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THE BIRTH AND BOYHOOD OF JESUS

THE
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OF JESUS

BY
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NOTE

THE sermons contained in this volume were extemporaneously delivered in the course of regular ministry, with no thought of publishing them in permanent form. In doing so now no attempt has been made to change them from their original form or style.

G. F. P.

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I

A NOTABLE COUPLE

“There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia : and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.”—LUKE i. 5-7.

THE scene into which we are introduced by Luke's graphic pen is essentially Jewish—the Holy City, the temple, the solemn service of prayer, the ministering priest, and the waiting people, expecting the re-appearance of Zacharias and his priestly benediction.

The time was one of crisis. The Jewish people were at that period of their history fallen to the lowest point, both nationally and spiritually. Their religious life had degenerated into a proud self-righteousness ; their national life was broken under the iron rule of Rome. Instead of being humbled by their national misfortunes, they had developed a fierce and fanatical spirit of rebellion toward their earthly masters, and a haughty self-sufficiency before God. The priestly and Rabbinical classes were arrogant and overbearing ; the rich oppressed the poor, and lived in disdain of all the softer virtues of life. John the Baptist characterized them as “a generation of vipers” ; ¹ and our Lord, a few months

¹ Luke iii. 7.

later, denounced them as hypocrites and robbers. He told them that as to their religious life they were whited sepulchres in pretence—fair without, but, in fact, full of corruption and dead men's bones. They were punctilious as to mint, anise, and cummin, but habitually neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice, and charity. Such were the Pharisees. The Sadducees were no better in these respects ; and worse in this, that they had developed a materialistic philosophy which led them practically on to the ground of our modern agnostics. They denied the existence of angels and spirits, and so, logically, the very existence of God. They, of course, repudiated the supernatural origin of the Hebrew nation, and scoffed at all the miraculous elements contained in their sacred history. Herod, the king, was a pagan by birth, though a proselyte to the Jewish faith. He was the servile friend of Rome ; greedy, rapacious, avaricious, tyrannical, and wholly of this world worldly. These were the predominant powers in the Jewish nation at this time—Phariseeism, Sadduceeism, and Herodianism. The people were poor, oppressed by their political rulers, and robbed and neglected by their spiritual guides. It was a dark time indeed ; but it was the darkness which preceded the dawn.

In the midst of that untoward generation God had His faithful witnesses, who had not forsaken the way of His commandments, and were awaiting with longing desire the Consolation of Israel. Such were good old Simeon ; Anna, the aged prophetess of the Lord ; the righteous couple who are brought before us in our text ; the lowly virgin Mary ; her espoused husband, Joseph of Nazareth ; and doubtless many others whose names are not recorded in any earthly book, but who, like the seven thousand in Elijah's day, were well known to God.

The seed of the righteous—children of faith—shall never perish off the earth; and God shall never lack for witnesses in any time of the world's history. As He has never lacked in the past for such testifiers, so shall He never lack in the future, however great and universal the apostasy from the faith may be among men.

I. A NOBLE FAMILY. Both Zacharias and Elisabeth were of the family of Aaron, as it was the custom of that priestly family to marry only within their own tribe, that the order of priests might remain intact as God had ordained. Of the tribe of Levi, Moses and Aaron were the most distinguished members. Aaron was the head of all the priesthood who ministered about the altars of the Lord; outside his immediate family, the Levites were a sort of lay-priestly order, who came not into the Holy Places of Jehovah.

From the earliest times certain families among men have forced their way to the front, risen to the top, and gained the first places among their fellows by the sheer force of their characters or abilities, and thus obtained for themselves and their descendants patents of nobility. In the case of the two royal families in Israel, the kingly and the priestly houses of David and Aaron, their nobility was conferred by God Himself, according to His discerning wisdom and grace. Amongst men the orders of royalty and nobility have come about in a different way, mainly through military ability and power. No doubt there are many and grave faults and abuses connected with the earthly orders of nobility; but, on the other hand, there is no lack of great excellences amongst many men and women in the world who have descended from long lines of noble ancestors. We certainly are not to despise good birth and noble family traditions, any more than we are to ignore and pass by greatness of character and high ability in those who have sprung

from ignoble ancestors, as some are inclined to do. The gentle-born man and woman should count their birth an inheritance to be cherished and made honourable in their own lives. The meanly born should always remember that though they may never establish titled families, they may become noble themselves and the ancestors of noble children, in the best sense of the word. It is true that not many wise or noble or great of this world are found in the household of faith; yet there have always been some of this class who have loved and honoured God in testimony and life. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were among the early disciples of our Lord. They were both men of high rank, perhaps of noble birth. Saul of Tarsus became the disciple of Christ soon after the resurrection. He was of aristocratic birth and parentage, of high rank both in his profession and in the political, social, and religious world; yet he forsook all outward advantages of worldly position in order to devote his life to the service of his Master. All through the ages there have been noble men and women in the ranks of believers who have alike honoured themselves and their Master by their faith and devotion. The Church of to-day has in her fellowship men and women of high family and great wealth who adorn her communion and are bulwarks of strength to the cause of true religion. No man in England excited more universal love and respect than did the late Earl of Shaftesbury. No doubt he has spiritual successors in his own rank. Of noble women, in both a social and religious sense, there are not a few. All honour to them.

God honoured the ancient priesthood of Israel by creating them an order of nobility. They were a royal priesthood. They were not the worse for that high distinction; they ought always to have been the better.

Every minister, nay, every servant of Christ, whether of common or aristocratic family, should be in himself a nobleman, by cultivating and maintaining that character which would have ennobled Zacharias and Elisabeth even had they not been of the house of Aaron.

From this righteous father and mother sprang John the Baptist, the forerunner of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was "great in the sight of the Lord," not because of his honourable birth, but because of his truly noble life. Our Lord Jesus was a nobleman by birth—nay, more, He was a Prince—the Prince of the House of David; and yet He did not count His high nobility something which should separate and lift Him away from His fellows. He was not ashamed to call the poorest of His disciples friends and brethren, and treat them as such. He put no barrier between Himself and those of lowly birth and calling. He digged no gulf which should divide the common people from Himself. He was the Friend of publicans and sinners. He voluntarily took a position which enabled Him to use His high descent both from God and man as a gift and talent by which He might bring blessing and help to the poor. It was His choice, in coming into the world, to choose for His *mother* a lowly maiden of a decayed, poor, and obscure family of the house of David, and to be born in a *stable*. He did not despise or treat with contempt His high birth, but used it rather as a means by which to ennoble many obscure and lowly men and women by taking them into kinship with Himself.

II. A RIGHTEOUS COUPLE. Matthew Henry well says that "grace does not run in the blood." Noble blood may flow in a man's veins, and yet his heart and life may be destitute of righteousness, which is the only badge of nobility in the kingdom of heaven. A man may be of ignoble family and blood, and yet by right-

eousness be a very prince with God. In the case of Zacharias and Elisabeth we have the happy combination of earthly nobility and heavenly righteousness. They were not righteous because they were the descendants of Aaron. No doubt they owed much to their heredity, and more to the environment in which they were reared. But neither heredity nor environment can altogether account for that righteousness which distinguished them. That supreme characteristic was determined by their own free faith and choice. The question of hereditary righteousness has been much debated on either side. There are some who hold that the children of believing parents are thereby endowed with certain hereditary and gracious characteristics which, in birth and nature, differentiate them from "common children." I do not believe this theory, for I do not think there is any warrant in the scripture for it. "Think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."¹ In our own Church Creed we define the Church as being composed of believers and their children; and yet we deny that article of our Creed when we exclude or debar the unconverted children of believing parents from the Lord's Supper. Until the child of believing parents is born from above, just as any other sinner must be, he cannot, though Abraham were his father, and Sarah his mother, enter into the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, I am one of those who believe that next to the gift of the Spirit Himself, the highest blessing which any man possesses in this world is a holy mother and a godly father. To have descended from such parents does not, it is true, guarantee your salvation, but it does

¹ Matt. iii. 9.

give you an immense advantage, so far, at least, as heredity and environment are concerned.

The question of heredity and environment is one, as I have already said, very much discussed and debated in our days. For myself, I am more inclined to believe in environment as a superior advantage to a child than heredity. That is, I would rather be born of unrighteous parents and reared in a godly family, than be born of righteous parents and reared in a godless family. Environment has more power to modify heredity than heredity has to overcome environment. We have a striking illustration of this truth in connection with the results of Dr. Barnardo's work among and for the waif children of London. He takes these poor little outcasts absolutely irrespective of their parentage. In fact, the more desperately wicked the parents, the more pity seems to go out to their abandoned and neglected children from the heart of that greatest christian philanthropist in London. He has five thousand of these waif children in his Homes at all times. They are of every age, from the tiny babe of a few months old, to the sturdy lad and lass of seventeen and eighteen years. These children he keeps from the time he takes them into his Home until they are old enough and sufficiently well trained to go out into the world well armed and equipped for life's battle. All do not become christians, but a very large proportion of them do. These, in all human probability, would have ended their lives in prison, or in association and fellowship with criminals, had they not been placed by the loving hand of christian philanthropy in a new environment. This is a marked demonstration of the fact that heredity may be overcome by environment. Righteousness is neither communicated by natural birth nor excluded from those who are born with the worst hereditary taints of sin in their

blood. How many bad sons have sprung from good fathers? and how many good sons have had bad fathers? Hezekiah, one of the best of the kings of Israel, was the son of Ahaz, one of the worst; but the order was reversed when Hezekiah, the good son of the bad Ahaz, became the father of the wicked Manasseh. It is so in our own families to-day; good sons spring from bad fathers, and wicked sons are born of holy parentage. It is from such facts that I say, I have more hope for a child well and wisely trained in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, than I have for one who is merely well born, so far as righteousness is concerned. An examination into the righteous lives of these two worthy servants of God will reveal characteristic marks which cannot be mistaken.

Theirs was no spurious righteousness. There were current in our Lord's time, as in ours, several types of religious life and character which passed for righteousness. The greater part of these were of a spurious kind. It was base coin which did not, and could not, pass the judgment of Christ; which, when He rang it on the rock of truth, sounded false, and was rejected. Some of these types were more base than others, but all of them counterfeit. Zacharias and Elisabeth were not Pharisees in the hypocritical sense of that term, though it is possible they may have been of that sect, as Martha, the confessor of Christ, and Paul, were. The Scribes and the Pharisees had a righteousness concerning which Jesus said, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."¹ Now, the righteousness of these two classes consisted in a strict conformity with the outward letter and ceremonial of the law of Moses; but more particularly in the minute

¹ Matt. v. 20.

observance of certain customs enjoined by the renowned doctors of the law, who had made void the word of God by their traditions. It will be observed that our Lord pronounced sentence against the spurious righteousness of these classes during the delivery of His great and searching Sermon on the Mount, in which He revealed the spirituality of the law and exposed the hidden fountain of sin in the human heart. This type of righteousness is much in vogue to-day, and is no better, and scarcely less ostentatious, than it was in our Lord's time. It is pretentious and formal without any real piety behind it. These outwardly righteous professors of religion have the form of godliness, but not the power of it. The most conspicuous example of this kind given in the New Testament is seen in our Lord's parable of the "two men" who "went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself: God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess."¹ Zacharias and his wife, Elisabeth, were not righteous after this kind. Then there was another and honester kind of righteousness, such as that which Paul sought to attain by honestly striving to keep the law, not for the sake of display, but for conscience' sake and God's sake. "Touching the righteousness which is in the law," he says he was "blameless"²; "and was zealous toward God."³ His was not an hypocritical righteousness, but it was a faulty one, because it is not possible for sinful man to attain to righteousness by any deeds of the law which he may do. Therefore Paul flung it from him as soon as he discovered "the righteousness of God, which is by faith in Christ."⁴ Of this kind was the righteousness of

¹ Luke xviii. 10-12. ² Phil. iii. 6. ³ Acts xxii. 3. ⁴ Rom. iii. 22

the young ruler whom Jesus "loved," but who, when put to the test, loved his wealth more than he desired eternal life. Of this kind also was the sincere, but mistaken, righteousness of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who also abandoned the law for the gospel in their search after life. Zacharias and Elisabeth were not righteous after this kind. Nor were they righteous after the manner of the Sadducees, who practised, or at least professed, the cold and lifeless morality of Moses' law, without the spirit of love that breathes in that law. Nor were these holy people righteous after the sentimentalists of our day, who, if only they can maintain a certain high degree of emotional experience, count all things else of little worth. With such it is not so much faith as it is feeling, not so much obedience to the commandments of Christ as it is an inward experience which has the approval of their school.

Their righteousness was intwrought and spiritual — manifesting itself in a holy walk with God. "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness."¹ This holy couple were the children of Abraham both by natural descent and by spiritual likeness. They believed God and feared Him, and counted nothing dear or worth possessing beyond His favour and approval. They were righteous before God. They did not their deeds of service before men—that is, to be seen of men—but before God; because they feared, loved, and revered Him, and desired above all things else to please Him. They observed the law not as a means to righteousness, but as expressing their subjection to God. It was spiritual because it brought them into real fellowship with God. When Zacharias offered up the ceremonial prayer on the altar of incense, his own heart was in holy communion with God. He had

¹ Rom. iv. 3.

learned that "in burnt-offerings and sacrifices for sin" ¹ God had no delight when they were unaccompanied by "a broken spirit and a contrite heart." ² The smoke from the altar of incense ascended *toward* heaven, but the prayers of Zacharias passed *through* the heavens and reached the ear and the heart of God. He had that communion of righteousness which Moses had when he talked with God as to a friend. It is true that righteousness is something *imputed* to us by faith in Christ; but it is more than that, it is something *imparted* by the Spirit of God. They *were* righteous before God—and therefore they *did* righteousness. The supreme test of righteousness is found in communion with God.

Their righteousness was practical. It did not stand in profession or in boasting of their descent from Abraham and Aaron, or in their ceremonial observances; but in walking before God in all His ordinances and commandments blameless. They were first righteous in heart and spirit, and then they *did* righteousness, or walked in it. There is an outward form of righteousness which may be seen of men, and which makes the heart of man proud, but which has no inward counterpart, or rather no inward root and spring. It is like the gilding on base metal, or veneering on soft wood. True righteousness pervades the heart and fills the spirit of man, and always manifests itself in his life. This kind of life is called the "fruit of righteousness"—the fruit of the Spirit. It was in the power of such a spiritual righteousness that this good man and woman lived and walked before God, and *in* the sight of, but not *for* the sight of, men. To them all the commandments and ordinances of God were of importance. They did not pick and choose among them, but studied them all, and sought to make them all honourable by obeying them. They maintained, or

¹ Heb. x. 6.

² Ps. li. 17.

rather lived, their righteousness before God. This made the precincts of their own home as sacred and holy as those of the temple. They were as careful when no human eye was upon them as when they walked to the temple in presence of a multitude. Had they been modern merchants and members of society, their offices and drawing-rooms would have been as sacred to them as the sanctuary on the Sabbath day.

They devoted themselves to the service of God. With them religion was not merely a private matter for the benefit of their own souls. They regarded themselves as the servants of God, and identified themselves with His cause. In the best sense of the word they were Levites, servants of God. They were careful to save their own souls, but, having done that, they were as careful to give their saved lives to the service of God as they had been to seek God for their own salvation. When I consider a multitude of professors of religion to-day who seem only anxious to secure their own salvation, and get for themselves the benefits which may accrue from fellowship in the Church of God, and yet care not for His service, I long for a revival of that righteousness which characterized Zacharias and Elisabeth. The Pharisee serves to live ; the truly righteous man lives to serve.

They were blameless in their walk and service. This is a high designation, and speaks marvels to the praise of these righteous servants of God. There are two words used in the New Testament of believers that are sometimes confounded. We read in the Epistle to the Ephesians that Christ will present His Church to Himself "a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish."¹ That is faultlessness—"without fault." That is the end in view in our salvation, and the end which

¹ Eph. v. 27.

God will work out for us ; therefore it is said, He "is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with joy."¹ A child or a servant of God may be blameless while he is not yet faultless. Faultlessness is perfection ; blamelessness is not faultlessness, but a state of not being worthy of rebuke. A child or servant may be far from faultless in his task, and yet a parent or master may perceive such an honest and sincere purpose in the work done, or the task attempted, that no blame is attached to the doer of it. Such a blameless one may be even praised and encouraged, notwithstanding fault or lack of perfection in the service. Moral perfection, faultlessness in life or service, is never attained in this life ; but blamelessness may be attained. We may be blameless before God. Therefore Paul prayed for the Thessalonians that their "whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."² "Walk before Me, and be thou perfect" ;³ that is, obedient to My word. This was the perfection or blamelessness of Zacharias and Elisabeth. This may be ours if we follow in their footsteps.

III. AN OLD AND CHILDLESS COUPLE. "I am an old man," said Zacharias, "and my wife well stricken in years." There is no reproach in old age, nor is there in it necessarily any measure of affliction. It may have stored up many regrets and recorded many disappointments ; but there can be no reproach in it, unless past days have been characterized by sin and disobedience. Jacob indeed said, when he was an old man, "Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been" ;⁴ but all the evil in his long life was traceable to his own sin and shortcomings. On the other hand, Joshua left a

¹ Jude 24.

² 1 Thess. v. 23.

³ Gen. xvii. 1.

⁴ Gen. xlvii. 9.

testimony which was joyous because of the continuous and unbroken record of gracious promises fulfilled. Joshua was a man of faith. He believed God, and walked in all His commandments and ordinances blameless. When old age is associated with wickedness and godlessness, there is indeed both reproach and affliction. What so utterly forlorn as to witness the hopelessness of a wicked old man and woman, who have spent their days in rebellion against God? The memory of the past can be of no solace to them; their present is full of bitter reflection, and the dry and salt ashes of spent and vanished pleasures; with nothing to look forward to but death, the grave, and the judgment of God. But the righteous have hope in their death; there is nought of misery or affliction in it to them. To look *back* upon a life spent in the service of God, to bring to remembrance all the good things which God hath done in the past, and to look *forward* to all the good things which He hath laid up for them that love Him in the world to come—this is a joyful experience. The backward look fills us with thanksgiving, and the forward look with hope; and the present is full of peace and quiet waiting, even while there is still service to be done. Let us not fear old age, but rather glorify it with the spoil of a youthful and mature life spent in the righteous service of God.

IV. THEY WERE CHILDLESS. There was one bitter drop in the cup of this good couple: they were childless. They had spent their long lives together in love and happiness; but their home had never been gladdened by the voice of children and the patter of their tiny feet; by the joy of their childhood, the care of their youth, and the hope of their manhood or womanhood. In their old age, no children gathered around them to repay, by their devotion, all the years of love

and care expended upon their training and upbringing. No children's children gathered about them and made them young again. There are those in these latter days who regard children as an encumbrance and a clog to their freedom, and an impediment to their pleasure; a bane, and not a blessing; a misfortune, and not a joy. They even sin against God and nature, rather than be inflicted with the care of them; to be without them they violate the law of their being, and the very ordinance of marriage which they have sworn to maintain sacred. They have no fear of God before their eyes, and of course no appreciation of that promise of His word which says, "Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them."¹ Apart from the personal affliction of a childless state, these good people could look forward with no hope and satisfaction to the preservation of their name and family among men. With them their name would die and their family come to an end. No sons nor sons' sons would rise up in coming generations to call them blessed and preserve blameless the traditions of their honourable lives. The love of posterity and the desire to keep one's name alive on the earth is God-implanted and worthy of cherishing. Zacharias and Elisabeth could not have hoped to be the parents of the Messiah, for He must be born of the house of Judah; yet they might have hoped that a son born to them should be closely associated with Him for whose coming they were waiting and praying. But their deprivation did not sour them; it did not lead them to entertain hard and rebellious thoughts in their hearts against God. They had continued in prayer for many years for two things—for the coming of the Consolation of Israel, and for a son. The time had passed accord-

¹ Ps. cxxvii. 5.

ing to nature for the answer to their personal prayer, and they had doubtless given it over years ago ; but that did not prevent or hinder them from earnestly praying day and night for the coming of the Messiah. They continued to serve God with faithful blamelessness. They had longed for children, but they did not doubt God's goodness. What a beautiful lesson there is in all this for us. We make prayer to God both for the coming of the Kingdom of Christ on earth, for the prosperity of His cause among men ; and we make prayer to God for those things which we personally wish for our own pleasure or for what we esteem to be needful for our best good. If our personal desires are not gratified, we are apt to have hard thoughts against God, to give over praying for His kingdom and glory, and to make our disappointment a reason for ceasing from His service ; thereby showing that we are not the sons of His love and grace, but mere hirelings, working for wages, the prompt payment of which we demand as a condition of our services. Not such servants were Zacharias and Elisabeth. They did not serve God for hire, nor walk before Him for gain. They were the servants of love, and God honoured them for it and in it.

And now a great surprise was in store for them. A blessing that they had ceased to expect was come to their door. God was about to pension them in their old age with a dowry which would make up for all their years of leanness and disappointment. God had not forgotten their work of faith and labour of love. Their eyes were to behold the coming of the King, and *their* son, born to them out of the course of nature and in their old age, was to be His herald. Even so will God deal with those who are faithful and true to Him. In this world, or in the next, we shall see all the desire

of our hearts fulfilled, and much more. Nothing is more certain than that God answers prayer. Only let us remember that His time and our time may not synchronize; and that He has two worlds in which to make good His promises.

II

GREAT IN THE SIGHT OF THE LORD

“For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord.”—LUKE i. 15.

FOUR hundred years had passed away since God had made any visible or audible communication to His people. That was a long hiatus between the last of the prophets and the appearance of the Angel Gabriel to Zacharias. It was a time during which His people had to live by faith. Yet there were many true hearts who continued to wait upon the Lord, read His word, long for His salvation, and believe His promises. Among these were the faithful Zacharias and his good wife Elisabeth, who were both righteous before God, “walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.” Nor was their faithfulness in vain, for one day while Zacharias was praying beside the altar and offering up incense, there came the angel of God, even Gabriel, and, standing beside him, told him that he had not been forgotten, nor his prayers disregarded. God does not forget, though to our short-sighted impatience it sometimes seems that He does. He is not unmindful of our faith and prayers, though He tarry long before answering them. The fruit that hangs longest on the tree, drinking in the sunshine slowly, is usually the sweetest. Prayers lose nothing in their answers because they have lain long before the Lord. Such prayers accumulate interest, as did the prayers of Zacharias. Had his prayers been answered when he

first made them years before, an ordinary child might have been given him, who would have been nothing different from other children ; but now a child had come to him—the fruit of supernatural power—whose coming should bring joy and gladness to him ; who should be great in the sight of the Lord, and do a wondrous work ; whose influence and power shall endure as long as the world lasts, nay, which shall extend into eternity itself. We may well reflect on the matter suggested by this incident ; one full of profit and comfort to ourselves, if we are disposed to question in the least degree the goodness and faithfulness of God. I am sure that God answers prayer. Nothing in this world is more certain than this. I am sure also that He answers prayer at the best *time*, and in the best *manner*, both for our good and His glory. We should desire nothing—and I trust none of us do—unless it can come to us out of His glory and for His glory. Is it not good for us to remember that all prayers which God answers are “according to the riches of His glory”?¹ This makes them worth while, and insures to us something of the glory of God out of which they come. No right-thinking christian would for a single moment wish to have any personal desire gratified if it had to be gratified at the cost of diminishing the glory of God, or even if it did not tend to increase it. In the meantime, let us continue to pray in this spirit, as I am sure Zacharias and Elisabeth did, coupling their request for a child with their constant prayer for the coming of Messiah and the establishment of His kingdom. There is no better argument in prayer than to plead it along with our desire for the glory of God. Let us pray then, and wait patiently, for the Lord’s time and way. He will not disappoint us either in granting or withholding our petitions. It must have

¹ Eph. iii. 16.

thrilled the hearts of these aged people who had waited so long to have heard not only that their prayer was answered, but that their son should "be great in the sight of the Lord."

I. THE GREATNESS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST. "He shall be great in the sight of the Lord." This declaration at once sets John the Baptist in contrast with a multitude of men who have been great in the sight of the world. The number of men who have been born great, have achieved greatness, or had greatness thrust upon them in this world, is very considerable ; but, after all, compared with the vast multitudes of men in every rank and condition, they make a very small company. The captains and kings, the philosophers and scientists, the poets and painters, upon whom the world has set the seal of greatness are really very few. A century scarcely produces one of a kind. In comparison with the greatness of any one of them, or all of them, the judgment which is awarded to John the Baptist is a glory which places him before them all. He was "*great in the sight of the Lord.*" Here is a verdict handed down direct from heaven itself, and from God Himself ; for it was not the angel's testimony, but that which he was commissioned to give from God.

Amongst the greatest men who have ever lived in this world have been the prophets ; those men to whom God has spoken, and who in turn have spoken for God ; God's chosen ambassadors ; men like Moses and Samuel, Elijah and David, Isaiah and Ezekiel, and Daniel and Jeremiah ; with whom we should include Noah, Abraham, and Job, of whom the world was not worthy. These were all great with a greatness akin to that of John the Baptist. They were the friends of God, beloved of God, mighty men of valour, men after God's own heart, men concerning whom He has said,

"There are none like them in the earth." And yet Jesus said of John, "Among those that are born of women, there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist."¹

His was the only greatness worth having. Because it was a greatness to which God set the seal of His approving judgment. God only knows what true greatness is, and therefore His judgment is the only judgment worth having. Let me illustrate what I mean. Here are two diamonds, or what appear to be diamonds. They both shine and glow with what seems to be an internal fire. One is larger than the other, and first catches the eye of the beholder; and most men would choose it out of hand as being the one of greater value. But who shall decide as to their relative worth? At last they are taken to a famous expert in precious stones, and his judgment is that the one which *seemed* the more valuable is made of paste; but the other and lesser one is a stone of purest water. The really great stone was not so artistically cut, was not so elaborately set as the paste imposture. It is the real stone that possesses the value. Who would be content with paste, however large and brilliant, when a real stone may be had? In such a case as this the judgment of the lapidary is final. So as between the greatness which most of us snatch at and true greatness, the judgment of God is final.

The Pharaoh who was contemporary with Moses was one of the greatest kings of the earth; how much greater in the sight of men than Moses, the foundling slave child, whom the king's daughter adopted and reared in the palace, but who, a few years later, was a fugitive from the palace and the wrath of the king. Yet in the sight of God Moses was greater than Pha-

¹ Luke vii. 28.

raoh; and the verdict of the world to-day is that the man despised by the world in which he lived, but chosen and honoured of God, was greater than his great adversary. Where are the Pharaohs, their writings, their laws, their works? Gone, gone, are they all; but Moses lives green in the memory of all ages—his great writings are extant and current to-day as never before; his life, his labours, and the impact of his character have affected for good the nations of the earth for nearly four thousand years. Herod, the great king, was a greater man in the sight of the world than was John the Baptist, the poor prophet-preacher whom he beheaded. The people said he was a god. He was great in the possession of a throne, and worldly power and pomp, and the glitter of regal splendour; but John was great in the sight of the Lord. The high priests and Jewish senators and doctors were greater in the sight of the world than Jesus, the carpenter's Son, who had not where to lay His head, and whom they accused before Pilate. Pontius Pilate was greater in the sight of the world than Jesus, whom he delivered to be scourged and crucified; but Jesus, the Man of Nazareth, was great in the sight of the Lord, for He had this testimony before His birth, "He shall be great"; and, later on, the word from God out of the heavens, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"¹; and again, "Behold My Servant, whom I uphold; Mine Elect, in whom My soul delighteth"²; and "Him hath God highly exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour."³

Greatness in the sight of the Lord carries with it God's loving favour. Enoch was regarded by his generation as a puritanic exclusivist, because he would not walk in the way and order his life according to the course of the

¹ Matt. xvii. 5.² Isa. xlii. 1.³ Acts v. 31.

great antediluvian world, whose great men were "giants in those days," and who filled the world with violence, as a majority of the world's great men have ever done. But Enoch had this testimony, "that he pleased God."¹ In the eyes of the world Noah was a cracked-brained visionary and fanatic of whom the people made a mock; but God distinguished him for his righteousness and the true greatness of his faith, and he found favour with the Lord, and was honoured by being made the new head of the race, who planted the earth again with men, after the judgment of God had swept it bare. His name is included in one of the two small lists of great men mentioned in the scriptures—Noah, Job, and Daniel. Abraham was God's friend. Job was God's pride, of whom He boasted that there was "none like him in the earth."² David was a great and much-loved favourite with Jehovah, because his heart was right with God. Yes, I know that David sinned greatly against the Lord, but also that he deeply repented of his sin. God did not cast him away, but forgave him, and continued His favour upon him because he was a great man in His sight; and greatness in God's sight always means favour—loving favour—from God. He was not so "goodly" a man as Saul, in the judgment of Israel, but he was greater in the sight of the Lord than that splendid hero-king of Israel, chosen after the flesh or according to a worldly judgment of greatness. Daniel was "greatly beloved" of God, and though only a servant of the king of Babylon, was an infinitely greater man. I have selected only a few well-known names with which to illustrate this point; but there are many thousands of men and women whose names are not known amongst men, and who, of course, have no worldly greatness, and yet "of whom the world is not

¹ Heb. xi. 5.

² Job i. 8.

worthy.”¹ If we would be great in the sight of the Lord, we must *be* something as well as *do* something that will win for us the loving approval of God—His “Well done, good and faithful servant ; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”² A railway porter in America, whose duty it was to stand by the door leading from the waiting-room to the station platform and examine the tickets of the travellers, was beset by a great and pressing throng. It was winter time, and many had put their tickets into their inner pockets and were angry because they had to get them out. In vain they protested that they had their tickets, and abused the porter for his inexorable demand that the tickets be produced. Presently a gentleman (?) came to the gate completely enveloped in fur, and made as though he would pass through without showing his ticket. The porter stopped him with a polite “Your ticket, if you please, sir.” “Oh, that is all right ! I have my ticket in my inner coat-pocket, and cannot be bothered to get at it now. I am Mr. Blank ; let me through, I have little time.” “I must see your ticket, sir,” and straightway the porter interposed himself between the struggling gentleman and the gate. Whereupon the gentleman began to curse and swear at the porter. He, however, was not in the least ruffled, but firmly demanded the ticket, and got it. I said to him afterwards, “You do not appear to be very popular with the ordinary traveller, and yet you do not seem to mind much the abuse which I have heard heaped upon you the last five minutes for simply doing your duty.” “No,” he replied, “of course I do not enjoy being sworn at, but I do not care what this man or that may think of me, if only I can get and keep the good opinion of the gentleman who sits up yonder (pointing in the direction of the Superintendent’s

¹ Heb. xi. 38.² Matt. xxv. 21.

office)—I am indifferent to all others.” If only we would be mindful of this, and so live and serve that we may win and keep the approval of our Divine Master—that will be for us true greatness.

Greatness in God's sight is true greatness, because it is the only enduring greatness. The world's judgment is often wrong, and has to be reversed. Many a man has dazzled the eyes of the world which made haste to proclaim him great under false apprehension of his worth. A later generation has reversed this first judgment and consigned the yesterday's hero to obscurity or ignominy. The world's judgment is proclaimed with palm leaves and plaudits to-day and to-morrow is fiercely voiced in a murderous cry of “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!”¹ A Robespierre is cheered as a patriot to-day and guillotined as a traitor to-morrow by the same world. The world and its judgment and applause and glory passes away and all human greatness fails; but the greatness which receives the approving judgment of God endures for ever. The glory of Solomon—where is it? what was it? His palaces, his hanging gardens, his singing men and his dancing women, his harem, his stables and his horses, his worldly knowledge, his earthly power among the rulers of the world—all that which dazzled the eyes of the world has passed away, and nothing is left to us of Solomon's greatness but the great humility of spirit which characterized him when he was a youth. All the rest—that which made him great in the sight of men—was *vanity*; and no one knew it better or confessed it more bitterly than Solomon himself. The greatness of the Cæsars—where is it? and what is it to the world? The greatness of Napoleon—where is it? and what is it worth even as a memory? It only excites the execration of all good men. His

¹ John xix. 15.

was the greatness of a remorseless ambition guided by an intellect which was Satanic in its fibre. What, indeed, is the worth of greatness which rests on the approbation of princes and the applause of the world? I think I can even now hear the lament of Henry's great Cardinal in answer to the question :—

“Farewell, a long farewell, to all my greatness !
 This is the state of man : To-day he puts forth
 The tender leaves of hope, to-morrow blossoms,
 And bears his blushing honours thick upon him :
 The third day, comes a frost, a killing frost ;
 And—when he thinks, good easy man, full surely
 His greatness is a-ripening—nips his root,
 And then he falls, as I do.”

