further than those metaphors which come from His lips as precepts, and, like all His precepts, are a commandment upon the surface, but a promise in the sweet kernel—‘Ye are the salt of the earth,’ ‘ye are the light of the world’—or than the prophet’s vision of an Israel which ‘shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord’? Is that the description of what you and I are? Have not we to say, ‘We have not wrought any deliverance in the earth, neither have the inhabitants of the world fallen’? ‘Salt of the earth,’ and we can hardly keep our own souls from going putrid with the corruption that is round about us. ‘Light of the world,’ and our poor candles burnt low down into the socket, and sending up rather stench and smoke than anything like a clear flame. The words sound like irony rather than promises, like the very opposite of what we are rather than the ideals towards which our lives strive. In our lips they are presumption, and in the lips of the world, as we only too well know, they are a not undeserved scoff, to be said with curved lip, ‘The salt of the earth,’ and ‘the light of the world’!

And look at what we are doing: scarcely holding our own numerically. Here and there a man comes and declares what God has done for his soul. But what is the Church, what are the Christian men of England, with all their multifarious activities, performing? Are we leavening the national mind? Are we breathing a higher godliness into trade, a more wholesome, simple style of living into society? And as for expansion, why, the Church at home does not keep up with the actual increase of the population; and we are conquering heathendom as we might hope to drain the ocean by taking out thimblefuls at a time. Is that what the Lord meant us to do? Our Father with us; yes, but oh! as a ‘mighty man, astonished,’ as He might well be, ‘that cannot save’ for the old, old reason, ‘He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.’ No wonder that on the other side men are saying—and it is not such a very presumptuous thing to say, if you have regard only to the facts that appear on the surface—men are saying, ‘wait a little while, and all these organisations will come to nothing; these Christian churches, as they are called,’ and everything that you and I regard as distinctive of Christianity, ‘will be gone and be forgotten.’ We believe ourselves to be in possession of an eternal light; the world looks at us and sees that it is like a flickering flame in a dying lamp. Dear brethren, if I think of the lowness of our own religious characters, the small extent to which we influence the society in which we live, of the slow rate at which the Gospel progresses in our land, I can only ask the question, and pray you to lay it to heart, which the old prophet asked long ago: ‘O Thou that art named the house of Jacob, is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these His doings? Do not my words do good to them that walk uprightly?’ ‘Why shouldest Thou be as a mighty man that cannot save?’

II. Let me ask you to look at the second thought that I think may fairly be gathered from these words, namely, that this consciousness of our low and evil condition ought to lead to very earnest and serious inquiry as to its cause.

The prophet having acknowledged transgression yet asks a question, 'Why shouldest Thou leave us? Why have all these things come upon us?' And he asks it not as ignorant of the answer, but in order that the answer may be deepened in the consciences and perceptions of those that listen to him, and that they together may take the answer to the Throne of God. There can be no doubt in a Christian mind as to the reason, and yet there is an absolute necessity that the familiar truth as to the reason should be driven home to our own consciences, and made part of our own spiritual experience, by our own honest reiteration of it and reflection upon it.

'Why shouldest Thou leave us?' Now, I need not spend time by taking into consideration answers that other people might give. I suppose that none of us will say that the reason is in any variableness of that unalterable, uniform, ever present, ever full, divine gift of God's Spirit to His children. We do not believe in any arbitrary sovereignty that withdraws that gift; we do not believe that that gift rises and falls in its fulness and its abundance. We believe that the great reservoir is always full, and that, if ever our small tanks be empty, it is because there is something choking the pipe, not because there is anything less in the centre storehouse. We believe, if I may take another illustration, that it is with the seasons and the rotation of day and night in the religious experience as it is with them in the natural world. Summer and winter come and go, not because of any variableness in the centre orb, but because of the variation in the inclination of the circling satellite; day and night come not by reason of any 'shadow cast by turning' from the sun that revolves not at all— but by reason of the side that is turned to his life-giving and quickening beams. We believe that all the clouds and mist that come between us and God are like the clouds and mist of the sky, not dropped upon us from the blue empyrean above, but sucked up from the undrained swamps and poisonous fens of the lower earth. That is to say, if there be any change in the fulness of our possession of the divine Spirit, the fault lies wholly within the region of the mutable and of the human, and not at all in the region of the perennial and divine.

Nor do we believe, I suppose, any of us, that we are to look for any part of the reason in failure of the adaptation of God's work and God's ordinances to the great work which they have to do. Other people may tell us, if they like—it will not shake our confidence—that the fire that was kindled at Pentecost has all died down to grey ashes, and that it is of no use trying to cower over the burnt-out embers any more in order to get heat out of them. They may, and do, tell us that the 'rushing, mighty wind that filled the house' obeys the law of cycles as the wind of the natural universe, and will calm into stillness after a while, and then set in and blow from the opposite quarter. They may tell us, and they do tell us, that the 'river of the water of life that flows from the Throne of God and of the Lamb' is lost in the sands of time, like the streams in the great Mongolian plateau. We do not believe that. Everything stands exactly as it always has been in regard to the perennial possession of Christ's Spirit as the strength and resource of His Church; and the fault, dear friends, lies

only here: 'O Lord, our iniquities testify against us; our backslidings are many; we have sinned against Thee.'

Oh, let me urge upon you, and upon myself, that the first thing which we have to do is prayerfully and patiently and honestly to search after this cause, and not look to superficial trifles such as possible variations and improvements in order and machinery, and polity or creed, or anything else, as the means of changing and bettering the condition of things, but to recognise this as being the one sole cause that hinders—the slackness of our own hold on Christ's hand, and the feebleness and imperfection of our own spiritual life. Dear brethren, there is no worse sign of the condition of churches than the calm indifference and complacency in the present condition of things which visits very many of us; it is like a deadly malaria wherever it is to be found, and there is no more certain precursor of a blessed change than a widespread dissatisfaction with what we are, and an honest, earnest search after the cause. The sleeper that is restless, and tosses and turns, is near awakening; and the ice that cracks, and crumbles, and groans, and heaves, is on the point of breaking up. When Christian men and women are aroused to this, the startled recognition of how far beneath the ideal—no, I should not say how far beneath, but rather how absolutely opposed to, the ideal—so much of our Christian life and work is, and when further they push the inquiry for the cause, so as to find that it lies in their own sin, then we shall be near the time, yea, the 'set time, to favour Zion.'

III. And so let me point you, in the next place—and but a word or two on that matter—to the consideration that the consciousness of the evil condition and knowledge of its cause leads on to lowly penitence and confession.

I dwell upon that for a moment for one reason mainly. I suppose that it is a very familiar observation with us all that when, by God's mercy, any of us individually, or as communities, are awakened to a sense of our own departure from what He would have us be, and the feebleness of all our Christian work, we are very apt to be led away upon the wrong scent altogether, and instead of seeking improvement and revivification in God's order, we set up an order of our own, which is a great deal more pleasing to our own natural inclinations. For instance, to bring the thing to a practical illustration, suppose I were, after these remarks of mine, as a kind of corollary from them, to ask for volunteers for some new form of Christian work, I believe I should get twenty for one that I should get if I simply said, 'Brethren, let us go together and confess our sins before God, and ask Him not to leave us.' We are always tempted to originate some new kind of work, to manufacture a revival, to begin by bringing together the outcasts into the fold, instead of to begin by trying to deepen our own Christian character, and purifying our own hearts, and getting more and more of the life of God into our own spirits, and then to let the increase from without come as it may. The true law for us to follow is to begin with lowly abasement at His footstool, and when we have purged ourselves from faults and sins in the very act of confessing them, and

of shaking them from us, then when we are fit for growth, external growth, we shall get it. But the revival of the Church is not what people fancy it to be so often nowadays, the gathering in of the unconverted into its fold—that is the consequence of the revival. The revival comes by the path of recognition of sin, and confession of sin, and forsaking of sin, and waiting before Him for His blessing and His Spirit. Let me put all that I would say about this matter into the one remark, that the law of the whole process is the old one which was exemplified on the day of Pentecost. ‘Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly; gather the people, assemble the elders; let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet; let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar. Yea, the Lord will be zealous for His land, and will pity His people; and I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh.’ Brethren, to our knees and to confessions! Let us see to it that we are right in our own inmost hearts.

IV. And so, finally, look at the wonderful way in which in this text of ours the prophet fuses together into one indistinguishable and yet not confused whole, confession, and pleading remonstrance and also the confidence of triumphant prayer.

I cannot touch upon the various points of that as I would gladly do; but I must suggest one or two of them for your consideration. Look at the substance of his petition: ‘Do Thou it for Thy name’s sake.’ ‘Leave us not.’ That is all he asks. He does not prescribe what is to be done. He does not ask for the taking away of the calamity, he simply asks for the continual presence and the operation of the divine hand, sure that God is in the midst of them, and working all things right. Let us shape our expectations in like fashion, not being careful to discover paths for Him to run in; but contented if we can realise the sweetness and the strength of His calming and purging presence, and willing to leave the manner of His working in His own hand.

Then, look at what the text suggests as pleas with God, and grounds of confidence for ourselves. ‘Do Thou it for Thy name’s sake, the hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in time of trouble. Thou art in the midst of us, we are called by Thy name.’ There are three grounds upon which we may base our firm confidence. The one is the name—all the ancient manifestations of Thy character, which have been from of old, and remain for our perpetual strength. ‘As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of Hosts.’ ‘That which is Thy memorial unto all generations pledges Thee to the constant reiteration and reproduction, hour by hour, according to our necessity, of all the might, and the miracles, and the mercies of the past. Do Thou it for Thy name’s sake.’

And then Jeremiah turns to the throne of God with another plea—‘the hope of Israel’—and thereby fills his mouth with the argument drawn from the fact that the confidence of the Church is fixed upon Him, and that it cannot be that He will disappoint it. ‘Because Thou hast given us Thy name, and because Thy name, by Thy grace, has become, through

our faith, our hope, Thou art doubly bound—bound by what Thou art, bound by what we expect—to be with us, our strength and our confidence.’

And the final plea is the appeal to the perennial and essential relationship of God to His Church. ‘We are called by Thy name’—‘we belong to Thee. It were Thy concern and ours that Thy Gospel should spread in the world, and the honour of our Lord should be advanced. Thou hast not surely lost Thy hold of Thine own, or Thy care for Thine own property.’ The psalmist said, ‘Thou wilt not suffer him that is devoted to Thee to see corruption.’ And what his faith felt to be impossible in regard to the bodily life is still more unthinkable in regard to the spiritual. It cannot be that that which belongs to Him should pass and perish. ‘We are called by Thy name, and Thou, Lord, art in the midst of us’—not a Samson shorn of his locks; not a wayfaring man turning aside to delay for a night; but the abiding Presence which makes the Church glad.

Dear brethren, calm and confident expectation should be our attitude, and lowly repentance should rise to triumphant believing hope, because God is moving round about us in this day. Thanks be to His name, there is spread through us all an expectation of great things. That expectation brings its own fulfilment, and is always God’s way of preparing the path for His own large gifts, like the strange, indefinable attitude of expectation which we know filled the civilised world before the birth of Jesus Christ—like the breath of the morning that springs up before the sun rises, and says, ‘The dawn; the dawn,’ and dies away. The expectation is the precursor of the gift, and the prayer is the guarantee of the acceptance. Take an illustration. Those great lakes in Central Africa that are said to feed the Nile are filled with melting snows weeks and weeks before the water rises away down in Egypt, and brings fertility across the desert that it makes to glisten with greenness, and to rejoice and blossom as the rose. And so in silence, high up upon the mountains of God, fed by communion with Himself, the expectation rises to a flood-tide ere it flows down through all the channels of Christian organisation and activity, and blesses the valleys below. It is not for us to hurry the work of God, nor spasmodically to manufacture revivals. It is not for us, under the pretence of waiting for Him, to be cold and callous; but it is for us to question ourselves wherefore these things have come upon us, with lowly, penitent confession to turn to God, and ask Him to bless us. Oh, if we were to do this, we should not ask in vain! Let us take the prayer of our context, and say, ‘We acknowledge, O Lord, our wickedness, and the iniquity of our fathers; for we have sinned against Thee. Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain? or can the heavens give showers? art not Thou He, O Lord, our God? Therefore we will wait upon Thee.’ Be sure that the old merciful answer will come to us, ‘I will pour rivers of water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground; and I will pour My Spirit upon thy seed, and My blessing upon thine offspring.’

SIN'S WRITING AND ITS ERASURE

'The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars.'—[JER. xvii. 1.](#)

'Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.'—[2 COR. iii. 3.](#)

'Blotting out the handwriting that was against us.'—[COL. ii. 14.](#)

I have put these verses together because they all deal with substantially the same metaphor. The first is part of a prophet's solemn appeal. It describes the sin of the nation as indelible. It is written in two places. First, on their hearts, which reminds us of the promise of the new covenant to be written on the heart. The 'red-leaved tablets of the heart' are like waxen tables on which an iron stylus makes a deep mark, an ineradicable scar. So Judah's sin is, as it were, eaten into their heart, or, if we might so say, tattooed on it. It is also written on the stone horns of the altar, with a diamond which can cut the rock (an illustration of ancient knowledge of the properties of the diamond). That sounds a strange place for the record of sin to appear, but the image has profound meaning, as we shall see presently.

Then the two New Testament passages deal with other applications of the same metaphor. Christ is, in the first, represented as writing on the hearts of the Corinthians, and in the second, as taking away 'the handwriting contrary to us.' The general thought drawn from all is that sin's writing on men's hearts is erased by Christ and a new inscription substituted.

I. The handwriting of sin.

Sin committed is indelibly written on the heart of the doer.

'The heart,' of course, in Hebrew means more than merely the supposed seat of the affections. It is figuratively the centre of the spiritual life, just as physically it is the centre of the natural. Thoughts and affections, purposes and desires are all included, and out of it are 'the issues of life,' the whole outgoings of the being. It is the fountain and source of all the activity of the man, the central unity from which all comes. Taken in this wide sense it is really the whole inner self that is meant, or, as is said in one place, 'the hidden man of the heart.' And so the thought in this vigorous metaphor may be otherwise put, that all sin makes indelible marks on the whole inward nature of the man who does it.

Now to begin with, think for a moment of that truth that everything which we do reacts on us the doers.

We seldom think of this. Deeds are done, and we fancy that when done, they are done *with*. They pass, as far as outward seeming goes, and their distinguishable consequences in the outward world, in the vast majority of cases, soon apparently pass. All seems evanescent and irrecoverable as last year's snows, or the water that flowed over the cataract a century ago. But there is nothing more certain than that all which we do leaves indelible traces on ourselves. The mightiest effect of a man's actions is on his own inward life. The recoil of the

gun is more powerful than the blow from its shot. Our actions strike inwards and there produce their most important effects. The river runs ceaselessly and its waters pass away, but they bring down soil, which is deposited and makes firm land, or perhaps they carry down grains of gold.

This is the true solemnity of life, that in all which we do we are carrying on a double process, influencing others indeed, but influencing ourselves far more.

Consider the illustrations of this law in regard to our sins.

Now the last thing people think of when they hear sermons about 'sin' is that what is meant is the things that they are doing every day. I can only ask you to try to remember, while I speak, that I mean those little acts of temper, or triflings with truth, or yieldings to passion or anger, or indulgence in sensuality, and above all, the living without God, to which we are all prone.

(a) All wrong-doing makes indelible marks on character. It makes its own repetition easier. Habit strengthens inclination. Peter found denying his Lord three times easier than doing it once. It weakens resistance. In going downhill the first step is the only one that needs an effort; gravity will do the rest.

It drags after it a tendency to other evil. All wrong things have so much in common that they lead on to one another. A man with only one vice is a rare phenomenon. Satan sends his apostles forth two by two. Sins hunt in couples, or more usually in packs, like wolves, only now and then do they prey alone like lions. Small thieves open windows for greater ones. It requires continually increasing draughts, like indulgence in stimulants. The palate demands cayenne tomorrow, if it has had black pepper to-day.

So, whatever else we do by our acts, we are making our own characters, either steadily depraving or steadily improving them. There will come a slight slow change, almost unnoticed but most certain, as a dim film will creep over the peach, robbing it of all its bloom, or some microscopic growth will steal across a clearly cut inscription, or a breath of mist will dim a polished steel mirror.

(b) All wrong-doing writes indelible records on the memory, that awful and mysterious power of recalling past things out of the oblivion in which they seem to lie. How solemn and miserable it is to defile it with the pictures of things evil! Many a man in his later years has tried to 'turn over a new leaf,' and has never been able to get the filth out of his memory, for it has been printed on the old page in such strong colours that it shines through. I beseech you all, and especially you young people, to keep yourselves 'innocent of much transgression,' and 'simple concerning evil'—to make your memories like an illuminated missal with fair saints and calm angels bordering the holy words, and not an *Illustrated* Police News. Probably there is no real oblivion. Each act sinks in as if forgotten, gets overlaid with a multitude of others, but it is there, and memory will one day bring it to us.

And all sin pollutes the imagination. It is a miserable thing to have one's mind full of ugly foul forms painted on the inner walls of our chamber of imagery, like the hideous figures in some heathen temple, where gods of lust and murder look out from every inch of space on the walls.

(c) All wrong-doing writes indelible records on the conscience. It does so partly by sophisticating it—the sensibility to right and wrong being weakened by every evil act, as a cold in the head takes away the sense of smell. It brings on colour-blindness to some extent. One does not know how far one may go towards 'Evil! be thou my good'—or how far towards incapacity of distinguishing evil. But at all events the tendency of each sin is in that direction. So conscience may become seared, though perhaps never so completely as that there are no intervals when it speaks. It may long lie dormant, as Vesuvius did, till great trees grow on the floor of the crater, but all the while the communication with the central fires is open, and one day they will burst out.

The writing may be with invisible ink, but it will be legible one day. So, then, all this solemn writing on the heart is done by ourselves. What are you writing? There is a presumption in it of a future retribution, when you will have to read your autobiography, with clearer light and power of judging yourselves. At any rate there is retribution now, which is described by many metaphors, such as sowing and reaping, drinking as we have brewed, and others—but this one of indelible writing is not the least striking.

Sin is graven deep on sinful men's worship.

The metaphor here is striking and not altogether clear. The question rises whether the altars are idolatrous altars, or Jehovah's. If the former, the expression may mean simply that the Jews' idolatry, which was their sin, was conspicuously displayed in these altars, and had, as it were, its most flagrant record in their sacrifices. The altar was the centre point of all heathen and Old Testament worship, and altars built by sinners were the most conspicuous evidences of their sins.

So the meaning would be that men's sin shapes and culminates in their religion; and that is very true, and explains many of the profanations and abominations of heathenism, and much of the formal worship of so-called Christianity.

For instance, a popular religion which is a mere Deism, a kind of vague belief in a providence, and in a future state where everybody is happy, is but the product of men's sin, striking out of Christianity all which their sin makes unwelcome in it. The justice of God, punishment, sinfulness of sin, high moral tone, are all gone. And the very horns of their altars are marked with the signs of the worshippers' sin.

But the 'altars' may be God's altars, and then another idea will come in. The horns of the altar were the places where the blood of the sacrifice was smeared, as token of its offering to God. They were then a part of the ritual of propitiation. They had, no doubt, the same

meaning in the heathen ritual. And so regarded, the metaphor means that a sense of the reality of sin shapes sacrificial religion.

There can be no doubt that a very real conviction of sin lies at the foundation of much, if not all, of the system of sacrifices. And it is a question well worth considering whether a conviction so widespread is not valid, and whether we should not see in it the expression of a true human need which no mere culture, or the like, will supply.

At all events, altars stand as witnesses to the consciousness of sin. And the same thought may be applied to much of the popular religion of this day. It may be ineffectual and shallow but it bears witness to a consciousness of evil. So its existence may be used in order to urge profounder realisation of evil on men. You come to worship, you join in confessions, you say 'miserable sinners'—do you mean anything by it? If all that be true, should it not produce a deeper impression on you?