But he who is great in the sight of the Lord, “shall shine as the brightness of the firmament.”¹ Nineteen centuries have not dimmed the fame or diminished the greatness of John the Baptist ; rather it is true that the world is steadily moving toward a complete approval and agreement with the judgment of God, and that is a great thing for the world.

II. IN WHAT HIS GREATNESS CONSISTED. It is a fond fashion with the world, when some man has achieved a great success in life, in any department—as a preacher, a politician, a lawyer, a statesman, a business man, an author, or an artist—to set to work to find out the secret of his success. It is not an altogether unworthy inquiry. To know wherein the greatness of any man of real or reputed worth consists is a knowledge worth having. This poet is great because of his human soulfulness, his exquisite pathos and close kinship to men—as was Burns. This one is great because of his profound knowledge of human nature—as was Shakespeare. This one is great because of the purity of his

¹ Dan. xii. 3.

thought and the crystalline clearness and beauty of his style and the rhythmic cadence of his metre—as was Tennyson. And this one because of the far-reaching and mystic depths of his penetration—as was Browning. And this one for the sublimity of his theme, the majesty of his language, and the stately movement of his verse—as was Milton. That was a great soldier because of his daring strategy and the swiftness of his movement—as was Napoleon. That one because he knew how to feed, as well as fight, his soldiers—as did Wellington. That one because of the dogged persistency which kept him “pounding away” and prompted him to declare in his famous dispatch, “I propose to fight it out on this line, if it takes all summer”—as did Grant. Among the scientists, speculative and practical, there are many great names—such as Faraday, Tyndall, Huxley, and Spencer. They all have their characteristics of greatness. So among the great preachers, we find one distinguished for his learning and argumentative force; another is great because of his eloquence; another because of his fervent piety, and another because of his patient zeal for God, both in and out of the pulpit. Among men who have been great in the sight of the Lord, each one has had his peculiarity of greatness. Job was great because of his unswerving integrity of soul—who would not yield it even to God. Abraham was great because of the unmovable character of his faith. Moses was great because of his love for the people who were committed to his care, and for his reverence and meekness before God. Samuel because of his great-hearted patience with a stiff-necked and rebellious nation, and for his humility before God. David because of his right-heartedness and flaming love for God. Daniel for his loyalty and courage in the midst of his pagan surroundings. Paul for his tireless zeal and unquenchable enthusiasm in

the service of Christ. I might mention many other examples, but these may suffice, while we turn to John the Baptist and make inquiry into the secret of *his* greatness.

It was not in the accidentals of his life and position. It was not in his birth, for although he was honoured in his parentage, that gave him no high standing with the world, because of his calling. It was not in worldly position and patronage, for he had none; he was a desert prophet and preacher. Nor was it in the power which wealth gives one in this world, for his raiment was of the skin of beasts, and his food locusts and wild honey. It was not in the flattery of his speech, for though he lived on honey, none of it stuck to his tongue to sweeten his words when he denounced the sins of the people. No; John was not great in the sight of the world; loved by a few, and hated by the many because of his faithfulness. Nor did his greatness stand in the long years in which he lived to serve the Lord; for his whole public career was of only half a year's duration. He was murdered at the age of thirty-one because of the hatred of a wicked woman and the weakness of a guilty king whose sins he had reproved. Nor, we may say, was it because of the uniform strength of his faith; for though he was a saint, he was not a perfect one. Though he were as bold as a lion in the wilderness and on the banks of the Jordan, where he confronted the embodied wickedness of the nation in the persons of the priests, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Herodians, when in prison his faith failed him, and despair took hold on him. He doubted of the Lord, and his faith swerved as concerning Jesus; and, like Elijah, his great prototype, he surrendered himself to despondency, if not to despair. This leads me to observe here that all God's great servants were men of like passions and infirmities

as ourselves. Job, Abraham, Moses, Jacob, and David were men great in the sight of the Lord, yet they all had great faults. But the virtues of these men, exercised by grace, were greater than their faults, grave as they were. We seem to despise and pass judgment upon Jacob because of a certain meanness in his character; but we forget the greatness of his soul in choosing and cleaving fast to the birthright, which redeems him from the pit of his weakness and sins. Elijah had his weakness; so had Jeremiah and Jonah. Peter, Paul, and John were all great men in the sight of the Lord, and yet they were all *blemished* men. Let no one, therefore, say that true greatness is not within your reach, because of inherent faults and natural weakness of character in this or that direction.

John's greatness is seen in the voluntary sacrifice of the world. How old John was when he retired to the wilderness we do not know; but it may be fairly inferred that he gave up the world at a time when most young men desire it with fierce enthusiasm. If he was ever in it, he was never of it. He was a Nazarite from his birth. He eschewed all the luxuries of the table; all the softness of fine raiment; all the delicate refinements of life which are so eagerly desired by the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eye, and the pride of life; in fact, everything which makes the strongest appeals to our natural life. It requires true greatness of soul to do this. Only men and women who have been strongly wrought upon by the Spirit of God can voluntarily sacrifice the seen to the unseen, the natural to the spiritual. Such a man was Abraham, and such men afford the only true types of the christian life. Yet let me be not misunderstood. To give up the world for God, to be a Nazarite, does not necessarily involve the wilderness or the monastery. John had some great suc-

cessors of this sort in later times, in such men as Francis of Assisi, Bernard of Clairvaux, and other holy and good men, who felt called to imitate him in retiring, in a literal way, from the world and all its associations—even from the ordinary activities of the Church. Yet there have been, and there are still, thousands of souls, some of them poor and obscure, and others living in circumstances of worldly competence and comfort and immersed in all the common activities of life, who have as truly betaken themselves to the wilderness as did John and those others who retired to desert places and lived apart from men. In the world, but not of it, they are leading lives of holy consecration and self-sacrifice for the glory of God and the good and the salvation of men. They are true Nazarites, though they are not dressed in camel's skin, nor feed on locusts and wild honey. Loyal to Christ and devoted to His cause, they are witnessing a good confession in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. I repeat the declaration that it is possible for us to live the true Nazarite life in the place and station in life in which we are called, either in the midst of the family or in the busy activities of the affairs of the world. The world as God has made it is not an evil world, it is the place of ministry and service, and requires and demands in God's name the service of those who are or would be great in the sight of the Lord. But who among us are really great enough to embrace this "high calling"?

"What millions died that Cæsar might be great."

How many of us are dead to the world that God may be great, and that those for whom Christ died may be saved!

He was great in the endowment of the Holy Spirit. "He was filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb." His greatness stood not in wealth, or

birth, or position, or in the splendour of his genius ; but in that he was filled with all the fulness of God. It is true that this great endowment was God's gift, so far as we know, without having been sought after by John ; but God gives the Holy Ghost "to them that ask Him," and yet when the Spirit is given He may be so grieved and quenched as to amount to rejection. John was not a mere passive recipient, but the active and voluntary partner of the Holy Spirit. He chose God's choice for him in this matter, even as *we* may inherit what we *choose* in this respect. Measured by this standard of greatness, who are the great ones in our congregation? Those who have wealth, position, great abilities, and large influence of a worldly kind only ; or those who, known or unknown, are true Nazarites, who have voluntarily renounced the world, its ambition and its pride, and are filled with the Holy Ghost? The humblest disciple may have this great endowment. Thank God there are some gifts which cannot be monopolized by the rich and great of this world. We may be great in the sight of the world and totally unknown by the world. There is an aristocracy of spiritual power and service to which the king and the peasant may alike belong. I would rather have the endowment which Billy Bray, the Cornwall miner had, than the greatness of the greatest kingdom of this world.

John was great in his profound humility. With great spiritual gifts there is always a temptation to spiritual pride ; a temptation so subtle that if there be ever so small a break in the joints of our spiritual harness, the enemy will get home one of his fiery darts. John closed all such breaks by his profound humility. "Who art thou?" asked the commission from the Sanhedrim. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness."¹ Nothing

¹ John i. 23.

and nobody in himself, but only a voice belonging to Another, who was greater than he. How nobly and humbly he served his Lord! "He must increase, but I must decrease."¹ "Whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose."² There is nothing more trying to human nature than to see another come before us and displace us in the admiration and affection of those who erstwhile crowded our ministry; and yet John rejoiced in the coming and the increasing greatness of Jesus, and was glad to be set aside for His sake after a brief but brilliant ministry. He was happy in being the friend of the bridegroom and glad in the joy of his Lord.

John was great in his faithfulness. First as a preacher of the gospel. I have read many sermons preached by men of distinguished talent. The reviews have spoken of them as marvels of learning and spiritual insight; and so I have bought and read their books. As literature and depositaries of learning they are great. I have read them, have laid them down with a sigh, because it is not my gift or ability to write such books or preach such sermons. Yet, after all, it has occurred to me that they are very unlike the sermons, both in matter and manner, which John the Baptist preached. How faithful in matter, how rugged in manner was John! He began his ministry by preaching repentance, and faith in the coming Messiah. How faithfully and fearlessly he rebuked the sins of the Pharisees and the Sadducees! He set judgment clearly before them, and warned them of the levelling axe and the winnowing fan. He was as fearless in denouncing the adultery of Herod as he was gentle in welcoming to his baptism the repentant publicans and sinners. As soon as Jesus appeared he changed this theme, and twice in one day preached from the text, "Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away

¹ John iii. 30.

² John i. 27.

the sin of the world.”¹ He was no wild socialist, pandering to the passions of the lower orders against the privileges of the upper classes. He was a conservator of law and order, counselling the soldiers to do violence to no man, and to be content with their wages. To handle the great themes of revelation faithfully and reverently, to be fearless and faithful before the great, and tender and gentle yet faithful toward the weak and lowly, is to be truly great in the sight of the Lord, as a preacher of His gospel.

If you say that it is not your calling to be a preacher of the gospel, and that it is only in some public trust that one may be great in the sight of the Lord, I say, “*Not so!*” It is possible that you may not be possessed of the burning and fiery eloquence of John, you may not be able to draw thousands to the river side, kings may not come to hear you or invite you to their private chapels to preach to them; but you may still cherish and teach the great truths which John taught, and be as faithful as he was in the discharge of your trust. Your congregation may be no larger than the number of children about your own knees, or in your own house; your husband or wife; your Sunday school class, or the fellow-servants in the house or shop where your duty and calling lie, or that friend and neighbour with whom you have such close relations. You may be the fathers and mothers of great and good men because of your faithfulness to your sons in things pertaining to God. How many women, like the mother of Wesley, mothers in Israel, whose biographies have never been written, who have lived and died in some shepherd’s cot on the lonely mountain-side, or in some obscure place in the great cities, have sent forth their sons, reared and trained in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord,

¹ John i. 29.

to do God's service. This is to be great in the sight of the Lord.

Nor is it in these directions only that one may be great in the sight of the Lord. One may be great in faith as the centurion was, or as the Syrophenician woman, who, when put to a severe trial, stood the test; when opposed, wrestled; when rebuffed, still persisted until she gained her cause. Or you may be great in your beneficence, as the poor widow was who gave her two mites—all her living—to the Lord. In this field there is a large opportunity for many christians. You may be great in love, as the woman was who broke the alabaster box of spikenard, a precious and costly ointment, upon the feet of the Lord, and filled all the place with its perfume. There is much need of great christians who shall fill the world with the perfume of their devotion to Christ. I might easily multiply ways and openings for the culture and development of true greatness. I assure you there is ample opportunity for the cultivation of greatness in our congregations.

John was great in the mission he discharged and the work he accomplished. He was the forerunner of Christ, and announced His coming. "He was a burning and a shining light,"¹ which lighted men to Christ. His ministry among men was beneficent and gracious. He turned many to righteousness. He reconciled families. He rescued many a lost and hopeless soul. In all these respects we may, in a measure, be his imitators; for it is given us to be lights in the world and the ministers of salvation to lost sinners. For myself, I covet this kind of greatness; and though I cannot thrust it upon you, I long that you may seek after it and possess it.

¹ John v. 35.

III

A GOOD MAN'S UNBELIEF

“Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.”—LUKE i. 18.

IN this incident we have an exceedingly interesting example of the unbelief of a good man, the indignation of the angel of God, and the consequences of his unbelief to himself. The whole situation is dramatic and poetic, as are all the incidents recorded by Luke.

On the first reading of this story we are forcibly reminded of the almost parallel case of Abraham and Sarah, who in the days of their old age, long after the time when, according to nature, they could expect such a blessing, God promised them a child. In both cases the promise of God was doubted by one of these old couples. In the case of Abraham and his wife, it was the woman who doubted and the man who believed. In the case of Zacharias and Elisabeth, it was the man who doubted and the woman who believed. In the account given of this concerning Abraham, we are told that both he and Sarah laughed when the promise came; but Abraham, it is evident, laughed with the gladness of faith, while Sarah laughed in the derision of unbelief at the bare thought of such a thing. Laughter does not always mean the same thing. One may laugh with joy and another may laugh with scorn. When Jesus assured the people that the little maid whom He came to heal was not dead, but sleeping, they laughed Him to

scorn.¹ But wherefore should we doubt because according to nature or experience a promise of God seems to us to be beyond fulfilment? "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"² There are some other interesting similarities and differences suggested both in close and remote connection with the case of Zacharias. Abraham asked God for a sign; that is, something whereby he might know that he should inherit the blessing which God had promised him. But this was not an unbelieving request. It was rather the request of one who wished something by which his faith and conduct might be guided. So, a little later, when the angel went to Mary and announced to her that she had been chosen of God to be the mother of the Saviour, she asked, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?"³ It should seem from this that Mary was as unbelieving as Zacharias. But a closer study of the two cases reveals the fact that Mary's question was the inquiry of innocent curiosity as to how God could do such a wonder; there was in her question no unbelief. Whereas in the case of Zacharias there was downright unbelief, and a demand that the promise or declaration of the angel should be endorsed by some supernatural sign. Zacharias was a "seeker after signs" in that sense which is so reprehended in God's word, and for which he was severely chastened.

There is nothing more offensive to God than unbelief in His people, especially in those who by reason of knowledge and years of experience ought to have better thoughts of God than to doubt His word. It is true that God does not cast off His people for their momentary lapses of faith, nor cease to be merciful to them. He still fulfils His purposes of grace toward them; though He sometimes shows His just displeasure and

¹ Luke viii. 52.

² Gen. xviii. 14.

³ Luke i. 34.

wise discipline by causing the unbelieving believer to suffer a severe penalty. In all this there is comfort and profound instruction. Comfort, because the consciousness of our unbelief has often filled us with the fear that great promises which contain all grace for us will not now be fulfilled. But God is merciful. Zacharias doubted; and yet the angel, while announcing the visitation of an afflictive punishment upon him, also announced that the glad tidings which he had doubted should yet be fulfilled. We are not, however, to take advantage of God's mercy in this respect to sin presumptuously in the matter of unbelief. Rather we should understand that these things God has shown us are to induce faith and not to condone unbelief.

It is interesting also to note this fact. Zacharias had or many years continued his prayer before God for a son, until perhaps of late years, moved by considerations of old age, he and his good wife had ceased further to urge the matter, and had long since given up hope. God had waited long, and had in the meantime been silent, giving no sign that the prayer had even been heard in heaven, much less entertained; but now, on a sudden, an angel comes and says, "Zacharias, thy prayer is heard." How long God waits sometimes! How it seems to us that He has not heard at all, that He does not care, that it is no use to pray, and we give over and say, "Well, at least it is now past possibility of being answered. I am an old man, and my wife also is well stricken with age"! And yet God has not forgotten; but in His own time of wisdom and grace brings forth the answer. On the other hand, note how swift God is to answer unbelieving prayers. "Whereby shall I know this?" asked Zacharias in unbelief; and swift as thought—no sooner were the words out of his mouth—the answer came: "Thou shalt be dumb, and not able

to speak, until the day that these things be performed.”¹ Since unbelief is so serious a matter, and since we are all more or less prone to its indulgence, let me try to expose its root and some of its branches ; and, later, endeavour to point out the cure for this fell evil.

I. THE SOURCE AND ROOT OF UNBELIEF. *Zacharias* was a true believer in God and in the covenant which He had made centuries before with His people. Moreover, he was a good man, being “righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.” Yet, strange to say, though he had persevered in his faith throughout the long years of his life, without a sign from God of any kind, the moment an angel straight from the presence of God comes, stands by his side, and declares the gracious fulfilment of his prayers, he is seized with doubt, and demands security for the angel’s word. We often hear christians and others say, “If only God would give me something tangible to take hold of ; if only I could see something out of the invisible world ; if only I could hear something—a voice out of heaven ; if an angel would appear to me ; if the dead would rise and come to me ; if I might be favoured as Peter, James, and John were on the Holy Mount ;—then I would have no difficulty in believing. Now, why does not God help me in some such way as this ?”—as if God were really to blame for their doubts and unbelief. And yet what do we find ? That, of old, God did thus deal with His people. From the time of Abraham’s call down to the captivity, God spake to His people by signs and wonders. Wonders in Egypt ; wonders in the desert ; wonders in the land. Angels came and went and spake with them as familiar guests ; the hosts of the Lord encamped about them and fought their battles ; prophets

¹ Luke i. 20.

spoke to them, and confirmed their messages with signs and wonders; the heavens withheld the rain, and then again poured it down in floods at the word of the prophet of God; fire fell from heaven and consumed the sacrifice on the mount, in the very eyes of the people, who were halting between two opinions, doubtful whether Baal or Jehovah were God! And, after all, what came of it? The people sank lower and lower in unbelief, until God carried them all away into captivity, there to discipline them with sorrow and suffering, until, *without signs and wonders*, they began to believe the word of God alone, and plead that word with confession of sin, humiliation of person, and many bitter prayers.

In Zacharias we have a remarkable instance of the perversity of the human heart in this respect. Zacharias had all his life been a steadfast believer in God, without sign or wonder to help his faith. For centuries God had been silent; not even a prophet had spoken; there was no Shekinah glory in the Holy of Holies; there were no Urim and Thummim; but silence always, and a blank and unopen heaven above him. And yet he believed God, served Him blamelessly in all His ordinances and commandments. He had so far no extraneous helps to his faith. Behold, now God sends an angel to him—and that angel is Gabriel—with a message that his faith, so long steadfast, was about to be rewarded in the answer of his most cherished hope; and forthwith he meets this supernatural messenger with distrust, and doubts the truth of his message. He could believe God and serve Him faithfully *without* an answer to his prayers; but he could not believe Him *in* the answer to his prayers, even though an angel from heaven had been sent to assure and comfort him. Gabriel comes to assure him of God's favour, and forthwith he demands a sign. Could anything be more perverse than this? In

this connection we are reminded of the words of our Lord put into the mouth of Abraham in his answer to the prayer of Dives for one to be sent from the dead to warn his brethren "lest they also come into this place of torment." And Abraham said unto him, "They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them. If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."¹ From this we learn that unbelief does not arise from lack of evidence, but rather from other causes, as a lack of will, or a secret and determined opposition in the affections to God.

The final cause of unbelief is sin ; and arises out of an "evil heart of unbelief" ; not from any lack of knowledge or deficiency of reason, either in the subjective or objective meaning of that word. "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken."² Sin had its rise in the human heart through a doubt of God's word and of His goodness. "Yea, hath God said?" was Satan's first word of attack. Then he followed that up with "For God doth know."³ In the one case Satan impeaches God's revelation, and in the other His goodness. As though he had said to the woman, "Are you sure God has said, Thou shalt not eat of the tree of knowledge, lest ye die? He has not said so, and thou shalt not surely die." Or: "Even if God has said, Thou shalt not eat of the fruit, He has done so through jealousy of you : for He doth not wish you to become wise ; but would withhold from you the best gifts." Is it not just after this fashion that Satan tempts to-day? First, "Are you sure the Bible is true?" And after that, "Even suppose it to be true (which it is not), it is not good to live a christian life. To do so is to deprive yourself of that which is pleasant

¹ Luke xvi. 31.² Luke xxiv. 25.³ Gen. iii. 1, 5.

to the eye and the taste ; and hinders highest and best knowledge." Thus did sin enter into the world through the door of doubt and unbelief ; thus it continues in the world ; and thus even believers are cursed with doubts entertained and unbelief indulged. One of the frightful penalties of unbelief is that it corrupts the heart with its poison ; so that it becomes "an evil heart of unbelief," and loses the power of faith. Just as drunkenness creates a thirst for more drink, which, instead of quenching, only adds more thirst, so it is with unbelief. The penalty of unbelief is a disposition to doubt. Therefore the exhortation, "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God." ¹

II. PROVOCATIONS TO UNBELIEF.

1. *The fact that we are not accustomed to deal practically with the unseen world.* We speculate and theorize about it, and believe in our theories. But believing in a theory or in an article of faith no more meets the real wants of the soul than does a printed bill of fare satisfy the hungry man. A man does not dine on a bill of fare. Yet many believers are vainly trying to live on their articles of faith. They deal with the proposition rather than with the things proposed. Our intelligence and reason may carry us midway between earth and heaven, but cannot take us into the heavenlies themselves, nor put us into possession of the things which "eye hath not seen nor ear heard," but "which God has prepared for them that love Him." ² It is only the spirit of man trained to familiarity with spiritual realities which enables us to deal with God practically and at close quarters. A faith which does not turn unseen into substantial realities ; which does not introduce the soul to the "powers of the world to come" ; which does not

¹ Heb. iii. 12.

² 1 Cor. ii. 9.

bring heaven down to earth ; which does not carry the soul into heaven with Christ, is not a faith that will believe in the presence of the supernatural. Zacharias had believed God, and *in God*, all his life. He had been a faithful servant of God, in the offices of personal religion, such as prayer and praise ; in the public offices of religion, such as serving the altar of the temple ; in practical righteousness, such as "walking before God and man in all the ordinances and commandments blameless" ; but the moment the unseen became seen, and, as it were, the supernatural became natural, then, instead of his faith flaming up into a glorious conflagration, it died down into cold ashes of doubt and unbelief. He doubted if the angel before him was sent from God, and asked for credentials. The supernatural had come before him, and he doubted its reality or genuineness. How many times we have asked of God certain things, and when they have come to us we were disposed to say (in unbelief), "This would have happened in any case" !

2. *Because we are not certain of the messenger of the unseen.* In all probability, when Zacharias saw Gabriel standing by his side, he did not recognise him as the angel of God. He probably thought him to be only a man. He doubtless did wonder how any man came to be standing there in the Holy Place, which was not lawful for any but the priests. And why should he have recognised him as the angel of God ? If I am not mistaken, in all the appearances of angels recorded in the Old and New Testaments there is no evidence that in outward appearance they differed from ordinary men, though I fancy they must have been wondrously fine-looking men. It is only artists who portray angels bathed in supernatural light, supplemented with wings, and represent them as females. The Bible always speaks of angels as being "men," and on their first appearance

they are never attended with any outward evidence of the supernatural. When Joshua saw "the captain of the Lord's host" standing before Jericho, he mistook him for an ordinary military chieftain, and straightway went up to him and demanded on whose side he had drawn his sword. He did not know that it was the Angel of the Lord. When the three angels appeared before Abraham's tent at Mamre, the patriarch did not recognise them as angels, but only as men on a journey, to whom he made haste to offer hospitality. It was not until they had communicated their message to him and to Sarah that they were revealed in their true characters. Neither did Lot recognise the two angels who came to rescue him from Sodom; nor did the Sodomites distinguish them as being other than men, whom they would have defiled. Peter did not at first recognise the man as an angel who came and delivered him out of the prison. When the women went early to the sepulchre of the Lord and saw the angels there, they seemed to them but two men in white robes. Nay, when a moment after Jesus stood before Mary, she did not recognise Him as her Lord, but supposed Him to have been the gardener. The disciples on their way to Emmaus did not at first recognise the risen Lord, but supposed Him to have been a stranger passing through the country, ignorant of the great events of the past few days. Is there not in all this a wonderful lesson? The supernatural is veiled to us in the natural. Angels appear as men—nay! are we not told: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares"?¹ We are in the habit of associating the supernatural with the marvellous, especially with the outwardly marvellous. When the greatest supernatural event of all time occurred in this world, it came in form and to outward appearance

¹ Heb. xiii. 2.

as natural as that of the birth of a peasant child ; and yet that Babe of Bethlehem was the Eternal Word of God incarnate in human nature. If this mightiest and greatest supernatural manifestation of the Eternal and Unseen came clothed in the natural, then may we not expect that there is less difference between what we call the natural and the supernatural than we have supposed ? Men are demanding some supernatural manifestation of the unseen, and behold the supernatural is all around us and before our eyes every day, and we do not recognise it. We have become so accustomed to count everything seen as being purely natural that we have ceased to see God in anything, and have remanded Him to some region of the imagination, or resolved Him quite out of the universe. We study the laws of the universe, and contemplate the working of what we call Nature ; but so intently do we consider second causes that we often fail to recognise in these natural phenomena the First Cause. Thus it is that certain scientists, by constantly dwelling upon the material shadows, have altogether lost sight of the immaterial substance of things. Because Gabriel was so like a man, Zacharias could not recognise him as an angel. He doubted the messenger because he was to appearance too human.

May I venture to apply this thought a little further ? God does not now send angels to communicate with us concerning Himself and His purposes, but has given us, once for all, a written word, in which He has both recorded for our profit and understanding all the former manifestations of Himself and the unseen world to His servants, and also all His promises and purposes toward us. Now, this Bible stands before us as did Gabriel, saying to us, "Thy prayer is answered !" But we are doubting the authority as well as the authenticity of the Bible. It seems to some of us merely a human, just a

natural book. A great volume containing the writings of Moses, David, Isaiah, Peter, James, John, and Paul. This, say the naturalists, is not the word of God, it is only Hebrew literature! It is not an angel, only a man! For how can such a natural thing as this Bible be of supernatural origin? They might as well say, and they do say, how can so natural a thing as the sun, or the moon, or the stars be of supernatural origin? They are not of divine creation, but of natural evolution; not supernatural because familiar. The temptation is like this. "How am I to know when I read the promises in the Bible whether I am reading God's promises, or merely the words of men? How was Zacharias to know that Gabriel was an angel, and not a man? Is it not so with our own spiritual experiences? 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God';¹ but how am I to know that this profound conviction is of the Spirit, and not the result of my own natural imagination?" The work of the Holy Spirit so veils itself under and in the natural powers and characteristics of men that He is scarcely perceived even by the spiritually-minded. The most precious experiences of our Christian lives, from our conversion to the latest thrill of the joy of salvation, sometimes seem to us, especially in moments of coldness and scepticism, to be only the results of some natural religious enthusiasm, or the effect of some magnetic human influence. When God answers prayers, as I have once before said, it seems to us that these answers are all brought about by natural causes. Ishmael was perishing for water, and God answered the anguished Hagar's prayer for her son by pointing out a well of water near by. Was that less an answer to prayer because the well was already there, and God only opened her eyes to see

¹ Rom. viii. 16.

or directed her to the place where it was? Was it any the less an answer to the prayer of Elijah for rain because the rain-cloud began to rise on the horizon as at other times, at first no bigger than a man's hand, and then filled all the heavens as with a fountain, and poured down its wealth of waters upon the earth? Must God never make use of the natural in order to make manifest the supernatural? Was Jesus Christ our Lord any the less the transcendent Son of God because He was born of a human virgin? Nay, rather is not this the glory of the supernatural that it is so closely associated with the natural? May not this be one of the joyful surprises of the future, that the natural and the supernatural will be so perfectly blended that there will be only a difference in the degree of glory which will break upon our astonished eyes; so that when we shall come into heaven we shall exclaim, "How glorious! but oh, how deliciously natural it all is!" We look for signs and wonders, but God meantime reveals Himself to us in the most natural way. At Cana of Galilee Jesus was there an almost unrecognised guest; a poor relation, perhaps, of the family who gave the feast. Another master, or ruler, sat at the head of the table; but, unknown and unrecognised as Jesus was, He was the true ruler of the feast, supplying all their need, and "manifesting forth His glory."¹ In all this there is great comfort, at least, to my own soul, and I trust also to yours. Let us not doubt the messengers of God because they seem to us to be but human.

3. *Because the things promised of God are out of the ordinary course of nature.* Strangely enough, while we are denying the supernatural, because it so often appears as the natural, we deny that God can fulfil to us any promise that involves any power or event transcending

¹ John ii. 11.

the natural. The paramount objection of agnostic science is that God cannot answer prayer because nothing can happen out of the ordinary or observed course of nature ; and whatever does happen has come to pass in regular sequence, and not as a special interposition. Even though we are believers, we have all more or less been influenced by this rule of natural science. We have assumed that we have made final observations, and know all there is to know about nature and God's relations to it ; that God cannot do anything extraordinary ; that He is a voluntary prisoner in His own world, manacled by laws which He made not to use, but to limit His power. O shame upon us, for such low thoughts of God ! Abraham once fell into this narrow line of thinking when he said, " Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old ; and shall Sarah that is ninety years old bear ? " ¹ Happily his faith triumphed over this momentary philosophical scepticism. So Zacharias fell into the same error of thinking when he unbelievingly opposed the fact of his age and that of his wife to the promise of God. He had forgotten God's answer to the unbelief of Sarah : " Is anything too hard for the Lord ? " ² Mary wondered in her innocent and pure heart how she could conceive without knowing a man ; a very natural opposing of the limitations of human knowledge to the supernatural resources of God. Thomas said he would not believe the resurrection of the Lord on the testimony of his brethren, because the thing seemed not only incredible, but impossible. Thus, by our constant habit of limiting the Almighty in His actions to the sphere of our knowledge and experience, we dishonour Him and give ourselves as prisoners over to doubt and the devil.

4. *Because we have forgotten God's dealings in the*

¹ Gen. xvii. 17.

² Gen. xviii. 14.

past. Had Zacharias really remembered the story of Abraham or believed it in other than an academic way, instead of demanding a sign, he would have broken forth into joyful thanksgiving, saying, "And will God indeed do unto me as He did for His servant Abraham of old?" Is not the whole Old Testament record a magnificent testimony to the supernatural power of God? Is not its every promise based on this, "The things which are impossible with men, are possible with God"?¹ "How can these things be?"² said Nicodemus. "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?"³ We think we shall suffer need because we have forgotten how the five thousand were fed. We fall into terror before new difficulties because we have forgotten how in times past God has delivered and helped us. We have either not erected an Ebenezer or, having done so, have forgotten all about it. There is no better passage of scripture for us to call to mind: "Hitherto the Lord hath helped us."⁴ For in this Ebenezer there lies a promise and guarantee of future help as well as a record of past deliverance. It was one of God's constant complaints against the ancient people that they had such short memories. Present fear or anxiety seems to paralyze our memories so that we run not back to gather up security from the past. The Hebrews forgot the wonders in Egypt as soon as they were hemmed in by the sea before them and Pharaoh behind them, even though the Cloudy Pillar was present with them. They forgot God again at the waters of Marah, almost before the echoes of the triumphant song of Miriam over the destruction of the hosts of Pharaoh in the Red Sea had ceased sounding in their ears. They forgot all these wonders in the wilderness, and became unbelieving concerning water and food, and the will and power of God

¹ Luke xviii. 27. ² John iii. 9. ³ *Ibid.* iii. 10. ⁴ 1 Sam. vii. 12.

to give them the promised land. So they fell away into unbelief and rebellion—and death. The disciples forgot all the sayings of Jesus concerning His resurrection from the dead, and so were unbelieving when the event transpired. But for this forgetfulness Thomas would not have asked for a physical proof of the resurrection. If Zacharias had remembered how God had dealt with Abraham and Sarah, he would not have said in unbelief “Whereby shall I know this?” How often in his epistle does Peter seek to stir up our minds to the remembrances of God’s precious promises. If we would avoid unbelief, then let us call to mind the former things of God—His past faithfulness in giving, and in fulfilling promises alike to ourselves and to others. Even though you be newly converted and have had no great experience of His faithfulness concerning promises, yet you need only to ask other christians and they will tell you how true God is, though He sometimes tarries long. But is not your own conversion a pledge to your faith?

5. *Because of excessive anxiety and selfishness.* In our haste and impatience we forget the power and resources of God; and remembering, we would bind Him down to our ways and thoughts. “Come down, ere my child die.”¹ How the impatience of this nobleman’s unbelief contrasted with the splendid faith of the centurion, who said, “Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.”² Jesus said to the nobleman, “Unless ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.” Nothing hinders faith more than a spirit of selfishness and impatience. So it often comes to pass that if God does not answer at once we fall into unbelief, and question both His power and His goodness. But has God nothing to do in this universe but to attend to our immediate demands? To recur to a former thought:

¹ John iv. 49.² Matt. viii. 8.

we pray for the speedy coming of Christ, and are bidden to "hasten" that day ;¹ and yet He has not come, and why ? Because though God has not forgotten *us*, He still remembers the *world*. So He may delay fulfilling *His promise* and answering *our prayers*, because the salvation of others may be hindered by the event we seek for ourselves. Would it not be more becoming in us to consider that we are but one of many ? Our immediate interests may be supreme to us ; but then, though God counts the hairs of our head for minuteness of His care, yet we belong to the whole family and are members one of another, and it may not be wise or best to deal with one member until all are ready for the blessing in which they too may be involved. We grow selfish, and suppose that the only interests in the kingdom of God worth attention are those which affect us. The Hebrew children were confident that God could deliver them out of the fiery furnace, and that He would deliver them if that were best for them and His glory ; but in any case they would not worship the image, and left the issue of the conflict to God. They did not lose faith because they were cast in the furnace, and therefore there was the Form of the Fourth walking with them. Had they been selfish and impatient, He could not have come, and the fire would have kindled upon them. If you would escape the sin of unbelief, beware of dealing selfishly with God.

6. *Because we are unwilling to obey God's command.* Much unbelief arises from this cause. Moses was really unwilling to give up the quiet repose of the wilderness and go forth to the excitement and hardships of controversy and war. Therefore he said, "They will not believe me,"² and practically asked for a sign. It is often so with us. Faith and obedience are so closely

¹ 2 Pet. iii. 12.

² Exod. ix. 1.

allied that we cannot embrace the one without the other ; and so it comes to pass that rather than obey God we will doubt Him.

7. *Because, sometimes, of a real sense of unworthiness and of sin.* That God should do great things for us who are so unworthy, and especially who have so sinned against Him, passes our power of belief. That is because we do not know and trust His great grace. Gideon felt his insignificance in presence of the commission brought by the angel ; therefore he doubted. Elisabeth said, " Whence is this to me ? " ¹ and Mary said, " He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden. " ² So we often doubt because of a sense of insignificance and a knowledge of sinful unworthiness before God. We do not understand the infinite and boundless generosity of God's grace. Study again the profound principle underlying that great test which Jesus put to the Jews, " If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know ; " ³ that is, he shall have a faith that shall be to him as knowledge. Faith is knowledge—assurance. Think what might have been the disaster to this world had not Mary obeyed the voice of the angel and said, " Behold the handmaiden of the Lord ; be it unto me according to thy word. " ⁴ True, hers was a negative obedience ; yet it was truest obedience. Now, to love God is to keep His commandments, and to believe God is to observe and do them. When faith as an emotion or a power of the mind seems not to be in exercise, or when doubt rises to usurp the throne of your will, then do thou at once begin to obey God with all thy heart in the things that lie next to thy hand, and verily thou shalt be kept from the power of unbelief ; otherwise not. Nothing brings in unbelief like the neglect of duty. Half the

¹ Luke i. 43.

² Luke i. 48.

³ John vii. 17 (R.V.).

⁴ Luke i. 38.

unbelief of God's people is just the other side of their careless living and life of daily disobedience.

8. *Because of deep depression of spirit and the indulgence of hard thoughts against God, it seems to us that God has treated us badly.* That He has forgotten us ; that He does not care ; and so, falling into the dungeon of depression and despair, we, like John the Baptist in prison, begin to doubt God, forgetting and counting as nothing all the previous evidences of His love, grace, and power. When faith ceases to act, the old nature triumphs. That old nature—the evil heart of unbelief—is always enmity against God, and resumes the old habit of misrepresenting God's goodness. When faith is weak, then the devil, our adversary, takes occasion to suggest all evil thoughts and forebodings. I can well imagine John the Baptist indulging doubtful and hard thoughts against our Lord. He had been in prison for six months or more, and yet Jesus, whom he had announced and introduced to the world as the Messiah, had never once sent him one word of cheer or comfort—had never used the vast power He had to set him free. From our low human standpoint it is hardly possible that he should not begin to doubt both the love and the power of Jesus, who, it should seem, had so utterly deserted him. And a Messiah without love or power is no Messiah. Have we not in hours of depression and suffering allowed such hard thoughts to come in and breed unbelief in our hearts? Or, more likely, the unbelief has caused the depression. Jesus indeed gave John an answer to his inquiry, but He did nothing to deliver him from prison. He left him to die under Herod's sword. But John had done his work ; he was now to seal his testimony with his blood. God had a better deliverance in store for him than the mere opening of Herod's prison. He opened heaven to him. Will we never learn that we

belong to two worlds, and that God has two worlds in which to make good His promises? Will we never remember that God has reserved in His wisdom some knowledge from us? Or that there are divine reasons too great for our understanding?—reasons which shall be as the noonday for clearness when they are unfolded to us. Has He not said, “What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter”?¹ Oh, I entreat you to resist those attacks of depression out of which an evil brood of wicked thoughts arise! Believe God. “Fear not, believe only.”² “Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise Him.”³

9. *Because of God's long delays.* Because years have passed and God has not answered prayer, we conclude that He is either unfaithful, unloving, or unable. I meet more cases of this kind than almost all others together; a kind of arbitrary impatience at God's delays. Perhaps there was something of this in Zacharias' doubt. “God has delayed to answer for so many years, that I do not believe He means to answer now; especially as I fear it is too late.” Our time and God's time do not always synchronize. There may be—and if prayer is not answered in the *affirmative* at all, or is long delayed, there is—a divine reason for it. If He has delayed to answer thy prayer, it is because He would give thee rich and luscious fruit, well ripened in a long summer's sun, and not the hasty, green, and unripe stuff your impatient hand would grasp. “When God is slow in giving,” says Augustine, “He sets off His own gifts to advantage. He does not withhold them.” Let me entreat you not to charge unfaithfulness against God. How long and bitterly Job cried and God was silent! And yet God was loving Job all the time, and compressing his prayers

¹ John xiii. 7.² Luke viii. 50.³ Ps. xlii. 11.

into blessings such as he had never dreamed of. Was not the long-delayed answer to Zacharias' prayer infinitely better than if it had been answered long before the "time" of Jesus had come? Have we forgotten the words of Jesus, "Mine hour has not yet come"?¹ Shall we force God's time to ours, or shall we yield ours to His? Hear David again: "I waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And He hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God. Many shall see it and fear, and shall trust in the Lord."² Oh, my friends, "trust in the Lord; . . . delight thyself also in the Lord; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart."³

10. *Finally, because "God's promises are too good to be true."* When God told Abraham that a son should be born to him and to Sarah in their old age, and that neither the son of a strange woman nor Eliezer his slave should be his heir, "he fell on his face, and laughed" for joy and gladness.⁴ As we sometimes say, "It is too good to be true." The women to whom Christ spake after the resurrection fled to spread the news of this great wonder, and as they fled they believed not for joy. I am sure that many of you know what this is. Indeed, when we think of all God's goodness and mercy to us from the day when He called us by His grace till now, it is difficult for us to believe that God has wrought these things for us. And yet has not God challenged us to ask and expect large things from Him? Is He not a wonder-working God (the Almighty), and does He not delight to work those wonders for His own whom He has redeemed by working the wonder of the universe—

¹ John ii. 4.² Ps. xli. 1-3.³ Ps. xxxvii. 3, 4.⁴ Gen. xvii. 17.

the incarnation of Jesus? Was He not, then, just bringing about that wonder of which Zacharias doubted the prelude? If faith should only deal with ordinary things such as might admit of an easy explanation, then we might soon become "naturalists," and leave God out of account altogether. But faith is given us that we may deal with God about large things. Things "too good to be true."

I have endeavoured thus to point out to you some of the immediate provocatives of unbelief, in order that I might put you on your guard against this great sin for the future, and encourage you to believe God in the present moment of the trial of your faith. I implore you not to dishonour God by unbelief; because you cannot, and do not, understand the counsels of His will; because, especially, you are not able to reconcile all the questions involved in the natural and supernatural mysteries of the universe. Believe these two things: "All things are possible with God"; and that all His power and wisdom are subordinated to His love and grace.

IV

THE PENALTY AND CURE OF UNBELIEF

"And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season."—LUKE i. 20.

NO one can read with the least care the word of God without noting how continuously we are warned and cautioned against unbelief. The whole epistle to the Hebrews is a warning, and, as our old Puritan fathers used to say, a "dehortation," against unbelief. It is "*the* sin that doth so easily beset us."¹ "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God."² "But with whom was He grieved forty years? . . . And to whom sware He that they should not enter into His rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief."³ "Let us labour, therefore, to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief."⁴ The only harsh word our Lord ever spoke to His disciples was when He exclaimed on a certain occasion, "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken."⁵ He is said never but twice to have been surprised during His earthly ministry. Once on the occasion of the vicious rejection of Him by His own townsmen: "And He marvelled because of their

¹ Heb. xii. 1.

² Heb. iii. 12.

³ Heb. iii. 17-19.

⁴ Heb. iv. 11.

⁵ Luke xxiv. 25.

unbelief."¹ The other time was on the occasion of the faith of the centurion who came to Him on behalf of his servant, who was sick : " He marvelled at him, . . . and said unto the people that followed Him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." ²

Unbelief is a great surprise and astonishment to our Lord. Faith itself was not so much of a marvel to Him, but that a *Gentile* should give so great an example of it while His *own people* were filled with unbelief! This was why He marvelled at the centurion's faith. It was really in both cases the unbelief of the Jews that excited His astonishment. And why should not our Lord be amazed and astonished at our unbelief? " I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God, and am sent to speak unto thee, and show thee these glad tidings." This was the indignant expression of his astonishment, that the word of him (Gabriel) should be for a moment questioned. If Gabriel expressed astonishment and indignation at the unbelief of Zacharias in *his* message, what must be the grief and indignation of *God* at our unbelief in Him and His word?

It might well go without saying that unbelief is the gravest of all sins. It is the one sin of which the Holy Spirit is sent to convict the world. That this sin is most displeasing and dishonouring to God there can be no question. It discredits His word; it makes Him "a liar" ³; it hinders the operation of His purposes of grace towards us. Jesus could do no mighty works among His own townspeople "because of their unbelief." ⁴ God cannot do mighty things for us because of our unbelief. Moreover, it involves us in trouble and distress, and not unfrequently brings down upon us the afflictive displeasure of God, such as came upon Zacharias at the word of the angel Gabriel, "because

¹ Mark vi. 6. ² Luke vii. 9. ³ 1 John v. 10. ⁴ Matt. xiii. 58.

thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season."

I. GOD'S ANSWER TO UNBELIEVING SIGN-SEEKERS. There are two kinds of unbelievers. *First*, there are what may be called the believing unbelievers, or the unbelieving believers. Zacharias was such an unbelieving believer. The whole tenor of his life testified his faith in God. Nay, his faith in God was of the most steadfast kind. It had endured through a long dreary time of silence; it had not forsaken him in all those years in which God seemed indifferent to his prayers, nor gave any sign even of His being. The unbelief of Zacharias came upon him as a surprise—leaping upon him as a sudden temptation. It was foreign to his habit and to his desire. So it is that unbelief comes to many believers now. They do not love it; they do not cherish it; they loathe and despise it, and condemn themselves for indulging it for a moment. It is hateful to them; it distresses and grieves them; and they get rid of it as soon as possible. Such unbelievers are both reverent and reluctant. These are they who cry out in distress, "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief."¹ Like John the Baptist, they doubt, but send at once to Jesus to have the doubt resolved. Like Thomas, they are ready at the first answer to their unbelieving inquiry (made not with a determined scoff, but with a reluctant incredulity) to fall at Jesus' feet and cry in penitent faith and longing love, "My Lord and my God."² *Second*, there are the wilful unbelievers—those who are determined not to believe, who *wish* not to believe, and who seek by all and every means to strengthen their unbelief against the testimony of God. Such men are either scoffers or defiers of God, and their attitude of unbelief is that of *enmity* against

¹ Mark ix. 24.

² John xx. 28.

God, or contempt; or else they are men who have adopted some speculative system of science or philosophy, opposed to God and His revelation. These are they whom Paul describes, "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools"¹; of whom Peter says, "They willingly are ignorant."² They are men blinded with the excess of their own light; or they have peered so steadily at one point that they are blinded to every other view. It is not an uncommon experience that after gazing steadily at one object for a long time and then closing your eyes you still see the object you have been looking at. It dances before your eyes like a spot of light in the darkness. This process of intellectual scepticism persevered in soon becomes, as it were, a part of one's consciousness.

With the former of these two classes of unbelievers—the reluctant sceptic or the unbelieving believer—God is most patient and tender; even when He chastises them in His displeasure, He does so more to correct and to recover than to punish them. Take the case of Zacharias as an illustration of this. Zacharias doubted the message of Gabriel, and asked for a sign or something beyond his word whereby he might know that his word was true. In answer, the angel rebuked his unbelief, and gave him this for a sign: that he was instantly stricken dumb, and the ban was laid upon him until the fulfilment of the promise. God did not alter His purpose of grace toward him, or withdraw His promise that Elisabeth should conceive and he should have the long-wished-for and prayed-for son, the birth of whom the angel had come to announce. When Abraham asked for a sign or something whereby his faith and obedience might be guided, God was most tender with him. His question indicated an imperfect faith, but it was not

¹ Rom. i. 22.

² 2 Pet. iii. 5.

dictated by unbelief. When Sarah laughed in pure derision of unbelief, God condescended, even while rebuking her, to repeat His promise and reason with her on the point of her scepticism, saying, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"¹ Sarah had no precedents to fall back upon, as Zacharias had. With Moses He was equally patient, bearing with his doubts and hesitancy; He instructed him in all the mysteries of His name, and gave him the double sign of the rod and the leprous hand healed again. When Gideon asked in great humility for a sign in confirmation of God's commission to him, even indicating what the sign should be, God was not angry; and, discerning that this request was not in unbelief, but for strength, He gave him the sign on the fleece twice over. When Hezekiah asked for a sign in confirmation of God's promise to him, in the matter of his recovery from sickness, God gave him the sign of the shadow going backward ten degrees on the dial of Ahaz. When John the Baptist, in his lonely and gloomy prison, became the prey of depression and doubts concerning the true Messiahship of Jesus, and sent to Him for some token, our Blessed Lord sent back a message full of gentleness, and at the same time one which would reassure John by a new reference to prophecy and its fulfilment in the events of His ministry. When Thomas doubted the testimony of his brother apostles concerning the resurrection, and declared that nothing would satisfy his scepticism but his own touch of the wounded hands and side of the Lord, the Lord most graciously and with pathetic tenderness complied with this troubled but honest "sign-seeker's" demand. At first glance all these cases, and others which might be mentioned, seem not to have differed greatly from that of Zacharias, who was so promptly punished for his unbelieving demand. But a more careful examination

¹ Gen. xviii. 14.

will reveal that there was in these cases not so much unbelief as anxious longing for a strengthening of faith, in which there was more serious inquiry than doubt. Even in the case of Zacharias, where unbelief is directly charged, there was great goodness and tenderness mixed with the chastisement.

On the other hand, God deals with severity when the sign-seeker is a deliberate and determined unbeliever. Take, for example, the lord upon whose arm the king of Israel leaned in the days of the siege and famine of Samaria. The prophet of God had declared that to-morrow food should be abundant and cheap in the city, now starving and straitly shut up by an investing army. This nobleman sneered out his unbelief, and said, "Behold, if the Lord would make windows in heaven, might this thing be?"¹ To the unbelieving challenge of this scoffing and haughty sceptic for a sign from heaven, the prophet immediately replied, "Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof."² The next day the siege was raised, and the abandoned camp of the Syrians was free spoil for all Samaria, and food became as plentiful to-day as it was scarce yesterday. In the wild rush through the city gates the scoffing nobleman was overthrown and trodden to death. Thus was his sneering unbelief answered. When Jesus was a helpless prisoner before Herod, that wicked king demanded a sign from Him. He got his answer later when he died, "eaten of worms."³ The Jews in our Lord's time were a sign-seeking and adulterous generation. Their punishment came in the utter destruction of their city and their own dispersion abroad, to be the objects of hatred and contempt for twenty centuries. The sign of the prophet Jonah—that is, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead—has been given.

¹ 2 Kings vii. 2.

² *Ibid.* vii. 2.

³ Acts xii. 49.

If the sign-seeking Jews and wisdom-seeking Greeks are not convinced with that, then they will find their punishment in permanent moral and intellectual blindness, and an utter incapacity for believing even though other signs were given. Therefore Paul declared, after he had preached Jesus to the Jews, and proclaimed the resurrection and the full and free forgiveness of God, "Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you."¹ Oh, it is a perilous thing to come before the Lord with deliberate unbelief, and challenge Him to prove His word by a sign! It makes my soul tremble when I hear people thus challenging and insulting God, lest before they know it there come a sign upon them which will cause them to behold and wonder and perish. Even when doubt is reverent and has more of inquiry than unbelief in it, it is not a wise thing to challenge God's word with a demand for a sign.

II. THE METHOD FOR THE CURE OF UNBELIEF. In the previous sermon I tried to point out the prime cause of unbelief, and some of the occasions of its manifestations. I shall now endeavour to point out some of the means by which sincere unbelief or—may I say it?—believing unbelief may be cured. Zacharias was a believer temporarily afflicted or assaulted by unbelief, which led him to demand some sign for the confirmation of God's word and promise. In answer, God gave him at once a sensible sign and renewed His promise, the truth of which should be seen in the fulfilment of His gracious purpose. Let us now consider these two things in the reverse order of their fulfilment.

1. The angel Gabriel, to whom Zacharias made his demand for a sign, replied, with a kind of amazed indig-

¹ Acts xiii. 41.

nation, "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God, and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings." It is as though he had said, "Is it possible that you doubt me, and, much more, the word of God which I deliver unto you?" It is true that God does not now send to us an angel to announce His gracious purpose and promise; nor does He in other ways make so obvious to our senses the presence and nearness of what we call the supernatural. Signs and wonders, the appearance of angels, and such-like manifestations, were, if we may say so, the early and sporadic forerunners of Christ in whom the final revelation of His grace was given. These signs have fulfilled their mission and disappeared; just as John the Baptist appeared and for a while blazed forth as a daystar upon the horizon, and then began to decrease before the increasing wonder of Christ, whom he heralded. The angel that now permanently announces God's purpose of grace is the written Word of God. In this blessed book God now speaks to us and brings us glad tidings. Do you ask, then, why we should believe the word of God and receive its message with confidence?

Consider the reliability of His message to us. In the first place, because it is the word of *God*, and cannot be broken. No word of man has ever been given to man containing such promises. If, instead of Gabriel, a mere man, however wise and mighty, had stood before Zacharias and promised him that, in spite of his old age and that of Elisabeth, a son should be born of them in the set time of such an event, it would have seemed preposterous and unworthy of belief; but when Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, proclaims it, then all doubt as to possibility and faithfulness should cease. Should the wisest philosopher have announced to us the resurrection from the dead and the forgiveness of sins,

we might well have asked some sign to confirm such glorious tidings ; but God, who raised up Jesus from the dead (there can be no greater sign than this), proclaims these things and gives us His word. We know now that it is His word, and that that word cannot be broken. "God is not a man, that He should lie,"¹ or be mistaken, or fail in power to fulfil His promise.

Then consider that God has *voluntarily* given to us this promise of glad tidings. It has not been reluctantly wrung from Him, or hastily or immaturely spoken. But according to His eternal purpose, which He purposed in Christ Jesus, as an act of free grace to sinful men, He has declared His promise. Why should He not fulfil His word so freely and voluntarily given? Then, as if to make assurance doubly sure, "that by two immutable things in which it is impossible for God to lie," He has confirmed His word with an oath ; and because there is none greater than Himself, that oath was given by and in the full sanctity of His own name. "Because He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself."² Thus did God ratify and confirm His word to Abraham ; and thus He ratifies and confirms it to us.

Then consider that God in times past has ever been *faithful* to His word. Is not the coming of Christ the best guarantee of the absolute truthfulness of God's word, and the faithfulness of His promises to sinful men? "How shall I know that the promises contained in the Bible are true?" so ask men and women of me almost every day. My reply is, "Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born in Bethlehem, of the seed of David according to the flesh, who died on Calvary, and was raised again the third day, and thus declared with power to be the Son of God, is the demonstration of the truth of God's word." For all these things were done "accord-

¹ Num. xxiii. 19.

² Heb. vi. 13-20.

ing to the scriptures." Until men can successfully disprove the existence of the scripture containing the *promise* of Christ's coming—His birth, His death, and His resurrection—or can successfully deny these *facts*, they cannot impeach the truth of this word of God, which stands by our side, as did Gabriel beside Zacharias, to show us the glad tidings of His love and salvation. It is easy for the wilful sceptic to deny, but it is not so easy for him to make good his denial. Have not twenty centuries of unbelief, scorn, and derision, heaped upon the word of God, failed to remove it from its impregnable rock of truth? Have not twenty centuries of philosophy and science (?) failed to dislodge the word of God from its place of testimony? "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My word shall not pass away."¹ "All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away; but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you."² Are not the ringing words of the old veteran Joshua, who, after a long life spent in the stern service of God, still full of force to us after the passage of long centuries?—"And behold, this day I am going the way of all the earth: and ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, and not one thing hath failed thereof."³ Wherever we have observed the conditions of God's promise, there have we seen the fulfilment of His word. If in any case it should seem to us that His word has not been fulfilled, we have learned that this also belongs to God, and is included in the essential condition of His promise—that time and eternity are alike His in which

¹ Matt. xxiv. 35. ² 1 Pet. i. 24, 25. ³ Josh. xxiii. 14.

to work. Zacharias might have said a month or a single day before the appearance of Gabriel, "For forty years I prayed for a son; all my life have I prayed for the coming of Messiah, and yet neither of these things have come to pass." Yet lo! out of a clear sky comes an angel of God to announce that the fulfilment of both these long-delayed prayers was at hand. You say, "I have prayed for many things that have not come to pass, and therefore I have a right to doubt the truth of the promises of the Bible." Even supposing that your prayers have been within conditions, *is the time so spent* that God cannot fulfil? Has He bound Himself to a day and an hour with you? Has He bound Himself to *your* wish and will without reference to His will, His wisdom, and His love? You say, "I prayed for the conversion of my dear one, and he did not come out on the Lord's side." Are you sure that in heaven you shall not greet that loved one, won to God even in last moments; or may it not appear that, hidden deeply in his heart as a flower blossoming under snow before the spring-time, the grace of God was waiting to burst into beauty and revelation, even on the very threshold of heaven itself? Oh, how shall we dare, in the face of so much that *has* come to pass, limit the truth and grace of God to the narrow range of our observation and *present* experience? "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Believe it, my friends, God's delays are not breaches of promises. Does not the delay of our Lord's second coming seem almost like a breach of promise, since even the apostles looked for His return in their day? But "the Lord is not slack concerning His promise as men count slackness."¹ What, then, is this delay but slackness or breach of promise? It is the long-suffering of God, who is not willing to cut the

¹ 2 Pet. iii. 9.

world off in sudden and irretrievable judgment, but will have men come to repentance and live. Much as we desire the Lord's speedy coming, shall we pray for it to the exclusion of mercy for a dying world? Shall we demand the immediate fulfilment of this great promise for the gratification of our desire and glory, at the price of withdrawing the long-suffering love of God from a world still "lying in the wicked one"? Nay, rather let me die and escape to heaven, and there with millions of saints gone before, wait and come with them *and Him* when it shall seem good to God to rise up and shut the door of mercy upon the world.

Again, *if you would cure your unbelief, lay His word up in your heart, as did Mary.* Instead of laying God's words up in our hearts and pondering them deeply day and night, until the fire burns, we open our hearts to all sorts of arguments of men and philosophies of this world, and are spoiled through these vain delusions. Show me the man who is carefully treasuring up God's words in his heart and meditating upon them day and night, and I will show you a man whose heart is burning within him, glowing with love, and faith, and expectation. It is a rare thing—I may say, an impossible thing—to find a real lover of God's word among the doubters. The word pondered becomes a witness to itself.

If you would be rid of your doubts, be obedient to His word. God's word is not for curious study, but to be reverently heeded and faithfully obeyed. The loving heart of Mary was full of wonder and innocent curiosity as to *how* these things *should be*, yet she quickly and humbly said to the angel, "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."¹ Willing and obedient souls need no other sign from God than His word, for they prove that word in their obedi-

¹ Luke i. 38.

ence. "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of Myself."¹ You sign-seekers! are you willing to accept this sign of *willing obedience*? "Oh that My people had hearkened unto Me, and Israel had walked in My ways. I should soon have subdued their enemies; and turned My hand against their adversaries. He should have fed them also on the finest of the wheat; and with honey out of the rock should I have satisfied thee."² "O that thou hadst hearkened to My commandments, then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea."³ "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land; but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."⁴ Here, my friends, is the clue to the maze of unbelief in which you have become entangled. Follow this clue of willing obedience, and it will lead you out into green pastures and beside the still waters of faith and peace. Do not stand and argue with the promise of Christ, asking for signs and wonders, but "Go thy way," in obedience to His gracious command, and ye shall surely find the word fulfilled, even as He hath said.

If you would be cured of your unbelief, deal with God's word reasonably. Jesus referred the doubt of John the Baptist to the prophecies of the scriptures and their fulfilment in Him. Do you also do that? Lay the prophecy of the Old Scriptures alongside the fulfilments in the New Testament record. Inquire concerning the promises of God now, and their fulfilment to them who have walked in the commandments, and you will not long remain in doubt. It is he who obeys, and not he who haggles and cavils at God's word, who finds out the

¹ John vii. 17.

² Ps. lxxxi. 13-16.

³ Is. xlviii. 18.

⁴ Isa. i. 19, 20.

truth of it—who has the sign in himself. Deal with God's word reasonably as to time. When Cain was born, Eve thought the promised "Seed of the woman" was lying in her bosom; but four thousand years must yet go by, and the time be filled up with the world's experiments, before God sent forth His Son born of a woman. A close study of the words of Jesus shows us an almost total absence of the time-element in them. Doth not the husbandman wait long and labour patiently for the promised harvest hidden in the seed to spring forth and make glad his heart?—and cannot we *wait* for God's promises to come to harvest in our lives? Did not the man who found the treasure hid in the field go and sell all that he had and buy that field? Have we been willing to forego the possessions and pleasures of this life that we might find the heavenly treasure? Did not the pearl merchant sell all his lesser treasures that he might gain the pearl of greatest price?—and have we been even willing to part with the lesser treasures of our lower life that we might find this heavenly pearl? Surely we make unreasonable demands on God's word—demands that we do not make upon Nature—His other word. We observe the laws and conditions imposed in Nature, but we would snatch out of God's hands our impatient demands, as though there was no law in the spiritual world.

III. THE PUNISHMENT OF UNBELIEF. In his unbelief Zacharias asked for a sign. As we have before said, this unbelieving prayer, or the prayer of this unbelieving heart, got a swift answer. That prayer was a sight draft on God, and it was honoured on demand; but he lost the sweet and joyful experiences of the believing Elisabeth and Mary, whose hearts were filled with praise and gladness—whose lips were bursting with song, whilst he, poor man, was silent in his dumbness

and deaf in the midst of their songs. It would seem that Zacharias was both deaf and dumb, for when they were about to name the son of Elisabeth, they had to make "signs to his father how he would have him called." We do not make signs to people who can hear.

He was deaf and dumb toward God. In this deafness and dumbness we suspect there is a latent suggestion of one of the deadly effects of unbelief. When the soul is attacked by this dreadful sin, and it is yielded to, there comes a spiritual deafness to the soul. God's word does not speak to us. We read its pages ; hear, as it were, the sound of words ; but we cannot discern their meaning and power. How dreary the Bible is to an unbelieving, deaf soul ! The penalty of unbelief is unbelief. Deafness toward God's word is a sign of unbelief in the heart. And then what may the dumbness signify but that we have lost the power of speech with God ? Prayer had gone out of the soul. "I cannot pray" is one of the commonest complaints of the unbelieving believer. In nine cases out of ten a prayerless condition of soul is the immediate result or effect of some unbelief to which the soul has yielded. Of course, if we begin to doubt God's word, how can we pray to God ? How should I pray to a God whose existence I doubt, of whose word I am not sure ? Do you know the misery of this state ? Alas ! I do ; for I, too, once called in question God's word, and for nearly nine months I went about my weary duties as a christian and a minister, and yet no words came to my soul out of His word, and all prayer died on my lips. May God save you from such a penalty as this visitation upon unbelief. An unconverted man can live without God's word making music in his soul, and without any opening of heart to God in prayer ; but a man who has once known the

secrets of God's truth and the comfort and joy of prayer does but live in misery when these things are taken away from him.

He was deaf and dumb toward men. Once it had been Zacharias' joy to hear the brethren with whom he associated talk over the wonderful things of God as they read the inspired record. Now his ears were closed to the believing speech of those around him. He could not hear. There are times when the believer has no greater delight than to hear other believers tell of the goodness and grace of God to them. The testimony of the righteous is sweeter than poetry, more comforting than music. When unbelief comes in, the language of faith is a dead language, and the testimony of the righteous is meaningless. Can you imagine what it would be to be cut off absolutely from ever hearing another sermon, another believing prayer, another joyful testimony ; to have all speech concerning God and salvation shut off from you ? For nine months Zacharias was so shut off from the speech of his godly family. No longer did he hear the voice of Elisabeth, his believing wife ; and when Mary came to visit her in her retirement, and the Holy Ghost came upon those two holy women so that they broke forth in the poetry of heavenly song, Zacharias was deaf and could not hear. Beside this, his own testimony was gone. When the brethren were speaking often one to another, and the Lord was hearkening and hearing, he could not speak. No soul was strengthened by his testimony ; no record was made in the book of remembrance of his believing and faithful words. Oh, it is an awful thing to be dumb, to have lost one's testimony, so that he can no longer speak for God ! My brother, my sister, do you know what it is to have been stricken with dumbness, so that you cannot speak for God ? "We cannot but speak the

things which we have seen and heard,"¹ said Peter. So neither can we help giving testimony for God and to the glorious truth of the gospel, unless we are living in unbelief or have been smitten in consequence of it. I once knew a man who, when he was about twenty-five years of age, was under conviction for sin, but turned away from the house of God, saying, with an oath, that he would never again listen to a sermon or hear the word of God read. A few weeks afterwards he was smitten with scarlet fever, and after a long illness arose from his bed stone deaf and with little power of speech left to him. He came to God under that affliction, and I used to see his pitiful face before me in the house of God and in the prayer-meeting of the church, but he could not hear; standing in a company of christian people, his ears were dead to their conversation. God had taken his daring and presumptuous oath at its face value, and he never heard the word of God again, either in sermon or testimony. He used to say that his one comfort left was his unweakened power of sight; and subordinate to that was the privilege of sitting in the church and *seeing others* worship and listening to their pastor. Oh, my friends, God pity you! do not allow the demon of unbelief to take possession of your souls, lest dumbness and deafness come upon you, ay, and blindness too; so that every avenue of divine knowledge and grace be shut up from you.