But another way of regarding the metaphor is this. The horns of the altar were to be touched with the blood of propitiation. But look! the blood flows down, and after it has trickled away, there, deep carved on the horns, still appears the sin, *i.e.* the sin is not expiated by the sinner's sacrifice. Jeremiah is then echoing Isaiah's word, 'Bring no more vain oblations.' The picture gives very strikingly the hopelessness, so far as men are concerned, of any attempt to blot out this record. It is like the rock-cut cartouches of Egypt on which time seems to have no effect. There they abide deep for ever. Nothing that we can do can efface them. 'What I have written, I have written.' Pen-knives and detergents that we can use are all in vain.

II. Sin's writing may be erased, and another put in its place.

The work of Christ, made ours by faith, blots it out.

(a) Its influence on conscience and the sense of guilt. The accusations of conscience are silenced. A red line is drawn across the indictment, or, as Colossians has it, it is 'nailed to the cross.' There is power in His death to set us free from the debt we owe.

(b) Its influence on memory. Christ does not bring oblivion, but yet takes away the remorse of remembrance. Faith in Christ makes memory no longer a record which we blush to turn over, or upon which we gloat with imaginative delight in guilty pleasures past, but a record of our shortcomings that humbles us with a penitence which is not pain, but serves as a beacon and warning for the time to come. He who has a clear beam of memory on his backward track, and a bright light of hope on his forward one, will steer right.

(c) Its influence on character.

We attain new hopes and tastes. 'We become epistles of Christ known and read of all men,' like palimpsests, Homer or Ovid written over with the New Testament gospels or epistles.

Christ's work is twofold, erasure and rewriting. For the one, 'I will blot out as a cloud their transgressions.' None but He can remove these. For the other, 'I will put My law into

their minds and will write it on their hearts.' He can impress all holy desires on, and can put His great love and His mighty spirit into, our hearts.

So give your hearts to Him. They are all scrawled over with hideous and wicked writing that has sunk deep into their substance. Graven as if on rock are your sins in your character. Your worship and sacrifices will not remove them, but Jesus Christ can. He died that you might be forgiven, He lives that you may be purified. Trust yourself to Him, and lean all your sinfulness on His atonement and sanctifying power, and the foul words and bad thoughts that have been scored so deep into your nature will be erased, and His own hand will trace on the page, poor and thin though it be, which has been whitened by His blood, the fair letters and shapes of His own likeness. Do not let your hearts be the devil's copybooks for all evil things to scrawl their names there, as boys do on the walls, but spread them before Him, and ask Him to make them clean and write upon them His new name, indicating that you now belong to another, as a new owner writes his name on a book that he has bought.

THE HEATH IN THE DESERT AND THE TREE BY THE RIVER

‘He shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, a salt land and not inhabited. . . He shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit.’—[JER. xvii. 6, 8](#).

The prophet here puts before us two highly finished pictures. In the one, the hot desert stretches on all sides. The fierce ‘sunbeams like swords’ slay every green thing. The salt particles in the soil glitter in the light. No living creature breaks the melancholy solitude. It is a ‘waste land where no one came, or hath come since the making of the world.’ Here and there a stunted, grey, prickly shrub struggles to live, and just manages not to die. But it has no grace of leaf, nor profitableness of fruit; and it only serves to make the desolation more desolate.

The other carries us to some brimming river, where everything lives because water has come. The pictures are coloured by Eastern experience. For in those lands more than beneath our humid skies and weaker sunshine, the presence or absence of running water makes the difference between barrenness and fertility. Dipping their boughs in the sparkling current, and driving their roots through the moist soil, the bordering trees lift aloft their pride of foliage and bear fruits in their season.

So, says Jeremiah, the two pictures represent two sets of men; the one, he who diverts from their true object his heart-capacities of love and trust, and clings to creatures and to men, ‘making flesh his arm and departing from the living God’; the other, he who leans the whole weight of his needs and cares and sins and sorrows upon God. We can make choice of which shall be the object of our trust, and according as we choose the one or the other, the experience of these vivid pictures will be ours.

Let me briefly, then, draw out the points of contrast in these two companion sketches.

I. The one is in the desert, the other by the river.

Underneath the pictures there lies this thought, that the direction of a man’s trust determines the whole cast of his life, because it determines, as it were, the soil in which he grows. We can alter our habitat. The plant is fixed; but ‘I saw men as trees—yes! but as ‘trees walking.’ We can walk, and can settle where we shall be rooted and whence we shall draw our inspiration, our confidence, our security. The man that chooses—for it is a matter of choice—to trust in any creature thereby wills, though he does not know it, that he shall dwell in a ‘salt land and not inhabited.’ The man that chooses to cast his whole self into the arms of God, and in a paroxysm of self-distrust to realise the divine helpfulness and presence, that man will soon know that he is ‘planted by the river.’

Now, the poor, little dusty shrub in the desert, whose very leaves have been modified into prickles, is fit for the desert, and is as much at home there as are the willows by the

water-courses with their lush vegetation in their moist bed. But if a *man* makes that fatal choice which so-many of us are making, of shutting out God from his confidence and his love, and squandering these upon earth and upon creatures, he is as fatally out of harmony with the place which he has chosen for himself, and as much away from his natural soil, as a tropical plant would be amongst the snows of Arctic glaciers, or a water-lily in the Sahara.

Considering all that I am and need, what and where is my true home and the soil in which I can grow securely, and fear no evil? Brethren, there is only one answer to that question. The very make of a man's spirit points to God, and to God alone, as the natural place for him to root and grow in. You, I, the poorest and humblest of men, will never be right, never feel that we are in our native soil, and compassed with the appropriate surroundings, until we have laid our hearts and our hands on the breast of God, and rested ourselves on Him. Not more surely do gills and fins proclaim that the creature that has them is meant to roam through the boundless ocean, nor the anatomy and wings of the bird witness more plainly to its destination to soar in the open heavens than the make of your spirits testifies that God, and none less or lower, is your portion. We are built for God, and unless we recognise and act upon that conviction, we are like the prickly shrub in the desert, whatever good may be around us; and if we do recognise and act upon it, whatever parched ground may seem to stretch on all sides, there will be soil moist enough for us to draw refreshment and vitality from it.

If that be so, brethren, what insanity the lives of multitudes of us are! As well might bees try to suck honey from a vase of wax flowers as we to draw what we need from creatures, from ourselves, from visible and material things.

What would you business men think of some one who went and sold out all his stock of Government or other sound securities, and then flung the proceeds down a hole in South Africa, out of which no gold will ever come? He would be about as wise as are the people who fancy that these hearts of theirs will ever be at home except they find a home in God.

Where else will you find love that will never fail, nor change, nor die? Where else will you find an object for the intellect that will yield inexhaustible material of contemplation and delight? Where else infallible direction for the will? Where else shall weakness find un-failing strength, or sorrow, adequate consolation, or hope, certain fulfilment, or fear, a safe hiding-place? Nowhere besides. Oh! then, brethren, do, I beseech you, turn away your heart's confidence and love from earth and creatures; for until the roots of your life go down into God, and you draw your life from Him, you are not in your right soil.

II. The one can take in no real good; the other can fear no evil.

One verse of our text says, 'He shall not see when good cometh'; the other one, according to our Authorised Version, 'He shall not see when heat cometh.' But a very slight alteration of one word in the original gives a better reading, which is adopted in the Revised Version, where we have, 'and shall not fear when heat cometh.' That alteration is obviously correct,

because there follows immediately a parallel clause, 'and shall not be careful'—or anxious—'in the year of drought.' In both these clauses the metaphor of the tree is a little let go; and the man who is signified by it comes rather more to the front than in the remainder of the picture. But that is quite natural.

So look at these two simple thoughts for a moment. He whose trust is set upon creatures is thereby disabled from recognising what is his highest good. His judgment is perverted. *There* is the explanation of the fact that men are contented with the partial and evanescent blessedness that may be drawn from human loves and companionship and material things. It is because they have gone blind, and the false direction of their confidence, has put out their eyes. And if any of my hearers are living careless about God, and all that comes from Him, and perfectly contented with that which they find in this visible, diurnal sphere, that is not because they have the good which they need, but because they do not know that good when they see it, and have lost the power of discerning what is really for their benefit and blessedness.

There is nothing sadder in this world than the conspiracy into which men seem to have entered to ignore the highest good, and to profess themselves contented with the lowest. I remember a rough parable of Luther's—the roughness of which may be pardoned for the force and vividness of it—which bears on this matter. He tells how a company of swine were offered all manner of dainty and refined foods, and how, with a unanimous swinish grunt, they answered that they preferred the warm, reeking 'grains' from the mash-tub. The illustration is coarse, but it is not an unfair representation of the choice that some of us are making.

'He cannot see when good cometh.' God comes, and I would rather have some more money. God comes, and I prefer some woman's love. God comes, and I would rather have a prosperous business. God comes, and I prefer beer. So I might go the whole round. The man that cannot see good when it is there before his face, because the false direction of his confidence has blinded his eyes, cannot open his heart to it. It comes, but it does not come in. It surrounds him, but it does not enter into him. You are plunged, as it were, in a sea of possible felicity, which will be yours if your heart's direction is towards God, and the surrounding ocean of blessedness has as little power to fill your heart as the sea has to enter some hermetically sealed flask, dropped into the middle of the Atlantic. 'He cannot see when good cometh.' Blind, blind, blind! are multitudes of us.

Turn to the other side. 'He shall not fear when heat cometh,' which is evil in those Eastern lands, 'and shall not be careful in the year of drought.' The tree, that sends its roots towards a river that never fails, does not suffer when all the land is parched. The man who has driven his roots into God, and is drawing from that deep source what is needful for his life and fertility, has no occasion to dread any evil, nor to gnaw his heart with anxiety as to what he is to do in parched days. Troubles may come, but they do not go deeper than the

surface. It may be all cracked and caked and dry, 'a thirsty land where no water is,' and yet deep down there may be moisture and coolness.

Faith, which is trust, and fear are opposite poles. If a man has the one, he can scarcely have the other in vigorous operation. He that has his trust set upon God does not need to dread anything except the weakening or the paralysing of that trust; for so long as it lasts it is a talisman which changes evil into good, the true philosopher's stone which transmutes the baser metals into gold; and, so long as it lasts, God's shield is round him and no evil can befall him.

Brethren, if our trust is in God, it is unworthy of it and of us to fear, for all things are His, and there is no evil in evil as men call it, so long as it does not draw away our hearts from our Father and our Hope. Therefore, he that fears let him trust; he that trusts let him not be afraid. He that sets his heart and anchors his hopes of safety on any except God, let him be afraid, for he is in a very stern world, and if he is not fearful he is a fool.

So the direction of our trust, if it is right, shuts all real evil out from us, and if it is wrong, shuts us out from all real good.

III. The one is bare, the other clothed with the beauty of foliage.

The word which is translated 'heat' has a close connection with, if it does not literally mean, 'naked' or 'bare.' Probably, as I have said, it designates some inconspicuously leaved desert shrub, the particular species not being ascertainable or a matter of any consequence. Leaves, in Scripture, have a recognised symbolical meaning. 'Nothing but leaves' in the story of the fig-tree meant only beautiful outward appearance, with no corresponding outcome of goodness of heart, in the shape of fruit. So I may venture here to draw a distinction between leafage and fruit, and say that the one points rather to a man's character and conduct as lovely in appearance, and in the other as morally good and profitable.

This is the lesson of these two clauses—misdirected confidence in creatures strips a man of much beauty of character, and true faith in God adorns a soul with a leafy vesture of loveliness. Now, I have no doubt that there start up in your minds at once two objections to that statement: first, that a great many godless men do present fair and attractive features of character; and secondly, that a great many Christian men do not. I admit both things frankly, and yet I say that, for the highest good, the perfect crowning beauty of any human character, this is needed, that it should cling to God. 'Whatsoever things are lovely and of good report' lack their supreme excellence, the diamond on the top of the royal crown, the glittering gold on the summit of the campanile, unless there is in them a distinct reference to God.

I believe that I am speaking to some who would not profess themselves to be religious men, and who yet are truly desirous of cultivating in their character the Fair and the Good. To them I would venture to say—brethren, you will never be so completely, so refinedly,

so truly, graceful as you might be, unless the roots of your character 'are hid with Christ in God.'

'A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine,'

said good old George Herbert. And any act, however humble, on which the light from God falls, will gleam with a lustre else unattainable, like some piece of broken glass in the furrows of a ploughed field.

Sure I am that if we Christian people had a deeper faith, we should have fairer lives. And I beseech you, my fellow-believers in Jesus Christ, not to supply the other side with arguments against Christianity, by showing that it is possible for a man to say and to suppose that he sets his heart on God, and yet to bear but little leafage of beauty or grace of character. Goodness is beauty; beauty is goodness. Both are to be secured by communion and union with Him who is fairer than the children of men. Dip your roots into the fountain of life—it is the fountain of beauty as well as of life, and your lives will be green.

IV. Lastly, the one is sterile, the other fruitful.

I admit, as before, that this statement often seems to be contradicted, both by the good works of godless men, and by the bad works of godly ones. But for all that, I would urge you to consider that the only works of men worth calling 'fruit,' if regard is had to their capacities, relations, and obligations, are those done as the outcome and consequence of hearts trusting in the Lord. The rest of the man's activities may be busy and multiplied, and, from the point of view of a godless morality, many may be fair and good; but if we think of him as being destined, as his chief end, 'to glorify God, and (so) to enjoy Him for ever,' what correspondence between such a creature and acts that are done without reference to God can there ever be? They are not worth calling 'fruit.' At the most they are 'wild grapes,' and there comes a time when they will be tested and the axe laid to the root of the trees, and these imperfect deeds will shrivel up and disappear.

Trust will certainly be fruitful. In so saying we are upon Christian ground, which declares that the outcome of faith is conduct in conformity with the will of Him in whom we trust, and that the productive principle of all good in man is confidence in God manifest to us in Jesus Christ.

So we have not to begin with work; we have to begin with character. 'Make the tree good,' and its fruit will be good. Faith will give power to bring forth such fruit; and faith will set agoing the motive of love which will produce it. Thus, dear brethren, we come back to this—the prime thing about a man is the direction which his trust takes. Is it to God? Then the tree is good; and its fruit will be good too. If you will trust yourselves to 'God manifest in the flesh,' to Jesus Christ and His work for you and in you, then you will be as

if 'planted by the rivers of water,' you will be able to receive into yourselves, and will receive, all good, and be masters of all evil, will exhibit graces of character else impossible, and will bring forth 'fruit that shall remain.' Separated from Him we are nothing, and can bring forth nothing that will stand the light of that last moment.

Brother, turn your trust to that dear Lord, and then you will have your 'fruit unto holiness, and the end shall be everlasting life,' when the transplanting season comes, and they that have been 'planted in the house of the Lord' below shall 'flourish in the courts of our God' above, and grow more green and fruitful, beside the 'river of the water of life that proceedeth from the throne of God and of the Lamb.'

A SOUL GAZING ON GOD

‘A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary.’—JER. xvii.
12.

I must begin by a word or two of explanation as to the language of this passage. The word ‘is’ is a supplement, and most probably it ought to be omitted, and the verse treated as being, not a statement, but a series of exclamations. The next verse runs thus, ‘O Lord! the hope of Israel, all that forsake Thee shall be ashamed’; and the most natural and forcible understanding of the words of my text is reached by connecting them with these following clauses: ‘O Lord! the hope of Israel,’ and, regarding the whole as one long exclamation of adoring contemplation, ‘A glorious throne,’ or ‘*Thou* glorious throne, high from the beginning; the place of our sanctuary, O Lord! the hope of Israel.’

I. If we look at the words so, we have here, to begin with, a wonderful vision of what God is.

‘A glorious throne,’ or, as the original has it, ‘a throne of glory,’— which is not quite the same thing—‘high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary.’ There are three clauses. Now they all seem to me to have reference to the Temple in Jerusalem, which is taken, by a very natural figure of speech, as a kind of suggestive description of Him who is worshipped there. There is the same kind of use of the name of a place to stand for the person who occupies or inhabits it, in many familiar phrases. For instance, ‘The Sublime Porte’ is properly the name of a lofty gateway which belonged to the palace in Constantinople, and so has come to mean the Turkish Government if Government it can be called. So we talk of the ‘Papal See’ having done this or that, and scarcely remember that a ‘see’ is a bishop’s seat, or, again, the decision of ‘the Chair’ is final in the House of Commons. Or, if you will accept a purely municipal parallel, if any one were told that ‘the Town Hall’ had issued a certain order, he would know that our authorities, the Mayor and Corporation, had decreed so and so. So, in precisely the same way here, the prophet takes the outward facts of the Temple as symbolising great and blessed spiritual thoughts of the God that filled the Temple with His own lustre.

‘A glorious throne’—that is grand, but that is not what Jeremiah means—‘A throne of glory’ is the true rendering. And to what does that refer? Now, in the greater number of cases, you will find that in the Old Testament, where ‘glory’ is ascribed to God, the word has a very distinct and specific meaning, viz. the light which was afterwards called the ‘Shekinah,’ and dwelt between the cherubim, and was the symbol of the divine presence and the assurance that that presence would be self-revealing and would manifest Himself to His people. So here the throne on which glory rests is what we call the *mercy-seat* within the veil, where, above the propitiatory table on which once a year the High Priest sprinkled the blood of sacrifice, and beneath which were shut up the tables of the covenant which constituted the bond between God and Israel, shone the Light in the midst of the darkness of the

enclosed inner shrine, the token of the divine presence. The throned glory, the glory that reigns and rules as King in Israel, is the idea of the words before us. It is the same throne that a later writer in the New Testament speaks of when he says, 'Let us come boldly to the Throne of Grace.' For that light of a manifested divine presence was no malign lustre that blinded or slew those who gazed upon it, but though no eye but that of the High Priest dared of old to look, yet he, the representative and, as it were, the concentration of the collective Israel, could stand, unshrinking and unharmed, before that piercing light, because he bore in his hand the blood of sacrifice and sprinkled it on the mercy-seat. So was it of old, but now we all can draw near, through the rent veil, and wall rejoicingly in the light of the Lord. His glory is grace; His grace is glory.

This, then, is the first of Jeremiah's great thoughts of God, and it means—'The Lord God omnipotent reigneth,' there is none else but He, and His will runs authoritative and supreme into all corners of the universe. But it is 'glory' that is throned. That is equivalent to the declaration that our God has never spoken in secret, in the dark places of the earth, nor said to any seeking heart, 'Seek ye My face in vain.' For the light which shone in that Holy Place as His symbol, had for its message to Israel the great thought that, as the sun pours out its lustre into all the corners of its system, so He, by the self-communication which is inherent in His very nature, manifests Himself to every gazing eye, and is a God who is Light, 'and in whom is no darkness at all.'

But reigning glory is also redeeming grace. For the light of the bright cloud, which is the glory of the Lord, shines still, with no thunder in its depths, nor tempests in its bosom, above the mercy-seat, where spreads the blood of sprinkling by which Israel's sins are all taken away. Well may the prophet lift up his heart in adoring wonder, and translate the outward symbol into this great word, 'The throne of glory; Jehovah, the hope of Israel.'

Then the next clause is, I think, equally intelligible by the same process of interpretation—'High from the beginning.' It was a piece of the patriotic exaggeration of Israel's prophets and psalmists that they made much of the little hill upon which the Temple was set. We read of the 'hill of the Lord's house' being 'exalted above the tops of the mountains.' We read of it being a high hill, 'as the hill of Bashan.' And though to the eye of sense it is a very modest elevation, to the eye of faith it was symbolical of much. Jeremiah felt it to be a material type, both of the elevation and of the stable duration of the God whom he would commend to Israel's and to all men's trust. 'High from the beginning,' separated from all creatural limitation and lowness, He whose name is the Most High, and on whose level no other being can stand, towers above the lowness of the loftiest creature, and from that inaccessible height He sends down His voice, like the trumpet from amidst the darkness of Sinai, proclaiming, 'I am God, and there is none beside Me.' Yet while thus 'holy'—that is, separate from creatures—He makes communion with Himself possible to us, and draws near to us in Christ, that we in Christ may be made nigh to Him.