¹ Acts iv. 20.

V

HEAVENLY SERVICE TO LOWLY PEOPLE

“And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.”—LUKE i. 26, 27.

ABOUT five hundred years had passed since this great angel who stands in presence of God, as His chief servant, had been sent to the beloved Daniel in Babylon, to tell him that his prayer was answered, to show him favour, to instruct him in and give him wisdom and understanding concerning things to come. Six months before the event recorded in our text, he had been sent on a somewhat similar mission to Zacharias, to bring to him the glad tidings of the near approach of the Redeemer of the world, and of the birth of John the Baptist as His forerunner. Now we find him back and down upon the earth, charged with a more exalted commission. It was just now a busy time with Gabriel. Stupendous events were nearing, and the mystery of the ages was on the verge of accomplishment; but we are sure this glorious spirit did not grudge this earthly service. How could he? who was the servant and herald of Him who, in coming from the bosom of God to undertake a still more lowly service, said, “Lo, I come; . . . I delight to do Thy will, O my God.”¹ It was more than enough for him

¹ Ps. xl. 7, 8.

to be and do as his Lord. This time he does not come to the great capital of the mighty kingdom of the East, nor to the sacred precincts of the Holy Place in the Temple of God in Jerusalem, to communicate with Daniel, the Prime Minister of the great king, or to Zacharias, the priest of the God of Israel; but to a mean little city in a despised province of Judæa, and to an obscure and lowly maiden, the espoused wife of a poor builder of fishing-boats—a carpenter. He came to Mary to announce the high honour which God was about to confer in choosing her out of all the millions of women who had lived, and might yet live, to become the mother of the Eternal Son of God—the Incarnate Word.

This passing to and fro of angels between heaven and earth, and between God and men, gives to us a sense of delightful confidence concerning the world to come. It assures us that the world to come is not only a reality, but a place inhabited by intelligences deeply interested and intimately connected with ourselves; that it is at no infinite distance from us, and that passage from one world to the other is not insuperable. It intimates to us the presence in the universe of laws and modes of being and action which lie beyond and above those which come under ordinary observation. Moreover, it gives us assurance that that world from whence Gabriel came is the source from whence comes to us all our highest and best good. The angel brought no message of wrath to Mary, or, through her, to us; but glad tidings of great joy indeed. No angel ever yet visited the earth except as a friend and helper of man. "Are they not all ministering spirits?"¹ How lovely and benignant they always appear! How deeply interested in our good! How anxious to push forward their

¹ Heb. i. 14.

heavenly commissions! How full of good-will to us! We fancy we can detect in the very words in which they communicated their tidings or instructions tones of tenderest love. One can almost hear the softness and intense sympathy with which Gabriel spoke to Daniel as "greatly beloved,"¹ and to Gideon as "thou mighty man of valour."² Gabriel's "Hail" to Mary thrills with an ecstasy of homage and delight. No haughtiness; no air of superiority; no cold condescension; but a noble and heavenly courtesy, in which he seemed to delight in the message he brought; and gave to her all the high honour which was about to be conferred upon her. "Hail, highly favoured; the Lord is with thee; blessed thou among women."³ I might fully occupy your time and attention by bringing to your mind the sweet and blessed ministry of God's angels to men during all the ages since which they began to visit the earth. I must not yield to this temptation, but proceed at once to the topic we have in hand.

I. THE MISSION OF GABRIEL TO MARY. The thought that strikes first as I ponder this incident is the wondrous and gracious humility of the mighty angel in discharging this great service to this lowly and obscure virgin. Very helpful and cheering are the suggestions which come from the contemplation of this event.

1. *The glad and gracious service of God's highest ministers to the lowliest people.* We are not so much surprised, perhaps, when we read of Gabriel's visit to Daniel in Babylon, for Daniel was a very great and distinguished man. He was the Prime Minister of the mightiest kingdom on the earth. He lived in the palace of the great king; he was clothed in courtly raiment; he wore the gold chain of high office; he was, beside, the

¹ Dan. ix. 23. ² Judg. vi. 12. ³ Luke i. 28.

beloved and high servant and prophet of God. But now we find this heavenly ambassador, of the highest rank, sent to a poor, obscure, unknown peasant maiden, who lived probably in a very poor little house, not much better than a hut, in the most despised town of a province held even by the Jews in great contempt, because of the rude speech and uncultured manners of its inhabitants. This embassy to Mary fills us with swelling thoughts of the love and condescension of God to the lowliest of mankind, and gives us the assurance that no obscurity of residence, no poverty of purse, no meanness of surroundings, excludes us from the very choicest gifts of God, or from highest honours which heaven can bestow.

Let us take the case of the present controversy between Great Britain and Venezuela concerning the interests of a very small and almost unknown colony of English people.¹ There is some question of rights and boundaries between the English colony and the Venezuelan Republic. Perhaps a governor not much above a consular agent in dignity is the highest representative of the Queen's government there. Now, how would that little colony spring into prominence if, in order to protect their rights and defend their integrity against the stronger power, Her Majesty should detach Lord Dufferin from the Court of St. Cloud, and send him, the greatest of English diplomats, to attend to that matter! Not only would such an act dignify the little colony, but it would convince the world in a most striking manner that Great Britain cared to the very last extent for the least, the most unknown, and, if it might be so, the meanest of her small colonies. And would not all men honour and admire the loyalty of Lord Dufferin if he should gladly turn away from the

¹ Dec. 1st, 1895.

splendours of the English Embassy and the Republican Court at St. Cloud to perform the lowly service required of him to the colony in South America? and if we should hear of his courtly and enthusiastic service out there as being equal to his best manner in France, or other great Courts of Europe, would we not all say, "Truly Her Gracious Majesty has a minister in Lord Dufferin worthy of herself"? Well, was not Gabriel's mission a greater display of high service to lowly people, discharged in the most gracious manner?

Lowly as Mary was, and mean as were her surroundings, Gabriel "went in unto her," in her little house (a mere highland cottage), and saluted her as though she had been a queen upon her throne—the very first and greatest of women in the land—instead of the least and most obscure. But, in fact, he or she to whom such a message and such a messenger comes is great indeed, independent of any earthly position, wealth, or surroundings. In this service there was no thought or suggestion in the mind of Gabriel that he was in any sense lowering his dignity, or doing something beneath him; nor was there any of that supercilious condescension which sometimes accompanies service rendered by the great in this world to the lowly people with whom they may have to do. A real servant of God can only feel himself honoured in doing God's service wherever and to whomsoever he may be sent. I know of a very wealthy and good woman who visits amongst the very poor, and extends to them very considerable help, but who goes always under an assumed name, because she does not care that her society friends should know that she does such things. In fact, she is, from her social point of view, just a little ashamed to be known as a visitor among the very poor. To blazon such service abroad and proclaim, as the Pharisee might, "See how humble I

am, how lowly in spirit I am to condescend to do such work as this!" would only be the opposite sin and error to that of doing a good work and yet being half ashamed before men of doing it. A true humility in service does not take into account what a man may say, or what, in fact, any human or heavenly intelligence may think. Beside, any object of God's gracious care becomes at once "highly favoured" and one to be courted and served with gladness and joy. The old legend of the two angels is in point. It is affirmed in this legend that on a time God sent two angels to the earth. One He commissioned to rule an empire, and the other He sent to sweep a street-crossing. Either flew to his post with the same glad alacrity, not considering at all *what* they were to do, but only for *whom* they were doing it. Therefore the angel who swept the street-crossing felt as highly honoured as he who ruled the empire, because they were each doing the will of God.

The condescension of angels to lowly places and men excites our wonder and gratitude, and ought to stimulate us to emulate the spirit which animated Gabriel in coming to earth with this message and mission to Mary. But the condescension of Gabriel in this matter fades away as the stars pale before the rising sun in presence of the condescension of God in grace to us sinners. When David thought of the grace of God to sinful men, he was filled with wonder and amazement. "When I consider Thy heavens, the works of Thy fingers; the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained; what is man, that Thou art mindful of him? or the son of man, that Thou visitest him?"¹ For the time being lower than angels, and yet highest angels are employed in serving and administering to him. Nay, far beyond that. The Eternal God humbled Himself to be born of a woman and take

¹ Ps. lxxxiii. 3, 4.

upon Himself all the limitations of our nature, to be formed and fashioned and take the place of a servant, to suffer shame, and pain, and death for us. No wonder David was astonished at this display of divine grace. But David went even beyond that in his amazement. That God should thus do for the sake of the whole race of man as such might possibly be a thinkable thing; but that He should do all this for an individual sinful man such as David knew himself to be—oh! that passed knowledge. We see him sitting down in the house of God, overwhelmed with “wonder, gratitude, and love,” saying to the Lord, “Who am I, and what is my house, that Thou hast done these great things for us?” David was the youngest of all his brothers—a mere sheep-tending lad, disposed a good deal to dreams and poetry. His father’s house was not a princely one, but only one among many of the humble families of Israel. And yet God chose him and his house to be the earthly head of His kingdom among men and the ancestor of the Eternal Son. Who, indeed, was Abraham, whom God so highly honoured with His grace? The son of an apostate Semitic family, of whose father tradition says he was a maker of idols. Who were the Hebrews, that they should be called out to be a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and a peculiar people, for a possession of Jehovah? A nation of slaves, degraded beyond measure, who were even themselves sunk into the worst forms of Egyptian life and religion; a people concerning whom God warned them that He did not save or love them because they were a great and worthy people, for He said they were at once the fewest and the most stiff-necked and rebellious of all people. In later times this favoured people were reproached with being descended from a Hittite mother and an Amorite father, allied on the one hand with Samaria and on the other with

Sodom. And yet God's love and service were to such people ! When Jesus chose His apostles, He did not go to the Sanhedrim and make a selection from the doctors and lawyers, but called a company of fishermen and tax-gatherers to be His ministers. It is easy of proof that, for the greater part, the men who have been most used of God in spreading His gospel for the past two thousand years have been men sprung from what the world calls the lower ranks in life.

2. *God regards humble places as well as humble people.* In coming to Mary the angel also came to Mary's mean city and her very humble house, and came in to her *there*. If one were to ask at random a half-dozen well-informed people in the congregation what were the five or six greatest cities of the world, he would get answers in which the names of Babylon, Thebes, Memphis, Athens, Rome, Paris, London, and New York would figure. But are these the great places of the world ? Are they really the great cities judged by the standard of heavenly policy and judgment ? Nay ; but I think we might venture to put in their places Nazareth, Bethlehem, Nain, and Bethany. The greatness of a city consists not in the splendour of its buildings, the magnitude of its population, the extent of its commerce ; but in the greatness of the events which have marked its history, and in the character of its citizens. " And thou, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah ; for out of thee shall come a Governor that shall rule My people Israel." ¹ Measured by this rule, Bethlehem, the little village, the home of the shepherd David, and the birthplace of Jesus, was far greater than Jerusalem ; Nazareth was greater than Cæsarea ; Nain was greater than Bethsaida ; Bethany greater than Chorazin. Verona, the birthplace of Virgil, is a greater city than

¹ Matt. ii. 6.

Rome, the place of Augustus' throne. Little Stratford-on-Avon has reflected more glory upon England by giving birth to Shakespeare than London has by being the home of her vast population and the moneyed centre of the world. We count up and name with pride the great houses in London; the splendid palaces of our nobility and citizens of fortune; but if Gabriel should come to London and propose to take us to the great houses according to God's estimate of greatness, I think he would lead us to some strange places—to some garrets; to some cellars; to some very humble homes indeed; to some modest apartments; possibly also to some fine houses. Why would you call these great houses? They are not to be compared with Grosvenor House, or Dorchester House, or a hundred others. Oh, these are great houses because they are the homes of great souls, of those beloved of God who are great in His sight. No great house in itself can make the inhabitant of it great; but a great soul, be he man or woman, rich or poor, can make the house great in which they live. Just in the same way, neither money nor position can really dignify a man; but a man may dignify and ennoble both money and position. These are God's estimations.

3. *This condescension to men and things of low estate is undoubtedly the fixed and settled policy of God.* "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord;"¹ and it is well for us if we carefully study His ways, and as far as possible make them ours. "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, and things which are not, to bring to naught things which are: that

¹ Isa. lv. 8.

no flesh should glory in His presence.”¹ We are wedded to the conventionality of the world, in our estimate alike of men and things. We render service, and honour, and homage to those whom the world esteems to be great ; we bow down before wealth and station, and pass by circumstances of poverty and obscurity. But God renders service to the poor, the obscure, and the lowly. He pours contempt upon the worldly greatness of wealth and station, and emphasizes again and again the truth that He is no respecter of persons. We worship the wisdom of the world, but Jesus thanks His Father that the salvation of God is revealed to babes. We deal more with the outward and seeming ; God deals with that which is real and eternal. That which we esteem the wisest, the mightiest, and of most worth very often contains all the possibilities of the worst evils. Can we say that the wisdom of the world, the might of the world, the most highly honoured of the world have been the ministers of that which is best to the world ? Surely not. The world’s wisdom has proved its greatest darkness ; its might, its greatest weakness ; and the most honoured things have been the breeders of the worst evils. On the other hand, out of the Nazareths and Bethlehems, despised and insignificant places, have always come to the world its best gifts. In what seems to have been, and still is, the uniform policy of heaven, we may detect a purpose of God to reverse the whole conventional order of the world ; and with the things which men despise, and with a policy that the wisdom of the world condemns, He will overturn the world and cause the first to be last and the last first. Dives shall be found in hell torments in spite (not because) of his riches, and Lazarus shall be found in heaven in spite (not because) of his poverty and sores. The proud man shall

¹ 1 Cor. i. 27-29.

be humbled, and the humble-minded man shall be exalted. Mary hinted at this heavenly policy in her song, "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree."¹ "These that have turned the world upside down have come hither also,"² was the complaint of the world against the apostles. Were they not rather turning the world right side up? As God does nothing out of mere sovereignty, but always because of love and wisdom, may we not profitably look about us and learn that just as there are great potentialities for evil in those things which the world most highly esteems, so in the poor and despised and weak things of this world there may be hidden the potentialities of greatest good and power? Behold the evil that was in Saul of Kish, that mighty and splendid man who was the choice of Israel for their king; and then behold the good that was in the despised shepherd lad whom God chose in the room of Saul. When we would form a great society (even we christians), the first thing we endeavour to do is to secure a half-dozen or more great names as patrons and patronesses. Then we think our society will march, by reason of the power and influence of human greatness. But when Jesus founded His church, He not only selected poor men for His apostles, but gathered for the body of the church men and women who were of the lowest, the weakest, and most unfortunate of mankind. Blind beggars, publicans, and harlots, the very outcasts of society.

Whom did He come to call to repentance? Not the righteous, but sinners. Whom did He, as the great Physician, turn His attention to? Not those who were whole, but those who were sick. Do we not see this principle of God to hold true even in our half-apostate faith and practice? How many rich and great and wise

¹ Luke i. 52.

² Acts xvii. 6.

men and women are enrolled among the disciples of Christ in our churches? Not many. We do not say—*not any*, but *not many*. If we had our way, would we not reverse all this and fill up our communion roll with the wise and the mighty and the great? If in our Sunday night after-meetings there should come forward twenty-five or thirty souls to confess Christ, and it were to get abroad that of these two-thirds were men and women of the upper classes—all rich and wise and distinguished—would not the *world say*, and would not *we feel*, that we were getting on? But last Sunday night twenty-five souls came forward to confess Christ, the greater part of whom were servants; and there is little care about that work of grace because God has only come to some obscure Nazarene men and maidens. And yet, my friends, let me ask you who it is that maintains the cause of Christ in the world? Who fill the pulpits? Not the sons of the nobility or of the men of wealth; but, for the most part, young men from the families of the poor. Who make our congregations on the Lord's day? Not the wealthy and the great, but the common people. Who attend our prayer meetings and other mid-week services? Not you who are well off and on the road to greatness in this world. *You* have no time; no inclination; no relief from the social duties of the world. But come and see, and I will show you nine out of ten there to be servants and other humble people. These are they who keep the fires burning. Who are they that support the church and send abroad the gospel? Not the rich, but the poor. You that are rich and well off (not all, but nearly all) use the bulk of your money for personal gratification, and give the tailings of it to God. When I look over the subscription lists of those who offer for the maintenance of the cause of worship here, I am amazed and ashamed.

I find many servants, whose incomes do not exceed £20 to £25 in the year, giving in weekly offerings from 6*d.* to two shillings per week ; on the other hand, I miss the names altogether of many very well-to-do, and even rich men from the list. I turn again to those who are represented on the list, and find there are people in our congregation who ride in their carriages and are able to give costly dinner parties, spend months away from London in the fairylands of the South in winter and the romantic Highlands in the summer, who seem to be ill able to give to their own church above that which some of their own servants give. Surely our Lord was wise with heavenly wisdom in condescending to choose Nazarene maidens and Galilean fishermen with whom to build His church. Do you say that I cannot judge of what a man gives by a pledge-card or an outward sign ? There are those who give otherwise. Perhaps ; but they do not give it in the open basket, nor do they send it to the treasurer. I confess I have little faith in a man's liberality who will not support his own church and build over against his own door. A man who can *afford* to give a pound a week and only gives a shilling, on the ground that he has claims elsewhere, raises in my mind a doubt of his sincerity. Do not be surprised if in the end you will have with bitterness to know what Mary meant in her song : "He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He hath sent empty away."¹

II. LESSONS FROM THESE FACTS. Let me now bring this sermon to a close by drawing a few practical lessons from the theme suggested by Gabriel's visit to Mary.

1. *No man or woman is so high in station or opulent in possessions or talents but that he or she should be willing,*

¹ Luke i. 53.

glad, and proud to do God's work, even when it is ministry in lowest places, and to the humblest people. But, alas! this is a lesson little perceived and followed out. This mind for lowly service which distinguished Gabriel, and was pre-eminent in Christ Jesus the Lord, is conspicuously absent from the vast majority of those in the church who occupy high positions in the world or are the possessors of its wealth.

2. *No man is too poor, too obscure, too lonely, or too sinful* to be the object of the ministry of God's dear, great love and grace, or a fit person for us to go to, as Gabriel did to Mary, with the messages of God's love and favour. A certain missionary spent six months among the low-caste natives of India, and then threw up his commission and returned home. When asked why he had done so, he replied that he "had carefully looked these miserable natives over, and had reached the conclusion that they were not worth saving." Yet I know the granddaughter of a Hindu sweeper (the lowest and most despised caste) who to-day is one of the foremost educationalists in India, exalted by the gospel of Christ into a place that not one Brahmin woman in a hundred thousand could ever attain to from her coign of vantage in worldly position. That missionary's judgment is the judgment of many. Yet Jesus preached the gospel to the poor; He healed the lepers; the blind beggars found Him gracious to them; He spoke words of love and forgiveness to the harlots, and was a friend to publicans and sinners. The early christian church had in its membership murderers, adulterers, thieves, fornicators, and covetous men. God thought them worth saving, and visited them with His favour. It is out of the so-called social waste of this world that God largely recruits for the kingdom of heaven. *He* condescends to men of low estate.

3. *No place is too obscure or mean to be an honoured place of service.* How can we think of Him who was conceived in the virgin's womb and born in a stable and forget this lesson? There is no lack of ministers of the gospel who are willing to be called to the strong churches of the great cities who feel that the small and obscure charges hitherto open to them are not worthy their great abilities. There are not a few workers who would be willing to have some service in the drawing-rooms of the great who cannot see their way clear to work in the slums. We have not a few well-to-do and very able men who might be induced to take office and responsibility in our Church Court if only there were two or three noblemen, half a dozen great bankers, and a few members of Parliament among the office-bearers now ; but as, for the most part, our Court is composed of humble men in comparatively low positions in the world, it is impossible for me to induce some men of our congregation who have large talents and means to take office and service. They seem content to be ministered to, but have no idea of being themselves ministers (deacons). There are many ladies who would attend the Dorcas Society and work diligently for an hour or two each week for the poor, if the society held its meetings in the drawing-room of some Duchess, but who cannot find it worthy of their time and station or convenience to meet with the score and a half humble women of our congregation in the modest little rooms at 37, Upper George Street. There are *some* noble ones and some rich, but not many. I often read the names of the rich and great ones of the earth printed among the patrons and patronesses of some of our missions and charities, but I have met very few of them any nearer the work of the charity they patronize than to come now and again to be gazed at while they open a fair or bazaar

4. *There are none so lowly and poor but that they are worthy (so far forth) of our hospitality and cordial salutation.* We may, and ought to give our "hail" and "greeting" to the lowliest about us, in the name of the Lord. A stranger was in our church recently. He was dressed rather plainly, and was not a man to attract superficial attention. As he passed by me going out, I spoke to him, offered my hand, and gave him a usual greeting. "I notice that you are a stranger among us; I am glad to see you here; hope the service has been helpful; shall be glad to see you at any time you may be free to come," etc. He thanked me, and said he had been pleased with and profited by the service, and would certainly come again when next he was up in town. Then he handed me his card, and I was surprised to note the name of a nobleman whose fame is in both State and Church. He was out of my reach by this time, and had just passed one of our gentlemen, who came to speak to me about some matter. I said to him, "Do you know the gentleman who has just passed you?" describing him and pointing him out as he went through the door. "No; who is he?" "Why, that is Lord Blank." "No, not really! *If I had known that, I should have spoken to him.*" Had it been Joseph or Mary of Nazareth, he would probably not have thought it worth while; but since it was Lord Blank, why he regretted not having been hospitable and cordial. Many of God's noblemen go in plain clothes. Gabriel left heaven to give Mary a royal salutation, and a Greater than Gabriel left the bosom of the Father to come and wash our feet and lay down His life for us miserable sinners; and is not ashamed now to call *us* brethren, who are so often ashamed of Him.

5. *It may be answered: that the greatness of Gabriel's commission made his visit to Mary a distinguished privi-*

lege. So it did. And I have no doubt that if we fully realized that we were bearing a message to one who should be raised to greatness, we would go, and wait for the vindication of our dignity by the revelation of the greatness of the object of our ministry and salutation. Well, when God sends you and me to some Nazareth place, to some poor woman, or sick working man, or sinner sunk in shame and vileness, He is sending us on a like mission. Has He not bidden us go to them with the "Hail" of joyful salutation, and put the message of His love in our lips to tell them that it is of His gracious will and favour that they should receive Christ Jesus, the Giver of Life and the Hope of Glory, into their hearts? Is not every soul that is overshadowed by the Holy Ghost the chosen womb for another incarnation? When He sends us on the least of His errands to the humblest of His disciples, does He not accept the service as done unto Himself? Have we forgotten His word: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me"¹? Alas! how we do forget! Nay, rather, how little we *believe* of all this! When we are bidden to give ourselves to hospitality, has He not told us as an encouragement that we may thereby entertain angels unawares, as some have done before us?

6. *The real greatness of our church is not dependent upon its wealth or the high social station of our communicants, but upon the number of those who enjoy the favour of the Lord, and are so taken up with service, so full of sympathy with God's gracious purpose, that they have only this one care and thought—to do the will of God. Let me be among those, whatever my earthly station, who have entered into fellowship for breaking up the conventionality of this world; overturning its*

¹ Matt. xxv. 40.

false principles, and bringing to light the true worth and power of the things which are not.

Believe it, my friends, you who are withholding your hands, your persons, your money, your presence, and the whole enthusiasm of your life from the service of God to the lowliest of His chosen ones, are depriving yourselves of the joys of salvation, preparing for yourselves great and bitter disappointment in the things for the sake of which you turn your back upon heavenly service, and are most likely losing your own souls.

VI

“*HAIL, MARY!*”—NOT “*AVE MARIA*”

“And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, highly favoured, the Lord is with thee : blessed thou among women.”—LUKE i. 28.

IF I seem disposed to linger over these incidents initial to the incarnation of our Lord, it is because their interest is most fascinating and profound. Here we are on holy ground, and it is inspiring to abide awhile with shoes taken off. It is not often we get glimpses of angels ; and but seldom in the world's history has Gabriel visited the earth. We may be sure that he never comes except the matter of his visit and the contents of his message are of surpassing importance. Here we are in presence of the most highly-favoured woman of her race ; the one woman out of millions who came before her, and millions who have come after her, upon whom the choice of the Lord fell that she might be the mother of the Incarnate Word. For her we feel all the interest possible—so sweet in character, so simple in faith, so patient in suffering, so raised above her sisters in privilege and honour, and yet who never left her lowly station in life, and chose only to be counted as one among many other holy women in the gatherings of the early Church.

I. CONCERNING MARY. In this connection it seems proper that we should consider two or three facts and theories concerning the Virgin Mother of our Lord, to whom the angel made this communication.

1. *She was the obscure descendant of two noble houses.* We know that she was cousin to Elisabeth, who was of the house of Aaron, and also a descendant of the house of David. While it is true that Joseph, her espoused husband, is alone declared to be of the house of David, it is fairly inferred that Mary also was of that Royal line. How could our Lord have been of the “seed of David according to the flesh” had not Mary been a descendant of the great king of Israel, seeing that He was not the child of Joseph at all? Though she is not mentioned by name in the genealogical tables either of Matthew or Luke, yet her immediate ancestors are mentioned. According to the best information within our reach, it seems most probable that Mary was the cousin of Joseph, her espoused husband, and so descended from Matthan, who was the grandfather of both Joseph and Mary. But of this we have no certain record. It is not material to the case, however, as we are well assured from other scriptures that Jesus was the son of David as to the flesh; and so, of course, His mother must have been of that house. The utter absence of all details concerning Mary’s birth and early life has given rise to a vast legendary literature, much of it full of interest, but all, so far as we are concerned, of an absolutely worthless character. It would seem that it was the very intention or purpose of God in thus hiding from us the early history of Mary that she might not be exalted into undue prominence because of being the mother of our Lord. She was the instrument of the Holy Spirit in bringing the Eternal Word into the world incarnate in human nature. Henceforth it is her Son who is to fill the whole horizon of our thought and faith, and not herself. It is a comfort in this connection to know that God does not overlook or despise those whom the world knows not or has forgotten.

"He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden." ¹ True greatness, as we have before remarked, depends upon the favour of God rather than the circumstances of our earthly life. When we behold God casting down a prince and exalting a peasant, we are sure that true greatness belongs to the peasant and not to the king. We should learn to regard those who are "greatly beloved of God," whether a Daniel or a Mary, as being worthy of our best honour. The poorest man or woman in this world who has been the means of leading one soul to Christ is worthy of more honour, and in the day of Judgment will receive more honour, than the mightiest king or millionaire upon the earth. "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree." ² And He does this, not by an arbitrary rule of mere sovereignty, but on principles of grace and divine discernment of real worth. Paul was a nobleman and a scholar, while John was a fisherman without culture ; but both alike were noble in the truest sense of the word, because both of them were chosen to be the servants of Jesus Christ. Mary was the espoused wife of Joseph, of the house of David. The Divine Wisdom chose an espoused virgin to be the mother of our Lord, rather than an unespoused one, it should seem, that she might have in a husband a shield to her virginity and fair, good name, and at the same time a natural protector for herself and her Holy Son. We are told that the angel who appeared to Joseph, when he thought ill of Mary, distinctly informed him of the true origin of her pregnancy, and bade him not to put her away, and so cause shame to come upon her, but to take her to himself with all confidence, and to be a husband to her. Later on the angel came again to Joseph and warned him of the wicked purpose of Herod, and bade him take

¹ Luke i. 48.

² *Ibid.* i. 52.

the young Child and His mother and go down into Egypt. Again Joseph received heavenly direction for bringing Mary and Jesus back again into their own land and their highland home at Nazareth. In all this there is manifested a divine and tender care both for Jesus and His mother. We know less of Joseph than we do of Mary, but we believe that he was in every way a wise and loving foster-father to our Lord, and that with His mother he surrounded the Child with the very best influence of a home in which God was revered and served with pure sincerity of heart and purpose, and with a mighty and holy regard for the trust which was committed to their joint care.

Mary, the mother of our Lord, has been the victim of two false judgments. It is remarkable that this pure and chaste virgin whom God has so highly honoured should have been the subject of the most vile and cruel slanders ; and, on the other hand, that she, who was of such low degree, and whom the scriptures have purposely left in apparent obscurity, should have been exalted by the judgment of men even into an equal place in the Godhead with the Holy Trinity. The one judgment is so vile as to be almost unthinkable, and the other so blasphemous as to cause a shudder of horror on every thought of it. About the middle of the second century, Celsus, the first writer against the christian religion, gave out a story, that after having been espoused to Joseph, she had abandoned him, and took up with a Roman soldier, who was the true father of Jesus ; thus branding Mary as a fallen woman, and Jesus as the illegitimate child of a guilty human love. This is so shocking a theory that it has been only with bated breath that the worst enemies of Christ and His gospel have dared repeat it down through the ages. And yet, if the account of the miraculous conception of Jesus is not the true one, we

must conclude that, at least, the most charitable suspicions of Joseph concerning her at the time of her early pregnancy were founded on fact. But with the whole story of Mary and Jesus before us, and considering the unimpaired stream of high moral influence which has continued to flow down upon the world from both Mary and Jesus (if Celsus was right in his conjectures), then henceforth let us wish that all women may be unchaste, and all sons born of illicit love ; with the hope that the world may be furnished with lovely and holy women and great and unselfish men.