And the loftiness involves, necessarily, timeless and changeless Being; so that we can turn to Him, and feel Him to be 'the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.' No words are needed, and no human words are anything but tawdry attempts to elaborate, which only result in weakening, these two great thoughts. 'High—from the beginning.'

The last of this series of symbols, even more plainly than the other two, refers originally to the Temple upon the hill of Zion; and symbolically, to the God who filled the Temple. He is 'the place of our sanctuary.' That is as though the prophet would point, as the wonderful climax of all, to the fact that He of whom the former things were true should yet be accessible to our worship; that, if I might so say, our feet could tread the courts of the great Temple; and we draw near to Him who is so far above the loftiest, and separate from all the magnificences which Himself has made, and who yet is 'our sanctuary,' and accessible to our worship.

Ay! and more than that—'Lord! Thou hast been our *dwelling-place* in all generations.' In old days the Temple was more than a place of worship. It was a place where a man coming had, according to ancient custom, guest rights with God; and if he came into the Temple of the Most High as to an asylum, he dwelt there safe and secure from avengers or foes.

'The place of our sanctuary,' then, declares that God Himself, like some ancestral dwelling-place in which generation after generation of fathers and children have abode, whence they have been carried, and where their children still live, is to all generations their home and their fortress. The place of our sanctuary implies access to the inaccessibly High, communion with the infinitely Separate, security and abode in God Himself. He that dwelleth in God dwelleth in peace. These, then, are the points of the prophet's vision of God.

II. Note, further, the soul rapt in meditation and this vision of God.

To me, this long-drawn-out series of linked clauses without grammatical connection, this succession of adoring exclamations of rapture, wonder, and praise, is very striking. It suggests the manner in which we should vivify all our thoughts of God, by turning them into material for devout reverence; awe-struck, considering meditation. There is nothing told us in the Bible about God simply in order that we may know it. It is all meant to be fuel to the fire of our divine affection; to kindle in us the sentiments of faith and love and rapturous adoration. It is easy to know the theology of the Old and the New Testaments, and a man may rattle over the catalogue of the divine 'attributes,' as they are called, with perfect accuracy, and never be a hair the better for knowing all of them. So I urge, on you and on myself, the necessity of warming our thoughts and kindling our conceptions of what God is until they melt us into fluidity and adoration and love.

I believe that there are few things which we Christian people more lack in this generation, and by the lack of which we suffer more, than the comparative decay of the good old habit of frequent and patient meditation on the things that we most surely believe. We are so busy in adding to our stock of knowledge, in following out to their latest consequence the logical effects of our Christianity, and in defending it, or seeking to be familiar with the defences,

against modern assaults, or in practical work on its behalf, that the last thing that a great many of us do is to feed upon the truth which we know already. We should be like ruminant animals who first crop the grass—which, being interpreted, means, get Scripture truth into our heads—and then chew the cud, which being interpreted is, then put these truths through a second process by meditation on them, so that they may turn into nourishment and make flesh. ‘He that eateth Me,’ said Jesus Christ (and He used there the word which is specially applied to rumination), ‘shall live by Me.’ It does us no good to know that God is ‘the Throne of Glory, high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary,’ unless we turn theology into devotion by meditation upon it. ‘Suffer the word of exhortation’—in busy, great communities like ours, where we are all driven so hard, there is need for some voices sometimes to be lifted up in pressing upon Christian people the duty of quiet rumination upon the truths that they have.

III. We may see in our text, further, the meditative soul going out to grasp God thus revealed, as its portion and hope.

As I have already said, the text is best understood as part of a series of exclamations which extends into the following verse. If we take account of the whole series, and regard the subsequent part of it as led up to, by the part which is our text, we get an important thought as to what should be the outcome of the truths concerning God, and of our meditative contemplation of them.

My relation to these truths is not exhausted even when I have meditated upon them, and they have touched me into a rapture of devotion. I can conceive that to have been done, and yet the next necessary step not to have been taken. What is that step? The next verse tells us, when it goes on to exclaim, ‘O Lord! *the hope of Israel.*’ I must cast myself upon Him by faith as my only hope, and turn away from all other confidences which are vain and impotent. So we are back upon that familiar Christian ground, that the bond which knits a man to God, and by which all that God is becomes that man’s personal property, and available for the security and the shaping of his life, is the simple flinging of himself into God’s arms, in sure and certain trust. Then, every one of these characteristics of which I have been speaking will contribute its own special part to the serenity, the security, the godlikeness, the blessedness, the righteousness, the strength of the man who thus trusts.

But such confidence which makes all these things my own possessions, which makes Him ‘a throne of glory,’ to which I have access; which makes Him a place in which I dwell by this exercise of personal faith; which makes Him my hope, has for its other side the turning away from all other grounds of confidence and security. The subsequent context tells us how wise it is thus to turn away, and what folly it is to make anything else our hope except that ‘throne of glory.’ ‘They that depart from Me shall be written in the earth,’ because ‘they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters.’ If we say, ‘O Lord! Thou art my hope,’ we shall have the ‘anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, which entereth within the

veil,' and fixes on Him who is within it, the throned Grace between the cherubim, our Brother and our Hope. So we may dwell in God, and from the secure height of our house look down serenely on impotent foes, and never know the bitterness of vain hopes, nor remove from the safe asylum of our home in God.

TWO LISTS OF NAMES

‘They that depart from Me shall be written in the earth’—*JER. xvii. 13.*

‘Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’—*LUKE x. 20.*

A name written on earth implies that the bearer of the name belongs to earth, and it also secondarily suggests that the inscription lasts but for a little while. Contrariwise, a name written in heaven implies that its bearer belongs to heaven, and that the inscription will abide.

We find running throughout Scripture the metaphor of books in which men’s names are written. Moses thought of a book which God has written, and in which his name was enrolled. A psalmist speaks of the ‘book of the living,’ and Isaiah of those who are ‘written among the living in Jerusalem.’ Ezekiel threatens the prophets who speak lies in Jehovah’s name that they ‘shall not be written in the writing of the house of Israel.’ The Apocalypse has many references to the book which is designated as ‘the Lamb’s book of life,’ and which is opened at the final judgment along with the books in which each man’s life-history is written, and only ‘they who are written in the Lamb’s book of life’ enter into the city that comes down out of heaven.

I. The principle on which the two lists are made up.

It is commonly supposed that the idea of unconditional predestination is implied in the writing of the names in the book of life. There is nothing in the figure itself to lead to that, and the text from Jeremiah suggests, on the contrary, that the voluntary attitude of men to God determines their being or not being inscribed in the book of heaven, since it is ‘they who depart from God’ whose ‘names are written on earth.’

Then, since in the New Testament the book of life is called ‘the Lamb’s,’ we are led to think of Christ as writing in it, and hence of our faith in Him as being the condition of enrolling our names.

II. The significance of the lists.

They are lists of the living and of the dead.

True life is in fellowship with God. The other is the register of the burials in a graveyard.

They are lists of the citizens of two cities.

The idea is that the one class have relations and affinities with the celestial, are ‘fellow-citizens with the saints,’ and have heaven as their metropolis, their mother city. Therefore they are but as aliens here, and should not wish to be naturalised. The other class are citizens of the earthly, belonging to the present, with all their thoughts and desires bounded by this visible diurnal sphere.

They are lists of those who shall be forgotten, and their works annihilated, and of those who shall be remembered and their work crowned.

The names written on earth are swiftly obliterated, like a child’s scrawl on the sand which is washed away by the next tide, or covered up by the next storm that blows about

the sand-hills. What a contrast is that of the names written on the heavens, high up above all earthly mutations!

In one sense oblivion soon seizes on us all. In another none of us is ever forgotten by God, but good and bad alike live in His thought. Still this idea of a special remembrance has place, as suggesting that, however unnoticed or forgotten on earth, God's children live in the true 'Golden Book.' Their names are in the book of life. 'Of so much fame, in heaven expect the meed.' Ay, and as, too, suggesting how brief after all is the honour that comes from men.

Also, there will be annihilation or perpetuation of their life's work. Nothing lasts but the will of God. Men who live godless lives are engaged in true Sisyphean labour. They are running counter to the whole stream of things, and what can be left at the end but frustrated endeavours covered with a gloomy pall?

Is your life to be wasted?

They are lists of those who are accepted in judgment, and of those who are not.

[Rev. xx. 12, 15; xxi. 27.](#)

The books of men's lives are to be opened, and also the book of life. What is written in the former can only bring condemnation. If our names are written in the latter, then He will 'confess our names before His Father and the holy angels.' And He will joyfully inscribe them there if we say to Him, like the man in *Pilgrim's Progress*, 'Set down my name.' He will write them not only there, but on the palms of His hands and the tablets of His heart.

YOKES OF WOOD AND IRON

‘Go and tell Hananiah, saying, Thus saith the Lord; Thou hast broken the yokes of wood; but thou shalt make for them yokes of iron.’—[JER. xxviii. 13.](#)

I suppose that I had better begin by a word of explanation as to the occasion of this saying. One king of Judah had already been carried off to Babylon, and the throne refilled by his brother, a puppet of the conquerors. This shadow of a king, with the bulk of the nation, was eager for revolt. Jeremiah had almost single-handed to stem the tide of the popular wish. He steadfastly preached submission, not so much to Nebuchadnezzar as to God, who had sent the invaders as chastisement. The lesson was a difficult one to learn, and the people hated the teacher. In the Jerusalem of Jeremiah’s day, as in other places and at other times, a love of country which is not blind to its faults and protests against a blatant militarism, was scoffed at as ‘unpatriotic,’ ‘playing into the hands of the enemy,’ ‘seeking peace at any price,’ whilst an insane eagerness to rush to arms without regard to resources or righteousness was called a ‘spirited foreign policy.’ So Jeremiah had plenty of enemies.

He had adopted a strange way of enforcing his counsel, which would be ridiculous to-day, but was natural and impressive then and there. He constantly for months went about with an ox-yoke on his neck, as a symbol of the submission which he advocated. One day, in the temple, before a public assembly, a certain Hananiah, a member of the opposite faction, made a fierce attack on the prophet and his teaching, and uttered a counter-prophecy to the effect that, in two years, the foreign invasion would be at an end, and all would be as it used to be. Our prophet answered very quietly, saying in effect, ‘I hope to God that it may be true; the event will show.’ And then Hananiah, encouraged by his meekness, proceeded to violence, tore the yoke off his shoulders and snapped it in two, reiterating his prophecy. Then Jeremiah went away home.

Soon after, the voice which he knew to be God’s, and not his own thoughts, spoke within him, and gave a much sharper answer. God declared, through Jeremiah, the plain truth that, for a tiny kingdom like Judah to perk itself up in the face of a world-conquering power like Babylon, could only bring down greater severity from the conqueror. And then he declared that Hananiah, for rebellion—not against Babylon, but against God, the true King of Israel—would be taken from the earth. He died in a couple of months.

My text forms the first word of this divine message. I have nothing more to do with its original application. It gives a picturesque setting to a very impressive and solemn truth; very familiar, no doubt, but none the less because of its familiarity needing to be dinned into people’s ears. It is that to throw off legitimate authority is to bind on a worse tyranny. To some kind of yoke all of us must bend our necks, and if we slip them out we do not thereby become independent, but simply bring upon ourselves a heavier pressure of a harder bondage. The remainder of my remarks will simply go to illustrate that principle in two or three cases of ascending importance. I begin at the bottom.

I. We have the choice between the yoke of law and the iron yoke of lawlessness.

We all know that society could not be held together without some kind of restraints upon what is done, and some stimulus to do what is apt to be neglected. Even a band of brigands, or a crew of pirates, must have some code. I have read somewhere that the cells in a honeycomb are circles squeezed by the pressure of the adjacent cells into the hexagonal shape which admits of contiguity. If they continued circles there would be space and material lost, and no complete continuity. So, in like manner, you cannot keep five men together without some mutual limitations which are shaped into a law. Now, as long as a man keeps inside it, he does not feel its pressure. A great many of us, for instance, who are in the main law-abiding people, do not ever remember that there is such a thing as restrictions upon our licence, or as obligations to perform certain duties; for we never think either of taking the licence or of shirking the duties. The yoke that is accepted ceases to press. Once let a man step outside, and what then? Why, then, he is an outlaw; and the rough side of the law is turned to him, and all possible terrors, which people within the boundary have nothing to do with, gather themselves together and frown down upon him. The sheep that stops inside the pasture is never torn by the barbed wires of the fence. If you think of the life of a criminal, with all its tricks and evasions, taking 'every bush to be an officer,' as Shakespeare says; or as the first of the brood who was the type of them all said, 'Every man that seeth me shall kill me': if you think of the sword that hangs over the head of every law-breaker, and which he knows is hanging by a hair; if you think of men in counting-houses who have manipulated the books of the firm, and who durst not be away from their desks for a day lest all should come to light; and if you think of the punishment that follows sooner or later, you will see that it is better to bear the light yoke of the law than the heavy yoke of crime. Some men buy their ruin very dearly.

So much for the individual. But there is another aspect of this same principle on which I venture to say a word, although it is only a word, in passing. I do not suppose that there are many of my hearers who are likely to commit overt breaches of the law. But there are a great many of us who are apt to neglect the obligations of citizenship. In a community like ours, laziness, fastidiousness, absorption in our own occupations, and a number of other more or less reputable reasons, tempt many to stand aloof from the plain imperative obligations of every citizen in a free country. Every man who thus neglects to do his part for the common weal does his part in handing over the rule of the community to the least worthy. You will find—as you see in some democratic countries to-day, where the cultivated classes, and the classes with the sternest morality, have withdrawn in disgust from the turmoil—the mob having the upper hand, the least worthy scrambling into high places, and the community suffering, and bearing a heavier yoke, by reason of the unwillingness of some to bear the yoke and do the duty of a citizen. Vice lifts up its head, morality is scouted, self-interest is pursued unblushingly, and the whole tone of public opinion is lowered. Christian men and

women, remember that you are members of a community, and you bear the yoke of responsibility therefore; and if you do not discharge your obligation, then you will have a heavier burden still to bear.

I need not remind you, I suppose, of how this same thesis—that we have to choose between the yoke of law and the iron yoke of lawlessness—is illustrated in the story of almost all violent revolutions. They run the same course. First a nation rises up against intolerable oppression, then revolution devours its own children, and the scum rises to the top of the boiling pot. Then comes, in the language of the picturesque historian of the French Revolution, the type of them all—then comes at the end ‘the whiff of grapeshot’ and the despot. First the government of a mob, and then the tyranny of an emperor, crush the people that shake off the yoke of reasonable law. That is my first point.

II. Let me take a higher illustration;—we have to choose between the yoke of virtue and the iron yoke of vice.

We are under a far more spiritual and searching law than that written in any statute-book, or administered by any court. Every man carries within his own heart the court, the tribunal; the culprit and the judge. And here too, if law is not obeyed, the result is not liberty, but the slavery of lawlessness.

No man can ponder his own nature and make without feeling that on every fibre of him is stamped a great law which he is bound to obey, and that on every fibre of him is impressed the necessity of part of his nature coercing, restraining, or spurring other parts of it. For, if we take stock of ourselves, what do we find? The broad basis of the pyramid, as it were, is laid in the faculties nearest the earth, the appetites which are inseparable from our corporeal being, and these know nothing about right or wrong, but are utterly blind to such distinctions. Put a loaf before a hungry man, and his mouth waters, whether the loaf belongs to himself or whether it is inside a baker’s window.

Then above these, as the next course of the pyramid, there are other desires, sentiments, affections, and emotions, less grossly sensuous than those of which I have been speaking, but still equally certain to be excited by the presence of their appropriate object, without any consideration of whether law is broken or kept in securing of it. Above these, which are, so to speak, branded on their very foreheads with the iron of slavery, stand certain faculties which are as clearly anointed to rule as the others are intended to serve. There is reason or intelligence, which is evidently meant to be eyes to these blind instincts and emotions of desire, and there is what we call the power of will, that stands like an engine-driver with his hand upon the lever which will either stop the engine or accelerate its revolutions. It says to passions and desires ‘Go!’ and they go; and, alas! it sometimes says ‘Halt!’ and they will not halt. Then there is conscience, which brings to light for every man something higher than himself. A great philosopher once said that the two sublimest things in the universe were the moral law and the starry heavens; and that law ‘I ought’ bends over

us like the starry heavens with which he associated it. No man can escape from the pressure of duty, and on every man is laid, by his very make, the twofold obligation, first to look upwards and catch the behests of that solemn law, and then to turn his eyes and his strength inwards and coerce or spur, as the case may be, the powers of his nature, and rule the kingdom within himself.

Now, as long as a man lets the ruling parts of his nature guide the lower faculties, he feels comparatively no pressure from the yoke. But, if he once allows beggars to ride on horseback whilst princes walk— sense and appetite and desire, and more or less refined forms of inclination, to take the place which belongs only to conscience interpreting duty—then he has exchanged the easy yoke for one that is heavy indeed.

What does a man do when, instead of loyally accepting the conditions of his nature, and bowing himself to serve the all-embracing and all-penetrating law of duty, he sets up inclination of any sort in its place? What does he do? I will tell you. He unships the helm; he flings compass and sextant overboard; he fires up the furnaces, and screws down the safety-valve, and says, 'Go ahead!' And what will be the end of that, think you? Either an explosion or a crash upon a reef; and you may take your choice of which is the better kind of death—to be blown up or to go down. Keep within the law of conscience, and let it govern all inclinations, and most of all the animal part of your nature; and you will feel little pressure, and no pain, from the yoke. Shake it off, and there is fulfilled in the disobedient man the threatening of my text, which rightly translated ought to be, 'Thou hast broken the yokes of wood, and thou *hast* made instead of them yokes of iron.'

For do you think it will be easy to serve the base-born parts of your nature, when you set them on the throne and tell them to govern you? Did you never hear of such a thing as a man's vices getting such a hold on him that, when his weakened will tried to shake them off, they laughed in his face and said, 'Here we are still'? Did you never hear of that other solemn truth—and have you never experienced how true it is?—that no man can say, 'I will let my inclination have its fling this once'? There are never 'this onces.' or very, very seldom. When you are glissading down a snowy Alpine slope, you cannot stop when you like, though you strike your alpenstock ever so deep into the powdery snow. If you have started, away you must go. God be thanked! the illustration does not altogether apply, for a man can stop if he will repent, but he cannot stop unless he does. Did you never hear that a teaspoonful of narcotic to-day will have to be a tablespoonful in a week or two, to produce the same effect? Are there not plenty of men who have said with all the force that a weakened will has left in it, 'I will never touch a drop of drink again, as long as I live, God helping me'?—and they have gone down the street, and they have turned in, not at the first or the second public-house, but at the fourth or the fifth. Ah! brother, 'they promised them liberty, but they are the servants of corruption.' Fix this in your minds. 'He that committeth sin is the slave of sin,' of the sin that he commits. Do not put off the easy yoke of obedience to conscience and

duty, or you will find that there is an iron one, with many a sharp point in its unpolished surface rubbing into your skin and wounding your shoulders. 'It's wiser to be good than bad. It's safer to be meek than fierce.' 'Thou hast broken the yokes of wood'; it is not difficult to do that; 'thou hast made instead of them yokes of iron.' That is my second point.

III. Lastly, we have the choice between the yoke of Christ and the iron yoke of godlessness.

You may think that to be a very harsh saying, and much too vehement an antithesis. Let me vindicate it according to my own belief in a sentence or two. It seems to me that for civilised and cultivated Europe at this day, the choice lies between accepting Jesus Christ as the *Revealer* of God, or wandering away out into the wastes of uncertainty, or as they call it nowadays, agnosticism and doubt. I believe myself, and I venture to state it here—though there is not time to do more than state it—that no form of what is now called Theism, which does not accept the historic revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the 'master-light of all our seeing,' will ever be able to sustain itself permanently in the face of present currents of opinion. If you do not take Christ for your Teacher, you are handed over either to the uncertainty of your own doubts, or to pinning your faith to some man and enrolling yourself as a disciple who is prepared to swallow down whole whatsoever the rabbi may say, and so giving to him what you will not give to Jesus; or else you will sink back into utter indolence and carelessness about the whole matter; or else you will go and put your belief and your soul into the hands of a priest, and shut your eyes and open your mouth and take whatever tradition may choose to send you. The one refuge from all these, as I believe, is to go to Him and learn of Him, and so take His yoke upon your shoulders.

But, let me say further, it is better to obey Christ's *commandments* than to set ourselves against them. For if we will take His will for our law, and meekly assume the yoke of loyal and loving obedience to Him, the door into an earthly paradise is thrown open to us. His yoke is easy, not because its prescriptions and provisions lower the standard of righteousness and morality, but because love becomes the motive; and it is always blessed to do that which the Beloved desires. When 'I will' and 'I ought' cover exactly the same ground, then there is no kind of pressure from the yoke. Christ's yoke is easy because, too, He gives the power to obey His commandments. His burden is such a burden (as I think one of the old fathers puts it) as sails are to a ship or wings to a bird. They add to the weight, but they carry that which carries them. So Christ's yoke bears the man that bears it. It is easy, too, because 'in,' and not only after or for, 'keeping of it there is great reward'; seeing that He commands nothing which is not congruous with the highest good, and bringing along with it the purest blessing. Instead of that yoke, what has the world to offer, or what do we get to dominate us, if we cast off Christ? Self, the old anarch self, and that is misery. To be self-ruled is to be self-destroyed.

There is no need that I should remind you of how it is better to accept Christ's *providences* than to kick against them. Sorrow to which we submit loses all its bitterness and much of its sadness. Kicking against the affliction makes its sharp point penetrate our limbs. The bird that will dash itself against the wires of its cage beats itself all bloody and torn. Let us take the providence and it ceases to be hard.

One last word;—we all carry an iron yoke upon our shoulders. For, hard as it is for us preachers to get our friends that listen to us to believe and realise it, 'We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' That yoke is on us all. And I, for my part, believe that no man by his own efforts can cast it off, but that the attempt to do so often brings greater strength to the sins that we seek to cast out, just as the more you mow the grass, the thicker and the stronger it grows. So I come with the great message which Jesus Christ Himself struck as the keynote and prelude of His whole ministry, when in the synagogue He said, 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me . . . to preach deliverance to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.' He, and He only, will break every yoke and let the oppressed go free. And then He addresses us, after He has done that, with the immortal words, the sweetness of whose sound, sweet as it is, is less than the sweetness of their sense: 'Take My yoke upon you . . . and ye shall find rest to your souls.' Oh, brother! will you not answer, 'O Lord! truly I am Thy servant. Thou hast loosed my bonds, and thereby bound me for ever to wear Thy yoke'; as the slave clings to his ransomer, and delights to serve him all the days of his life?

WHAT THE STABLE CREATION TEACHES

‘If those ordinances depart from before Me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me for ever.’—*JER. xxxi. 36.*

This is the seal of the new covenant, which is to be made in days future to the prophet and his contemporaries, with the house of Israel and of Judah. That new covenant is referred to in Hebrews as the fundamental law of Christ’s kingdom. Therefore we have the right to take to ourselves the promises which it contains, and to think of ‘the house of Israel’ and ‘the seed of Jacob’ as including us, ‘though Abraham be ignorant of us.’

The covenant and its pledge are equally grand. The very idea of a covenant as applied to God is wonderful. It is meant to teach us that, from all the infinite modes of action possible to Him, He has chosen One; that He has, as it were, marked out a path for Himself, and confined the freedom of His will and the manifold omnipotences of His power to prescribed limits, that He has determined the course of His future action. It is meant to teach us, too, the other grand thought that He has declared to us what that course is, not leaving us to learn it piecemeal by slow building up of conclusions about His mind from His actions as they come forth, but inversely telling us His mind and purpose in articulate and authentic words by which we are to interpret each successive work of His. He makes known His purposes. ‘Before they spring forth I tell you of them.’

It is meant to teach us, too, that He regards Himself as bound by the declaration which He has made, so that we may rest secure on this strong foundation of His faithfulness and His truth, and for all doubts and fears find the sufficient cure in His own declaration: ‘My covenant will I not break nor alter the thing that is gone out of My lips.’ No wonder that the dying king found the strength of his failing heart in the thought, ‘He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure.’

The weighty promises of this solemn bond of God’s cover the whole ground of our spiritual necessities—forgiveness of sins, true, personal, direct acquaintance with God, an intercommunion of mutual possession between Him who is ours and us who are His, and an inward sanctification by which His precepts shall coincide with our desires. These are the blessings which He binds Himself to bestow.

And of this transcendent pact, the seal and guarantee is worthy. God descends to ratify a bond with man. By it He binds Himself to give all possible good for the soul. And to confirm it heaven and earth are called in. He points us to all that is august, stable, immense, inscrutable in the works of His hands, and bids us see there His pledge that He will be a faithful, covenant-keeping God. Sun, moon and stars, heaven, earth and sea—‘ye are My witnesses,’ saith the Lord.

God’s unchangeable love is the true lesson from the stable regularity of the universe. The tone in which Scripture speaks of external nature in all its parts is very remarkable, al-

together peculiar. It does not take the aesthetic or the scientific, but the purely religious point of view.

I. The facts. All nature is directly the effect of God's will and power. 'He giveth,' 'He divideth' (v. 35).

The physical universe presents a spectacle of stable regularity.

This regularity is the consequence of sovereign, divine will. These ordinances are not laws of *nature*, but of God.

II. The use commonly made of the facts.

Ordinary unthinking worldliness sees nothing noticeable in them because they come uniformly. Earthquakes startle, but the firmness of the solid earth attracts no observation. God is thought to speak in the extraordinary, but most men do not hear His voice in the normal.

Scientific godlessness formularises this tendency into a system, and proclaims that laws are everything and God a mere algebraical x .

III. The lesson which they are meant to teach.

God's works are a revelation of God.

There is nothing in effect which is not in cause, and the stability of these ordinances carries our thoughts back to an unchanging Ordainer.

They witness to His constancy of purpose or will. His acts do not come from caprice, nor are done as experiments, but are the stable expression of uniform and unchanging will.

They witness to His unfailing energy of power, which 'operates unspent' and is to-day as fresh as at creation's birth.

They witness to a single end pursued through all changes, and by all varieties of means. Darkness and light, sun rising and setting, storm and sunshine, summer and winter, all serve one end. As a horizontal thrust may give rise to opposite circular motions which all issue in working out an onward progress, so the various dealings of Providence with us are all adapted to 'work together,' and that 'for good.'

They witness that life, joy, beauty, flow from obedience.

Thus, then, these ordinances in their stability are witnesses. But they are inferior witnesses. The noblest revelation of the divine faithfulness and unchangeable purpose of good is in Jesus. And these witnesses will one day pass. Even now they have their changes, slow and unmarked by a short-lived man. Stars burn out, there have been violent convulsions, shocks and shatterings in the heavens, and a time comes, as even physical science predicts, when 'the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment,' but that to which they witnessed shall endure, 'My salvation shall be for ever, and My righteousness shall not be abolished.' The created lights grow dim and die out, but in 'the Father of lights' is 'no variableness, neither shadow that is cast by turning.'

Hence we see what our confidence should be. It should stand firm and changeless as the Covenant, and we should move in our orbits as the stars and hearken to the voice of His word as do they. Let us see to it that we have faith to match His faithfulness, and that our confidence shall be firmer than the mountains, more stable than the stars.

WHAT THE IMMENSE CREATION TEACHES

'If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, saith the Lord.'—[JER. xxxi. 37.](#)

In the former sermon we considered the previous verse as presenting the stability of creation as a guarantee of the firmness of God's gracious covenant. Now we have to consider these grand closing words which bring before us another aspect of the universe as a guarantee for another side of God's gracious character. The immensity of creation is a symbol of the inexhaustibleness of the forgiving love of God.

I. A word or two as to the fact here used as a symbol of the divine long-suffering.

The prophet had very likely no idea at all beyond the ordinary one that presents itself to the senses—a boundless vault above an endless plain on which we stand, deep, sunless foundations, the Titanic substructions on which all rests, going down who knows where, resting on who knows what. We may smile at the rude conception, but it will be well for us if we can get as vivid an impression of the fact as He had.

We thankfully avail ourselves of modern science to tell us something about the dimensions of this awful universe of ours. We learn to know that there are millions of miles between these neighbour orbs, that light which has been travelling for thousands of years may not yet have fallen on some portion of the mighty whole, that the planetary masses of our system are but tiny specks in the whole, that every fresh stride which astronomical observation takes but opens up new nebulae to be resolved, where suns and constellations and systems are dwarfed by distance into hazy brightness which hardly deserves the name of light. We know all this, and can find all about the distances in any book. So much for space. Then the geologist comes to bewilder us still more, with extension in time.

But while all this may serve to give definiteness to the impression, after all, perhaps, it is the eye alone, as it gazes, that really feels the impression. Astronomy is really a very prosaic science.

II. The effects which this immensity often produces on men.

Very commonly in old days it led to actual idolatry, bowing down before these calm, unreachable brightnesses. In our days it too often leads to forgetting God altogether, and not seldom to disbelief that man can be of any account in such a universe. We are told that the notions of a covenant, a redemption, or that God cares about us are presumptuous. We all know the talk of men who are so modestly conscious of their own insignificance that they rebuke God for saying that He loves us, and Christians for believing Him.

III. The true lesson.

The immensity of the material universe is for us a symbol of the infinity of God's long-suffering love.

The creation proceeds from a greater Creator. That gigantic and overwhelming magnitude, that hoary and immemorial age, that complicated and innumerable multitude of details, what less can they show than ONE Eternal and Infinite?

The immense suggests the infinite.

Granted that you cannot from the immense creation rise logically to the Infinite Creator, still the facts that the soul conceives that there is an infinite God, and is conscious of the spontaneous evoking of that thought by the contemplation of the immeasurable, are strong reasons for believing that it is a legitimate process of thought which hears the name of God thundered from the far-off depths of the silent heavens. The heavens cannot be measured, no plummet can reach to the deep foundations of the earth. We are surrounded by a universe which to our apprehensions is boundless. How much more so from expansions of our conceptions of celestial magnitudes since Jeremiah's days, and what is to be the lesson from that? That we are insignificant atoms in this mighty whole? that God is far away from us? that the material stretches so far that perhaps there is nothing beyond?

The thought of faith is that the material immensity teaches me my God's infinity, and especially His inexhaustible patience with us sinners. It teaches us the unfathomed depths of His gracious heart, and the abysses of His mysterious providence, and the unbounded sweep of His long-suffering forgiveness. His forgiving forbearance reaches further than the limits of the heavens. Not till these can be measured will it be exhausted, and the seed of Israel cast off for what they have done.

He, the Infinite Father, above all creation, mightier than it, is our true home, and living in Him we have an abode which can never be 'dissolved,' and above us stretch far-shining glories, unapproached masses of brightness, nebulae of blessedness, spaces where the eye fails and the imagination faints. All is ours, our eternal possession, the inexhaustible source of our joy. Astronomers tell of light which has been travelling for millenniums and has not yet reached this globe; but what is that to the flashing glories which through eternity shall pour on us from Him? So, then, our confidence should be firm and inexhaustible.

God has written wondrous lessons in His creation. But they are hieroglyphs, of which the key is lost, till we hear Christ and learn of Him. God has set His glories in the heavens and the earth is full of His mercy, but these are lesser gifts than that which contains them all and transcends them all, even His Son by whom He made the worlds, and— mightier still—by whom He redeemed man. God has written His mercy in the heavens and His faithfulness in the clouds, but His mercy and His faithfulness are more commended to us in Him who was before all things, and of whom it is written: 'As a vesture shalt Thou fold them up, but Thou art the same and Thy years shall not fail.' God has confirmed the covenant of His love to us by the faithful witnesses in the heavens, but the love shall abide when they have perished. The heavens bend above us all, and over the head of every man the zenith stands. Every spot of this low earth is smiled upon by that serene apocalypse of the loving

will of God. No lane is so narrow and foul in the great city, no spot is so bare and lonely in the waste desert, but that thither the sunlight comes, and there some patch of blue above beckons the downcast eye to look up. The day opens its broad bosom bathed in light, and shows the sun in the heavens, the Lord of light, to preach to us of the true light. The night opens deeper abysses and fills them with stars, to preach to us how fathomless and immense His loving kindnesses and tender mercy are. They are witnesses to thee, dear friend, whatsoever thy heart, whatsoever thy sins, whatsoever thy memories. No iniquity can shut out God's forgiving love. You cannot build out the heavens. He will not be sent away; you cannot measure, you cannot conceive, you cannot exhaust, His pardoning love. No storms disturb that serene sky. It is always there, blazing down upon us unclouded with all its orbs. Trust Christ; and then as years roll on, you will find that infinite love growing ever greater to your loving eyes, and through eternity will move onwards in the happy atmosphere and boundless heaven of the inexhaustible, deep heart and changeless love of God.

A THREEFOLD DISEASE AND A TWOFOLD CURE.

‘I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against Me; and I will pardon all their iniquities, whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against Me.’—*JER. xxxiii. 8.*

Jeremiah was a prisoner in the palace of the last King of Judah. The long, national tragedy had reached almost the last scene of the last act. The besiegers were drawing their net closer round the doomed city. The prophet had never faltered in predicting its fall, but he had as uniformly pointed to a period behind the impending ruin, when all should be peace and joy. His song was modulated from a saddened minor to triumphant jubilation. In the beginning of this chapter he has declared that the final struggles of the besieged will only end in filling the land with their corpses, and then, from that lowest depth, he soars in a burst of lyrical prophecy conceived in the highest poetic style. The exiles shall return, the city shall be rebuilt, its desolate streets shall ring with hymns of praise and the voices of the bridegroom and the bride. The land shall be peopled with peaceful husbandmen, and white with flocks. There shall be again a King upon the throne; sacrifices shall again be offered. ‘In those days, and at that time, will I cause the branch of righteousness to grow up unto David. . . . In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely; and this is the name wherewith she shall be called, the Lord our righteousness.’ That fair vision of the future begins with the offer of healing and cure, and with the exuberant promise of my text. The first thing to be dealt with was Judah’s sin; and that being taken away, all good and blessing would start into being, as flowerets will spring when the baleful shadow of some poisonous tree is removed. Now, my text at first reading seems to expend a great many unnecessary words in saying the same thing over and over again, but the accumulation of synonyms not only emphasises the completeness of the promise, but also presents different aspects of that promise. And it is to these that I crave your attention in this sermon. The great words of my text are as true a gospel for us—and as much needed by us, God knows!—as they were for Jeremiah’s contemporaries; and we can understand them better than either he or they did, because the days that were to come then have come now, and the King who was to reign in righteousness is reigning to-day, and His Name is Christ. My object now is, as simply as I can, to draw your attention to the two points in this text: a threefold view of our sad condition, and a twofold bright hope.

Now for the first of these. There is here—

I. A threefold view of the sad condition of humanity.

Observe the recurrence of the same idea in our text in different words: ‘Their iniquity whereby they have sinned against Me.’ . . . ‘Their iniquity whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against Me.’ You see there are three expressions which roughly may be taken as referring to the same ugly fact, but yet not meaning quite the same—‘iniquity, or iniquities, sin, transgression.’ These three all speak of the same sad ele-

ment in your experience and mine, but they speak it from somewhat different points of view, and I wish to try to bring out that difference for you.

Suppose that three men were to describe a snake. One of them fixes his attention on its slimy coils, and describes its sinuous gliding movements. Another of them is fascinated by its wicked beauty, and talks about its livid markings and its glittering eye. The third thinks only of the swift-darting fangs, and of the poison-glands. They all three describe the snake, but they describe it from different points of view; and so it is here. 'Iniquity,' 'sin,' 'transgression' are synonyms to some extent, but they do not cover the same ground. They look at the serpent from different points of view.

First, a sinful life is a twisted or warped life. The word rendered 'iniquity,' in the Old Testament, in all probability literally means something that is not straight, but is bent, or, as I said, twisted or warped. That is a metaphor that runs through a great many languages. I suppose 'right' expresses a corresponding image, and means that which is straight and direct; and I suppose that 'wrong' has something to do with 'wrung'—that which has been forcibly diverted from a right line. We all know the conventional colloquialism about a man being 'straight,' and such-and-such a thing being 'on the straight.' All sin is a twisting of the man from his proper course. Now there underlies that metaphor the notion that there is a certain line to which we are to conform. The schoolmaster draws a firm, straight line in the child's copybook; and then the little unaccustomed hand takes up on the second line its attempt, and makes tremulous, wavering pot-hooks and hangers. There is a copyhead for us, and our writing is, alas! all uneven and irregular, as well as blurred and blotted. There is a law, and you know it. You carry in yourself—I was going to say, the standard measure, and you can see whether when you put your life by the side of that, the two coincide. It is not for me to say; I know about my own, and you may know about yours, if you will be honest. The warped life belongs to us all.

The metaphor may suggest another illustration. A Czar of Russia was once asked what should be the course of the railway from St. Petersburg to Moscow, and he took up a ruler and drew a straight line upon the chart, and said, 'There; that is the course.' There is a straight road marked out for us all, going, like the old Roman roads, irrespective of physical difficulties in the contour of the country, climbing right over Alps if necessary, and plunging down into the deepest valleys, never deflecting one hairsbreadth, but going straight to its aim. And we—what are we? what are 'our crooked, wandering ways in which we live,' by the side of that straight path? This very prophet has a wonderful illustration, in which he compares the lives of men who have departed from God to the racing about in the wilderness of a wild dromedary, 'entangling her ways,' as he says, crossing and recrossing, and getting into a maze of perplexity. Ah, my friend, is that not something like your life? Here is a straight road, and there are the devious footpaths that we have made, with many a detour, many a bend, many a coming back instead of going forward. 'The labour of the foolish wearith

every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.' All sin is deflection from the straight road, and we are all guilty of that.

Let me urge you to consult the standard that you carry within yourselves. If you never have done it before, do it now; or, better, when you are alone by yourselves. It is easy to imagine that a line is straight. But did you ever see the point of a needle under a microscope? However finely it is polished, and apparently tapering regularly, the scrutinising investigation of the microscope shows that it is all rough and irregular. What would a builder do if he had not a T-square and a level? His wall would be ever so far out, whilst he thought it perfectly perpendicular. And remember that a line at a very acute angle of deflection only needs to be carried out far enough to diverge so widely from the other line that you could put the whole solar system in between the two. The smallest departure from the line of right will end, unless it is checked, away out in the regions of darkness beyond. That is the lesson of the first of the words here.