On the other hand, very early in the history of the Church the imagination of men began to gather about the virgin mother of Christ, invested her with supernatural honours, and clothed her with supernatural powers, which exalted her not *among* women, but *above* all women, men, and angels. The pseudo-gospels are full of the wildest romances concerning her ; and there is little doubt that during the third and fourth centuries there were many individual christians and some foremost teachers who, if they did not give her absolute worship, did render to her an adoration which came little short of it. In the middle of the fifth century, say about A.D. 430, the doctrines of the Nestorians became so alarming in their wide-spreading influence that a general Council of the Church was called to meet at Ephesus in order to condemn this heresy. According to Nestorius, our Lord had two complete personalities—one purely human, and one purely divine. The human nature was born of Mary, and the divine nature communicated to Him *after* His human birth. Whereas it was, and ever has been, the orthodox teaching of the Church (as of the apostles) that our Lord had but one personality, in which the human and the divine were perfectly united, and that that union took place in the

womb of the virgin at the time of the miraculous conception. The Council of Ephesus, in condemning the doctrine of Nestorius, applied to Mary a term which designated her as the mother of God (*Theotokos*). This term was adopted to counterbalance the teaching that Mary was only the mother of the *human nature* of Jesus, and for the purpose of protecting doctrinally the true divine nature of our Lord. It is almost certain that the Council of Ephesus had no intention of sanctioning, much less of inaugurating, any worship of Mary. The controversy over this word has been a long one, and is beset with difficulties which it is not my purpose to go into. It is perfectly proper in a sense to use it, for Jesus, while He was truly man, was also God, manifested in the flesh, and Mary was His mother. But the people about that time, by reason of a growing tendency to exalt the mother of our Lord into a place of divine honour, quickly took this decision of the Council as approving the adoration or worship which was already being given to her. Thenceforward till now the worship of the virgin, or Mariolatry, as we term it, has been the prevailing cult and custom of the Roman and the Greek Church ; and, alas ! there is not wanting many symptoms of the spread of this blasphemy even in the Church of England. At the present time the worship of the virgin Mary has almost superseded the worship of Christ, and even of God Himself, in so-called Catholic countries. She is the Queen of Heaven ; she is the only mediatrix between the soul and Christ ; she holds in her authority all gifts of grace, all earthly blessing ; she is the bestower and dispenser of salvation ; she guards both the gates of hell and of heaven ; it is only through her that God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost can administer salvation. Nay, she has, according to these idolaters, been assumed into the Godhead and become one with the Holy Trinity,

thus making it a Quarternity. Even Dr. Pusey, the founder of the present Anglican movement in the Church of England, taught that "Mary is the complement of the Trinity,"¹ and that "the intercession of Mary is needed for the salvation of the followers of Jesus Christ." We might quote pages of this blasphemy were it necessary. The steps which have led up to the worship of the Virgin, as she is invariably styled, are these:—(1) The doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. That even though she were married to Joseph, she never became in fact his wife, and never bore other children after Jesus. (2) The doctrine of the miraculous *birth* as well as the miraculous conception of Jesus; that our Lord passed out from the virgin's womb in a manner similar to the miracle by which He came in to the disciples after the resurrection, "the door being shut" (John xx. 26). (3) The declaration of the Council of Ephesus, which bestowed upon her the title of *Theotokos*. (4) The dedication of chapels and churches to her honour, until there came to be no limit to the worship given her, and no gift of God her worshippers did not seek at her hands, even to the utmost salvation. (5) The horrible and blasphemous mutilation of the scriptures, in which throughout the whole Psalter the name of Mary, or some title representing her, is substituted for the names and titles of God and Jehovah. As, for instance, in the first Psalm, "Blessed is the man who loveth thy name, O Virgin Mary." As in the ninth Psalm, "I will confess thee, O Lady (Domina); I will declare among the people thy praise and glory. To thee belong glory, thanksgiving, and the voice of praise." As in the fifteenth Psalm, "Preserve me, O Lady, for I have hoped in thee." As in the seventeenth Psalm, "I will love thee, O Queen of heaven and earth, and will glorify thy name among the Gentiles."

¹ *Eirenicon*, ii. 167.

As in the forty-second Psalm, “As the hart panteth after the waterbrooks, so panteth my soul for thy love, O Holy Virgin”; and so on to the end. The *Te Deum* is likewise parodied in the office of worship: “We praise thee, Mother of God; we acknowledge thee to be a Virgin. . . . To thee all angels cry aloud with a never-ceasing voice, Holy, Holy, Mary, Mother of God. The holy Church throughout all the world doth invoke and praise thee, the Mother of Divine Majesty. Thou sittest with the Son on the right hand of the Father. In thee, sweet Mary, is our hope; defend us for evermore. Praise becometh thee; empire becometh thee; virtue and glory be unto thee for ever and ever.” Can we conceive anything more blasphemous than this? And yet this is the Cult to which some of our Anglican brethren are longing to have the grand old English Protestant Church united again. This apostate body the whole English Church recognise as being a part, if not the chief section, of the Holy Catholic Church, whose orders and priesthood they recognise, whilst excluding from their fellowship all the dissenting Protestant bodies of the world, refusing to recognise the validity of their ministry and ordinances. (6) The final step toward completing this blasphemy was to declare, as the Roman Church did by decree of council in 1870, the doctrine of the immaculate *conception*. That is, that by a miracle no less great than that of the incarnation the Virgin herself was conceived without sin, and was therefore a sinless being in nature as she was subsequently in her life.

There are but few references to Mary in the New Testament, and every one of these most distinctly discourage any thought of exalting her to be an object of worship. It should seem that, foreseeing this movement of the spirit of Antichrist, our Lord has specially spoken

to her, and of her, in such a manner as to show that, highly honoured and greatly beloved as she was, in respect of her relation to God and man, she was nothing more nor less than any other woman save by grace, although chosen to the high honour of being the mother of the Christ. In the song which Mary sang on her visit to Elisabeth she appears a devout and humble worshipper, not as the Queen of Heaven, demanding worship of others. She acknowledges that she has been highly exalted, but not to a place of adoration or worship. Twelve years later, when we find her seeking Jesus, who stayed behind in the temple to reason with the doctors, she seems not fully to have understood the import of His words, "Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business? And they understood not the saying which He spake unto them; . . . but His mother kept all these sayings in her heart."¹ At Cana of Galilee, where Jesus made the water into wine, it would seem that Mary rather officiously interfered by a suggestion to Him as to what He ought to do, and drew from Him this rather stern but yet gentle and respectful rebuke, "Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come."² Here certainly there is no hint that Mary was in His mind exalted to any position of especial authority. The next place Mary appears in the New Testament record, she and her other sons came to where Jesus was teaching and preaching. A great crowd was gathered about Him, and it should seem that it was the desire of His mother and His brethren to get Him away and take Him home, as though they thought Him either in danger or perhaps too enthusiastic in His mission. "Then came to Him His mother and His brethren, and could not come at Him for the press. And it was told Him by certain

¹ Luke ii. 49-51.

² John ii. 4.

which said, Thy mother and Thy brethren stand without, desiring to see Thee. And He answered and said unto them, My mother and My brethren are these which hear the word of God, and do it."¹ In this speech Jesus distinctly puts Mary and His natural brethren on no pinnacle or platform above other disciples who hear and do the word of God. On another occasion an enthusiastic woman breaks out into a rhapsody of praise upon Mary, "Blessed is the womb that bare Thee, and the paps which Thou hast sucked. But He said, Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it."² Surely if ever there was a thought that Mary was to be exalted to the position which the Romanists and Anglicans give her, this was when our Lord might have signified something which would have warranted at least adoration. But He even checks a warm ascription of praise to her, and turns our thought to hearing and doing the word of God. We next see Mary at the foot of the cross, and hear Jesus commending her to the care of John³; but in this tender address to her and to John there is no hint of adoration or worship, or that at any future time such should be given her. She was His mother, dearly and tenderly beloved, but beyond that and the honour of that relation she was as other women. We last see Mary with some of the other holy women assembled with the brethren in the upper room in Jerusalem, whither they had repaired to wait for the gift of the Holy Ghost. Here she takes her place with the rest of the disciples, and unites her prayers with theirs for the fulfilment of the promise of the Father. It is a remarkable fact that among the various manifestations of Himself after the resurrection there is no mention that He appeared to Mary, His mother. To James, His half-

¹ Luke viii. 19-21 ; *cf.* Mark iii. 32-35 ; Matt. xii. 46.

² Luke xi. 27, 28. ³ John xix. 25-27.

brother, He did appear, and seems to have satisfied his doubts, for afterwards James took his place amongst the disciples, and became the first minister of the Church at Jerusalem.

Whilst we must protest with all our power against this antichristian worship of Mary, it is not necessary for us in any way to lower her from the high and holy place which she must ever hold in the affectionate regard of believers in all ages. Mary will always remain to us the sweetest among women, the holiest among mothers, the most perfect type of motherhood and womanhood, an example of lowly and obedient faith, and of sweet humility and grace.

II. THE SALUTATION OF THE ANGEL. It is time now that we should turn to the facts before us, and, by examining them, find out the true position of Mary as set forth in this salutation. When Gabriel stood before her and saluted her, he did not either offer worship or make a prayer to her. He came to announce a wondrous thing, and saluted her as it became them both.

1. "*Hail!*" The Romanists have changed this simple salutation into "*Ave Maria*," a term which implies worship and conveys a supplication. They use this salutation in their approach to her, "Mary, we worship thee; we pray to thee." Though we may suppose the angel's salutation was made with rare and gracious dignity, as it became him that stood in the presence of God, in bringing a message to the one woman whom God chose to be the mother of the Lord, it does not convey even a hint that he either worshipped her or made petition to her for favour. We are told that "all the angels of God worship"¹ the risen Christ, but nowhere in scripture is it intimated that they ever offered worship or

¹ Heb. i. 6.

made supplication to a mortal man or woman. The meaning of the word “Hail” (*chairoo*) is joy. In the imperative form used here it signifies “Joy to thee.” It is not a prayer, but a happy greeting which has in it the suggestion of good tidings or the wish for joy to be to the one who is saluted. It was a *communication* of joy to Mary, and not a *solicitation* of favour from her. Bishop Hall thus quaintly and beautifully says, “The angel salutes the virgin; he prays not to her as a goddess. For us to salute her as he did were gross presumption; for neither are we as she was, and neither is she (now) as she was (then). If he that was a spirit saluted her that was flesh and blood here on earth, it is not for us that are flesh and blood to salute her which is a glorious spirit in heaven. For us to pray to her in the angel’s salutation were to abuse the virgin, the angel, and the salutation.” The word in this form is used in three other places in the New Testament; and reference to them will help us to understand its true meaning. We are told that Judas, who betrayed our Lord, approached Him and said, “Hail, Master!” and kissed Him.¹ The “Hail” of treachery. The Roman soldiers, when our Lord had been delivered to them to be reviled, clothed Him in an old cast-off military cloak, put a reed in His hand, in mockery of a sceptre, a crown of thorns upon His head, and, bowing the knee in derision, mocked Him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!”² The “Hail” of derision. After the resurrection, Jesus met the women who were going to His disciples with the good news, and greeted them with “All hail!”³ upon which they fell at His feet and worshipped Him. This was the “Hail” of joy. In many other places the word is used in other forms, but always to express joy and joyful greeting. Well did

¹ Matt. xxvi. 49.² Matt. xxvii. 29.³ Matt. xxviii. 9.

the angel use this joyful salutation, for he brought joyful news to her and to all the world.

2. *Highly favoured.* Here we have another word which the blasphemers have twisted into a meaning which it does not bear. The Romanists would have us believe that these two words mean "full of grace"; as though the angel, having saluted her with worship and prayer, now ascribes to her fulness of grace, from which favour may be granted. The Greek word, literally translated, means "much graced," and is correctly translated "highly favoured." "Joy to you," said the angel; "thou art a much graced—or greatly favoured—woman." We are at once reminded of the salutation of the same angel to Daniel, five hundred years before this date, whom he approached and touched and said, "O man, greatly beloved; fear not; peace be unto thee; be strong, yea, be strong."¹ These words are the communication of grace to the one so saluted and addressed, and must have thrilled his heart with a sense of God's favour; as I am sure it would your heart and mine if the words were spoken to us. Perhaps we may even get a fuller idea of the meaning of this part of the salutation if we look at the word in another place where it occurs in the New Testament. In Ephesians i. 6, Paul says of the saints that "we are *accepted* in the Beloved." Now, then, we find that, as a matter of fact, the salutation of Gabriel to Mary was the declaration of her own salvation in Christ, as well as the prelude to the announcement that she had been chosen to bear the Lord her Saviour in her own body. Mary was first accepted in the Beloved, or greatly graced by Him, and then brought Him forth into the world that we, through grace, might also be "highly favoured, or accepted in Him." How great was that favour—beloved of God;

¹ Dan. x. 19.

accepted in the Beloved ; and highly favoured, as the providential means of giving to the world the Incarnate Saviour ! May we hope in some way to inherit such a blessing ; not, indeed, as Mary did, but in some such way that we shall be accepted in the Beloved and highly favoured with the privilege of bearing at least His name to others, who also shall be accepted in Him. And does not his subsequent word to her make this very plain ?—“Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God.”¹ The Romanists have distorted all this, and have made her to be the fountain of grace, instead of the recipient of grace.

3. *The Lord with thee.* This expression reminds us at once of an almost identical one used by the angel to Gideon when he came to announce that God had chosen him to be the judge and deliverer of Israel : “The Lord with thee, thou mighty man of valour.”² Taken with the next word of assurance we have an expression with which we are all familiar, which we have had many occasions to appropriate to ourselves : “Fear not ; I am with thee.” Why he should have thus assured her is not far to see. He was about to make a communication to her which might well stagger her faith and fill her with a sense of responsibility almost beyond the possibility of human support. In the first place, to be made the mother of the Incarnate God was such a responsibility that it might in her simple mind far out-balance the honour which it conferred. Then, perhaps, the angel would anticipate the terrible thought which would come to her, that should she be found with child of the Holy Ghost, not having known a man, and being betrothed to a fond and loving husband, it might involve her in shame and sore trouble. Therefore the angel gave her good consolation, and would anticipate or pre-

¹ Luke i. 30.

² Judg. vi. 12.

vent her fears. We may take these words to ourselves. For though we are not in the same case with Mary, yet every call of God to us, every grace of God received by us, every event in our lives brought about by reason of our acceptance with God and devotion to Him, brings us into circumstances that awaken in us the fear of men. It is always at cost that we accept the favour of God. For to be a friend of God is to incur the enmity of the world. Let us, however, call to mind some circumstances in which this oft-repeated assurance of God is full of comfort. When God called Moses to go down into Egypt and bear to Pharaoh His message and command to let His people go, and to the people to deliver them from the house of bondage, many things arose in his mind that made him afraid. He said boldly that he feared—nay, was convinced—that neither Pharaoh nor the children of Israel themselves would believe the story he should have to tell them of the Burning Bush and his commission received from God. Pharaoh would deride him, and the children of Israel would certainly distrust him as either mad or a self-seeking man. To this natural and very reasonable fear God replied out of the bush that burned with fire, "*Certainly I will be with thee.*"¹ So also when in later times He who dwelt in the bush of human nature called His disciples about Him and showed them all the nations of the earth, with all the powers of the world, the flesh, and the devil confederate together to resist and oppose His gospel, He bade them go and preach and make disciples of all nations—He allayed their fears and encouraged their hearts by saying, "*Lo, I am with you alway*, even unto the end of the age."² It was this assurance of the Divine Presence and Power that made them strong; that makes us strong to do and dare for God. As the

¹ Exod. iii. 12.

² Matt. xxviii. 20.

Lord was with Moses and with Gideon, and with the first disciples in prosecuting their great calling against the odds of the world and all enemies, so is He with us and all those who undertake service for Him. Then we have this same good word of cheer and encouragement when we are compassed about or confronted with afflictions and dangers personal to ourselves. “Thou art My servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away. *Fear thou not*: for I am with thee. Be not dismayed, for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness. . . . For I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee: *Fear not*; I will help thee. Fear not, thou worm Jacob. . . . I will help thee, saith the Lord and thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.”¹ With such assurances as these Daniel went into the lions’ den; the children, Hebrew children, into the fiery furnace; and in all ages God’s people have faced dangers and difficulties, suffered afflictions and trials, passed through periods of darkness and spiritual distress, sacrificed themselves, their pride—their good name even—rather than withdraw from their allegiance to Him, or shrink from duty imposed upon them. When human nature shrinks and hangs back, when foes assail, when friends forsake, when men say all manner of evil against us for His name’s sake; by honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report, as unknown and yet well known; the people of God, with this sweet and precious promise in their hearts, “Fear not, *the Lord is with thee*,” have been able to go forward without terror. It was this promise that gave David comfort in prospect of death, and it is this which comforts us as well: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, *I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me*; Thy rod and

¹ Isa. xli. 9–14.

Thy staff they comfort me." ¹ But for this assurance, what would, what could, we do as we enter the waters of death? It is likewise this assurance which gives us comfort and peace when we meet together to pray or worship in His name, for "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." ² This is to be *with us* in all the fulness and plenitude of His love, His power, and His grace. Looking forward to the time when we shall have done with earth, what is the chief joy we are to anticipate? Why, is it not that we are to be *with Him* as He has been with us? "Father, I will that they also whom Thou hast given Me, be *with Me* where I am, that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given Me." ³ Had He not comforted His disciples with this promise just before, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" ⁴? We shall never exhaust the promise of God given alike to Mary and to us: "Fear not; the Lord is with you."

4. *Blessed thou among women.* With every responsibility comes blessing. It is true that Mary was highly favoured; but that favour also involved great sorrow and suffering, for a sword should pierce through her heart. Yet God does not call to suffering and responsibility without bestowing compensating blessing. The most lowly among women, she was, by reason of her high destiny, to become greatest among them. "All generations," she sang after that, "shall call me blessed." ⁵ Now, the Romanists have changed this to mean that God then and there *deified* her above all women; whereas it was a simple statement that among women no one should be esteemed to have been so highly honoured. Jael was called by

¹ Ps. xxiii. 4. ² Matt. xviii. 20. ³ John xvii. 24.

⁴ John xiv. 3. ⁵ Luke i. 48.

Deborah “blessed *above* all women in the tent.”¹ Mary is blessed *among* them—a chosen and highly favoured one, but not lifted above them as an object of adoration and worship. Her blessedness was in being permitted to bear in her body the Incarnate God, and for His sake, and in the sanctification which came to her through the favour, to set before us in her own person and character the first, the highest example of sweet womanhood and motherhood—a type of saintship which has honoured all women in all ages.

¹ Judg. v. 24.

VII

THE SON OF THE HIGHEST

“He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest.”
—LUKE i. 32.

IN a most remarkable manner Plato, the Athenian sage, anticipated by a philosophical speculation the great doctrine of what John calls “The Word,” which was the fundamental tenet of that great thinker’s theology. But the speculations of Plato concerning the Logos or Word of God were too deep for common understanding. Athanasius, the greatest of the early christian theologians, confessed that the more he studied and wrote about Plato’s doctrine of the Logos, the less he understood it, and the less able he was to express his thoughts. Whatever of truth there was in the doctrine of the Logos, as announced and expounded by Plato, it must be confessed that “the immeasurable distance between the size of the object and the capacity of the human mind ” put it beyond the reach of mankind. Philosophers might silently meditate upon this mystery which was suggested to the profound mind of the Athenian sage, and temperately discuss it, “but their lofty speculations neither convinced the understanding nor stirred the passions of the Platonists themselves, and were carelessly overlooked by the idle, the busy, and even the studious part of mankind.” But when John, the beloved disciple, adopted the term which Plato had used as a key with which to unlock the

mystery of the Godhead, and introduced it into the wonderful prologue to the fourth Gospel, saying, "In the beginning was the Word (Logos), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,"¹ he put the whole Platonic speculation into a single sentence. By his further statement, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth,"² he, in another simple sentence, embodied that philosophy in the person of the Incarnate Jehovah—Jesus, and brought the whole matter level to the understanding of all men, to the peasant as well as to the sage. The revelation of the Word as the Incarnate God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the object of christian faith and worship, has ever since been embraced by an increasing multitude of men and women in every nation of the earth; while the philosophical doctrine of Plato remains unknown to the world outside a select few scholars. Certainly it has no power with men, for it is impossible for men, even of the loftiest understanding, to comprehend a metaphysical speculation so subtle. For who by searching can find out God?

The doctrine of the Incarnate Logos is no less a mystery than the speculative doctrine of the philosopher of Greece; but it is such a mystery *in revelation* that it attracts rather than repels the mind, and engages the heart as well as the intellect of mankind. We do not pretend that we comprehend the hidden depth of the great "mystery of Godliness; God was manifested in the flesh"; but we do most cordially embrace the fact. And although we can neither comprehend the measure of this eternal mystery, nor explain the *how* of it, we do know, by an inner power of knowledge greater even than the reason itself, the truth of it. It is a singular

¹ John i. 1.

² *Ibid.* i. 14.

fact in human experience, testified alike by the learned and the unlearned, the wise and the simple, that it is just at the point of our deepest need, both intellectually and spiritually, that we fly for refuge to that which most utterly confounds our reason and staggers our faith. "A faith that is not founded on revelation," says an acute thinker, and one not at all friendly to the christian religion, "must remain destitute of any firm assurance." Hence all systems of religion founded on the observation of nature, or upon speculative inquiry, have invariably degenerated into mere superstition. Nothing less than the mysteries of revelation will satisfy the human mind and heart. No resource in ourselves, and nothing in nature, nor anything which the human mind can conceive, has in it that which can satisfy our deepest longings and necessities. We are reproached for believing that which we can neither understand nor explain, and which seems to some to be a *denial*, and is confessed by us, at least, to *baffle* the intellectual reason. Our reply to this is :

"The heart hath a reason that the reason knows not of."

Abraham could not understand *how* God could fulfil what He had promised, but he believed "that what He *had* promised He was able also to perform." Therefore he "staggered not at the promise."¹ His faith was counted to him for righteousness. So, in like manner, we do not understand *how* the Word could be made flesh, nor *how*, in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, there should exist a perfect and unconfused union between the human and the divine nature. Yet we firmly believe this, and it is not only *counted* to us for righteousness, but "is *made* unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification."² The world has yet to learn that

¹ Rom. iv. 20, 21. ² 1 Cor. i. 30.

which our faith has taught us, "That in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God." Yet it has "pleased God by the foolishness of preaching (the declaration of the revelation of God) to save them that believe."¹ We therefore go on preaching Christ, "unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness, but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."² In a recent little book on the "Creed of the Christian," Canon Gore treats of the holy mysteries of our faith. In the chapter on the Holy Trinity he supposes that this question is put to him: "How can three persons be one God? If the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, here then are three Gods, according to the simple law of addition." In answering this difficulty, the Canon gives an interesting extract from a letter from the late Professor Huxley. Canon Gore says:

"I do not think it would become a thoughtful man to reject the doctrine of the Trinity on this ground. At any rate, Professor Huxley would not allow you to. He once said as much in a private letter which he gave me leave to quote, and I learned his words by heart, for I thought they might be useful. 'I have not,' he said, 'the slightest objection to offer *a priori* (that is, on grounds of reason) to all the propositions of the three creeds. The mysteries of the Church are child's-play compared with the mysteries of nature. The doctrine of the Trinity is not more puzzling than the necessary antinomies (that is, contradictions) of physical nature.'"

Now this remark concerning the mysteries of the Trinity applies, of course, to the mystery involved in the unique personality of our Lord, which is, indeed, a part of the mystery of the Trinity. Ought we not to be

¹ 1 Cor. i. 21. ² *Ibid.* i. 23, 24.

careful not to allow ourselves to be mystified by these puzzling questions? A wise and intelligent scientist does not reject a truth of revealed religion *because* he cannot fathom the mystery involved in it. He has been compelled to bow before the mysterious facts with which he is everywhere confronted in nature ; but he does not and cannot deny those facts. Now, we are confronted with a mystery in the divine-human personality of Jesus. We do not understand the apparent contradiction here presented to our understanding, but here it is, and explain it or deny it as we will, the fact remains. When I say the fact remains, I do not mean alone the inexplicable mode of His dual nature, but the undeniable fact of His unique personality. Many may deny the Deity of our Lord Jesus, but they are unable to account for the moral glory of His character on any theory of human nature, or development, or culture, which they can suggest. It is far more easy for the reason to accept the truth concerning Jesus as set forth in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments than it is to construct a satisfactory theory of His unique personality—*His pre-eminent greatness*—apart from the mystery of the Incarnation.

Let me give you one illustration of what I have just said about flying to the greatest mysteries in the time of our greatest need. The best-known verse in the Bible is: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."¹ Now here are just the two things which we most need and must have, if we are to have peace at all—the "Love" of God, and "Everlasting Life." The love of God, without everlasting life, will not suffice us. Neither would everlasting life, without the love of God, meet our need. To live

¹ John iii. 16.

everlastingly, without the love of God and all that His love implies, would be to be saddled with a burden of existence simply intolerable. But where shall we go to discover the love of God, and where shall we find everlasting life? "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork,"¹ but they do not reveal His love nor discover to us eternal life. A vision of beauty, a glory of sunshine is indeed there; but just at the moment of our highest delight in contemplating the power and wisdom of the Creator, a bolt of lightning leaps from the same heavens and strikes us dead, or a hurricane sweeps us off our feet and away out of life. We are less assured concerning love and life when we contemplate the inscrutable ways of Providence; for that which baffled Job and made his life miserable confounds us. If we look within, we find only darkness; and in whatever direction we look without, we behold only confusion. Where, then, is the love and life of God revealed to us? For these two great necessities of the human soul we must needs go to that Nazareth maiden in whose womb the Incarnate God was conceived, and to that manger-cradle in little Bethlehem where the Saviour of the world was born; and there, bowing down before Him with the Magi, we behold both the Love and Life of God revealed *to* us and *for* us; and as we behold, we hear again the announcement of the holy angel which spake to the shepherds of Bethlehem, "Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."² It is of this Saviour, Christ the Lord, the Incarnate God, that we are to speak this morning, especially in regard to the

¹ Ps. xix. 1.² Luke ii. 10.

one distinguishing characteristic of His personality—*“He shall be great.”*

I. THE GREATNESS OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. John the Baptist was great in the sight of the Lord; that is, according to the judgment of God, as God knows and judges men. But the Son of the Highest *was* great; not as compared with other men, but great in Himself. Every element and substance of greatness was in Him. Reading the brief life and work of John the Baptist, great and honourable as they were, if we had been called upon for a judgment, we should not have called him so great a man as Moses, or Isaiah, or Elijah; but we bow to the judgment which God has put upon him, and call him the peer of the greatest men who have ever lived, for, says Jesus, “there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.”¹ But greatness among men is only a comparative greatness. One man may be greater than another; but the difference is only one of degree, not in kind. Let me suppose the very greatest man in the world. His greatness towers above me and excites my admiration and wonder. But, after all, he is only *greater* than I; his genius or abilities are of the *same kind*, be he soldier, statesman, poet, or philosopher. I am something of all these, and so are you—something of a soldier, something of a poet, something of a statesman, something of a philosopher. It is true that I have no great degree in these characteristics or qualities; still they are in me and in you. The greatness of Jesus was not one of comparison or degree. He was incomparably great. He was immeasurably great. In a word, He was great without qualification. I cannot hope to set all His greatness before you, yet I may try to present to your thoughts some of the main points of His greatness.

¹ Matt. xi. 11.

1. *He was great in His divine-human personality.* Jesus was the God-man. I can conceive of God, and I know something of what man is; but here I am presented to a unique personality. Not a deified man, not a humanized God; but God and man in one perfect personality—perfect in His Godhead and perfect in His humanity. There are two words used in the Greek to designate man; one describes a male of the human species, and the other describes the human race. Jesus in His humanity was *a* man in the sense of being a male man; but He was man in the sense of being of the human race. “For verily not of angels doth He take hold, but He taketh hold of the seed of Abraham.”¹ He was not two personalities under one form, but one personality. The union between God and man was so perfect that there was neither confusion nor division in his personality. This is too high a theme to be debated here, but it is a part of the glorious mystery which the heart understands, although the reason cannot comprehend nor human language describe it. There are unspeakable things and things past understanding. No one can fully understand or set forth in words either “the *peace* of God that passeth understanding,”² “the *love* of Christ that passeth knowledge,”³ or the *gift* of God which is “unspeakable.”⁴ Paul, when he was caught up into Paradise, “heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful [marg., “*possible*”] for a man to utter.”⁵ In this sense the greatness of His divine-human personality passeth understanding. “His name shall be called Wonderful;”⁶ that is, one with whom nothing can be compared, and who can be compared with nothing. “In all things He hath the pre-eminence.”⁷ If any of you think that such thoughts of Jesus are vain

¹ Heb. ii. 16 (R.V.). ² Phil. iv. 7. ³ Eph. iii. 19. ⁴ 2 Cor. ix. 15.

⁵ 2 Cor. xii. 4. ⁶ Isa. ix. 6. ⁷ Col. i. 18.

thoughts or useless thoughts, then let me assure you that your faith will never be strong, appropriating, and wonder-working until it is firmly built upon *this* Rock of Ages. It will never be a victorious faith until it is energized by union with the Son of the Highest. There is nothing more pernicious and dangerous to the christian life of our times than the incessant outcry against "theology." The spiritual life of man cannot live *on* ethics, however much it must embody itself *in* ethics to demonstrate its genuineness. The spiritual life of man is first awakened by contact with, and then fed on, the mysteries of God. The closer we get to those mysteries, the more we familiarize ourselves with them, the closer we get to God, and the more sure our hope in God becomes.

2. *He is great in His love.* If I were to ask any thoughtful person among my hearers what was the outstanding revelation contained in the New Testament—what was the first and greatest impression made upon his mind or heart in reading the New Testament?—I have no doubt I should get this answer: "The principal revelation, and the first and deepest impression made upon my mind by reading the New Testament is, *the great love that God hath toward man.*" And that is true. With the coming of Jesus into the world, we cannot but perceive and feel that a new power has come along with Him, and that power is Love; the love of God toward man. Love, not only in words, but in deeds; and not in words and deeds only, but in manner—a divine manner of tenderness and sympathy—such as the world never knew or dreamed of before. It was this fact and conviction which lived deepest down in Paul's soul, and which led him to exclaim, out of his bursting heart, "He loved me, and gave Himself for me."¹ God in Christ

¹ Gal. ii. 20.

loves us not a little ; not even much ; but with all His love. He has measured it out to us in the infinite measure of the Incarnation, than which there is no larger measure. All the angels of God together could not convey the fulness of God's love measured out to us in our Lord Jesus Christ. God has no more love than is in Jesus Christ. And, blessed be God, nothing less than this infinite measure of God's love will satisfy my soul, or your soul, if you really have been awakened to the need that is in you. It has pleased God to represent Himself as being a husband unto us. Well, let me ask you with what would, or ought, a wife be satisfied in her husband? Let us suppose that one should come to a good woman, or, for that matter, to any right womanly woman, and propose himself to her for a husband. He says to her, " I am great in position, in wealth, in power, in wisdom and human culture. There is no one greater than I in these respects ; and all these I lay at your feet. You may draw on them all at your will and pleasure, and you shall never find me wanting, either in willingness or ability, to honour your drafts." The woman looks at him and says, " But you have said nothing about *loving me*. To me neither position, wealth, wisdom, nor power would signify, unless I had your love. Do you not love me ? " " Well—yes—a little. I will try and be good to you." The woman would reply, if she were a real woman, " You say you love me a *little*. Sir, unless you love me *much*, yea, with all the strength of your love, I shall never be sure of any part of it." So, though the least of God's favours to us would be condescending grace, we cannot do without His love, and must have the full measure of it. Anything less than all His love would leave us in doubt as to the possession of any part of it. It is the revelation

of the Love of God in all its fulness that gives us hope and peace, and makes us sure.

Love may *send* a gift, or love may *bring* a gift. God did not send us the gift of His love by Jesus; but in Christ He brought us His love. You may have sent many gifts the past Christmas to many poor people. It was good of you to do it. In a few cases you took into your own hands and carried your gift; it may have been a Christmas dinner to some one poor and needy. Ah! it was that personal coming with the gift that made it so precious to the one you brought it to. Now, Jesus is at once the full measure of God's love to us, and in Him it is personally administered. Had God sent word of His love to us by an angel, even by Gabriel himself, and commissioned him to attend us by day and night, to guard and keep us, that would have been great grace; but it would not be to us what the love of God in Christ is—for Jesus is Love Incarnate, and He abides with us always.