The second of them, rendered in our version 'sin,' if I may recur to my former illustration, looks at the snake from a different point of view, and it declares that all sin misses the aim. The meaning of the word in the original is simply 'that which misses its mark.' And the meaning of the prevalent word in the New Testament for 'sin' means, in accordance with the ethical wisdom of the Greek, the same thing. Now, there are two ways in which that thought may be looked at. Every wrong thing that we do misses the aim, if you consider what a man's aim ought to be. We have grown a great deal wiser than the Puritans nowadays, and people make cheap reputations for advanced thought by depreciating their theology. We have not got beyond the first answer of the Shorter Catechism, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever.' That is the only aim which corresponds to our constitution, to our circumstances. A palaeontologist will pick up part of a skeleton embedded in the rocks, and from the study of a bone or two will tell you whether that creature was meant to swim, or to fly, or to walk; whether its element was sea, or sky, or land. Our destination for God is as plainly stamped on heart, mind, will, practical powers, as is the destination of such a creature deducible from its skeleton. 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' God's, stamped deep upon us all. And so, brother, whatever you win, unless you win God, you have missed the aim. Anything short of knowing Him and loving Him, serving Him, being filled and inspired by Him, is contrary to the destiny stamped upon us all. And if you have won God, then, whatever other human prizes you may have missed, you have made the best of life. Unless He is yours, and you are His, you have made a miss, and if I might venture to add, a mess, of yourself and of your life.

Then there is another side to this. The solemn teaching of this word is not confined to that thought, but also opens out into this other, that all godlessness, all the low, sinful lives that so many of us live, miss the shabby aim which they set before themselves. I do not believe that any men or women ever got as much good, even of the lowest kind, out of a wrong

thing as they expected to get when they ventured on it. If they did, they got something else along with it that took all the guilt off the gingerbread. Take the lowest kind of gross evil—sins of lust or of drunkenness. Well, no doubt the physical satisfaction desired is secured. Yes; and what about what comes after, in addition, that was not aimed at? The drunkard gets his pleasurable oblivion, his desired excitement. What about the corrugated liver, the palsied hand, the watery eye, the wrecked life, the broken hearts at home, and all the other accompaniments? There is an old Greek legend about a certain messenger that came to earth with a box, in which were all manner of pleasant gifts, and down at the bottom was a speckled pest that, when the box was emptied, crawled out into the sunshine and infected the land. That Pandora's box is like 'the good things' that sin brings to men. You gain, perhaps, your advantage, and you get something that spoils it all. Is not that your experience? I do not deny that you may satisfy your lower desires by a godless life. I know only too well how hard it is to get people to have higher tastes, and how all we ministers of religion are spending our efforts in order to win people to love something better than the world can give them. I also know that, if I could get to the very deepest recess of your hearts, you would admit that pleasures or advantages that are complete, that is to say, that satisfy you all round, and that are lasting, and that can front conscience and God who is at the back of conscience, are not to be won on the paths of sin and godlessness.

There is an old story that speaks of a knight and his company who were travelling through a desert, and suddenly beheld a castle into which they were invited and hospitably welcomed. A feast was spread before them, and each man ate and drank his fill. But as soon as they left the enchanted halls, they were as hungry as before they sat at the magic table. That is the kind of food that all our wrongdoing provides for us. 'He feedeth on ashes,' and hungers after he has fed. So, dear friends, learn this ancient wisdom, which is as true today as it ever was; and be sure, of this, that there is only one course in this world which will give a man true, lasting satisfaction; that there is only one life, the life of obedience to and love of God, about which, at the end, there will not need to be said, 'This their way is their folly.'

And now, further, there is yet another word here, carrying with it important lessons. The expression which is translated in our text 'transgressed,' literally means 'rebelled.' And the lesson of it is, that all sin is, however little we think it, a rebellion against God. That introduces a yet graver thought than either of the former have brought us face to face with. Behind the law is the Lawgiver. When we do wrong, we not only blunder, we not only go aside from the right line, but also we lift up ourselves against our Sovereign King, and we say, 'Who is the Lord that we should serve Him? Our tongues are our own. Who is Lord over us? Let us break His bands asunder, and cast away His cords from us.' There are crimes against law; there are faults against one another. Sins are against God; and, dear friends, though you do not realise it, this is plain truth, that the essence, the common characteristic, of all the acts which, as we have seen, are twisted and foolish, is that in them we are setting

up another than the Lord our God to be our ruler. We are enthroning ourselves in His place. Do you not feel that that is true, and that in some small thing in which you go wrong, the essence of it is that you are seeking to please yourself, no matter what duty—which is only a heathen name for God—says to you?

Does not that thought make all these apparently trivial and insignificant deeds terribly important? Treason is treason, no matter what the act by which it is expressed. It may be a little thing to haul down a union-jack from a flagstaff, or to tear off a barn-door a proclamation with the royal arms at the top of it, but it may be rebellion. And if it is, it is as bad as to turn out a hundred thousand men in the field, with arms in their hands. There are small faults, there are trivial crimes; there are no small sins. An ounce of arsenic is arsenic, just as much as a ton; and it is a poison just as surely.

Now I have enlarged perhaps unduly on this earlier part of my subject, and can but briefly turn to the second division which I suggested, viz.:—

II. The twofold bright hope which shines through this darkness.

‘I will cleanse . . . I will pardon.’

If sin combines in itself all these characteristics that I have touched upon, then clearly there is guilt, and clearly there are stains; and the gracious promise of this text deals with both the one and the other.

‘I will pardon.’ What is pardon? Do not limit it to the analogy of a criminal court. When the law of the land pardons, or rather when the administrator of the law pardons, that simply means that the penalty is suspended. But is that forgiveness? Certainly it is only a part of it, even if it is a part. What do you fathers and mothers do when you forgive your child? You may use the rod or you may not, that is a question of what is best for the child. Forgiveness does not lie in letting him off the punishment; but forgiveness lies in the flowing to the child, uninterrupted, of the love of the parent heart, and that is God’s forgiveness. Penalties, some of them, remain—thank God for it! ‘Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions,’ and the chastisement was part of the sign of the forgiveness. The great penalty of all, which is separation from God, is taken away; but the essence of that pardon, which it is my blessed work to proclaim to all men, is, that in spite of the prodigal’s rags and the stench of the sty, the Father’s love is round about him. It is round about you, brother.

Do you need pardon? Do you not? What does conscience say? What does the sense of remorse that sometimes blesses you, though it tortures, say? There are tendencies in this generation, as always, but very strong at present, to ignore the fact that all sin must necessarily lead to tremendous consequences of misery. It does so in this world, more or less. A man goes into another world as he left this one, and you and I believe that ‘after death is the judgment.’ Do you not require pardon? And how are you to get it? ‘Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree.’ Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died that the loving forgive-

ness of God might find its way to every heart, and might take all men to its bosom, whilst yet the righteousness of God remained untarnished. I know not any gospel that goes deep enough to touch the real sore place in human nature, except the gospel that says to you and me and all of us, 'Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.'

But forgiveness is not enough, for the worst results of past sin are the habits of sin which it leaves within us; so that we all need cleansing. Can we cleanse ourselves? Let experience answer. Did you ever try to cure yourself of some little trick of gesture, or manner, or speech? And did you not find out then how strong the trivial habit was? You never know the force of a current till you try to row against it. 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin?' No; but God can change it for him. So, again, we say that Jesus Christ who died for 'the remission of sins that are past,' lives that He may give to each of us His own blessed life and power, and so draw us from our evil, and invest us in His good. Dear brother, I beseech you to look in the face the fact of your rebellion, of your missing your aim, of your perverted life, and to ask yourself the question, 'Can I deal either with the guilt of the past, or with the imperative tendency to repeated sin in the future?' You may have your leprous flesh made 'like the flesh of a little child.' You may have your stained robe washed and made lustrous 'white in the blood of the Lamb.' Pardon and cleansing are our two deepest needs. There is one hand from which we can receive them both, and one only. There is one condition on which we shall receive them, which is that we trust in Him, 'Who was crucified for our offences, and lives to hallow us into His own likeness.'

THE RECHABITES

‘The sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have performed the commandment of their father, which he commanded them; but this people have not hearkened unto Me.’—[JER. xxxv. 16.](#)

The Rechabites had lived a nomad life, dwelling in tents, not practising agriculture, abstaining from intoxicants. They were therein obeying the command of their ancestor, Jonadab. They had been driven by the Babylonian invasion to take refuge in Jerusalem, and, no doubt, were a nine days’ wonder there, with their strange ways. Jeremiah seized on their loyalty to their dead ancestor’s command as an object-lesson, by which he put a still sharper edge on his rebukes. The Rechabites gave their ancestral law an obedience which shamed Judah’s disobedience to Jehovah. God asks from us only what we are willing to give to one another, and God is often refused what men have but to ask and it is given. The virtues which we exercise to each other rebuke us, because we so often refuse to exercise them towards God.

I. Men’s love to men condemns their lovelessness towards God.

These Rechabites witnessed to the power of loyal love to their ancestor. Think of the wealth of love which we have all poured out on husbands, wives, parents, children, and of the few drops that we have diverted to flow towards God. What a full flood fills the one channel; what a shrunken stream the other!

Think of the infinitely stronger reasons for loving God than for loving our dearest.

II. Men’s faith in men condemns their distrust of God.

However you define faith, you find it abundantly exercised by us on the low plane of earthly relations. Is it belief in testimony? You men of business regulate your course by reports of markets on the other side of the world, and in a hundred ways extend your credence to common report, with but little, and often with no examination of the evidence. ‘If we believe the witness of men, the witness of God is greater.’ And how do we treat it? We are ready to accept and to act on men’s testimony; we are slow to believe God’s, and still slower to act on it, and to let it mould our lives.

Is faith the realising of the unseen? We exercise it in reference to the earthly unseen; we are slow to do so in reference to the heavenly things which are invisible.

Is faith the act of trust? Life is impossible without it. Not only is commerce a great system of credit, but no relations of life could last for a day without mutual confidence. We depend on one another, like a row of slightly built houses that help to hold each other up. These earthly exercises of trust should make it easier for us to rise to trusting God as much as we do each other. They ought to reveal to us the heavenly things. For indeed our human trust in one another should be a sample and shadow of our wise trust in the adequate Object of trust.

III. Men’s obedience to human authority condemns their rebellion against God.

Jonadab's commandment evoked implicit obedience from his descendants for generations. Side by side in man's strange nature, with his self-will and love of independence, lies an equally strong tendency to obey and follow any masterful voice that speaks loudly and with an assumption of authority. The opinions of a clique, the dogmas of a sect, the habits of a set, the sayings of a favourite author, the fashions of our class—all these rule men with a sway far more absolute than is exercised on them by the known will of God. The same man is a slave to usurped authority and a rebel against rightful and divine dominion.

Whether we consider the law of God in its claims or its contents, or its ultimate object, it is worthy of entire obedience. And what does it receive?

God asks from us only what we willingly give to men. Even the qualities and acts, such as love, trust, obedience, which as exercised towards men give dignity and beauty and strength, rise up in judgment to condemn us. There is a sense in which Augustine's often-denounced saying that they are 'splendid vices' is true, for they are turned in the wrong direction, and very often their being directed so completely towards men and women is the reason why they are not directed towards God, who alone deserves and alone can satisfy and reward them. Then they become sins and condemn us.

JEREMIAH'S ROLL BURNED AND REPRODUCED

'Then took Jeremiah another roll, and gave it to Baruch . . . who wrote therein . . . all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire, and there were added besides unto them many like words.'—*JER. xxxvi. 32.*

This story brings us into the presence of the long death agony of the Jewish monarchy. The wretched Jehoiakim, the last king but two who reigned in Jerusalem, was put on the throne by the King of Egypt, as his tributary, and used by him as a buffer to bear the brunt of the Babylonian invasion. He seems to have had all the vices of Eastern sovereigns. He was covetous, cruel, tyrannous, lawless, heartless, senseless. He was lavishing money on a grand palace, built with cedar and painted in vermilion, when the nation was in its death-throes. He had neither valour nor goodness, and so little did he understand the forces at work in his times that he held by the rotten support of Egypt against the grim power of Babylon, and of course, when the former was driven like chaff before the assault of the latter, he shared the fate of his principal, and Judaea was overrun by Babylon, Jerusalem captured, and the poor creature on the throne bound in chains to be carried to Babylon, but, as would appear, discovered by Nebuchadnezzar to be pliable enough to make it safe to leave him behind, as his vassal. His capture took place but a few months after the incident with which I am dealing now. It would appear probable that the confusion and alarm of the Babylonian assault on Egypt had led to a solemn fast in Jerusalem, at which the nation assembled. Jeremiah, who had been prophesying for some thirty years, and had already been in peril of his life from the godless tyrant on the throne, was led to collect, in one book, his scattered prophecies and read them in the ears of the people gathered for the fast. That reading had no effect at all on the people. The roll was then read to the princes, and in them roused fear and interested curiosity, and kindly desire for the safety of Jeremiah and Baruch, his amanuensis. It was next read to the king, and he cut the roll leaf by leaf and threw it on the brasier, not afraid, nor penitent, but enraged and eager to capture Jeremiah and Baruch. The burnt roll was reproduced by God's command, 'and there were added besides . . . many like words.'

I. The love of God necessarily prophesying evil.

As a matter of fact, the prophets of the Old Testament were all prophets of evil. They were watchmen seeing the sword and giving warning. No one ever spoke more plainly of the penalties of sin than did Christ. The authoritative revelation of the consequences of wrongdoing is an integral part of the gospel.

It is not the highest form of appeal. It would be higher to say, 'Do right because it is right; love Christ because Christ is lovely.' The purpose of such an appeal is to prepare us for the true gospel. But the appeal to a reasonable self-love, by warnings of the death which is the wages of sin, is perfectly legitimate. Dehortations from sin on the ground of its consequences is part of God's message.

Further, the warning comes from love. Punishment must needs follow on sin. Even His love must compel God to punish, and to warn before He does. Surely that is kind. His punishments are made known beforehand that we may be sure that caprice and anger have no part in inflicting them, but that they are the settled order of an inviolable law, and constitutional procedure of a just kind. Whether is it better to live under a despot who smites as he will, or under a constitutional king whose code is made public.

Surely it is needful to have clearly set forth the consequences of sin, in view of the sophistries buzzing round us all and nestling in our own hearts, of the deceitfulness of sin, of siren voices whispering, 'Ye shall not surely die.'

God's prophecies of evil are all conditional. They are sent on purpose that they may not be fulfilled.

II. The loving warnings disregarded and disliked. Jehoiakim's behaviour is very human and like what we all do. We see the same thing repeated in all similar crises. Cassandra. Jewish prophets. Christ. English Commonwealth. French Revolution. Blindness to all signs and hostility to the men that warn.

We see it in the attitude to the gospel revelation. The Scripture doctrine of punishment always rouses antagonism, and in this day revolts men. There is much in present tendencies to weaken the idea of future retribution. Modern philanthropy makes it hard sometimes to administer even human laws. The feeling is good, but this exaggeration of it bad. It is a reaction to some extent against an unchristian way of preaching Christian truth, but even admitting that, it still remains true that an integral part of the Christian revelation is the revelation of death as the wages of sin.

We see the same recoil of feeling operating in individual cases. How many of you are quite indifferent to the preaching of a judgment to come, or only conscious of a movement of dislike! But how foolish this is! If a man builds a house on a volcano, is it not kind to tell him that the lava is creeping over the side? Is it not kind to wake, even violently, a traveller who has fallen asleep on the snow, before drowsiness stiffens into death?

III. The impotent rejection and attempted destruction of the message.

The roll is destroyed, but it is renewed. You do not alter facts by neglecting them, nor abrogate a divine decree by disbelieving it. The awful law goes on its course. It is not pre-eminent seamanship to put the look-out man in irons because he sings out, 'Breakers ahead.' The crew do not abolish the reef so, but they end their last chance of avoiding it, and presently the shock comes, and the cruel coral tears through the hull.

IV. The neglected message made harder and heavier.

Every rejection makes a man more obdurate. Every rejection increases criminality, and therefore increases punishment. Every rejection brings the punishment nearer.

The increased severity of the message comes from love.

Oh, think of the infinite 'treasures of darkness' which God has in reserve, and let the words of warning lead you to Jesus, that you may only hear and never experience the judgments of which they warn. Give Christ the roll of judgment and He will destroy it, nailing it to His cross, and instead of it will give you a book full of blessing.

ZEDEKIAH

‘Zedekiah the son of Josiah reigned as king . . . whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon made king’—[JER. xxxvii. 1.](#)

Zedekiah was a small man on a great stage, a weakling set to face circumstances that would have taxed the strongest. He was a youth at his accession to the throne of a distracted kingdom, and if he had had any political insight he would have seen that his only chance was to adhere firmly to Babylon, and to repress the foolish aristocracy who hankered after alliance with the rival power of Egypt. He was mad enough to form an alliance with the latter, which was constructive rebellion against the former, and was strongly reprobated by Jeremiah. Swift vengeance followed; the country was ravaged, Zedekiah in his fright implored Jeremiah’s prayers and made faint efforts to follow his counsels. The pressure of invasion was lifted, and immediately he forgot his terrors and forsook the prophet. The Babylonian army was back next year, and the final investment of Jerusalem began. The siege lasted sixteen months, and during it, Zedekiah miserably vacillated between listening to the prophet’s counsels of surrender and the truculent nobles’ advice to resist to the last gasp. The miseries of the siege live for ever in the Book of Lamentations. Mothers boiled their children, nobles hunted on dunghills for food. Their delicate complexions were burned black, and famine turned them into living skeletons. Then, on a long summer day in July came the end. The king tried to skulk out by a covered way between the walls, his few attendants deserted him in his flight, he was caught at last down by the fords of the Jordan, carried prisoner to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah away up in the north beyond Baalbec, and there saw his sons slain before his eyes, and, as soon as he had seen that last sight, was blinded, fettered, and carried off to Babylon, where he died. His career teaches us lessons which I may now seek to bring out.

I. A weak character is sure to become a wicked one.

Moral weakness and inability to resist strong pressure was the keynote of Zedekiah’s character. There were good things in him; he had kindly impulses, as was shown in his emancipation of the slaves at a crisis of Jerusalem’s fate. Left to himself, he would at least have treated Jeremiah kindly, and did rescue him from lingering death in the foul dungeon to which the ruffian nobility had consigned him, and he provided for his being at least saved from dying of starvation during the siege. He listened to him secretly, and would have accepted his counsel if he had dared. But he yielded to the stronger wills of the nobles, though he sometimes bitterly resented their domination, and complained that ‘the king is not he that can do anything against you.’

Like most weak men, he found that temptations to do wrong abounded more than visible inducements to do right, and he was afraid to do right, and fancied that he was compelled by the force of circumstances to do wrong. So he drifted and drifted, and at last was smashed to fragments on the rocks, as all men are who do not keep a strong hand on the helm and

a steady eye on the compass. The winds are good servants but bad masters. If we do not coerce circumstances to carry us on the course which conscience has pricked out on the chart, they will wreck us.

II. A man may have a good deal of religion and yet not enough to mould his life.

Zedekiah listened to the prophet by fits and starts. He was eager to have the benefit of the prophet's prayers. He liberated the slaves in Jerusalem. He came secretly to Jeremiah more than once to know if there were any message from God for him. Yet he had not faith enough nor submission enough to let the known will of God rule his conduct, whatever the nobles might say.

Are there not many of us who have a belief in God and a general acquiescence in Christ's precepts, who order our lives now and then by these, and yet have not come up to the point of full and final surrender? Alas, alas, for the multitudes who are 'not far from the kingdom,' but who never come near enough to be actually *in* it! To be not far from *is* to be out of, and to be out of *is* to be, like Zedekiah, blinded and captived and dead in prison at last.

III. God's love is wonderfully patient.

Jeremiah was to Zedekiah the incarnation of God's unwearied pleadings. During his whole reign, the prophet's voice sounded in his ears, through all the clamours and cries of factions, and mingled at last with the shouts of the besiegers and the groans of the wounded, like the sustained note of some great organ, persisting through a babel of discordant noises. It was met with indifference, and it sounded on. It provoked angry antagonism and still it spoke. Violence was used to stifle it in vain. And it was not only Jeremiah's courageous pertinacity that spoke through that persistent voice, but God's unwearied love, which being rejected is not driven away, being neglected becomes more beseeching, 'is not easily provoked 'to cease its efforts, but 'beareth all' despite, and hopeth for softened hearts till the last moment before doom falls.