3. *He is great in His condescension.* This great truth is frequently set forth and illustrated in the scriptures. When Paul would excite his beloved Philippians to a sweet condescension toward each other, he said, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery (something to be for ever snatched and insisted on) to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."¹ And the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says of Him, "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the

¹ Phil. ii. 5-8.

same. For verily He took not hold on the nature of angels, but took hold on the seed of Abraham.”¹ Thus in all things He was made like unto His brethren. There is no such example of condescension as this. With what may we compare it? When we consider who He was, and whence He came to us, and what we are, and where we are, we are amazed that He should have condescended to our low and wretched estate, not only in *coming to* us, but in becoming *one of* us. For what he thought to be the good of the Republic, Diocletian renounced the purple of Rome and retired to a PRIVATE PALACE. He did not take his place down among the people from whom he sprang. But, supposing he had resigned his throne in order to become one of the humblest citizens, in position and circumstances, what would that have been in condescension to the step down which Jesus has made in order to be among us and save us? Another Roman emperor was taken prisoner in one of the wars with Persia, and was reduced to slavery by the haughty Eastern king, and made to do menial work among his palace servants. That was *humiliation*, but it was not *condescension*. Or another emperor, Julian, when he was the Cæsar of Gaul, and in time of great hardship and discouragement, left his royal tent, abandoned his horse, distributed the Imperial provisions among his troops, and, taking his place at their head, marched barefooted with them, and lived on the coarsest fare of the common soldiers. That was *condescension*. And yet such an act is not worthy to be compared with the voluntary condescension of our Lord Jesus Christ, who came from the throne of the universe to be one with us ; and, under the broken law, became obedient unto death for us. How hard it is for a man who has been rich, surrounded with every

¹ Heb. ii. 14, 16.

comfort, luxury and elegance of life ; who has been looked up to and honoured and served by all about him, to be forced into an estate of poverty and contempt ! You remember how bitterly the iron of such a fate entered into the soul of the patriarch Job. But Jesus, " though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich." ¹ An entire picture of perfect condescension and grace is seen in this voluntary descent of our Lord Jesus Christ from heaven to earth ; from inhabiting the praises of eternity to an inheritance of shame and contempt among men, even the very men whom He came to save.

This great condescension is seen in the fact that He entered into union with human nature under any circumstances. Although He did not take hold on *sinful* human nature, He took hold on *our* nature, and was made in the likeness of sinful flesh and in fashion as a man. He came not only as a man, but as a servant. It would have been amazing had He come as a king, and been born in a palace, and condescended to us from the most glorious throne on earth. But He came as a servant, and as the lowliest of all servants, to mete out His own and His father's love in the greatest as in the meanest offices, even to the washing of our feet. When I consider another fact in His condescension, as set forth in the two genealogies preserved to us by Matthew and Luke, my soul is filled with wonder and amazement. What shall we say when we discover that in taking human nature He chose to take it through a line of ancestors on whom the *bar sinister* was conspicuously drawn ? For among His ancestors I read the names of Rahab the harlot, Tamar, another harlot, and Bathsheba, the dishonoured and adulterous wife of Uriah, not to speak of Jacob the supplanter, and David the adulterer

¹ 2 Cor. viii. 9.

and murderer. Oh, surely our Lord in His condescension wanted us to know that there is no man or woman so fallen or sunk in sin but that He came to declare His love and bring His saving help to them! No wonder He has drawn the heart of humanity to Himself; no wonder that in all ages the sinful and the poor have ever seen in Him the only possible hope of salvation and recovery.

Again, we see this great condescension in that, having come to us, He was not ashamed to call us brethren. Having identified Himself with our race, He took the full measure of kinship upon Him. He did not, He does not, He will not shirk any of the logical relations of that kinship. He is not ashamed to call us brethren, and to do so openly. To the weakest, to the poorest, and to the most sinful He comes and says, "I am *your* brother, you are *My* brother." He who made the worlds and created the angels was not ashamed to take in His blessed arms the children of the poor women who brought their babes to Him. What a sight is this to behold, the Son of the Highest cuddling little children in His arms! He was not ashamed to lay His spotless hand on the rotten flesh of a vile leper and say, "My brother, be thou clean." He was not ashamed to allow a poor fallen and outcast woman, who crept into Simon's house, where He was dining, to wash His feet with her scalding tears, and wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kiss them with her burning lips. The Pharisees who sat at meat with Him would not have suffered *that* indignity to *their* holy feet. They whispering among themselves said, "Ah! we have been mistaken in Him; He is no prophet, else would He have known what manner of woman she is that kisses His feet." They did not, could not, understand such condescension. But they did not know Him. He was not ashamed of His

poor fallen sister, for, turning to Simon, He said, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven."¹ Before those proud, self-righteous Pharisees He openly acknowledged her. He was not ashamed to sit upon the well's kerb and talk of "the gift of God" with an outcast Samaritan woman, whom her own townspeople would not be seen in company with at the well. He was not ashamed to proclaim openly before the crowd that Zacchæus was His brother, and that He had come to bring salvation to his house. Mr. Forbes, the great war correspondent, has recently written the story of what he says was the bravest deed he ever saw. It was the rescue of a common soldier's life, in the face of what seemed certain death, by Lieut.-Col. Beresford. But I will tell you the bravest thing I ever saw. A fashionable and wealthy young man, walking down Fifth Avenue in New York in company with some of his social companions, espied before him the slouching, ill-clad form of what seemed to be a common tramp—miserable, dirty, and forlorn. Looking at him a second time with a keen glance, he left the side of his fashionable friends and went straight to the tramp, and, laying one arm across his shoulder, said to the surprised and miserable man, "Why, Charlie, dear chum, what does this mean? How come you here and in this condition?" The young man had recognised in the poor outcast the much-beloved chum of his college days, and, without waiting to inquire or know anything of the history of his life during the years in which they had dropped apart, he hastened to call him friend even in the face of his great fashionable companions, and at once said to them, "Excuse me, gentlemen, this is an old college chum of mine whom I have not seen for years, and I am going to dine with him." Taking him by the arm, the young man walked his

¹ Luke vii. 47.

miserable and fallen friend off to Delmonico's, and, in the face of day and all the fashion of New York, ordered dinner fit for two kings, and feasted with him. He was not ashamed to be known as his friend. That was a brave deed, a deed worthy the love of Christ. But oh, what was such condescension as that compared with the condescension of the Son of the Highest, who confesses us before His Father and His angels, and even down here calls us brethren? He is not ashamed to call us brethren ; alas ! that we are sometimes, and very often, ashamed to call Him Saviour, except in the privacy of our own closets.

In His condescension He was made sin, suffered shame, and tasted death for us. Do you ask me how He was made sin? I do not know *how*, I only know that He *was* made sin for us—that, somehow, He bore in His body our sins upon the tree, after all our iniquities were laid upon Him. Somehow, He entered into the shame and horror of our condition before God. How horrible it was for Him to do it let those blood-drops of sweat that covered His body in the garden tell. How His holy soul must have shrunk from even the imputation of sin, only He, who knew no sin, can tell. I say again, I do not know how He was made sin, and I say, reverently, I don't care how. I accept the condescending, gracious fact, and rejoice in the unspeakable love of it. How was He made shame for us? That is somewhat easier to see, at least in some of the outside features of this act of condescension. Look at Him who was rich becoming the poor wanderer on the earth. Born of a poor virgin peasant, reared in a poor little house, apprenticed in His boyhood and youth to the poor trade of Joseph the carpenter ; always living in a despised province and town. Later on in His life He said, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of

Man hath not where to lay His head.”¹ This was shame for Him as we count shame. But it was small shame to that which cost Him His reputation among men—one of our dearest possessions. He was denounced as a wine-bibber and a glutton; sneered at as the friend of publicans and sinners; proclaimed the agent and partner of the devil himself; arrested, after betrayal, as a common breeder of sedition; falsely accused, smitten, spat upon; the hair pulled from His cheeks; condemned as a criminal; bound to a pillar and whipped by the brutal soldiers of Rome; clothed in an old cast-off military coat, and mocked; crowned with thorns, and crucified between the two worst criminals found in the Roman prisons at Jerusalem. Oh, who can know the shame to which He condescended for our sakes? How shall we measure the amazing condescension of that act which led the Lord and Master of death Himself to submit to that awful executioner of sinners—the last enemy of mankind and of God? Yet, for the joy that was set before Him, of delivering us whom He was not ashamed to call brethren, He endured the cross and despised the shame of it. Was He not rightly called “great” by Gabriel?

Jesus did all this for us voluntarily. He was not forced into any position which He took. “Lo, I come; I delight to do Thy will, O my God.”² There was no reluctance, no hesitancy, but an infinite delight in His heart all the time. Great deeds must be judged by the motives which inspire them. Napoleon did great deeds—deeds that dazzled the eyes of the world; deeds which made him for a time the world’s hero; but we must judge of the greatness of Napoleon and his deeds by the motive which inspired him. The more we study his life and character, the more we execrate both. His

¹ Matt. viii. 20.

² Ps. xl. 7, 8.

only motive was a mean, selfish, and diabolical ambition, for the sake of which he overturned the world, slaughtered hundreds of thousands of men, and filled the earth with the lamentations and cries of countless widows and orphans. In Jesus we see real greatness in the voluntary love which He had for us. He came willingly. He came and achieved, that we might share with Him His own blessedness.

4. *He was great in His grace toward us.* Grace is unmerited favour. "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹ Grace is a much-used word in the New Testament, as if not enough could be said of this disposition of our Lord. "Grace abounding, to the chief of sinners"—a title we might all borrow from Bunyan with which to give title to our own autobiographies. Considering His greatness in this respect, we must take into account who and what we were. A race dishonoured and outcast from God; driven forth under the curse of the law. Characters lost, standing with God lost, helpless and hopeless. We who were created for God and eternal happiness are by sin destined to be the companions of devils in eternal misery, shame, and contempt. We may shrink from taking or admitting this heavy indictment against our race, but such is the truth. If a few remnants of our glorious nature have been saved from the wreck of the fall, and diligently cultivated into the appearance of some kind of virtue and refinement, the study of human history, with its wars, its crimes of every nameless kind and description, its hates and enmities and jealousies, and treasons and unspeakable wickednesses, should show us that God's indictment against the race of man is a true one. If we withdraw ourselves individually from the mass of mankind, and make some kind of stand

¹ 2 Cor. viii. 9.

for ourselves against this indictment, each one of us knows that in our own hearts we are alienated and estranged from God; that our boasted virtues are largely superficial; that in our hearts, in our thoughts, if not in our words and deeds, there is a fountain of evil, a cesspool of corruption which we would not willingly have the world look into. "The carnal mind is enmity against God."¹ The works of the flesh the world over are "adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like."² If we have not all gone astray *alike*, we have all alike *gone astray*, every one in his own way. There are none of us righteous—no, not one; for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God; and there is no greater sin among our many sins than that which leads us to deny our sin. Now, the greatness of His grace is seen in that He comes with grace to such a race and such individuals of the race as we are, collectively and individually.

Then consider His grace in what He brings to us. He did not come to condemn, but to forgive the world. Almost the first words of His public ministry were words of forgiveness: "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee."³ How these words of our Lord filled all the land where He lived and wrought for God and man! The opening words of the apostolic gospel are in the same strain. "Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins."⁴ His forgiving grace is not a commodity to be bargained for, to be bought with good works, or by prayers and repentance. Forgiveness is the full and free proclamation of

¹ Rom. viii. 7. ² Gal. v. 19-21. ³ Matt. ix. 2. ⁴ Acts xiii. 38.

God to the whole world. Yes, the unconditional favour of God. He does not proclaim, "If you will repent, I will forgive you"; but He proclaims, "Hear Me; I forgive you; repent and be reconciled to Me." "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them."¹ Believe it, my friends, we do not half understand the grace of God in Christ. There is a fulness and freeness in it, there are depths and heights and breadths and reaches in it that we have not grasped. With forgiveness He brings justification, which sets us right, as to standing, with God; and with justification comes the new birth, which begins to put us right characteristically before Him, to restore to us by a new creation that which was lost to us in the old creation, by reason of sin. Nor does He deal out these gracious gifts and then stand apart from us; but when God sends forth the Spirit of His Son Jesus Christ into our hearts crying, "Abba, Father," He makes us the heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ, as well as the sons of God. He does not save us and then fling us back upon ourselves to make the best of a new trial and opportunity; but Himself enters into us and becomes the substance of our hope and the hope of our glory. He abides with us on the earth in the person of the Holy Ghost our Comforter; He interceded for us as our Advocate at the right hand of God. He has gone to prepare a place for us, that we may be with Him in His glory and share it with Himself. He stooped to our low estate and position that He might lift us to His high estate and into His glory. Having first taken part with our nature, He has given it to us to be partakers of the divine nature. Truly we can understand a little what the angel meant when he said, "He shall be great." Who that was not great in Himself—unconditionally

¹ 2 Cor. v. 19.

and incomparably great—could venture to do such great things for us? Surely it is not in man to do these things ; and yet these things only have to be mentioned to convince us that nothing short of them will suffice us in the long run. We only have to compare all earthly greatness, and what comes of it, with the true greatness of Christ Jesus and what comes to us of that, to say of a truth, “There is none great but God in Christ, who hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad.”

This Son of the Highest, this great Saviour, is God’s gift to you. He came to bring and to administer God’s love and life, God’s grace and power. How can you not with all your sin and need accept and trust Him? How can you not, having accepted Him as your Saviour, knowing His greatness (of which I have too inadequately spoken), confide your whole spirit, soul, and body to His keeping ; and how can you not give to Him all that you are and have to serve and glorify Him for ever?

VIII

A MYSTERY—NOT A MYTH

“And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee : therefore also that Holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”—LUKE i. 35.

WRITING to his son Timothy, Paul says, “Without controversy, great is the mystery of Godliness : God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.”¹ The first meaning of the word mystery is “secret.” If we had only the account of the *creation* before us, in the Bible, we might suppose that God had completed His purpose when He finished that work, declared the whole to be good, and then rested on the seventh day and hallowed it. But a further reading and study of the word of God shows us that the creation was but the beginning of the “mystery of God.” God had a great purpose in the creation of man, the mystery or secret of which has only been gradually unfolded to us through the course of the ages. The centre of this mystery is at last seen in Christ and the Church. “This is a great mystery,” says Paul, “but I speak concerning Christ and the Church,”² which is His body, and which in the ages to come will at once reveal and embody the mystery of the hidden wisdom of God. Little by little

¹ 1 Tim. iii. 16.

² Eph. v. 32.

God has taken us into His confidence, until at last we are fairly able to understand the "mystery of the Gospel."¹ In the passage quoted in the opening sentence of this discourse there is a statement of the "great mystery," and of several of its many chapters. They stand in this order :

The mystery of the *Incarnation*, "God manifested in the flesh."

The mystery of the *Resurrection*, "Justified in the Spirit"; that is, raised from the dead.

The mystery of *redemption*, "Seen of angels," which may refer either to the resurrection or to the crucifixion, that mystery "which the angels desire to look into."²

"The mystery . . . that the *Gentiles* should be fellow heirs and of the same body."³ The Incarnation was "preached to the Gentiles."

"The mystery of *Faith*,"⁴ "believed on in the world."

The "*mystery of the kingdom*"⁵—the first radiant movement of which was seen when Christ "was received up into glory."

To these and other mysteries mentioned in the scriptures of both Old and New Testaments may be added the Second Coming of our Lord, which is the central fact in the closing chapter of wonders by which shall be "finished the mystery of God."⁶

If we hold steadily in our mind the thought that the revelation of God, both in word and in event, is the gradual unfolding of the "eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ,"⁷ we shall be able to surmount many difficulties which we find in the scriptures and which are propounded to us by the common unbelief of the world. As we have been able to bear the "revelation of the mystery," God has from time to time "un-

¹ Eph. vi. 19. ² 1 Pet. i. 12. ³ Eph. iii. 3-6. ⁴ 1 Tim. iii. 9.

⁵ Mark iv. 11. ⁶ Rev. x. 7 (R.V.). ⁷ Eph. iii. 11.

covered our ears," and whispered His purpose and plans to us. "Unto you," says our Lord, "it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God."¹ This method of God in revealing to us "things to come," or explaining to us things wonderful and strange that *have* come to pass, prevents surprise on the one hand, and on the other, enables us to understand many things which we otherwise could not understand. It also prepares us for "new things" which the world cannot accept or receive, because the world knoweth not the mysteries of God. It is true that the secrets of God when once communicated are open secrets, "but the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, because they are spiritually discerned."² Having ears to hear, he hears not; and eyes to see, sees not; for had they heard and seen that which was communicated by the prophets and enacted before their eyes, they would not have rejected and crucified the Lord of Glory, nor would they now turn away from those things which are reported and demonstrated to be true "by many infallible proofs."³

Since the first announcement of the coming of a Saviour, given to fallen man in the garden of Eden, the world has been prepared (by this promise) for the larger development of this great mystery. When God enlarged and made this Edenic promise more plain, in the covenant made with Abraham, concerning his seed, in whom "shall all families of the earth be blessed,"⁴ this "mystery" of God was further unfolded. From that time onward the coming of the Messiah became the passionate expectation of the Jewish people. As the time drew nigh for Christ to come, that expectation flamed into an uncontrollable fanaticism. The Jews of our Lord's time became infatuated with the belief and desire that the coming Messiah would be a great

¹ Mark iv. 11. ² 1 Cor. ii. 14. ³ Acts i. 3. ⁴ Gen. xii. 3.

temporal prince. They had not given heed to *all* the unfoldings of the mystery by the prophets, and so were led to expect only a great conquering prince who should deliver them from the oppression of their enemies and establish them on the earth amid the glories of the Messianic kingdom. In other words, they had overlooked the mystery of our Lord's humiliation; and so rejected Him when He came. "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not."¹ This "mystery of God," though especially communicated to the Hebrew people, was not altogether confined to their knowledge. The secret, so to speak, had gotten abroad, and the prophet Haggai tells us that He "was the desire of all nations."² In the meantime His coming has been the theme of all the prophets and the inspiration of all holy song. Since His coming millions of souls have turned to Him for relief from the intolerable burden of human sin and guilt, and for deliverance from the fear of death, in the hope of immortality.

It is here, at the place of the unfolding of the great "mystery of godliness," the announcement of the Incarnation to Mary, that we get close to the source of our salvation. *Now* we know what and whom to trust. The arm of flesh cannot save us. It is vain to put our trust in princes. "Silver and gold shall not be able to deliver in the day of the wrath of the Lord."³ And we know that "by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight."⁴ Despairing, then, of all self-help, of all earthly powers, of riches and self-righteousness, where, and to whom, shall we turn? "I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; He also is become my salvation."⁵ It is here, then, in the Incarnation of the Lord JEHOVAH,

¹ John i. 11. ² Hag. ii. 7. ³ Ezek. vii. 19.

⁴ Rom. iii. 20.

⁵ Isa. xii. 2.

that all human hope for time and eternity centres. The JEHOVAH of the Old Testament is the JESUS of the New Testament.

There is a disposition in our time to deal only with second causes. The too exclusive and too close study of natural phenomena has blinded the eyes of many scientific inquirers to the existence of anything behind phenomena. This disposition to deal with second causes has led to much confusion both in the world of philosophy and of science.

If only we could get behind the mysteries of nature, what revelations of glory there would be! I am conscious of my consciousness, therefore I know that "I am." But what lies behind consciousness? Shall I be content with simply knowing *ex cogito* that "I am"; or shall I push the question back and ask, "Whence am I?" If only we could know what lies behind all things—behind what we call matter, behind life—what peace would come to us in our pursuit after knowledge! On the other hand, if there is a popular disposition to deal with second causes, there is also a strong movement on the part of more thoughtful students, in every branch of human knowledge, to get behind original sources of knowledge; partly that doubts may be resolved, and that the great gaps now existing in our present knowledge may be filled in. A history written fifty years ago, no matter how conscientiously, has to be re-written to-day in order that it may be reliable, or at least edited, to correct mistakes or supply new facts gathered from further sources of information. I have been recently re-reading Gibbon's great history. We have been wont to rely upon Gibbon for facts, however we may have questioned his ingenuousness in those matters where his prejudices led him astray; but now we have to read Gibbon with Guizot's and Millman's notes in order to

be measurably sure of the *facts* which he records. The scientist is pushing his investigations farther and farther in toward the origin of phenomena, and standard scientific books must be revised at least every ten years to keep in touch with our advancing knowledge. The archæologist is literally spading up the whole ancient world, in order to discover some new clue to the maze of history. Every rough arrow head is preserved and treasured beside every fragment of broken pottery, the smallest cylinder, and rudest brick, upon which some hieroglyphics may be found. This that scepticism may be satisfied, and the gaps in our historical and scientific knowledge, if not filled in, at least bridged. Nor is this spirit of backward inquiry content with matters of common history and science. The sacred scriptures themselves have come in for their share of this deeper inquiry. A hundred years ago the christian world was content to accept the scriptures as we have them, without question, as the word of God. But now the question is asked on every hand, "How do you know that the present canon of scripture is the true one? How do you know that Moses wrote the Pentateuch? that Daniel wrote the book attributed to him? that John wrote the fourth gospel, or Peter the epistles that bear his name?" We may not shut our eyes and ears and say, "We will not inquire; we will accept what our fathers accepted; we desire not to look to foundations; we are content with superstructure." If the scriptures are the inspired record of a divine revelation, we want to know it; but we want to know why and how we know it. It is well that it should be so. We do not oppose, but welcome all criticism which carries us back toward the beginning, and that deals in the most thorough manner even with the sacred scriptures, which have received, and still hold, our profoundest veneration and confidence. All this

radical inquiry as to the source of things, this indisposition to accept anything which does not and cannot produce its pedigree, has disturbed the whole superstructure of our knowledge. But as I have said, if all this drives us back to the beginning of things, and settles our knowledge on the eternal foundation of truth, then these seismic disturbances will not have been in vain. Among theologians the same tendency is observable. "Back to the Fathers," cry the Romanist and Anglican. "Back to the Apostles," cries the Protestant Dissenter. "Back to Christ," cry a certain school of new theologians, who are doubtful of the Apostles. "Back to God" is, and must be, the final cry. Back to GOD IN CHRIST—to CHRIST IN GOD. This is to take us to the little city of Nazareth, and place us by the side of Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, and listen, with all our hearts, as the "great mystery of godliness" is unfolded.

There is a striking and significant similarity in the record of the old and the new creation, but in comparing them we feel that we have made great progress; that the mystery—the secret of God—is being wonderfully unfolded, so that we really begin to see the glorious end of it. "In the beginning God *created the heavens and the earth.*"¹ What is the mystery of the creation? GOD! God creating—unfolding His purpose in creation. "In the beginning *was the Word*, and the Word was with God, and the Word WAS GOD; and the WORD WAS MADE FLESH AND DWELT amongst us (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth."² What, then, is the mystery of the new creation? *Why, GOD manifest in the flesh.* God in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. We begin to see! The creation recorded by Moses was only the first chapter in the

¹ Gen. i. 1.

² John i. 1, 14.

"mystery of godliness"; the new creation recorded by John, the full details of which are given by Luke, is the centre and key to the whole mystery, explaining all that went before, and illuminating the pathway along which the finished mystery of God is seen. Let us now turn to the consideration of the "great mystery" of the Incarnation.

I. THE GREAT MYSTERY. We must dismiss from our minds all thought that a mystery is necessarily something vague and uncertain *as to fact*. I have already said that the first meaning of mystery is "a secret"—something not generally or heretofore known. We often speak of the mysterious actions of this or that man, or the mysterious purposes of this or that statesman, of movements which, as yet, are unexplained, or purposes not yet unfolded. We read of some great crime which has been committed, but which is still shrouded in mystery; that both the perpetrator and his motive are secret or unknown. A "mysterious man" is none the less a man; he is only an unknown man. Now, the Incarnation is a mystery, or was a secret, in the purpose of God, but now fully revealed by the announcement of the angel to Mary. The world for long centuries had been apprised of the coming of Immanuel—God with us—and that He should be born of a virgin, and where He should be born—in Bethlehem. But all this was an unsolved mystery until the angel announced to Mary: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that Holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." Here is no *myth*, but the unfolding of a *mystery*.

A myth is the creation of the imagination, usually invented and developed for the purpose of embodying some idea or belief. The mythologies of Greece and

Rome, or of the Hindus, were not facts, but fancies; fancies, I believe, embodied in the stories of their imaginary gods, originating in that mysterious longing in man for the embodiment of God, which was implanted in his nature from the beginning, to prepare and qualify him for the reception of the Incarnation when in the fulness of time Christ should come. While there is this much connection between myths and mysteries, it is utterly wrong and misleading to confound a mystery with a myth, and especially misleading to confound the mystery of the Incarnation with a mythology. And yet there is a school of interpretation—the mythical or legendary school—which, instead of reasoning from the ancient mythologies (the product of the religious imagination in its effort to bring the “gods” within the region of sense) to the great mystery of godliness which brought God Incarnate before us, has reasoned backward from the Incarnation to the mythologies. On this principle the story of the creation of man, his temptation and fall, are treated as myths, pictorial allegories, by the aid of which we may explain or grasp the mystery of man’s appearance upon the earth, and his present degeneration. In like manner the story of the Exodus from Egypt is treated as a mere poetical account of a great struggle for liberty, in which the Hebrews were gloriously victorious over the Pharaoh of Egypt. Abraham and Isaac, these same interpreters tell us, were not real living men, but myths, creations of the religious and poetical imagination, for the purpose of explaining or making history. By many the story of Job is so treated. The struggle of Jacob with the angel is not historical, but mythological, a story of the imagination by which we better learn the nature of the mental conflict of a bad man with his better self. So Elijah’s conflicts with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel is treated. “This is not his-

tory," these interpreters tell us, "but poetry." They condescend to say it is very good poetry and very useful mythology. The story of the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, and of Daniel in the lions' den, are likewise myths. The story of Lot's wife, and of Jonah and the whale, are of the same nature, only not so good as some of the others. Only recently one of our own ministers justified belief in the story of Jonah by appealing to the myth of Andromeda, saying, as we can get good out of the old Greek myth, why should we reject the story of Jonah, when we may likewise draw useful and helpful lessons from it? Having disposed of all the Old Testament mysteries and miracles by an applying to them the mythical theory, it is not so difficult to apply the same method to the Incarnation, which some boldly do. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is treated in like manner; as is also His ascension into heaven. As for His second coming, that is mythed away into death, the revival of christian enthusiasm in some time to come, and a score of other intellectual and religious movements. The resurrection promised to believers is, of course, only the promise of the survival of the spiritual nature of man; a very small advance, if any advance at all, upon the speculative immortality of the ancient Greeks and Romans. But as we read these Bible records, we feel sure that we are called upon to contemplate facts and not fancies. Myths originate in remote periods of past ages, but the Incarnation took place in the days of Augustus Cæsar, when Herod was on the throne in Judæa. It was announced in Nazareth and consummated in Bethlehem of Judæa. It is not easy to unite the historical and the mythical in such a modern case. Who will tell us in what country, in whose reign, and what were the attending historical circumstances in connection with the birth of Jupiter,

or Siva, or Vishnu, or Krishna? The historical setting of the Incarnation is too vivid and real for us to treat it in any sense as a myth, or otherwise than as a fact, extraordinary and stupendous as it is. Let us consider this point a little.

1. *The Incarnation is an extraordinary event, but not therefore to be rejected as a myth.* Extraordinary! Yes; of course. If there had been nothing extraordinary in the advent of JEHOVAH into the world, on His mission of salvation to men, how should we have known that it was JEHOVAH? On what ground should we have been exhorted to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ? If He were after all only a man, conceived and born as other men are conceived and born, with the same hereditary taint of sin and subject to the same inexorable law of mortality as the rest of us—in that case we might indeed embrace His teachings so far as they relate to abstract truth or practical ethics; but trust Him, commit the keeping of our souls to Him, receive from Him the gift of eternal life, we could not. The best and most we could do would be to canonize Him along with Socrates, Marcus Antoninus Aurelius, and other great ethical philosophers. The Unitarians are entirely consistent in this matter. Having denied the supernatural character of Jesus Christ, they refuse to worship or trust Him as God, but accept Him as the greatest of religious teachers. Their faith still stands on the earth, and cannot lift them into the heavens from whence came our Lord Jesus Christ. "To believe that a virgin who had never known a man should conceive and bring forth a son is to believe an *incredible* thing. "To believe this, we must," they say, "believe that the invariable order of nature has been revolutionized, or at least transcended, in such a way as to contradict and overthrow all law." No doubt some

such thought as this was in the innocent mind of the virgin herself when she remarked to the angel, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" Will the laws of nature be suspended, broken, overturned? This, the sceptics affirm, they cannot believe. But is it not a rather large assumption to make when they say that God *cannot* accomplish a purpose which was present with Him when He created nature and man, without violating, suspending, or overturning His laws? Must we assume that we are familiar with all the laws of nature and of God; that we know everything already; that God made no provision for this event when He made man and purposed his redemption? We *do not*, for a moment, believe that the Incarnation or any of the lesser miracles in connection with the "great mystery of godliness" involve any breach or overturning of the laws of nature. We *do* believe, however, that here, as in every other event which we characterize as miraculous, the ordinary course of nature has been departed from; that nature, as we understand nature, has been transcended; that here a higher power than any stored up in nature is at work. To Mary's amazed inquiry the angel made answer, "For *with God* nothing shall be impossible."¹ Here is the *crux* of the controversy. The angel did not announce a natural, but a supernatural event. He did not say that the Holy Thing to be born of her should be conceived according to the course of nature, but according to the power of God; acting, if you please, in nature, out of the *course* of nature and off the lines of any previous human experience. Jesus Himself announced the same great truth when He said to His disciples on a certain occasion, "With men this is impossible, but *with God* all things are possible."² And so, on a later occasion,

¹ Luke i. 37.² Matt. xix. 26.

when Paul was making his defence before Agrippa, he put the case thus to meet the same sceptical spirit, "Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you *that God* should raise the dead?"¹ You will perceive that this is not a question as to what is possible with nature, but whether it is possible *with God*. If we push this controversy back, I think we shall find that with the sceptic it is not so much a question as to whether it is possible that God could or would bring about this miracle, as it is *whether there be any God at all*; whether there is any power in the universe that transcends that which we call nature. Even Prof. Huxley, in his later and more thoughtful years, speaking as a scientist purely, says that it is unscientific to say that anything is impossible. I think, then, we may safely say that, either from the theistic or the scientific point of view, the Incarnation, as related by Luke and Matthew, affirmed by John, and taught by all the Apostles, *was not an impossible event*, transcendent though it was.

The Incarnation is a new revelation in human experience, but not for that reason to be rejected as a fact. We admit, not only readily, but joyfully, that the Incarnation is entirely new to human experience. Were it not, or had it only been another event more or less common to human experience, we would not have been lifted out of our human environment, or helped to anything above our present helplessness and hopelessness. But why should there be no new revelations in human experience? Have there never been new revelations in human experience? Was everything, as we know it, complete and perfect from the foundation of the world? The first man was not born, but created. The first woman was not created as the first man was, neither was she born, but taken from man's side in an extraordinary

¹ Acts xxvi. 8.

manner. Cain did not come into the world as either of his parents did. He was begotten by his father and born of his mother. That first birth was a new experience, and what a wonderful experience it was—what a revelation of the purpose of God—what an unfolding of His secret! The birth of the first man was as much of a wonder, in its way, as the Incarnation itself. It was as much of a departure from the “ordinary course of things” as was the miraculous conception of our Lord. But there were other new things or experiences to come after birth. We do not know how long after the first birth of man into the world came that next great mystery—death. The possibility of death was foretold at the time of the creation; but the experience of it was unknown. When it came, what a dreadful shock it was! Then, indeed, the whole creation began to groan and travail in pain together. Does some one say that death was contemplated from the beginning? Well, who then shall say that the Incarnation was not contemplated and provided for in the beginning? Did Adam and Eve know the mysterious provisions made in their physical constitution for the reproduction of their own kind, by generation and birth? And though they heard the warning word at the beginning, “In the day that thou eatest thereof, dying thou shalt die,”¹ did they understand what death was, or did they deny the fact when it came, with all its shuddering horror, because they had lived, perhaps, a hundred years before? Therefore, if from the beginning God provided for birth, and death to follow in the course of time, after creation, why should it be thought an incredible thing that God should have from the beginning contemplated and provided for resurrection? Shall we say that because life and immortality were not brought to light for a thousand, or four

¹ Gen. ii. 17.

thousand, or any number of thousand years after death entered into the world, that therefore it was not contemplated in God's plan? Geologists tell us that *millions of years* elapsed after the appearance of what we call the substantial matter of this world before life appeared on the earth. But shall we say that it was an incredible thing that life should appear in a world in which there had been no life for a million years or a million ages? Does not all nature teach us that God unfolds His secret purposes—His mysteries—slowly? Shall we say to Him, because He has not wrought a wonder such as the Incarnation *frequently* from the beginning, He must not presume to introduce such a mystery at a later period in the history of man, because it is upsetting to our settled ideas of uniformity and sequence in nature? Shall God never do a new or an extraordinary thing in His own world? Has He exhausted Himself in the present creation? Are there no more possibilities in Him who made all worlds? We allow that even human genius may go on inventing and bringing to perfection scientific and mechanical wonders. Should the genius of Edison slumber for fifty years, dare we forbid that he should rouse himself and bring a new thing out of his laboratory? Shall we say "No!" to him, because after having ceased to work for so long a time, it would be unseemly for him to disturb us again after we had settled down to the conclusion that the wonders of electricity had been exhausted? Oh no! it is not the power of man which we limit; we do not say to him, "Thus far shalt thou go, but no farther"; we reserve that prohibitive mandate for God.