That patient love pleads with each of us as persistently as Jeremiah did with Zedekiah.

IV. The long-delayed judgment falls at last.

With infinite reluctance the divine love had to do what God Himself has called 'His strange work.' Divine Justice travels slowly, but arrives at last. Her foot is 'leaden' both in regard to its tardiness and its weight. There is no ground in the long postponement of retribution for the fond dream that it will never come, though men lull themselves to sleep with that lie. 'Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is thoroughly set in them to do evil.' But the sentence will be executed. The pleading love, which has for many returning autumns spared the barren tree and sought to make it fit to bear fruit, does not prevent the owner saying at last to his servant with the axe in his hand, 'Now! thou shalt cut it down.'

THE WORLD'S WAGES TO A PROPHET

‘And it came to pass, that when the army of the Chaldeans was broken up from Jerusalem for fear of Pharaoh’s arm, 12. Then Jeremiah went forth out of Jerusalem to go into the land of Benjamin, to separate himself thence in the midst of the people. 13. And when he was in the gate of Benjamin, a captain of the ward was there, whose name was Irijah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Hananiah; and he took Jeremiah the prophet, saying, Thou fallest away to the Chaldeans. 14. Then said Jeremiah, It is false; I fall not away to the Chaldeans. But he hearkened not to him: so Irijah took Jeremiah, and brought him to the princes. 15. Wherefore the princes were wroth with Jeremiah, and smote him, and put him in prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe: for they had made that the prison. 16. When Jeremiah was entered into the dungeon, and into the cabins, and Jeremiah had remained there many days; 17. Then Zedekiah the king sent, and took him out: and the king asked him secretly in his house, and said, Is there any word from the Lord? And Jeremiah said, There is: for, said he, thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon. 18. Moreover, Jeremiah said unto king Zedekiah, What have I offended against thee, or against thy servants, or against this people, that ye have put me in prison? 19. Where are now your prophets which prophesied unto you, saying, The king of Babylon shall not come against you, nor against this land? 20. Therefore hear now, I pray thee, O my lord the king: let my supplication, I pray thee, be accepted before thee; that thou cause me not to return to the house of Jonathan the scribe, lest I die there. 21. Then Zedekiah the king commanded that they should commit Jeremiah into the court of the prison, and that they should give him daily a piece of bread out of the bakers’ street, until all the bread in the city were spent. Thus Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison.’—[JER. xxxvii. 11-21](#).

SOME sixteen years had passed since Jehoiakim had burned the roll, during all of which the slow gathering of the storm, which was to break over the devoted city, had been going on, and Jeremiah had been vainly calling on the people to return to Jehovah. The last agony was now not far off. But there came a momentary pause in the siege, produced by the necessity of an advance against a relieving army from Egypt, which created fallacious hopes in the doomed city. It was only a pause. Back came the investing force, and again the terrible, lingering process of starving into surrender was resumed. Our text begins with the raising of the siege, and extends to some point after its resumption. It needs little elucidation, so clearly is the story told, and so natural are the incidents; but perhaps we shall best gather its instruction if we look at the three sets of actors separately, and note the hostile authorities, the patient prophet and prisoner, and the feeble king. The play of these strongly contrasted characters is full of vividness and instruction.

I. We have that rough ‘captain of the ward,’ who laid hands on the prophet at the gate on the north side of the city, leading to the road to the territory of Benjamin. No doubt there was a considerable exodus from Jerusalem when the Assyrian lines were deserted, and

common prudence would have facilitated it, as reducing the number of mouths to be fed, in case the siege were renewed; but malice is not prudent, and, instead of letting the hated Jeremiah slip quietly away home to Anathoth, and so getting rid of his prophecies and him, Irijah ('the Lord is a beholder') arrested him on a charge of meditating desertion to the enemy. It was a colourable accusation, for Jeremiah's constant exhortation had been to 'go out to the Chaldeans,' and so secure life and mild treatment. But it was clearly false, for the Chaldeans were for the moment gone, and the time was the very worst that could have been chosen for a contemplated flight to their camp.

The real reason for the prophet's wish to leave the city was only too simple. It was to see if he could get 'a portion'—some of his property, or perhaps rather some little store of food—to take back to the famine-scourged city, which, he knew, would soon be again at starvation-point. There appears to have been a little company of fellow-villagers with him, for 'in the midst of the people' (v. 12) is to be construed with 'to go into the land of Benjamin.' The others seem to have been let pass, and only Jeremiah detained, which makes the charge more evidently a trumped-up excuse for laying hands on him. Jeremiah calls it in plain words what it was—'a lie'—and protests his innocence of any such design. But the officious Irijah knew too well how much of a feather in his cap his getting hold of the prophet would be, to heed his denials, and dragged him off to the princes.

Sixteen years ago 'the princes' round Jehoiakim had been the prophet's friends; but either a new generation had come with a new king, or else the tempers of the men had changed with the growing misery. Their behaviour was more lawless than the soldiers' had been. They did not even pretend to examine the prisoner, but blazed up at once in anger. They had him in their power now, and did their worst, lawlessly scourging him first, and then thrusting him into 'the house of the pit'—some dark, underground hole, below the house of an official, where there were a number of 'cells'—filthy and stifling, no doubt; and there they left him. What for?

The charge of intended desertion was a mere excuse for wreaking their malice on him. They hated Jeremiah because he had steadily opposed the popular determination to fight, and had foretold disaster. Add to this that he had held up a high standard of religion and morality to a corrupt and idolatrous people, and his 'unpopularity' is sufficiently explained.

Would that the same causes did not produce the same effects now! Individuals still think an honest rebuke of their faults an insult, and a plain statement of their danger a sign of ill-feeling. Try to warn a drunkard or a profligate by telling him of the disease and misery which will dog his sins, or by setting plainly before him God's law of purity and sobriety, and you will find that the prophet's function still brings with it, in many cases, the prophet's doom. But still more truly is this the case with masses, whether nations or cities. A spurious patriotism resents as unpatriotic the far truer love of country which sets a trumpet to its mouth to tell the people their sins. In all democratic communities, whether republican or regal in

their form of government, a crying evil is flattery of the masses, exalting their virtues and foretelling their prosperity, while hiding their faults and slurring over the requirements of morality and religion, which are the foundations of prosperity. What did England do with her prophets? What did America do with hers? What wages do they get to-day? The men who dare to tell their countrymen their faults, and to preach temperance, peace, civic purity, personal morality, are laid hold of by the Irijahs who preside over the newspapers, and are pilloried as deserters and half traitors at heart.

II. We see the patient, unmoved prophet. One flash of honest indignation repels the charge of deserting, and then he is silent. 'As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.' It is useless to plead before lawless violence. A silent martyr eloquently condemns an unjust judge. So, without opposition or apparent remonstrance, Jeremiah is cast into the foul den where he lies for 'many days,' patiently bearing his fate, and speaking his complaint to God only. How long his imprisonment lasted does not appear; but the context implies that during it the siege was resumed, and that there was difficulty in procuring bread. Then the king sent for him secretly.

Zedekiah's temper at the time will be considered presently. Here we have to do with Jeremiah's answer to his question. In it we may note, as equally prominent and beautifully blended, respect, submission, consciousness of peril and impending death, and unshaken boldness. He knew that his life was at the disposal of the capricious, feeble Zedekiah. He bows before him as his subject, and brings his 'supplication'; but not one jot of his message will he abate, nor smooth down its terribleness an atom. He repeats as unfalteringly as ever the assurance that the king of Babylon will take the city. He asserts his own innocence as regards king and courtiers and people; and he asks the scornful question what has become of all the smooth-tongued prophets of prosperity, as if he were bidding the king look over the city wall and see the tokens of their lies and of Jeremiah's truth in the investing lines of the all but victorious enemy.

Such a combination of perfect meekness and perfect courage, unstained loyalty to his king, and supreme obedience to his God, was only possible to a man who lived in very close communion with Jehovah, and had learned thereby to fear none less, because he feared Him so well, and to reverence all else whom He had set in places of reverence. True courage, of the pattern which befits God's servants, is ever gentle. Bluster is the sign of weakness. A Christian hero—and no man will be a Christian as he ought to be, who has not something of the hero in him—should win by meekness. Does not the King of all such ride prosperously 'because of truth and meekness,' and must not the armies which follow Him do the same? Faithful witnessing to men of their sins need not be rude, harsh, or self-asserting. But we must live much in fellowship with the Lord of all the meek and the pattern of all patient sufferers and faithful witnesses, if we are ever to be like Him, or even like His pale shadow

as seen in this meek prophet. The fountains of strength and of patience spring side by side at the foot of the cross.

III. We have the weak Zedekiah, with his pitiable vacillation. He had been Nebuchadnezzar's nominee, and had served him for some years, and then rebelled. His whole career indicates a feeble nature, taking the impression of anything which was strongly laid on it. He was a king of putty, when the times demanded one of iron. He was cowed by the 'princes.' Sometimes he was afraid to disobey Jeremiah, and then afraid to let his masters know that he was so. Thus he sends for the prophet stealthily, and his first question opens a depth of conflict in his soul. He did believe that the prophet spoke the word of Jehovah, and yet he could not muster up courage to follow his convictions and go against the princes and the mob. He wanted another 'word' from Jehovah, by which he meant a word of another sort than the former. He could not bring his mind to obey the word which he had, and so he weakly hoped that perhaps God's word might be changed into one that he would be willing to obey. Many men are, like him, asking, 'Is there any word from the Lord?' and meaning, 'Is there any change in the condition of receiving His favour?'

He had interest enough in the prophet to interfere for his comfort, and to have him put into better quarters in the palace and provided with a 'circle' (a round loaf) of bread out of Baker Street, as long as there was any in the city—not a very long time. But why did he do so much, and not do more? He knew that Jeremiah was innocent, and that his word was God's; and what he should have done was to have shaken off his masterful 'servants,' followed his conscience, and obeyed God. Why did he not? Because he was a coward, infirm of purpose, and therefore 'unstable as water.'

He is another of the tragic examples, with which all life as well as scripture is studded, of how much evil is possible to a weak character. In this world, where there are so many temptations to be bad, no man will be good who cannot strongly say 'No.' The virtue of strength of will may be but like the rough fence round young trees to keep cattle from browsing on them and east winds from blighting them. But the fence is needed, if the trees are to grow. 'To be weak is to be miserable,' and sinful too, generally. 'Whom resist' must be the motto for all noble, God-like, and God-pleasing life.

THE LAST AGONY

'In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army against Jerusalem, and they besieged it. 2. And in the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, the ninth day of the month, the city was broken up. 3. And all the princes of the king of Babylon came in, and sat in the middle gate, even Nergal-sharezer, Samgar-nebo, Sarse-chim, Rab-saris, Nergal-sharezer, Rab-mag, with all the residue of the princes of the king of Babylon. 4. And it came to pass, that when Zedekiah the king of Judah saw them, and all the men of war, then they fled, and went forth out of the city by night, by the way of the king's garden, by the gate betwixt the two walls: and he went out the way of the plain. 5. But the Chaldeans' army pursued after them, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho; and when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon to Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he gave judgment upon him. 6. Then the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah in Riblah before his eyes: also the king of Babylon slew all the nobles of Judah. 7. Moreover he put out Zedekiah's eyes, and bound him with chains, to carry him to Babylon. 8. And the Chaldeans burned the king's house, and the houses of the people, with fire, and brake down the walls of Jerusalem. 9. Then Nebuzar-adan the captain of the guard carried away captive into Babylon the remnant of the people that remained in the city, and those that fell away, that fell to him, with the rest of the people that remained. 10. But Nebuzar-adan the captain of the guard left of the poor of the people, which had nothing, in the land of Judah, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time.'—[JER. xxxix. 1-10](#).

Two characteristics of this account of the fall of Jerusalem are striking,—its minute particularity, giving step by step the details of the tragedy, and its entire suppression of emotion. The passionless record tells the tale without a tear or a sob. For these we must go to the Book of Lamentations. This is the history of God's judgment, and here emotion would be misplaced. But there is a world of repressed feeling in the long-drawn narrative, as well as in the fact that three versions of the story are given here ([chap. lii.](#), [2 Kings xxv.](#)). Sorrow curbed by submission, and steadily gazing on God's judicial act, is the temper of the narrative. It should be the temper of all sufferers. 'I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it.' But we may note the three stages in the final agony which this section distinguishes.

I. There is the entrance of the enemy. Jerusalem fell not by assault, but by famine. The siege lasted eighteen months, and ended when 'all the bread in the city was spent.' The pitiful pictures in Lamentations fill in the details of misery, telling how high-born women picked garbage from dung-heaps, and mothers made a ghastly meal of their infants, while the nobles were wasted to skeletons, and the little children piteously cried for bread. At length a breach was made in the northern wall (as Josephus tells us, 'at midnight'), and through it, on the ninth day of the fourth month (corresponding to July), swarmed the conquerors, unresisted.

The commanders of the Babylonians planted themselves at 'the middle gate,' probably a gate in the wall between the upper and lower city, so securing for them the control of both.

How many of these fierce soldiers are named in [verse 3](#)? At first sight there seem to be six, but that number must be reduced by at least two, for Rab-saris and Rab-mag are official titles, and designate the offices (chief eunuch and chief magician) of the two persons whose names they respectively follow. Possibly Samgar-Nebo is also to be deducted, for it has been suggested that, as that name stands, it is anomalous, and it has been proposed to render its first element, *Samgar*, as meaning *cup-bearer*, and being the official title attached to the name preceding it; while its second part, *Nebo*, is regarded as the first element in a new name obtained by reading *shashban* instead of Sarsechim, and attaching that reading to Nebo. This change would bring [verse 3](#) into accord with [verse 13](#), for in both places we should then have Nebo-shashban designated as chief of the eunuchs. However the number of the commanders is settled, and whatever their names, the point which the historian emphasises is their presence there. Had it come to this, that men whose very names were invocations of false gods ('Nergal protect the king,' 'Nebo delivers me' if we read 'Nebo-shashban,' or 'Be gracious, Nebo,' if Samgar-nebo) should sit close by the temple, and have their talons fixed in the Holy City?

These intruders were all unconscious of the meaning of their victory, and the tragedy of their presence there. They thought that they were Nebuchadnezzar's servants, and had captured for him, at last, an obstinate little city, which had given more trouble than it was worth. Its conquest was but a drop in the bucket of his victories. How little they knew that they were serving that Jehovah whom they thought that Nebo had conquered in their persons! How little they knew that they were the instruments of the most solemn act of judgment in the world's history till then!

The causes which led to the fall of Jerusalem could be reasonably set forth as purely political without a single reference to Israel's sins or God's judgment; but none the less was its capture the divine punishment of its departure from Him, and none the less were Nergal-sharezer and his fellows God's tools, the axes with which He hewed down the barren tree. So does He work still, in national and individual history. You may, in a fashion, account for both without bringing Him in at all; but your philosophy of either will be partial, unless you recognise that 'the history of the world is the judgment of the world.' It was the same hand which set these harsh conquerors at the middle gate of Jerusalem that sent the German armies to encamp in the Place de la Concorde in Paris; and in neither case does the recognition of God in the crash of a falling throne absolve the victors from the responsibility of their deeds.

II. We have the flight and fate of Zedekiah and his evil advisers ([vs. 4-7](#)). His weakness of character shows itself to the end. Why was there no resistance? It would have better seemed him to have died on his palace threshold than to have skulked away in the dark

between the shelter of the 'two walls.' But he was a poor weakling, and the curse of God sat heavy on his soul, though he had tried to put it away. Conscience made a coward of him; for he, at all events, knew who had set the strangers by the middle gate. Men who harden heart and conscience against threatened judgments are very apt to collapse, when the threats are fulfilled. The frost breaks up with a rapid thaw.

Ezekiel ([Ezek. xii. 12](#)) prophesied the very details of the flight. It was to be 'in the dark,' the king himself was to 'carry' some of his valuables, they were to 'dig through' the earthen ramparts; and all appears to have been literally fulfilled. The flight was taken in the opposite direction from the entrance of the besiegers; two walls, which probably ran down the valley between Zion and the temple mount, afforded cover to the fugitives as far as to the south city wall, and there some postern let them out to the king's garden. That is a tragic touch. It was no time then to gather flowers. The forlorn and frightened company seems to have scattered when once outside the city; for there is a marked contrast in [verse 4](#) between 'they fled' and 'he went.' In the description of his flight Zedekiah is still called, as in [verses 1 and 2](#), the king; but after his capture he is only 'Zedekiah.'

Down the rocky valley of the Kedron he hurried, and had a long enough start of his pursuers to get to Jericho. Another hour would have seen him safe across Jordan, but the prospect of escape was only dangled before his eyes to make capture more bitter. Probably he was too much absorbed with his misery and fear to feel any additional humiliation from the mighty memories of the scene of his capture; but how solemnly fitting it was that the place which had seen Israel's first triumph, when 'by faith the walls of Jericho fell down,' should witness the lowest shame of the king who had cast away his kingdom by unbelief! The conquering dead might have gathered in shadowy shapes to reproach the weakling and sluggard who had sinned away the heritage which they had won. The scene of the capture underscores the lesson of the capture itself; namely, the victorious power of faith, and the defeat and shame which, in the long-run, are the fruits of an 'evil heart of unbelief, departing from the living God.'

That would be a sad march through all the length of the fair land that had slipped from his slack fingers, up to far-off Riblah, in the great valley between the Lebanon and the anti-Lebanon. Observe how, in [verses 5 and 6](#), the king of Babylon has his royal title, and Zedekiah has not. The crown has fallen from his head, and there is no more a king in Judah. He who had been king now stands chained before the cruel conqueror. Well might the victor think that Nebo had overcome Jehovah, but better did the vanquished know that Jehovah had kept his word.

Cruelty and expediency dictated the savage massacre and mutilation which followed. The death of Zedekiah's sons, and of the nobles who had scoffed at Jeremiah's warnings, and the blinding of Zedekiah, were all measures of precaution as well as of savagery. They diminished the danger of revolt; and a blind, childless prisoner, without counsellors or

friends, was harmless. But to make the sight of his slaughtered sons the poor wretch's last sight, was a refinement of gratuitous delight in torturing. Thus singularly was Ezekiel's enigma solved and harmonised with its apparent contradictions in Jeremiah's prophecies: 'Yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there' ([Ezek. xii. 13](#)).

Zedekiah is one more instance of the evil which may come from a weak character, and of the evil which may fall on it. He had good impulses, but he could not hold his own against the bad men round him, and so he stumbled on, not without misgivings, which only needed to be attended to with resolute determination, in order to have reversed his conduct and fate. Feeble hands can pull down venerable structures built in happier times. It takes a David and a Solomon to rear a temple, but a Zedekiah can overthrow it.

III. We have the completion of the conquest ([vs. 8-10](#)). The first care of the victors was, of course, to secure themselves, and fires and crowbars were the readiest way to that end. But the wail in the last chapter of Lamentations hints at the usual atrocities of the sack of a city, when brutal lust and as brutal ferocity are let loose. [Chapter lii.](#) shows that the final step in our narrative was separated from the capture of the city by a month, which was, no doubt, a month of nameless agonies, horrors, and shame. Then the last drop was added to the bitter cup, in the deportation of the bulk of the inhabitants, according to the politic custom of these old military monarchies. What rending of ties, what weariness and years of long-drawn-out yearning, that meant, can easily be imagined. The residue left behind to keep the country from relapsing into waste land was too weak to be dangerous, and too cowed to dare anything. One knows not who had the sadder lot, the exiles, or the handful of peasants left to till the fields that had once been their own, and to lament their brethren gone captives to the far-off land.