In a world infinitely full of variety, both in phenomena and law, must we bind God down to those varieties of His creative power which have already appeared on the stage of the world's development? Has not God in the

infinite and ever-increasing variations in nature, which we are constantly discovering, given us a prophecy of new wonders, yet reserved within His purpose? It is the more common order of nature that flowers should bloom annually; yet there is a plant—the century plant—which blooms but once in a hundred years. Is not this extraordinary when compared with the common habit of flowers? So the common rule and order in nature is that flowers bloom in the day time; yet there is a flower known as the *night-blooming* cereus, which closes its petals to the sunlight and opens them to the darkness. In my country there is a lovely little ground-vine which we call the arbutus, which flowers under the snow, and there, in the very earliest month of the spring time, we find it under its cold white blanket, beautiful in form, exquisite in colour, and delicate in perfume. Shall we reject the little arbutus because it chooses to “violate the common order of nature,” and blossoms where other flowers would die, or at least refuse to bloom? It is the common order for trees to shed their foliage annually, but then we have non-deciduous trees which refuse to shed their leaves at all. Can any one tell why this deviation is persisted in, in the face of the common habits of the forest?

In a world infinitely full of mystery, each one of which seems to be a promise and portent of more mysteries, shall we refuse belief to the culminating mystery of the universe, one which seems to crown and give meaning to all those which have gone before? Must we conclude that we are—that creation is—bound hand and foot by a fixed and exclusive law, to a fixed and unvarying order of events brought about by a fixed and invariable method? That were to pronounce God’s world a *machine*, and not a part of a great *universe*. Because an Italian organ-grinder can only produce six tunes in

regular sequence upon his poor little mechanical barrel, shall we say that there can only be so many tunes played on the great church organ, which is not manipulated by fixed pegs on a barrel, but by the skilful and sensitive fingers of a great musician whose whole soul thrills to the melody which he produces? Shall we say that on a pipe organ no new tunes can be played, no new combinations executed, no new harmonies extemporized? That would be strange indeed. But there are those who hold that God's universe is a machine—a *mechanism*—not a *creation*; that it is constructed on the principles of a barrel-organ, and not on those that enter into the structure of the great cathedral or church organ. I, for one, have no such low thoughts of God and His infinite resources—no such low thoughts of this glorious creation, of which I also am a part.

Must there be no deviation from the common law of natural birth, inevitable and calamitous death? Is there no remedy or deliverance from this inexorable treadmill of miserable experience—birth, sin, suffering, struggle, death? That were indeed to have a hard thought of God. I would a thousand times rather be an atheist, than to believe in the existence of a God who was great enough to create a universe, wicked enough to abandon it to its own devices, to a fixed and remorseless fate of evil, or too feeble to come to its help and rescue in the time of its sorest need.

II. THE INCARNATION NOT AN UNEXPECTED EVENT. To hear some sceptics and thoughtless unbelievers talk, one would suppose that the Incarnation was a mystery suddenly sprung upon an unexpecting world. But was this the case? Let us see. God for ages—from the beginning of the creation of the world—had been whispering this, His secret, and glorious purpose into the ears of man.

1. *In promise and prophecy.* Like the first faint strain of an organ, preluding the grand burst of harmony in the mind of the composer, so the first promise of the Incarnation was given to the first man and woman just after their sin and fall from their paradisaic innocence. And God said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."¹ How came it that God gave this promise through the *woman*, and not through the man? Why did He say *her* seed, and not *his* seed? Why! just because God knew what His promise was, and how He would fulfil it; and that when it came to pass we might know and understand it. Even so Jesus said to His disciples, "And these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them."² This promise to the woman was the first whispered syllable of His secret. Did He not foretell and confirm the *manner* of His coming when He said through Isaiah, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel"?³ Did He not further detail this secret when He told another prophet *where* He should be born, saying, "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be Ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting"?⁴ We might easily multiply such promises or intimations of the great mystery as these, were it necessary, even those giving the details of His sorrowful life, and the circumstances attending His cruel and bitter death.

2. *In miraculous intimation.* Following the words of promise, God has further unfolded the transcendent character of this mystery prepared from the foundation

¹ Gen. iii. 15. ² John xvi. 4. ³ Isa. vii. 14. ⁴ Mic. v. 2.

of the world. Following the first intimation of the coming of the "seed of the woman," God gave us a hint of His purpose to transcend and break the ordinary course of nature, and bring about a rescue. Enoch lived in the days before the flood. He separated himself from the course of the world, which then ran in rebellion, violence, and wickedness, and walked with God. Enoch was the first—the father—of the Puritans. At the end of three hundred years he won this testimony, "that he pleased God, and was not found, because God had translated him."¹ Thus early God whispered, by a miracle, that He had a purpose of deliverance from death, which the world did not know, and which was not provided for in nature. Oh, thank God for this early hint of His purpose to break the iron rule and law of death, and, by anticipation, prepare us for the resurrection, the fulfilment of this mystery! And did He not give to Abraham an earnest of great things to come, when He quickened his body, as good as dead, and strengthened Sarah so that she conceived and bare a son when she was ninety years old? Here was a further unfolding of the great mystery, in which two new facts are intimated. The promised seed should be the son of Abraham, after the *flesh*, but the Son of God with *power*, by the resurrection from the dead. Of this, the transcendent birth of Isaac and his subsequent deliverance from death were the hints. Verily, the writer of Genesis must have been a clever man to have put these hints and suggestions of things to come into his story; hints such as never entered into the heart of man, and which could not possibly have been understood except in the fulfilment of the event which they foreshadowed. This is a seductive theme, but we must leave it.

3. *In the poetry of the whole mystery.* Poets are pro-

¹ Heb. xi. 5.

phets, and poetry is prophecy. Poetry is the art of setting forth things in apposite and wonderful beauty, in a way which illuminates and fires the imagination. And how full of poetry the Bible is ! Its highest strains are those which sing the coming glories of the Incarnation. We lost our inheritance through the sin of the first man ; we are to gain it again through the obedience of the second man. Since by man came sin and death into the world, so by man came righteousness and life back to it again. The coming in of sin brought death ; the expiation of sin brought life. By man came the sin ; by man came the expiation. But what man could expiate the sin of man ? “ For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God,”¹ and so condemnation passed upon all men unto death. But now one man has appeared, by whose righteousness and death judgment has passed upon all men unto life. But who is this “ one man ” ? Surely not the son of Adam, of whose sin we have all partaken and ratified. One bankrupt cannot be security or bondsman for another bankrupt. The one man who brought justification unto life was not the seed of the *man* Adam, but the seed of the *woman*. The continuity of the law of nature was interrupted by the introduction of a new and transcendent law or power, “ the power of the Highest,” which came upon the virgin, “ who was found with child of the Holy Ghost.” And look again at the poetry of this thing. Eve was called “ the mother of all living,”² and Mary became the mother not of the living, but of Him who had “ life in Himself.”³ Since it was through the *woman* that sin and death entered into the world, so it is by woman that righteousness and life is given back to the world. I cannot refrain from repeating to you an exquisite bit of poetry, the product of this Christmas time. It came to me only yesterday

¹ Rom. iii. 23.² Gen. iii. 20.³ John v. 26.

from across the sea, and is called "The Song of the Man."

"The woman gave, and I did eat."

Whereof gave she?

'Twas of the garden's fruitage sweet—

A portion fair to see;

She plucked and ate, and I did eat,

And lost alike are we:

God saith,

"Ye die the death."

"The woman gave, and I did eat."

Whereof gave she?

'Twas of her womb, a Burden sweet—

But sad, alas! to see;

She took and ate, and I did eat,

And saved alike are we:

God saith,

"Thus dieth death."

III. THE MYSTERIOUS FRUIT OF THE INCARNATION. "That Holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." If the miraculous conception of our Lord was a great mystery, our Lord Himself is a still greater mystery. Who shall understand how the Eternal God could enter into union with human nature? how this flame of Eternal God-head could dwell in the bush of human nature and yet not consume it? We may well turn aside to see "this great sight" and take off the shoes from our feet, for this place whereon we stand is holy ground.¹ Who can tell how the Eternal Son could become truly and really man? and how the man Christ Jesus could be truly God? How such a union could be perfected in *one* personality? how there could be the union of these two natures, the infinite and the finite, the Eternal Spirit of God and mortal nature of man, and yet not be confused, the

¹ Exod. iii. 3-5.

human nature not losing itself in the divine, and the divine not diminishing itself into the human? "All this is beyond our comprehension," say the sceptics; "therefore we cannot believe it." Very likely; but when you urge that as a reason for not believing the Incarnation and *in* the Incarnate God, would you have us believe that you understand even *one* of the *common* mysteries which are involved in our own nature and being? How does the soul and spirit of man unite with his body? How do such diametrically opposite substances as spirit and matter come together in such complete union as they do in our persons, the spirit being entirely distinct from the body and yet permeating it at every point? Can any wise man tell us at what point in the body the spirit unites with it? Do you understand the lesser mystery of life? "The life is in the blood."¹ So says the scripture, and after five thousand years science has at last consented. But can you *find* life in the blood? Is a drop of blood from a dead man's veins any lighter or different in substance from what it was when pervaded and filled with life? Can you explain or even understand the mysteries of your own consciousness? We discriminate between consciousness and will, and reason and affection; but who can locate the one or the other? Love and hate dwell together in the same heart; but who can tell how the one or the other is excited, or how they are differentiated in the same consciousness? Yet these powers and emotions of the human soul are never confused the one with the other, though they are united in one consciousness. Surely if we ourselves are such a mystery to ourselves, we should not be startled at, much less protest against, the mystery of the Incarnation. Nor should it stagger our faith, even though it transcends our understanding and reason,

¹ Lev. xvii. 11.

except that highest reason which bows before the mysteries of God. Rather let us gladly avail ourselves of the help of faith.

Let me ask one question in conclusion of this matter. If any of you are disposed to reject the mystery of the Incarnation because you cannot understand it, or because it is an event out of the common order of nature, can you suggest how or by what means we are to deliver ourselves from the plague of sin, the curse of the law, and the despotism of death? Can you imagine how else God Himself could have redeemed us and given to us eternal life? Amen.

IX

MARY'S GREAT CONFESSION

"Behold the handmaid of the Lord ; be it unto me according to thy word."—LUKE i. 38.

THE scenes and incidents in connection with the nativity of our Lord have been, ever since the rise of christian art, the point upon which the genius of great painters has been concentrated. The visit of the angel to Mary, his salutation and the announcement of the purpose of God concerning her, known as the Annunciation, has been a favourite subject with painters. While the two persons concerned, the angel and the virgin, must always fill the foreground of such a painting, the conceptions of the artists have differed widely, and the interpretations of the great event have been as varied as the number of artists who have undertaken the task. The imagined environment in which Mary and the angel are depicted in many of the older masters shows in a striking manner the influence of the Romish doctrine of Mariolatry. In most of these pictures the virgin is represented as a young woman of exalted rank, surrounded by all the accessories of wealth and station. In some she is portrayed in the portico of a magnificent building, the angel approaching her in most deferential manner, with outstretched hands presenting her with a stalk of lilies, the emblem of virginity ; in others, the angel is prostrate upon his knees adoring her, or offering homage and worship ; in others, she is surrounded by ecclesiastical dignitaries

who are auditors and spectators of this interview. The later artists have returned to a more literal interpretation, in which the virgin is seen in an ordinary Oriental house surprised by the appearance of the angel, who is represented as a man only, without the adjunct of wings. In still another, the angel is seen as a mere spot in the midst of effulgent rays of light, which stream from his body in every direction, poised in the air above the virgin. One of the very latest pictures seems to me the best. In this one the virgin is depicted as a young maiden—one might suppose sixteen or eighteen years of age—sitting in a very humble room, with the angel standing before her, grave and dignified, while she is looking up into his face with every expression of wonder and amazement. This is more likely to have been the true situation. If we revert to the inspired pen-picture limned by the beloved physician, there is presented to us just these simple facts. A virgin of a small and mean village or "city" of Galilee is surprised by the sudden appearance before her of a strange man. For we are told that the angel entered in to her—that is, came into the house where she was—greeted her with a stately salutation of joy, and immediately communicated his message. It does not require any great effort of the imagination to set this simple picture before our minds. We may fancy the maiden busy about her household duties, her mind and thoughts filled with happy dreams of the future; for she was betrothed to a good though poor man, Joseph the carpenter. As any other maiden would be thinking, so Mary was thinking of her approaching marriage, of her future home, in which she was to be the honoured mistress, the beloved wife, for so she would certainly be in Joseph's care; and possibly of what that home would be to her when, in years to

come, children would play about her feet and be taught out of the scriptures the things concerning the kingdom of God, as they stood about her knees. In such surrounding, and occupied with some such holy thoughts as these, her occupation was interrupted and her heart's dreams were awakened by the words of the angel, who had entered unannounced and unawares, "Hail! highly favoured, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women." We can well imagine the surprise and amazement which this salutation under the circumstances awakened in Mary's mind and heart.

I. THE AMAZEMENT OF MARY. "And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be."¹ In like manner we are told that Zacharias "was troubled"; he being filled with fear, while Mary's mind was set thinking what it all might mean. The scanty records concerning Mary given us in the New Testament lead us to conceive of her as an extremely thoughtful woman, not given to much talking, but to much thinking. She laid things up in her heart and pondered them deeply. We can well imagine why Mary should be disturbed and agitated by this appearance of Gabriel (whom, of course, she did not know), and by the extraordinary character of the message communicated to her.

1. *The appearance of Gabriel himself would have naturally agitated her.* Not that she was unaccustomed to see young men, her own townsmen and acquaintances, but here was a stranger who suddenly appears within the precincts of her house and salutes her. Strangers were not common in Nazareth, and the first natural wonder was as to whom this unknown young man might be. There was nothing extraordinary in the appearance of Gabriel to indicate that he was an angel;

¹ Luke i. 29.

for, as we have before remarked, the angels of God who have appeared to men at different periods of the world's history have always come simply as men, with nothing in their appearance to indicate that they were heavenly beings. Doubtless Gabriel was in appearance a young man of extraordinary dignity, and handsome beyond the type of men with whom Mary was acquainted. I say a young man, because though he may have been a million of years old, according to our reckoning of time, yet he was endowed with that everlasting youth which belongs to the immortals. With the angels there is no sense of years, no signs of decay. These two facts alone must have given to Gabriel the appearance of a man of princely bearing and looks. What young girl would not have been "agitated" by such a visitor, even when the open hospitality of the East made it possible for a stranger to enter a house unbidden, as did Gabriel?

2. *The salutation of the angel would have still further increased her astonishment.* The ordinary salutation of the East was not greatly different from the opening words of the angel's salute. "Hail!" or "Joy to you!" might have been spoken by any friend who was the bearer of good news or pleasant tidings. The language of heaven, I fancy, is not greatly different from the language of earth, only more elevated in tone; more serious, yet more joyous in the mode of delivery. That the angel prostrated himself before the virgin we do not for a moment believe; but that his manner was profoundly respectful, and his speech mellow with tones of great regard, there can be no doubt. The elevated strain in which he began his salutation was only the fitting prelude to the message he immediately delivered. "Thou art highly favoured" would indicate some great good news. Was this by any chance a messenger from Joseph, bringing her some good news of him which

intimately affected her? or was he the messenger of her kinsfolk and friends, who had combined to surprise her with some great gift in honour of her coming marriage? A number of such curious inquiries might have passed with the rapidity of thought through her mind, in an instant. "The Lord is with thee"; this next part of the salutation would naturally lift her thoughts higher, and cause her to wonder yet more. That the Lord was with her, as with every other truly pious soul, was true; but this declaration had a deeper and more special meaning than that. The Lord is with us always; He never leaves us, nor forsakes us; but there are times when He is with us to bless us in a peculiar way. Certainly Mary was wondering what this declaration might import to her. Still further, as the angel proceeded, was her surprise increased. "Blessed thou among women." Now Mary was but a humble maiden, both in station and in the habit of her mind. She had not been accustomed to think great thoughts, nor to dream great things for herself. Though she belonged to the house of David by descent, yet she was so far removed from any of the possible honours which might still come to that royal house, that no thoughts of distinction among women or eminence in any way had ever entered her mind. What, then, could this salutation mean, and especially what the declaration, "Thou art highly favoured among women"? This salutation seems to have wrought surprise and agitation to the point of fear, for the angel said, "Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God."¹ Thus speaking to calm her mind, and to prepare her for what was to follow.

3. *The annunciation message would still further increase her agitation.* The angel immediately proceeded to make the stupendous announcement of the miraculous

¹ Luke i. 30.

conception of our Lord—an announcement of the greatest and profoundest mystery of the universe. “Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call His name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David: and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.”¹ Here were two new facts communicated to Mary. First, that she was to be the mother of the Messiah—that glorious hope which had animated the breasts of ten thousand Jewish women in all ages. Was it possible that this most glorious honour had come to her? Small wonder if her young heart was stirred with surprise and amazement. But then, beyond that, here was a matter that for the moment overshadowed even the thought of being the mother of the Messiah. The mode of the accomplishment of this wonder was now announced to her, and her mind fairly staggered under the thought. For the first time she found speech, and there came from her lips this astonished and innocent inquiry, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?”² The human and natural impossibility of such a thing happening to her or to any other woman at once presented itself to her mind, and prompted not so much a doubt as an inquiry, to which the angel made immediate answer, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that Holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”³ No doubt this extraordinary communication filled her mind with the greatest wonder—a wonder which the angel made haste to prevent from degenerating into doubt, for he immediately assured her with the words, “For with God nothing is impossible.”⁴

¹ Luke i. 31-33. ² Luke i. 34. ³ *Ibid.* i. 35. ⁴ *Ibid.* i. 37.

We are so familiar with the particulars of this wondrous story, have heard it so often, believed it for so long, that we are apt to forget how astounding it must have sounded to Mary's ears, and how overwhelming it must have been to her mind and heart. I have dwelt on these details as being necessary for a fuller appreciation of the greatness of Mary's confession of faith which immediately followed upon the completion of the angel's message.

II. THE FOUNDATION AND WARRANT OF MARY'S FAITH. This is suggested to us by her own words, "Be it unto me according to THY WORD." Before that word her amazement, her curiosity, her understanding, and even her reason all bowed. On that word her faith took its stand, and

" . . . laughed at impossibilities,
And cried, It shall be done."

In this case the word of the angel was the word of God ; and the word of God, which we cannot disassociate from God Himself, is not only the warrant of our faith, but the final centre and source of all authority and power, even the source of all things in heaven and earth. The universe seems to have been constructed on the principle of centres. The moon circles about the earth, and the earth about the sun, as do a vast number of planets ; the sun itself, drawing in his train a thousand worlds, is moving majestically about some more distant centre ; and, for aught we know, this procession of worlds moving in circles goes on indefinitely. But what *is* the centre of all things ? There can be but one answer to this question. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."¹ "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was no-

¹ Gen. i. 1.

thing made that was made.”¹ God and His Word are one, and the same in their eternity and authority. “For by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him, and for Him: and He is before all things, and by Him all things consist (are held together). And He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; that in all things He might have the pre-eminence.”²

Leaving the material universe and the centre of its obedience, we find the same principle obtains among men. All earthly governments centre about the Throne, if they be monarchies, as Great Britain is. Should the Queen be taken away, with no successor found to ascend the throne of England, the monarchy would fall into confusion and momentary chaos; but the body politic would immediately tend to re-organize itself about some new governmental centre. The same is true of the social life of a country or community. It has its centre of authority, which regulates customs, habits, dress, and manners. The man or woman who is not associated with some social circle, and amenable to some social centre of authority, is an outcast. The business world has its centre about which it moves. The Bank of England regulates the rate of interest, and determines the value of money from day to day. The scientific world has its centre in the British Association. The family life is organized about the husband and father, whose word is the final law on all domestic matters. The Church of Christ has its hundreds of smaller circles and centres; but all these, like the starry worlds above us, move about the great Head of the Church, whose word is the final authority in all matters of faith

¹ John i. 1, 3.

² Col. i. 16-18.

and practice. Synods, General Assemblies, Convocations, States, Popes, and Patriarchs are only subordinate centres of authority ; and these, with the local Churches which they govern, whether they are in fellowship with each other or not, move about the centre common to them all—Jesus Christ, the Great Head of the Church. When the end of all God's purposes concerning us is accomplished, we are told that the Son of God Himself will become subject to the Father ; for “when all things shall be subdued unto Him, then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him that put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.”¹ From all this we easily learn that as God is the centre of all created things in the material world, so is He the centre of all authority and power in things spiritual. In all matters of personal faith and conduct the individual believer is subject directly to God in Christ. Thus, when Mary said, “Be it unto me according to thy word,” she struck the high key-note of the soul's allegiance to God, and freedom from all human lordship. God's word is final. Every faculty, nay, the whole spirit and soul and body of man, is bound to submit ; and the believing soul of man does joyfully acquiesce and unite with the word of God. That word of God is voiced in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose holy and mysterious Incarnation Mary now accepted with a humble yet sublime faith. Since His coming we turn to the Son of Mary and yield our whole conscience, heart, and will to Him. For “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth ; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”² It is to this principle of yielding *all* to the final authority of Christ—the Word of God—that we owe all spiritual liberty as

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 28.² Phil. ii. 10.

well as all individual peace. It is only when other authorities and powers intervene that the Church is distracted, and the individual soul confused and left in darkness. He that followeth Jesus shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. Mary, by her confession, implied, "I acknowledge the Word of God to be the true and only centre of my life, and I gladly fall into my proper orbit, and by faith will order my life henceforth, according to His word."

III. MARY'S CONFESSION OF FAITH. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." In this declaration we have a simple, sublime, and beautiful confession of faith—a confession than which there has been no greater one made by man. It is equal to that of Martha, who confessed, "Yea, Lord: I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world"¹; or to that of Peter, who confessed, "Thou art Christ, the Son of the Living God."² I even venture to say that Mary's confession was greater than these and all subsequent confessions of faith. Hers, indeed, was the first great confession of Christ, for she confessed Him as the Incarnate Son of God before He came into the world; whilst they and we confess Him after the fact of His incarnation was demonstrated before our eyes. All honour and glory to this the greatest heroine of faith the world has ever known! In regard to the great honour conferred upon her she was pronounced by the angel to be "blessed among women." In respect to her sublime faith in the word of God she is the greatest among both men and women.

The word or exclamation, "Behold," is not in this case to be taken as a word of direction, as when John the Baptist cried, saying, "Behold the Lamb of God"³;

¹ John xi. 27.

² Matt. xvi. 16.

³ John i. 36.

or when Pilate said, "Behold the Man"¹; or when John the revelator said, "Behold, He cometh with clouds"²; but rather as a word of consent, as when the prophet said, "Here am I: send me"³; or as when Samuel said, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."⁴ So Mary would seem to say, "Amen"; "So be it"; "Behold, I am from this moment the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word"; "I hear, and I accept; I consent; I gladly yield all to Thee and to Thy will." It will be observed that Mary's faith was not a blind credulity, but was declared after the angel had replied to her amazed inquiry, "How shall this thing be?" by his "With God all things are possible"; which proposition at once commended itself to her intelligence as well as to her faith. True faith is always associated with the highest intelligence. When I say this, I do not mean that the highest intelligence is always found in the most highly cultured and trained minds. God often reveals things of sublimest import to babes and sucklings which the wise and prudent fail to grasp. There is an old saying that a woman's intuition is better than a man's reason. We would not dare say that the quick intuition of many very simple-minded people is not instinct with highest intelligence. The men and women of faith are those to whom the Spirit of God gives the most enlightenment. There is a vast meaning in that word of our Lord to Peter after his confession: "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but My Father which is in heaven."⁵

IV. MARY'S SURRENDER. The faith of Mary carried along with it the entire surrender of herself, and all that she had and was. There is a spurious kind of faith

¹ John xix. 5.

² Rev. i. 7.

³ Isa. vi. 8.

⁴ 1 Sam. iii. 10.

⁵ Matt. xvi. 17.

which surrenders the intellect to a speculative proposition, but which does not affect the heart or move the will to action. This is abundantly seen in the comparative absence of moral results from the classic philosophies. The Greeks and the Romans believed in God and immortality, but their faith did not affect their conduct in any great degree. So there are a great many people among us who have accepted the *doctrines* of the christian religion as being true, but they have no faith in *God*. Their faith goes no further than to the propositions of their creed. They are hearers, but not doers of the word. With Mary it was different. From the moment she accepted the word of God, she became the handmaid of the Lord. Wherever there is real faith, there will be—there must be—unconditional surrender. This characterized the faith of Saul of Tarsus. When he became assured that Jesus was the Christ, he cried, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to *do*?"¹ "Henceforth it is Thine to speak, mine to hear; Thine to command, mine to obey. Do to me what Thou wilt; command me to do what Thou wilt." Such was Mary's surrender.

1. *Her surrender was passive.* That is, she first of all fully consented to be the subject of this great miracle. She yielded her body as well as her soul to the power of the Highest. She consented to become the virgin mother of the Son of God. It is often more difficult to be passive in the hands of God than it is to be active in obedience to a command. The passive obedience of our Lord throughout His earthly ministry was as great, if not greater, than His active exercise of power. It would have been much easier for Him to have overthrown His enemies and escaped out of their hands, than to submit to their power. This He

¹ Acts ix. 6.

demonstrated when the soldiers, with Judas at their head, came to arrest Him at the gate of the garden. He "became obedient unto death."¹ To submit to an insult is harder than to resent one.

2. *On the other hand, Mary's surrender was intensely active.* She not only surrendered to the word of the Lord, but she became intelligently and intensely active as the champion of that word. There was no mere negative assent in her faith. Having accepted the high commission, and yielded to the will of God, she became eager that the word of God should be fulfilled. "Be it unto me according to thy word" may mean, as it doubtless did mean, "I submit"; but it meant more. There was an eagerness of consent in it. We may even imagine a joyous consent and a quick desire that the wonderful thing might be done unto her. She already embraced in her heart the Son of God, whom she was to conceive in her body. Her whole spirit, soul, and body went out with yearning desire that God's great purpose should be performed. Holy motherhood awakened in her at the very thought, and she was all eagerness now for the will of God. Her heart was beating with quick desire and expectation, which is hope. It was not only "Be it unto me," but it was also "Lord, *let* it be unto me according to Thy word."

3. *What was involved in this active surrender on the part of Mary?* There is more in her surrender than at first reading appears. In the first place, it was the surrender of her understanding and her reason. She could not understand how this wonder was to be wrought; but she surrendered her ignorance or her inability to understand to the double argument of the angel. "With God nothing shall be impossible." This her faith accepted, though she did not understand *how*

¹ Phil. ii, 8.

the thing should be. Then the angel further fortified her faith by declaring that the Lord had already wrought a similar miracle upon her cousin Elisabeth; though not so great, it was, nevertheless, just as real. If God calls upon us to surrender our understanding or reason to His word, He never insults or dethrones it. It is no dishonour to submit the reason to the word of God, which deals with matters higher than the reason can attain to, until the understanding is enlightened by revelation. I do not either insult or abandon my sight when in a *dark* room I cease to depend on sight, and bring into play the sense of feeling, in order to find a lost object, or make my way out into the light. So, in dealing with the high mysteries of God, I do not insult my reason, or deny it, when I appeal to faith to guide me where reason cannot see. The experience of the world, wherever the revelation of God has come, proves that the highest intelligence of man has been dignified and strengthened, rather than degraded, by the action of faith. Thousands upon thousands of men of highest mental endowments and greatest intellectual attainments have not felt their reason to have been dishonoured by the cordial acceptance of the mystery of God and the Incarnation. On the other hand, they confess with gladness that the revelation of God in Christ, which they have accepted by faith, has quickened their understanding and glorified their reason. No countries have made such strides intellectually as those where the gospel of God has been preached and believed. The surrender of what I may call the Western mind to the revelation of God has sent them forward far beyond the dead point in intellectual development at which the Eastern mind came to a full stop centuries ago. There never came to this world so great a stimulant to the mind of man

as the gospel of the mysteries of God. The little carbon film enclosed in yonder incandescent lamp is incapable itself of giving light; but once it is touched by the electric fluid, it shines and glows with a glory of light which fills all the church. So the human reason in itself cannot by *searching* find out God, but it is capable of *receiving* a revelation from God; and, having so received it, becomes the light-bearer to the world. It is not merely the act of believing which gives light. It is the thing believed. The heathen believe, perhaps sincerely, the stories of their mythical gods, but their faith gives them no light, and moves them to no high and holy living; because what they believe is vanity, and has in it nothing to communicate of light or life. The result is that the beliefs of the heathen have produced superstition and fanaticism. The Unitarian believes that *Jesus is a good man*; but Unitarianism has never had warmth enough in it to move the world to any great moral action. When the Roman Church ceased to believe in Jesus Christ as the one *only* Mediator between God and man, and her votaries betook themselves to belief in the virgin as the source and centre of power, and to praying to saints and angels, then it became dark with superstition, and morally powerless to subdue the grosser passions and tendencies in man.

4. *Mary surrendered her humility to God when she accepted His word.* Let us remember that Mary was a very lowly woman, with nothing either in her birth or surroundings to recommend her to this transcendent honour and dignity. She might well have said to herself, "Even accepting this great purpose and mystery of God as a possible thing, it is quite unreasonable to believe that God should have chosen *me* to be the instrument of His great purpose. I am not only personally

unworthy of such a favour and honour, but it is not worthy that the Son of the Highest should have for a human mother one so obscure and unknown as I am. It would prejudice the whole purpose of His coming to have Him associated in this way with one so unknown and mean in position." This is not an extravagant supposition. It was Nazareth which prejudiced the thoughtful and pious Nathanael against Jesus, and led him at once to reject with sarcastic scorn the declaration of Philip, that in Jesus of Nazareth he had found the Messiah. According to the thinking of the world—shall I say the reason of the world?—the proposition of a Saviour associated with Nazareth, Mary, Joseph the carpenter, little Bethlehem, and the stable there in which He was born, and His subsequent association with Galilean fishermen and hated publicans, would have been absurd. But God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are His ways our ways. I can easily fancy that Mary's consciousness of unworthiness and unfitness to be the mother of our Lord must have been a point at which she would have stumbled, and which it would be hard for her to give up. That she did feel this is certain, from one expression in her beautiful song, "He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden."¹ The condescension of God to this humble maid was very great; but it agreed with the voluntary humility of our Lord, who "made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant."² Our Lord's humility was in stooping from the height of glory which was His; while Mary's humility was in her reluctance to be lifted in the high place of honour to which God had destined her. In a very subordinate way this feeling of unworthiness not unfrequently stands in the way of men and women deeply conscious of their sinfulness. It

¹ Luke i. 48.² Phil. ii. 7.

hinders their faith from promptly accepting the amazing grace of salvation, offered to them in Christ—a salvation which exalts men of low degree. For “He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory.”¹ But this is the grace of God. Peter very naturally expressed this feeling when he said to Jesus, “Thou shalt never wash my feet.”² It was the surrender of his humility into a deeper humility which led him afterward to cry, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my face.”³ Mary saw all this, and it was a great point in her active surrender that she quietly and joyfully acquiesced in this also. It was a great act of faith and humility which led Mary to say, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord ; be it unto me according to thy word.”