Surely the fall of Jerusalem, though all the agony is calmed ages ago, still remains as a solemn beacon-warning that the wages of sin is death, both for nations and individuals; that the threatenings of God's Word are not idle, but will be accomplished to the utmost tittle; and that His patience stretches from generation to generation, and His judgments tarry because He is not willing that any should perish, but that for all the long-suffering there comes a time when even divine love sees that it is needful to say 'Now!?' and the bolt falls. The solemn word addressed to Israel has application as real to all Christian churches and individual souls: 'You only have I known of all the inhabitants of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities.'

EBEDMELECH THE ETHIOPIAN

‘For I will surely deliver thee, and thou shalt not fall by the sword, but thy life shall be for a prey unto thee: because thou hast put thy trust in Me, saith the Lord.’—[JER. xxxix. 18.](#)

Ebedmelech is a singular anticipation of that other Ethiopian eunuch whom Philip met on the desert road to Gaza. It is prophetic that on the eve of the fall of the nation, a heathen man should be entering into union with God. It is a picture in little of the rejection of Israel and the ingathering of the Gentiles.

I. The identity in all ages of the bond that unites men to God.

It is a common notion that faith is peculiar to the New Testament. But the Old Testament ‘trust’ is identical with the New Testament ‘faith,’ and it is a great pity that the variation in translation has obscured that identity. The fact of the prominence given to law in the Old Testament does not affect this. For every effort to keep the law must have led to consciousness of imperfection, and that consciousness must have driven to the exercise of penitent trust. The difference of degrees of revelation does not affect it, for faith is the same, however various the contents of the creed.

Note further the personal object of Faith—‘in ME.’ The object of Faith is not a proposition but a Person. That Person is the same in the Old Testament and in the New. The Jehovah of the one is the God in Christ of the other. Consequently faith must be more than intellectual assent, it must be voluntary and emotional, the act of the whole man, ‘the synthesis of the reason and the will.’

II. The contrast of a formal and real union with God.

The king, prophets, priests, the whole nation, had an outward connection with Him, but it meant nothing. And this foreigner, a slave, perhaps not even a proselyte, a eunuch, had what the children of the covenant had not, a true union with God through Faith.

Judaism was not an exclusive system, but was intended to bring in the nations to share in its blessings. Outward descent gave outward place within the covenant, but the distinction of real and formal place there was established from the beginning. What else than this is the meaning of all the threatenings of Deuteronomy? What else did Isaiah mean when he called the rulers in Jerusalem ‘Rulers of Sodom’? Here the fates of Ebedmelech and of Zedekiah illustrate both sides of the truth. The danger of trusting in outward possession and of thinking that God’s mercy is our property besets all Churches. Organisations of Christianity are necessary, but it is impossible to tell the harm that formal connection with them has done. There is only one bond that unites men to God—personal trust in Him as ‘in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.’

III. The possibility of exercising uniting faith even in most unfavourable circumstances.

This Ebedmelech had everything against him. The contemptuous exclusion of him from any share in the covenant might well have discouraged him. The poorest Jew treated him as a heathen dog, who had no right even to crumbs from the table spread for the children

only. He was plunged into a sea of godlessness, and saw examples enough of utter carelessness as to Jehovah in His professed servants to drive him away from a religion which had so little hold on its professed adherents. The times were gloomy, and the Jehovah whom Judah professed to worship seemed to have small power to help His worshippers. It would have been no wonder if the conduct of the people of Jerusalem had caused the name of Jehovah to be blasphemed by this Gentile, nor if he had revolted from a religion that was alleged to be the special property of one race, and that such a race! But he listened to the cry of his own heart, and to the words of God's prophet, and his faith pierced through all obstacles—like the roots of some tree feeling for the water. He found the vitalising fountain that he sought, and His name stands to all ages as a witness that no seeking heart, that longs for God, is ever balked in its search, and that a faith, very imperfect as to its knowledge, may be so strong as to its substance that it unites him who exercises it with God, while the possessors of ecclesiastical privileges and of untarnished and full-orbed orthodox knowledge have no fellowship with Him.

IV. The safety given by such uniting faith.

To Ebedmelech, escape from death by the besiegers' swords was promised. To us a more blessed safety and exemption from a worse destruction are assured. 'The life which is life indeed' may be ours, and shall assuredly be ours, if our trust knits us to Him who is the Life, and who has said 'He that liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.'

GOD'S PATIENT PLEADINGS

'I sent unto you all my servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, saying, Oh, do not this abominable thing that I hate.'—[JER. xliv. 4.](#)

The long death-agony of the Jewish kingdom has come to an end. The frivolous levity, which fed itself on illusions and would not be sobered by facts, has been finally crushed out of the wretched people. The dreary succession of incompetent kings—now a puppet set up by Egypt, now another puppet set up by Babylon, has ended with the weak Zedekiah. The throne of David is empty, and the long line of kings, which numbered many a strong, wise, holy man, has dwindled into a couple of captives, one of them blind and both of them paupers on an idolatrous monarch's bounty. The country is desolate, the bulk of the people exiles, and the poor handful, who had been left by the conqueror, flitting like ghosts, or clinging, like domestic animals, to their burnt homes and wasted plains, have been quarrelling and fighting among themselves, murdering the Jewish ruler whom Babylon had left them, and then in abject terror have fled *en masse* across the border into Egypt, where they are living wretched lives. What a history that people had gone through since they had lived on the same soil before! From Moses to Zedekiah, what a story! From Goshen till now it had been one long tragedy which seems to have at last reached its fifth act. Nine hundred years have passed, and this is the issue of them all!

The circumstances might well stir the heart of the prophet, whose doleful task it had been to foretell the coming of the storm, who had had to strip off Judah's delusions and to proclaim its certain fall, and who in doing so had carried his life in his hand for forty years, and had never met with recognition or belief.

Jeremiah had been carried off by the fugitives to Egypt, and there he made a final effort to win them back to God. He passed before them the outline of the whole history of the nation, treating it as having accomplished one stadium—and what does he find? In all these days since Goshen there has been one monotonous story of vain divine pleadings and human indifference, God beseeching and Israel turning away—and now at last the crash, long foretold, never credited, which had been drawing nearer through all the centuries, has come, and Israel is scattered among the people.

Such are the thoughts and emotions that speak in the exquisitely tender words of our text. It suggests—

- I. God's antagonism to sin.
- II. The great purpose of all His pleadings.
- III. God's tender and unwearied efforts.
- IV. The obstinate resistance to His tender pleadings.

I. God's antagonism to sin.
It is the one thing in the universe to which He is opposed. Sin is essentially antagonism to God. People shrink from the thought of God's hatred of sin, because of—

An underestimate of its gravity. Contrast the human views of its enormity, as shown by men's playing with it, calling it by half-jocose names and the like, with God's thought of its heinousness.

A false dread of seeming to attribute human emotions to God. But there is in God what corresponds to our human feelings, something analogous to the attitude of a pure human mind recoiling from evil.

The divine love must necessarily be pure, and the mightier its energy of forth-going, the mightier its energy of recoil. God's 'hate' is Love inverted and reverted on itself. A divine love which had in it no necessity of hating evil would be profoundly immoral, and would be called devilish more fitly than divine.

II. The great purpose of the divine pleadings.

To wean from sin is the main end of prophecy. It is the main end of all revelation. God must chiefly desire to make His creatures like Himself. Sin makes a special revelation necessary. Sin determines the form of it.

III. God's tender and unwearied efforts.

'Rising early' is a strong metaphor to express persistent effort. The more obstinate is our indifference, the more urgent are His calls. He raises His voice as our deafness grows. Mark, too, the tenderness of the entreaty in this text, 'Oh, do not this abominable thing that I hate!' His hatred of it is adduced as a reason which should touch any heart that loves Him. He beseeches as if He, too, were saying, 'Though I might be bold to enjoin thee' that which is fitting, 'yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee.' The manifestation of His disapproval and the appeal to our love by the disclosure of His own are the most powerful, winning and compelling dehortations from sin. Not by brandishing the whip, not by a stern law written on tables of stone, but by unveiling His heart, does God win us from our sins.

IV. The obstinate resistance to God's tender pleadings.

The tragedy of the nation is summed up in one word, 'They hearkened not.'

That power of neglecting God's voice and opposing God's will is the mystery of our nature. How strange it is that a human will should be able to lift itself in opposition to the Sovereign Will! But stranger and more mysterious and tragic still is it that we should choose to exercise that power and find pleasure, and fancy that we shall ever find advantage, in refusing to listen to His entreaties and choosing to flout His uttered will.

Such opposition was Israel's ruin. It will be ours if we persist in it. 'If God spared not the natural branches, neither will He spare thee.'

THE SWORD OF THE LORD

‘O thou sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? put up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still. 7. How can it be quiet, seeing the Lord hath given it a charge?’—*JER. xlvii. 6, 7.*

The prophet is here in the full tide of his prophecies against the nations round about. This paragraph is entirely occupied with threatenings. Bearing the cup of woes, he turns to one after another of the ancestral enemies of Israel, Egypt and Philistia on the south and west, Moab on the south and east, then northwards to Ammon, south to Edom, north to Damascus, Kedar, Hagor, Elam, and finally to the great foe—Babylon. In the hour of Israel’s lowest fortunes and the foe’s proudest exultation these predictions are poured out. Jeremiah stands as if wielding the sword of which our text speaks, and whirls and points the flashing terror of its sharpened edge against the ring of foes. It turns every way, like the weapon of the angelic guard before the lost paradise, and wherever it turns a kingdom falls.

In the midst of his stern denunciations he checks himself to utter this plaintive cry of pity and longing. A tender gleam of compassion breaks through the heart of the thunder-cloud. It is very beautiful to note that the point at which the irrepressible welling up of sweet waters breaks the current of his prophecy is the prediction against Israel’s bitterest, because nearest, foe, ‘these uncircumcised Philistines.’ He beholds the sea of wrath drowning the great Philistine plain, its rich harvests trampled under foot by ‘stamping of hoofs of his strong ones,’ and that desolation wrings from his heart the words of our text. I take them to be spoken by the prophet. That, of course, is doubtful. It may be that they are meant to give in a vivid dramatic form the effect of the judgments on the sufferers. They recognise these as ‘the sword of the Lord.’ Their only thought is an impatient longing that the judgments would cease,—no confession of sin, no humbling of them selves, but only—‘remove Thy hand from us.’

And the answer is either the prophet’s or the divine voice; spoken in the one case to himself, in the other to the Philistines; but in either setting forth the impossibility that the sweeping sword should rest, since it is the instrument in God’s hand, executing His charge and fulfilling His appointment.

I. The shrinking from the unsheathed sword of the Lord.

We may deal with the words as representing very various states of mind.

They may express the impatience of sufferers. Afflictions are too often wasted. Whatever the purpose of chastisement, the true lesson of it is so seldom learned, even in regard to the lowest wisdom it is adapted to teach. In an epidemic, how few people learn to take precautions, such as cleanliness or attention to diet! In hard times commercially, how slow most are to learn the warning against luxury, over-trading, haste to be rich! And in regard to higher lessons, men have a dim sense sometimes that the blow comes from God, but, like

Balaam, go on their way in spite of the angel with the sword. It does not soften, nor restrain, nor drive to God. The main result is, impatient longing for its removal.

The text may express the rooted dislike to the thought and the fact of punishment as an element in divine government. This is a common phase of feeling always, and especially so now. There is a present tendency, good in many aspects, but excessive, to soften away the thought of punishment; or to suppose that God's punishments must have the same purposes as men's. We cannot punish by way of retribution, for no balance of ours is fine enough to weigh motives or to determine criminality. Our punishments can only be deterrent or reformatory, but this is by reason of our weakness. He has other objects in view.

Current ideas of the love of God distort it by pitting it against His retributive righteousness. Current ideas of sin diminish its gravity by tracing it to heredity or environment, or viewing it as a necessary stage in progress. The sense of God's judicial action is paralysed and all but dead in multitudes.

All these things taken together set up a strong current of opinion against any teaching of punitive energy in God.

The text may express the pitying reluctance of the prophet.

Jeremiah is remarkable for the weight with which 'the burden of the Lord' pressed upon him. The true prophet feels the pang of the woes which he is charged to announce more than his hearers do.

Unfair charges are made against gospel preachers, as if they delighted in the thought of the retribution which they have to proclaim.

II. The solemn necessity for the unsheathing of the sword.

The judgments must go on. In the text the all-sufficient reason given is that God has willed it so. But we must take into account all that lies in that name of 'Lord' before we understand the message, which brought patience to the heart of the prophet. If a Jewish prophet believed anything, he believed that the will of the Lord was absolutely good. Jeremiah's reason for the flashing sword is no mere beating down human instincts, by alleging a will which is sovereign, and there an end. We have to take into account the whole character of Him who has willed it, and then we can discern it to be inevitable that God should punish evil.

His character makes it inevitable. God's righteousness cannot but hate sin and fight against it. To leave it unpunished stains His glory.

God's love cannot but draw and wield the sword. It is unsheathed in the interests of all that is 'lovely and of good report.' If God is God at all, and not an almighty devil, He must hate sin. The love and the righteousness, which in deepest analysis are one, must needs issue in punishment. There would be a blight over the universe if they did not.

The very order of the universe makes it inevitable. All things, as coming from Him, must work for His lovers and against His enemies, as 'the stars in their courses fought against Sisera.'

The constitution of men makes it inevitable. Sin brings its own punishment, in gnawing conscience, defiled memories, incapacity for good, and many other penalties.

It is to be remembered that the text originally referred to retribution on nations for national sins, and that what Jeremiah regarded as the strokes of the Lord might be otherwise regarded as political catastrophes. Let us not overlook that application of the principles of the text. Scripture regards the so-called 'natural consequences' of a nation's sins as God's judgments on them. The Christian view of the government of the world looks on all human affairs as moved by God, though done by men. It takes full account of the responsibility of men the doers, but above all, recognises 'the rod and Him who hath appointed it.' We see exemplified over and over again in the world's history the tragic truth that the accumulated consequences of a nation's sins fall on the heads of a single generation. Slowly, drop by drop, the cup is filled. Slowly, moment by moment, the hand moves round the dial, and then come the crash and boom of the hammer on the deep-toned bell. Good men should pray not, 'Put up thyself into thy scabbard,' but, 'Gird Thy sword on Thy thigh, O thou most mighty. . . on behalf of truth and meekness and righteousness.'

III. The sheathing of the sword.

The passionate appeal in the text, which else is vain, has in large measure its satisfaction in the work of Christ.

God does not delight in punishment. He has provided a way. Christ bears the consequence of man's sin, the sense of alienation, the pains and sorrows, the death. He does not bear them for Himself. His bearing them accomplishes the ends at which punishment aims, in expressing the divine hatred of sin and in subduing the heart. Trusting in Him, the sword does not fall on us. In some measure indeed it still does. But it is no longer a sword to smite, but a lancet to inflict a healing wound. And the worst punishment does not fall on us. God's sword was sheathed in Christ's breast. So trust in Him, then shall you have 'boldness in the day of judgment.'

THE KINSMAN-REDEEMER

‘Their Redeemer is strong; the Lord of Hosts is His name: He shall thoroughly plead their cause.’—[JER. I. 34](#).

Among the remarkable provisions of the Mosaic law there were some very peculiar ones affecting the next-of-kin. The nearest living blood relation to a man had certain obligations and offices to discharge, under certain contingencies, in respect of which he received a special name; which is sometimes translated in the Old Testament ‘Redeemer,’ and sometimes ‘Avenger’ of blood. What the etymological signification of the word may be is, perhaps, somewhat doubtful. It is taken by some authorities to come from a word meaning ‘to set free.’ But a consideration of the offices which the law prescribed for the ‘Goel’ is of more value for understanding the peculiar force of the metaphor in such a text as this, than any examination of the original meaning of the word. Jehovah is represented as having taken upon Himself the functions of the next-of-kin, and is the Kinsman-Redeemer of His people. The same thought recurs frequently in the Old Testament, especially in the second half of the prophecies of Isaiah, and it were much to be desired that the Revised Version had adopted some means of showing an English reader the instances, since the expression suggests a very interesting and pathetic view of God’s relation to His people.

I. Let me state briefly the qualifications and offices of the kinsman-redeemer, ‘*the Goel*.’ The qualifications may be all summed up in one—that he must be the nearest blood relation of the person whose Goel he was. He might be brother, or less nearly related, but this was essential, that of all living men, he was the most closely connected. That qualification has to be kept well in mind when thinking of the transference of the office to God in His relation to Israel, and through Israel to us.

Such being his qualification, what were his duties? Mainly three. The first was connected with property, and is thus stated in the words of the law, ‘If thy brother be waxen poor, and sell some of his possession, then shall his *kinsman* that is next unto him come, and shall redeem that which his brother hath sold’ ([Lev. xxv. 25, R. V.](#)). The Mosaic law was very jealous of large estates. The prophet pronounced a curse upon those who joined ‘land to land, and field to field. . . that they may be alone in the midst of the earth.’ One great purpose steadily kept in view in all the Mosaic land-laws was the prevention of the alienation of the land from its original holders, and of its accumulation in a few hands. The idea underlying the law was that of the tribal or family ownership—or rather occupancy, for God was the owner and Israel but a tenant—and not individual possession. That thought carries us back to a social state long since passed away, but of which traces are still left even among ourselves. It was carried out thoroughly in the law of Moses, however imperfectly in actual practice. The singular institution of the year of Jubilee operated, among other effects, to check the acquisition of large estates. It provided that land which had been alienated was to revert to its original occupants, and so, in substance, prohibited purchase and permitted only the

lease of land for a maximum term of fifty years. We do not know how far its enactments were a dead letter, but their spirit and intention were obviously to secure the land of the tribe to the tribe for ever, to keep the territory of each distinct, to discourage the creation of a landowning class, with its consequent landless class, to prevent the extremes of poverty and wealth, and to perpetuate a diffused, and nearly uniform, modest wellbeing amongst a pastoral and agricultural community, and to keep all in mind that the land was 'not to be sold for ever, for it is Mine,' saith the Lord.

The obligation on the next-of-kin to buy back alienated property was quite as much imposed on him for the sake of the family as of the individual.

The second of his duties was to buy back a member of his family fallen into slavery. 'If a stranger or sojourner with thee be waxen rich, and thy brother be waxen poor beside him, and sell himself unto the stranger. . . after that he is sold, he may be redeemed; one of his brethren may redeem him.' The price was to vary according to the time which had to elapse before the year of Jubilee, when all slaves were necessarily set free. So Hebrew slavery was entirely unlike the thing called by the same name in other countries, and by virtue of this power of purchase at any time, which was vested in the nearest relative, taken along with the compulsory manumission of all 'slaves' every fiftieth year, came to be substantially a voluntary engagement for a fixed time, which might be ended even before that time had expired, if compensation for the unexpired term was made to the master.

It is to be observed that this provision applied only to the case of a Hebrew who had sold himself. No other person could sell a man into slavery. And it applied only to the case of a Hebrew who had sold himself to a foreigner. No Jew was allowed to hold a Jew as a slave. 'If thy brother be waxen poor with thee, and sell himself unto thee, thou shalt not make him to serve as a bondservant: as an hired servant, and as a sojourner, he shall be with thee.' (*Lev. xxv. 39, R. V.*).

The last of the offices of the kinsman-redeemer was that of avenging the blood of a murdered relative. If a man were stricken to death, it became a solemn obligation to exact life for life, and the blood-feud incumbent on all the family was especially binding on the next-of-kin. The obligation shocks a modern mind, accustomed to relegate all punishment to the action of law which no criminal thinks of resisting. But customs and laws are unfairly estimated when the state of things which they regulated is forgotten or confused with that of today. The law of blood-feud among the Hebrews was all in the direction of restricting the wild justice of revenge, and of entrusting it to certain chosen persons out of the kindred of the murdered man. The savage vendetta was too deeply engrained in the national habits to be done away with altogether. All that was for the time possible was to check and systematise it, and this was done by the institution in question, which did not so much put the sword into the hand of the next-of-kin as strike it out of the hand of all the rest of the clan.

These, then, were the main parts of the duty of the Goel, the kinsman-redeemer—buying back the alienated land, purchasing the freedom of the man who had voluntarily sold himself as a slave, and avenging the slaying of a kinsman.

II. Notice the grand mysterious transference of this office to Jehovah.

This singular institution was gradually discerned to be charged with lofty meaning and to be capable of being turned into a dim shadowing of something greater than itself. You will find that God begins to be spoken of in the later portions of Scripture as the Kinsman-Redeemer. I reckon eighteen instances, of which thirteen are in the second half of Isaiah. The reference is, no doubt, mainly to the great deliverance from captivity in Egypt and Babylon, but the thought sweeps a much wider circle and goes much deeper down than these historical facts. There was in it some dim feeling that though God was separated from them by all the distance between finitude and infinitude, yet they were nearer to Him than to any one else; that the nearest living relation whom these poor persecuted Jews had was the Lord of Hosts, beneath whose wings they might come to trust. Therefore does the prophet kindle into rapture and triumphant confidence as he thinks that the Lord of Hosts, mighty, unspeakable, high above our thoughts, our words, or our praise, is Israel's Kinsman, and, therefore, their Redeemer. How profound a consciousness that man was made in the image of God, and that, in spite of all the gulf between finite and infinite, and the yet deeper gulf between sinful man and righteous God, He was closer to a poor struggling soul than even the dearest were, must have been at all events dawning on the prophet who dared to think of the Holy One in the Heavens as Israel's Kinsman. No doubt, he was dwelling mostly on historical outward deliverances wrought for the nation, and his idea of Israel's kinship to God applied to the people, not to individuals, and meant chiefly that the nation had been chosen for God's. But still the thought must have been felt to be great and wonderful, and some faint apprehension of the yet deeper sense in which it is true that God is the next-of-kin to every soul and ready to be its Redeemer, would no doubt begin to be felt.

The deepening of the idea from a reference to external and national deliverances, and the large, dim hopes which clustered round it, may be illustrated by one or two significant instances. Take, for example, that mysterious and very beautiful utterance in the Book of Job, where the man, in the very depth of his despair, and just because there is not a human being that has any drop of pity for him, turns from earth, and striking confidence out of his very despair, like fire from flint, sees there his Kinsman-Redeemer. 'I know that my Redeemer liveth.' Men may mock him, friends may turn against him, the wife of his bosom may tempt him, comforters may pour vitriol instead of oil into his wounds, yet he, sitting on his dunghill there, poverty-stricken and desolate, knows that God is of kin to him, and will do the kinsman's part by him. The very metaphor implies that the divine intervention which he expects is to take place after his death. It was a dead man whose blood the Goel avenged. Thus the view which sees in the subsequent words a hope, however dim and undefined, of an experi-

ence of a divine manifestation on his behalf beyond the grave is the only one which gives its full force to the central idea of the passage, as well as to the obscure individual expressions. Most strikingly, then, he goes on to say, carrying out the allusion, 'and that he shall stand at the last upon the dust.' Little did it boot the murdered man, lying there stark, with the knife in his bosom, that the murderer should be slain by the swift justice of his kinsman-avenger, but Job felt that, in some mysterious way, God would appear for him, after he had been laid in the dust, and that he would somehow share in the gladness of His manifestation—for he believes that 'without his flesh' he will see God, 'whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another.' Large and mysterious hopes are gathering round the metaphor, which flash some light into the darkness of the grave, and give to the troubled soul the assurance that when life with all its troubles is past, and flesh has seen corruption, the inmost personal being of every man who commits his cause to God will behold Him coming forth his Kinsman-Redeemer.

Another illustration of the hopes which gathered round this image is found in the great psalm which prophesies of the true King of Peace, in language too wide for any poetical licence to warrant if intended only to describe a Jewish king (Ps. lxxii. 14). The universal dominion of this great King is described in terms which, though they may be partly referred to the Jewish monarchy at its greatest expansion, sweep far beyond its bounds in exulting anticipation that 'all kings shall fall down before Him, all nations shall serve Him.' The reason for this world-wide dominion is not military power, as was the case with the warrior kings of old, who bound nations together for a little while in an artificial unity with iron chains, but His dominion is universal, 'for He shall deliver the needy when he crieth, . . . He shall *redeem* their souls from oppression and violence, and precious shall their blood be in His sight.' Two of the functions of the Kinsman-Redeemer are here united. He buys back slaves from their tyrannous masters, and He avenges their shed blood. And because His Kingdom is a kingdom of gentle pity and loving help, because He is of the same blood with His subjects, and brings liberty to the captives, therefore it is universal and everlasting. For the strongest thing in all the world is love, and He who can staunch men's wounds, and will hear their cries and help them, will rule them with authority which conquerors cannot wield.

This universal King, the kinsman and the sovereign of all the needy, is not God. A human figure is rising before the prophet-psalmist's eye, whose meekness as well as His majesty, and whose kingdom as well as His redeeming power, seem to pass beyond human limits. Divine offices seem to be devolved on a man's shoulders. Dim hopes are springing which point onwards. So that great psalm leads us a step further.

III. See the perfect fulfilment of this divine office by the man Christ Jesus.

Job's anticipation and the psalmist's rapturous vision are fulfilled in the Incarnate Word, in whom God comes near to us all and makes Himself kindred to our flesh, that He may discharge all those blessed offices, of redeeming from slavery, of recovering our alienated

inheritance, and of guarding our lives, which demand at once divine power and human nearness. Christ is our Kinsman. True, the divine nature and the human are nearly allied, so that even apart from the Incarnation, men may feel that none is so truly and closely akin to them as their Father in Heaven is. But how much more blessed than even that kinship is the consanguinity of Christ, who is doubly of kin to each soul of man, both because in His true manhood He is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, and because in His divinity He is nearer to us than the closest human kindred can ever be. By both He comes so near to us that we may clasp Him by our faith, and rest upon Him, and have Him for our nearest friend, our brother. He is nearer to each of us than our dearest is. He loves us with the love of kindred, and can fill our hearts and wills, and help our weakness in better, more inward ways than all sympathy and love of human hearts can do. Between the atoms of the densest of material bodies there is an interspace of air, as is shown by the fact that everything is compressible if you can find the force sufficient to compress it. That is to say, in the material universe no particle touches another. And so in the spiritual region, there is an awful film of separation between each of us and all others, however closely we may be united. We each live on our own little island in the deep, 'with echoing straits between us thrown.' We have a solemn consciousness of personality, of responsibility unshared by any, of a separate destiny parting us from our dearest. Arms may be twined, but they must be unlinked some day, and each in turn must face the awful solitude of death, as each has really faced that scarcely less awful solitude of life, alone. But 'he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit,' and our kinsman, Christ, will come so near to us, that we shall be in Him and He in us, one spirit and one life. He is your nearest relation, nearer than husband, wife, parent, brother, sister, or friend. He is nearer to you than your very selves. He is your better self. That is His qualification for His office.

Because He is man's kinsman, He buys back His enslaved brethren. The bondage from which 'one of His brethren' might 'redeem' the Israelite was a voluntary bondage into which he had sold himself. And such is our slavery. None can rob us of our freedom but ourselves. The world and the flesh and the devil cannot put their chains on us unless our own wills hold out our hands for the manacles.

And, alas! it is often an unsuspected slavery. 'How sayest thou, ye shall be made free. We were never in bondage to any man,' boasted the angry disputants with Christ. And if they had lifted up their eyes they might have seen from the Temple courts in which they stood, the citadel full of Roman soldiers, and perhaps the golden eagles gleaming in the sunshine on the loftiest battlements. Yet with that strange power of ignoring disagreeable facts they dared to assert their freedom. 'Never in bondage to any man!'—what about Egypt, and Assyria, and Babylon? Had there never been an Antiochus? Was Rome a reality? Did it lay no yoke on them? Was it all a dream?

Some of us are just as foolish, and try as desperately to annihilate facts by ignoring them, and to make ourselves free by passionately denying that we are slaves. But 'he that committeth sin is the slave of sin.' That sounds a paradox. I am master of my own actions, you may say, and never freer than when I break the bonds of right and duty and choose to do what is contrary to them, for no reason on earth but because I choose. That is liberty, emancipation from the burdensome restraints which your narrow preaching about law and conscience would impose. Yes, you are masters of your actions, and your sinful actions very soon become masters of you. Do we not know that that is true? You fall into, or walk into a habit, and then it gets the mastery of you, and you cannot get rid of it. Whosoever sets his foot upon that slippery inclined plane of wrongdoing, after he has gone a little way, gravitation is too much for him and away he goes down the hill. 'Whosoever committeth sin is the slave of sin.' Did you ever try to kill a bad habit, a vice? Did you find it easy work? Was it not your master? You thought that a chain no stronger than a spider's web was round your wrist till you tried to break it; and then you found it a chain of adamant. Many men who boast themselves free are 'tied and bound with the cords of their sins.'

Dreaming of freedom, you have sold yourself, and that 'for nought.' Is that not true, tragically true?

What have you made out of sin? Is the game worth the candle? Will it continue to be so? Ye shall be redeemed without money, for Jesus Christ laid down His life for you and me, that by His death we might receive forgiveness and deliverance from the power of sin. And so your Kinsman, nearer to you than all else, has bought you back. Do not refuse the offered emancipation, but 'if thou mayest be made free, use it rather.' Be not like the spiritless slaves, for whose servile choice the law provided, who had rather remain bond than go out free. Surely when Christ calls you to liberty, you will not turn from Him to the tyrannous masters whom you have served, and, like the Hebrew slave, let them fasten you to their door-posts with their awl through your ear. Do you hug your chains and prefer your bondage?

Your Kinsman-Redeemer brings back your squandered inheritance, which is God. God is the only possession that makes a man rich. He alone is worth calling 'my portion.' It is only when we have God in our hearts, God in our heads, God in our souls, God in our life—it is only when we love Him, and think about Him, and obey Him, and bring our characters into harmony with Him, and so possess Him—it is only then that we become truly rich. No other possession corresponds to our capacities so as to fill up all our needs and satisfy all our being. No other possession passes into our very substance and becomes inseparable from ourselves. So the mystical fervour of the psalmist's devotion spoke a simple prose truth when he exclaimed, 'The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup.'

We have squandered our inheritance. We have sinned away fellowship with God. We have flung away our true wealth, 'wasted our substance in riotous living.' And here is our

Elder Brother, our nearest relative, who has always been with the Father; but who, instead of grudging the prodigals their fatted calf and their hearty welcome when they come back, has Himself, by the sacrifice of Himself, won for them the inheritance, its earnest in the possession of God's spirit here and its completion in the broad fields of 'the inheritance of the saints in light,' the entire fruition and possession of the divine in the life to come. 'If children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.'

Your Kinsman-Redeemer will keep your lives under His care, and be ready to plead your cause. 'He that touches you, touches the apple of Mine eye.' 'He reproveth kings for their sake, saying, Touch not Mine anointed.' Not in vain does the cry go up to Him, 'Avenge, O Lord, Thy slaughtered saints,'—and if no apparent retribution has followed, and if often His servant's blood seems to have been shed in vain, still we know that it has often been the seed of the Church, and that He who puts our tears into His bottle will not count our blood less precious in His sight. So we may rest confident that our Kinsman-Redeemer will charge Himself with pleading our cause and intervening in our behalf, that He will compass us about with His protection, and that we are knit so close to Him that our woes and foes are His, and that we cannot die as long as He lives.

So, dear brethren, be sure of this, that if only you will take Christ for your Saviour and brother, your Helper and Friend, if only you will rest yourself upon that complete sacrifice which He has made for the sins of the world, He will give you liberty, and restore your lost inheritance, and your blood shall be precious in His sight, and He will keep His hand around you and preserve you; and finally will bring you into His home and yours. 'In Him we have redemption through His blood,' and He comes to every one of you now, even through my poor lips, with His ancient word of merciful invitation: 'Behold! I have blotted out as a cloud thy sins and as a thick cloud thy transgressions. Turn unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.'

'AS SODOM'

'Zedekiah was one and twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Hamutal the daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah. 2. And he did that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that Jehoiakim had done. 3. For through the anger of the Lord it came to pass in Jerusalem and Judah, till he had cast them out from his presence, that Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. 4. And it came to pass, in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he and all his army, against Jerusalem, and pitched against it, and built forts against it round about. 5. So the city was besieged unto the eleventh year of king Zedekiah. 6. And in the fourth month, in the ninth day of the month, the famine was sore in the city, so that there was no bread for the people of the land. 7. Then the city was broken up, and all the men of war fled, and went forth out of the city by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, which was by the king's garden; (now the Chaldeans were by the city round about) and they went by the way of the plain. 8. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued after the king, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho; and all his army was scattered from him. 9. Then they took the king, and carried him up unto the king of Babylon to Riblah in the land of Hamath; where he gave judgment upon him. 10. And the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes: he slew also all the princes of Judah in Riblah. 11. Then he put out the eyes of Zedekiah; and the king of Babylon bound him in chains, and carried him to Babylon, and put him in prison till the day of his death.'—[JER. lii. 1-11](#).

This account of the fall of Jerusalem is all but identical with that in [2 Kings xxv](#). It was probably taken thence by some editor of Jeremiah's prophecies, perhaps Baruch, who felt the appropriateness of appending to these the verification of them in that long-foretold and disbelieved judgment.

The absence of every expression of emotion is most striking. In one sentence the wrath of God is pointed to as the cause of all; and, for the rest, the tragic facts which wrung the writer's heart are told in brief, passionless sentences, which sound liker the voice of the recording angel than that of a man who had lived through the misery which he recounts. The Book of Lamentations weeps and sobs with the grief of the devout Jew; but the historian smothered feeling while he tells of God's righteous judgment.

Zedekiah owed his throne to 'the king of Babylon,' and, at first, was his obedient vassal, himself going to Babylon ([Jer. li. 59](#)) and swearing allegiance ([Ezek. xvii. 13](#)). But rebellion soon followed, and the perjured young king once more pursued the fatal, fascinating policy of alliance with Egypt. There could be but one end to that madness, and, of course, the Chaldean forces soon appeared to chastise this presumptuous little monarch, who dared to defy the master of the world. Our narrative curtails its account of Zedekiah's reign, bringing into strong relief only the two facts of his following Jehoiakim's evil ways, and his rebellion

against Babylon. But behind the rash, ignorant young man, it sees God working, and traces all the insane bravado by which he was ruining his kingdom and himself to God's 'wrath,' not thereby diminishing Zedekiah's responsibility for his own acts, but declaring that his being 'given over to a reprobate mind' was the righteous divine punishment for past sin.

An eighteen months' agony is condensed into three verses ([Jer. lii. 4-6](#)), in which the minute care to specify dates pathetically reveals the depth of the impression which the first appearance of the besieging army made, and the deeper wound caused by the city's fall. The memory of these days has not faded yet, for both are still kept as fasts by the synagogue. We look with the narrator's eye at the deliberate massing of the immense besieging force drawing its coils round the doomed city, like a net round a deer, and mark with him the piling of the mounds, and the erection on them of siege-towers. We hear of no active siege operations till the final assault. Famine was Nebuchadnezzar's best general. 'Sitting down they watched' *her* 'there,' and grimly waited till hunger became unbearable. We can fill up much of the outline in this narrative from the rest of Jeremiah, which gives us a vivid and wretched picture of imbecility, divided counsels, and mad hatred of God's messenger, blind refusal to see facts, and self-confidence which no disaster could abate. And, all the while, the monstrous serpent was slowly tightening its folds round the struggling, helpless rabbit. We have to imagine all the misery.

The narrative hurries on to its close. What widespread and long-drawn-out privation that one sentence covers: 'The famine was sore in the city, so that there was no bread for the people!' Lamentations is full of the cries of famished children and mothers who eat the fruit of their own bodies. At last, on the memorable black day, the ninth of the fourth month (say July), 'a breach was made,' and the Chaldean forces poured in through it. [Jeremiah xxxix. 3](#) tells the names of the Babylonian officers who 'sat in the middle gate' of the Temple, polluting it with their presence. There seems to have been no resistance from the enfeebled, famished people; but apparently some of the priests were slain in the sanctuary, perhaps in the act of defending it from the entrance of the enemy. The Chaldeans would enter from the north, and, while they were establishing themselves in the Temple, Zedekiah 'and all the men of war' fled, stealing out of the city by a covered way between two walls, on the south side, and leaving the city to the conqueror, without striking a blow. They had talked large when danger was not near; but braggarts are cowards, and they thought now of nothing but their own worthless lives. Then, as always, the men who feared God feared nothing else, and the men who scoffed at the day of retribution, when it was far off, were unmanned with terror when it dawned.

The investment had not been complete on the southern side, and the fugitives got away across Kedron and on to the road to Jericho, their purpose, no doubt, being to put the Jordan between them and the enemy. One can picture that stampede down the rocky way, the anxious looks cast backwards, the confusion, the weariness, the despair when the rush of

the pursuers overtook the famine-weakened mob. In sight of Jericho, which had witnessed the first onset of the irresistible desert-hardened host under Joshua, the last king of Israel, deserted by his army, was 'taken in their pits,' as hunters take a wild beast. The march to Riblah, in the far north, would be full of indignities arid of physical suffering. The soldiers of that 'bitter and hasty' nation would not spare him one insult or act of cruelty, and he had a tormentor within worse than they. 'Why did I not listen to the prophet? What a fool I have been! If I had only my time to come over again, how differently I would do!' The miserable self-reproaches, which shoot their arrows into our hearts when it is too late, would torture Zedekiah, as they will sooner or later do to all who did not listen to God's message while there was yet time. The sinful, mad past kept him company on one hand; and, on the other, there attended him a dark, if doubtful, future. He knew that he was at the disposal of a fierce conqueror, whom he had deeply incensed, and who had little mercy. 'What will become of me when I am face to face with Nebuchadnezzar? Would that I had kept subject to him!' A past gone to ruin, a present honey-combed with gnawing remorse and dread, a future threatening, problematical, but sure to be penal— these were what this foolish young king had won by showing his spirit and despising Jeremiah's warnings. It is always a mistake to fly in the face of God's commands. All sin is folly, and every evildoer might say with poor Robert Burns:

'I backward cast my e'e
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear.'

Nebuchadnezzar was in Riblah, away up in the north, waiting the issue of the campaign. Zedekiah was nothing to him but one of the many rebellious vassals of whom he had to make an example lest rebellion should spread, and who was especially guilty because he was Nebuchadnezzar's own nominee, and had sworn allegiance. Policy and his own natural disposition reinforced by custom dictated his barbarous punishment meted to the unfortunate kingly of the petty kingdom that had dared to perk itself up against his might. How little he knew that he was the executioner of God's decrees! How little the fact that he was so, diminished his responsibility for his cruelty! The savage practice of blinding captive kings, so as to make them harmless and save all trouble with them, was very common. Zedekiah was carried to Babylon, and thus was fulfilled Ezekiel's enigmatical prophecy, 'I will bring him to Babylon, . . . yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there' ([Ezek. xii. 13](#)).

The fall of Jerusalem should teach us that a nation is a moral whole, capable of doing evil and of receiving retribution, and not a mere aggregation of individuals. It should teach us that transgression does still, though not so directly or certainly as in the case of Israel,

sap the strength of kingdoms; and that to-day, as truly as of old, 'righteousness exalteth a nation.' It should accustom us to look on history as not only the result of visible forces, but as having behind it, and reaching its end through the visible forces, the unseen hand of God. For Christians, the vision of the Apocalypse contains the ultimate word on 'the philosophy of history.' It is 'the Lamb before the Throne,' who opens the roll with the seven seals, and lets the powers of whom it speaks loose for their march through the world. It should teach us God's long-suffering patience and loving efforts to escape the necessity of smiting, and also God's rigid justice, which will not shrink from smiting when all these efforts have failed.

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