5. *Her surrender involved all the consequences which immediately followed.* Among them I cannot but feel that there was the one which affected her more nearly than life itself, and which gave rise to those early and later scandals, which have followed to some extent this holy and pure virgin-mother ever since. It could have been no small thing for Mary to face the suspicions of her friends and relatives regarding her subsequent condition. Even Joseph, just and good man as he was, in his charity, was unwilling to deliver her to the law, but was privately minded to put her away, because of the unjust and false suspicions he entertained in common with others concerning her. This possibility and fear, the hardest of all for her to bear, must have instantly presented itself to her mind ; and yet she did not hesitate a moment. The giving up of all plans for her earthly life went with it. Of course, even could she have

¹ 1 Sam. ii. 8. ² John xiii. 8. ³ John xiii. 9.

escaped the deep shame which would be put upon her, she could no longer think of marriage under these new, holy, and mysterious conditions. Look at it as she would, her entire life would have to be changed and surrendered to the will of God. Shall any one say that it did not require a heroic faith to face all this? In defending her from the false and blasphemous honours which the Romanists have sought to put upon her, it is meet at the same time to bow before her in wonder and admiration, beyond that which we give to any woman who ever lived, because of her sublime surrender to God in this holy emergency.

6. *Finally, we note her immediate and active obedience.* The angel having left her, after receiving her word of acceptance, she at once made her brief preparations for the journey, which she immediately took, to Juda, in order to greet and confer with Elisabeth. Henceforth these two cousins, the one an old woman and the other a young maid, came into new relations. To Mary henceforth Elisabeth took the place of a human mother, and her maidenly instinct sent her to this aged relative, now so closely associated with her in this great mystery of godliness, that she might confide her secret, and get the motherly protection she would so much need. Like every true believer, she sought the company and companionship of those who were likewise related to God. When Peter was released from prison, he immediately went to the house where the believers were assembled for prayer, and made known to them the fact of his deliverance. It is true that it was Barnabas, a man older in the faith than Saul, who sought that new disciple out; but Saul was happy and content to be for a time under the immediate protection of Barnabas, and to dwell for a whole year in fellowship with the Church at Antioch. A common kinship to Jesus makes us kin to each other,

and the possession of the common salvation draws us toward each other and away from the world.

I must close this sermon with noting two points only. First, no sooner did Mary, in obedience to the working of faith within her, come into the presence of Elisabeth, than the consciousness of her new condition came upon her, and her soul was filled with a baptism of holy joy, the spirit of prophecy and song coming upon her with the Holy Ghost. This is a suggestion of a great truth which we should never lose sight of. Those who are obedient to faith are not left long without some holy experience, which confirms their faith and fills their lives with substantial joy. After we believe, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. Those who receive Christ, presented *to* them by the word, are not long in finding Christ *in* them, the hope of glory.

My last observation is that *the faith of Mary in almost every detail ought to be a guide to us in dealing with God on the authority of His word.* He has announced to us His great love and grace in Christ. We should at once receive it, no matter how extraordinary it may seem to us, or how incomprehensible to our unenlightened reason. "He that heareth My word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, *hath* everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but *is* passed from death unto life."¹ *How* we do not know. As many as believe that Jesus is the Son of God *are* born again. *How* we do not know; but we *do* know that "as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."² So when the word of God comes to us in regard to any duty to be done or sacrifice to be made, it is for us, even though we do not know the reason or see the wisdom of

¹ John v. 24.

² John i. 12, 13.

the command, to say at once, "Be it unto me according to Thy word," and become not hearers only, but doers of the word. If we are faced by some unexpected and surprising providence, the inscrutability of which baffles and confounds us, then it is for us to say, with implicit trust and acquiescence, "Be it unto me according to Thy word;" "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him;"¹ "It is the Lord: let Him do what seemeth Him good."² If His ways with us or the world are past finding out, it is ours to say, "Be it unto me according to Thy word;" "Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in Thy sight."³ In regard to the afflictions which come upon us, we must take up the same word, "Be it unto me according to Thy word;" "Nevertheless not my will, but Thine, be done."⁴ Therefore I will take pleasure in afflictions, if they be according to Thy word or Thy will; for the word and the will of God come to the same thing, and must always be good to us. Taking up this attitude of prompt faith, whole-hearted surrender to God, both passively and actively, we may expect to find the same baptism of joy which greeted Mary when she confirmed her confession to Elisabeth.

¹ Job xiii. 15. ² 1 Sam. iii. 18. ³ Luke x. 21. ⁴ Luke xxii. 42.

X

MAGNIFYING THE LORD

“And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”—LUKE i. 46, 47.

WE know that Mary of Nazareth, and Elisabeth, the wife of Zacharias, were cousins ; but how closely they were related otherwise we do not know. Mary lived in the far north of the Holy Land, and was a poor and obscure maiden ; while Elisabeth lived in the south not far from Jerusalem, and was an aged woman occupying a position much higher than Mary's, as the “daughter of Aaron” and the wife of Zacharias. Whether the two families had hitherto visited each other or held any correspondence we do not know. It is possible that they had met occasionally at some of the annual feasts. Whether the remarkable visitation of the angel Gabriel to Elisabeth, six months before his visit to Mary, had been communicated to the family at Nazareth we have no means of knowing. It is just possible that Mary may have heard of the favour of God to her cousin Elisabeth, and, being a thoughtful young woman, pondered the news, and secretly and sympathetically rejoiced with her relatives in the good gift which had come to them, and in the near advent of the Messiah whose forerunner Elisabeth's son was to be.

The mention of Elisabeth's condition to Mary by Gabriel was a sufficient hint to her that henceforth they

were bound by closer ties than that of mere kinship. "Thy cousin Elisabeth hath conceived a son in her old age." Mary's Son and her cousin Elisabeth's, so closely related in the great mystery just revealed to her, would henceforth form a new bond between them. Mary was a reticent young woman, and had evidently the good habit of thinking much and speaking little. The angel's word concerning Elisabeth brought her to quick decision, and as soon as he departed from her she made some hasty preparations, and immediately started to visit her cousin in Juda. It was a long journey, covering more than two-thirds of the length of the land; but that seemed as nothing compared with the great importance of the visit. If Mary was a motherless girl, as is supposed, then she would naturally turn to her aged cousin Elisabeth as the one to whom she should confide her secret, and from whom she should seek that motherly sympathy and protection she would so surely need during the serious and anxious time just before her. How she made the journey, and in whose company, we do not know (Mary would not have travelled alone). That she had told her great secret to any one in Nazareth I cannot for a moment believe. Elisabeth and Zacharias were the only two persons who would be likely to know and understand. It is evident that Joseph, her espoused husband, knew nothing of the matter until she returned, three months later, to her own home in Nazareth. We know from Matthew's gospel (i. 18-25) what a painful revelation this was to that good man, and how his very natural, but unfounded, suspicions were removed by the angel of the Lord coming to him in a dream, and enlightening him as to the true state of the case.

I. THE MEETING OF MARY AND ELISABETH.

No sooner had Mary entered into the house of Elisabeth and saluted her, than her unborn babe was agitated

by a strange emotion, which seems to have been a sign to Elisabeth by which she understood the import of Mary's visit, and recognised in her the future mother of her Lord. At the same moment when her child manifested itself in this unusual manner Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to utter in a loud voice a beatitude upon Mary and upon her child. It is thought by many commentators that it was at this moment that the Incarnation took place. Elisabeth's beatitude was in the exact language of the angel's. She was speaking under the immediate influence of the Holy Spirit, and therefore intelligently, as to the high honour and great dignity God had conferred upon Mary. She had accounted herself a highly-honoured woman, but now there came to her one, lower in earthly station and younger in years, upon whom higher honour and a greater dignity had been conferred.

Elisabeth's humility. No spark of jealousy arose in her heart; on the contrary, the elder woman felt herself deeply honoured by the visit of her young relative, now the destined mother of the Lord. Therefore in deepest humility she addressed Mary in these words: "And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" In the next sentence she tells Mary how she had recognised her as the mother of the Lord. I cannot refrain from here remarking that in this incident we have a hint of what is the true rule of precedence and honour among men and women. In this world noble birth, great wealth, exalted position, and power in the State, are the accidents by which precedence is awarded. But, in the kingdom of God, we find that those whom God has highly honoured are they to whom we should give precedence and pay reverence. The world bows down to the ducal coronet, to the millionaire's bank account, and to the statesman's power; but

it does not follow that these have been highly favoured or honoured of God. The world passes by many men whom God has gifted with spiritual power (to win men to Him, to be the guides and succourers of distressed souls, and to fill the world with the perfume of holy lives) because they lack those things which command the estimation of men. But let us learn the higher rule. "Honour to whom honour" is due¹ is God's rule. To whom, then, is honour due? Why, of course, first and before all others, to those whom God honours. We are to honour all men, because they were made in the image of God. We are to honour the king, because God has conferred on him great power and responsibility in the government of men, and as such he is God's servant and magistrate; but above such honour is that which makes us children of God, "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ."² I remember, years ago in England, being introduced to a lady as Mrs. So-and-So. Having saluted her and passed on with my friend, he whispered, "Do you know who that lady is to whom I introduced you?" "No," I replied, "not beyond the fact that she is Mrs. So-and-So." Then, with an air of profound respect, he said, "When her husband's father dies (and he is not expected to live much longer) she will be *Lady So-and-So*." She was to be honoured because of her heirship to a great title. Suppose I should introduce some of you honourable people who are before me to some ordinary person, and then tell you quietly afterwards that he was a man to be highly honoured (though in a position in this world much lower than your own), because he was a son of God, and the joint-heir with Jesus Christ to all the glory of the Father, would not such a case deserve your honourable recognition? Jesus said on one occasion, "He that honoureth not the Son

¹ Rom. xiii. 7.

² Rom. viii. 17.

honoureth not the Father.”¹ And we may say, without irreverence, “He that honoureth not the least of the sons and daughters of God honoureth not God.” Let us not forget that all God’s children, however obscure or poor, are His heirs, and are therefore in themselves princes royal. Beggars they may have been (“taken from the dunghill”); they are now by grace set among the princes, and will be exalted to the throne of glory. We cannot afford to ignore or slight the least of God’s children.

The blessedness of Mary’s faith. Mary was blessed of God among women; but she was more blessed because of her faith. Zacharias had doubted, while Elisabeth had believed. Zacharias had been stricken with dumbness for his unbelief, but Elisabeth had conceived a son in her old age through faith. She now perceived by the Holy Ghost that Mary had also believed, and should see the performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. Here is another lesson worth our learning: that faith in God and obedience to His word, a certainty that the things which He has promised shall be performed, and the immediate ordering of our actions in accordance with His word, will bring blessedness and honour to us. “Without faith it is impossible to please God.”² “All things are possible to him that believeth.”³ Our Lord constantly inculcated this lesson during His earthly ministry among men. Let us, like Mary, cultivate this grace, and say with her and the Psalmist, “I will hear what God the Lord will speak.”⁴ “Be it unto me according to Thy word.”⁵ I know many people who are miserable because they cannot, or rather because they *will* not, believe. They are constantly saying, “How can these things be?” and

¹ John v. 23. ² Heb. xi. 6. ³ Mark ix. 23. ⁴ Ps. lxxxv. 8.

⁵ Luke i. 38.

will not hear, as Mary did, the answer of the angel, "With God nothing shall be impossible." A believing life is not an emotional life, but an obedient one. "Blessed is she that believes, for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord."¹ Oh! "be not faithless, but believing." "Sirs," said Paul, "be of good cheer, for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me."² How happy and strong Paul was among that terrified and despairing crew because he believed! God can do little for us because of our unbelief; whereas for those who believe He can and will do great things.

II. THE SONG OF MARY. It was meet that the new dispensation should be ushered in with song. There seems to have been a perfect burst of music in connection with the Incarnation. The angel's annunciation was highly poetic. On the coming of Mary to Elisabeth the Holy Ghost fell upon her, and she sang her benedictions upon both Mary and her child. No sooner does Elisabeth cease speaking, than Mary breaks forth into poetry and song so majestic, so tender and beautiful, that it has been sung in all ages since as the chiefest and finest hymn of the Church. Upon the birth of the Baptist, the long-dumb Zacharias is filled with poetry, and expresses himself in song. When Jesus was born, a multitude of the heavenly host sang in chorus with the announcing angel, "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace, toward men of good will."³ Since that time song has been the chief characteristic of christian worship. The Incarnation set the world singing because it brought hope to a hopeless world, and filled the hearts of all who received the Saviour with a "joy unspeakable and full of glory."⁴ Song is an exercise which is appropriate at all times.

¹ *Ibid.* i. 45. ² Acts xxvii. 25 ³ Luke ii. 14. ⁴ 1 Pet. i. 8.

The Psalmist was right when he declared, "I will bless the Lord at *all* times."¹ The soul finds in song the easiest and highest expression of its emotions. I have seen tears dimming the eyes of an afflicted believer while his soul was pouring forth song from the lips. We can sing alike in joy and sorrow. Many of the Psalms are sad and bitter complaints and expressions of discouragement and depression; yet these emotions were voiced in song. But it is when the soul is exalted with some lofty emotion of gladness or victory that song finds its highest vocation. Mary's soul was at this moment in an holy ecstasy of joy because of the coming of "her Saviour," and she might well magnify the Lord and rejoice. She was animated by the same Spirit which moved David to exclaim, "Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless His holy name"²; and, again, "My soul shall make her boast in the Lord; the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad. O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together."³

An examination of Mary's song discloses a fact greatly to her credit. She must have been a true student of the scriptures, and have pondered them very deeply; for her song is a mosaic, composed of many of the most beautiful passages and sentiments found in the songs of Hannah, Deborah, and David. These, and the sayings of the prophets, must have been all stored up in her heart, and now, when the Holy Ghost comes upon her, they were all fused, and poured forth in a golden stream of praise, with here and there a gem of ancient song sparkling in its original and unaltered beauty. In India I was one day in the shop of a dealer in precious stones. He took me into a small room lined on every side with crimson velvet, in which he displayed his

¹ Ps. xxxiv. 1.² Ps. ciii. 1.³ Ps. xxxiv. 3.

jewels to customers and others. It was lighted only from above by a large skylight of glass, through which the Eastern sun poured with unbroken rays. He took from a safe half a dozen little leather bags, in which were contained his treasures, and poured forth upon a velvet-covered table a wealth of diamonds, sapphires, opals, pearls, rubies, and emeralds. Placing all these (probably about half a pint in bulk) in a wooden cup, and holding in the other hand another cup of the same size and make, he slowly (lifting his hands as he did so) poured the jewels from one cup to another, parting his hands a little further at each movement, and making the transfer a little more rapidly each time, until with his hands perhaps three feet apart, and with rapid motion, he caused the precious stones to pass from one cup to another, under the blazing sunlight, in a perfect stream of variegated and gleaming beauty. It was a fascinating sight. Well, it seems to me that Mary's song is something like that. She has gathered up in her heart all the song-jewels in the Old Testament, and now pours them forth in a liquid stream, which, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, fascinates and charms our hearts. If we will lay up in our hearts the treasures of wisdom which God has stored up for us in His word, when a crisis of joy or sorrow comes upon us, we, too, shall open our lips and show forth His praise,—if not always in song, at least in testimony. It is the blessed promise of the Holy Spirit to bring to our remembrance the precious truths of God's word, and to take of the things of Christ and show them unto us. But how can the Spirit do this for us unless we have first stored up these words in our memories by much reading and thought?

1. *Mary magnifies the Lord.* She did not, of course, for a moment dream that her song could add anything to the greatness of the Lord. She would only declare

her homage, and exalt His name and character by declaring it to others. No doubt she had received a great enlargement of her own views and understanding. God had never seemed so great and gracious and loving to her before. Her soul was bursting with praise, and she would fain call all the world and all coming generations to hear her testimony, and join with her in exalting the Lord : " And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation." ¹ We cannot make the Lord greater or more glorious by anything we say or do ; but we can lift Him up in our hearts, and publish His greatness in song and by our lives, and thus with Mary magnify His name. In this blessed work we have fellowship with the saints of all ages and of both worlds. It is heavenly work upon the earth to praise the Lord ; and the more it is done by us and the whole Church, the more of " the days of heaven on earth " there will be. The armies of Israel used to go forth led by a company of singers. The Church that goes forth to the world to live its life and do its work with songs of praise to God will ever be a conquering Church. I have never known a singing christian to be a doubting christian, or one who has dishonoured the Lord in his life. Let us magnify the Lord and rejoice in God our Saviour. I love the Sabbath, and daily repetition of the Lord's Prayer, especially the clause which teaches us to say, " Hallowed be Thy name." I love the simple form of our worship, which is always opened, morning and evening, by singing our grand old Doxology :

" Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow ;
Praise Him, all creatures here below ;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host ;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

2. *This work of magnifying the Lord is no formal*

¹ Luke i. 50.

act. Mary called upon her soul for this service. The worship of God, whether in prayer or song, is no mere perfunctory work. It is soul-work; and he who does not magnify God with his soul insults Him by the offer of that which God abhors. It was one of God's complaints of old that "This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me."¹ They brought Him many sacrifices, but they withheld their hearts from Him. He says, "I cannot away with" such praise or service.² It was an abomination to Him. In our public worship it is right and proper that our praise be conducted not only reverently, but according to the best rules of music. We should study to sing in time and in tune; there should be harmony between the organ, the choir, and the congregation; because whatever is worth doing at all is worth doing well—but it must be soul-work. The gospel should be preached from the heart; should be the spontaneous delivery of a message received from God for the people; but that would be a poor and unfaithful preacher who did not give to his work all that is ablest and best in him, his most careful thought and fullest preparation. He must study to show himself "a workman that needeth not to be ashamed."³ He should use a trained mind, and gather from every storehouse of knowledge; he should endeavour to present his thought in well-chosen and simple language; he should appeal to the heart, to the conscience and the imagination, to the hopes and fears of his congregation; but if his sermon is nothing more than the work of the scholar, the logician, the literary artist, or the orator, he has but miserably failed in his high calling. So neither should the simplest or the grandest hymn of praise be sung merely as a formal performance or a work of art. We should study our hymns, put ourselves into fellow-

¹ Matt. xv. 8.² Isa. i. 13.³ 2 Tim. ii. 15.

ship with their sentiments—make them our own—and then call upon our souls, and all that is within us, to praise the Lord. Singing, even when it is done according to the best rules of art, in expression, manner, or posture, is hateful to God, and an insult to His glory, unless the soul and the spirit are engaged. “God is a Spirit,” and He “seeketh *such* to worship Him.” I wonder, if we should all make strict inquiry into this matter, whether we would escape our own condemnation. I love to have the whole congregation join heartily in our service of song, and it grieves me when I see so many motionless lips before me ; but I would a thousand times rather have you all silent than singing carelessly, soullessly, and without the Spirit, for then the glory of the Lord departs from the temple, and “Ichabod” is written all over the house, and deeply branded upon the worshippers.

3. *Mary's song was more than soulful ; it was joyous.* Her highest intelligence was engaged to magnify the Lord, and her spirit was filled with joyful praise. Religion in any of its aspects is but a heavy and hard service when it is formally rendered or participated in without joy. Joyfulness is characteristic of the gospel. “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy,” said the angel to the shepherds, “which shall be to all people.”¹ “O come, let us sing unto the Lord ; let us make a joyful noise to the Rock of our salvation,”² said the Psalmist. Much more ought we to serve the Lord with joyful hearts. It is the Lord's will that we should be filled with joy. “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice,”³ was the apostolic exhortation. The Incarnation has given us access by faith into the grace of God, wherein we stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Mary rejoiced in God

¹ Luke ii. 10.² Ps. xcv. 1.³ Phil. iv. 4.

her Saviour; every thought of Him filled her soul with gladness and stirred her spirit with joy. So should we rejoice in our Saviour, whom having not seen we love, and in whom, though now we see Him not, yet believing we rejoice with a joy unspeakable and full of glory. Surely the christian has a better right and title to rejoice than any other man!

“Oh, happy christian, sing.”

4. *The object of Mary's praise.* She magnified the Lord, and rejoiced in God her Saviour. It is fair to suppose that the trend of Mary's thought and feeling was according to her Jewish and Old Testament education. The God of the Old Testament was her Lord. The “Jehovah” of Israel was her God. And yet she must have got, in this new inspiration, and especially from the words of the angel who announced to her the Incarnation, a wider and more evangelical view of God than she ever had had before. Her vision was cleared of many a cloud of Jewish prejudice, and her horizon was widened to see that, in Jesus, God's mercy was to be extended to all people, and from generation to generation. Certainly, however, her soul was filled with thoughts of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of David and the prophets. She magnified Him who created the world, and placed and numbered the stars which fill the heavens with His glory and show forth His handiwork. She remembered Him who was the preserver and providence of the world, as well as its creator; but especially would she magnify Him who was, in a peculiar sense, the God of Israel; who had delivered the people out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of that land of bondage and affliction into the land of milk and honey, of rains from heaven, and hills and valleys, the land of corn and wine

and oil. She remembered how He had called Abraham, and made a covenant of grace with him; she remembered how he had fought their battles and delivered them out of the hands of their enemies, and taught them that He was their Judge as well as their Redeemer. She would think of Him as the maker of great promises, and now as the fulfiller of them, in sending Jesus to perform all His good will. A hundred sacred images of Him who for generations had dealt with Israel in righteousness and mercy, in goodness and severity, but always in love and faithfulness, floated before her mind. He was their great Captain, who fought for them; their Shepherd, who watched over them and fed them; the Mighty to save, who was to tread the wine-press alone. Perhaps there came a dim vision of Him as the Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, wounded for their transgressions, and bearing away their sins in His own body. His character as Saviour was blended with that of the great Sovereign and Judge. I cannot think that her ideas were as clear to her as they are to us, for the whole secret of His being and purpose was not as fully revealed to her as it is now to us; but she had faint glimpses of it all, and her soul sung of that of which her intelligence was not as yet fully informed. God in Christ and Christ in God was not dogmatically set before her; yet in spirit she grasped these great truths, and poured them out in a tribute of magnificent praise before Him. We still deal with great mysteries in our adoration, the meaning of which we *feel* rather than *understand*.

How far Mary understood the mysterious personality of the Child whom she was to bear it is difficult to say. She, no doubt, was thinking of Him when she declared that her spirit rejoiced in God her Saviour. Her spirit and soul were in a high state of elevation at this time,

and she spoke forth things which at a later time she did not fully understand. When Jesus was a boy in the Temple, she did not appreciate what He meant when He said, "I must be about My Father's business."¹ She did not fully understand Him in His public ministry, and on a certain occasion somewhat officiously sought to interrupt it by calling Him away from the multitude which crowded round Him. Perhaps her motherly anxiety was at that time dominating her spiritual perceptions, just as our natural anxieties sometimes—nay, very often—blind our higher spiritual intelligence. Nevertheless, on this occasion, when her soul and spirit were fully illuminated by the Holy Spirit, she joined Elisabeth in singing praise to the Incarnate God. She believed that the mysterious Being whose earthly life was beginning in her body was her Saviour. More than that, *God* her Saviour. Philosophical and speculative difficulties were not present with her; neither are they present with us when we are in the highest spiritual condition. Faith takes the place of the speculative faculties, and deals directly with God.

If any should suggest that Mary was not justified in directing her rejoicing adoration to Him whom she had just conceived, I would only remind them that she was but doing what she was abundantly warranted in doing, had she only the Old Testament scriptures to guide her. All the prophets had testified that the Messiah, when He came, would be possessed of the attributes of the Godhead; that the Messiah of her hopes would be none other than the Jehovah of her worship, come to earth as a man. She remembered the Messianic prophecies and songs: "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

¹ Luke ii. 49.

called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”¹ Such passages from the prophets were now involuntarily associated with her unborn Son. She would remember, as the daughter of David, how her great ancestor had spoken of Messiah as at once “his Son” and “his Lord.”² She would at that moment recall the saying of Gabriel, who declared that “that Holy Thing which should be born of her was the Son of the Highest, and should be called the Son of God, and that the Lord God would give unto Him the throne of David, and that He should rule over the house of Jacob for ever; and that of His kingdom there should be no end.” Surely she was warranted in thinking and speaking of her unborn Son as God her Saviour! Elisabeth, speaking by the Holy Ghost, had just saluted and given precedence to her as the “mother of my Lord.” This confession of faith in Him as Saviour-God was fully warranted to her; it is much more abundantly warranted to us. Let us not be behind Mary, who have even more light than she had, in bringing the worship of our hearts to Him who is God *our* Saviour as truly as He was hers.

In her rejoicing song Mary fully recognised her higher relation to her Son. He was her “Saviour.” She was a sinner as other women were sinners, and she rejoiced in salvation come to her through Him even as we do. No note of proud superiority in her song suggests to us what the Romanists would have us believe, that she herself was conceived and born without sin. The deepest humility pervades this song, so far as Mary is concerned. It is a truth for us to take deeply into our hearts, that the angels sing praises to God and celebrate His glory, but they cannot sing to

¹ Isa. ix. 6.

² Mark xii. 37.

Him as their Saviour; only His redeemed sing of the Lamb slain.¹ Angels have never known the depths of divine love as it is given us. Nor can we ever enter into the full sweetness and power of that holy name—Jesus, Saviour—unless we take our place before Him as lost sinners. Perhaps, at this moment, Mary felt more deeply than ever before in her life that she was a sinful woman, even while the most blessed among women. I am sure that they who sing the praises of Christ the loudest, and with deepest understanding and most sincere spirit, are they who have seen the deepest into the sinful depths of their own hearts. How shall any one sing and rejoice in God as Saviour who has never learned the plagues of his own heart, which Jesus has come to cure?

We ought to join with Mary most heartily in this great song of praise, for, like Mary, we are sinners who need a Saviour, and, like Mary, we are sinners to whom a Saviour has come. Therefore “the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing into Zion, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.”² “Rejoice in the Lord, O ye justified ones; for praise is comely in the upright.”³ “Praise ye the Lord; for it is good to sing praises unto our God; for it is pleasant; and praise is comely.”⁴ This is an act of worship; this is a gracious duty; this is a debt of love which all may pay. To rejoice in God our Saviour is a privilege which is monopolized by no class, and is not limited to those who are most highly favoured with the great things of the earth. It is a privilege as well as a duty, which the poorest and least educated may discharge. None so poor that they cannot rejoice in God their Saviour. The rich and the trained and

¹ Rev. vii. 9. ² Isa. li. 11. ³ Ps. xxxiii. 1. ⁴ Ps. cxlvii. 1.

cultivated ones in the Church of God have no monopoly of praise and rejoicing.

The youngest among us may engage in this delightful and grateful service of magnifying the Lord, and rejoicing in God our Saviour. It must not be forgotten that amongst those who first hailed Jesus with songs and praises were the little children who went with the multitude, and sang Hosanna in the Temple, lifting up their sweet young voices. Their song angered the rulers and chief priests ; but Jesus rebuked them, saying, "Yea, have ye never read, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings Thou hast perfected praise?" Yes, indeed ! the children who cannot do great things as men can, according to our estimate of great things, may praise Him and give Him joy in their praise. I love to hear the clear, sweet voices of the boys in our choir, and I do pray that their songs may be inspired by the love of Him whose praise they sing.

This service and joyful worship may be rendered anywhere—at home or abroad, on the land or on the sea ; the soldier in his tent or on the march ; the sailor in the fore-castle of his ship or in the shrouds, with the winds playing an organ accompaniment to his song ; the mother in the home amidst the children, or about her household work ; the father in the fields or in the shop. Oh ! we may sing anywhere—in the church, or on the street ; for all places are temples of God, and the time has come when neither to this place nor that are our praises restricted. The sick may sing as truly as those who are well ; the weak may sing as well as the strong ; the prisoner as well as the freeman ; the slave as well as the master ; the hand-maiden in the kitchen as well as the mistress in the drawing-room—the one may sing to the accompaniment of a piano, the other keeping time with the broom and the dust-cloth. Except in the matter of prayer, there is no

soul-exercise in which we are so free as in the singing, with melody in our hearts, to God.

Since sacred song proceeds from the soul and is quickened by the Spirit, it cannot be fettered. No one can prevent us from singing and magnifying the Lord, and rejoicing in God our Saviour. The enraged multitude could arrest Paul and Silas, beat them, and set them in the stocks in the inner prison at Philippi; but they could not prevent them from waking the echoes of their dreary cell at midnight with praises to God. I once talked with a little Hindu maiden about fourteen years of age, who, because she had come to love the Lord Jesus Christ, was taken away from the mission school, beaten, starved, and forbidden to speak His name, or bow her knee to Him. And since she would not worship the family idols any longer, she was sent as a kind of prisoner to the idol temple, where I met her. With some friends we stood on the edge of rock upon which the temple was built, and, looking abroad upon the lovely landscape, we sang a hymn of praise to God. This brought a troop of young girls from the temple cloisters, and this little maid said to us, in fairly good English, "I can sing those songs too, for I love Jesus, and sing to Him every day *in my heart*. The priests will not let me sing with my lips, but they can't prevent me from singing in my heart. They will not let me kneel down and pray to my Saviour, but they can't prevent me from praying in my heart," and her young face shone with the gladness of this privilege. There are some of you who cannot make much music with your voices, but you can with soul-music make melody in your hearts to the Lord.

I know of no other spiritual exercise which ministers so much comfort and strength to the soul as that of rejoicing in God our Saviour, and exalting the Lord in song. In times of depression and trouble it is an in-

fallible help ; in times of affliction it is the minister of greatest consolation. Sometimes in constant prayer, by which we pour out our complaints to God, the heart becomes depressed and the spirit heavy with dwelling on our own troubles and trials ; but when we sing praise to God—sing of His goodness and mercy which endureth for ever—the soul gets lifted out of its bondage and depression, and flies away to heaven in song, and breathes in that higher atmosphere. Holy song is the best possible corrective for selfish discontent. If we put the question to ourselves, “What shall I sing?” the answer comes at once :

“ I will sing of my Redeemer
And His wondrous love to me.”

This is an endless theme of praise, and the heart cannot long abide in darkness or gloom when the lips are framing song. Hear David, from “among the lions” and from the fires of trial and suffering. He begins by prayer and ends by singing. “My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed ; I will sing and give praise. Awake up, my glory ; awake, psaltery and harp ; I myself will awake early. I will praise Thee, O Lord, among the people : I will sing unto Thee among the nations. For Thy mercy is great unto the heavens, and Thy truth unto the clouds. Be Thou exalted, O God, above the heavens ; let Thy glory be above all the earth.” Sing, christian, sing ; sing in your gladness ; sing in your sorrow ; sing in your light and in your darkness. Sing of His power ; sing of His strength ; sing of His mercy and His judgment which endureth for ever ; sing the new song ; sing praises unto the Lord ; sing as long as you live. Sing to the well-Beloved, for He hath done great things for you ; sing with the spirit and with the understanding. I, for one, can bear testimony to the power of song to deliver

the soul out of darkness. Many years ago I passed through a long and dreary period of spiritual darkness. I had prayed until I could pray no more. My soul was in misery ; my heart was as a desert of sand. I was on the very verge of despair. At the time I speak of, I was making a railway journey to fulfil an appointment to preach. I can never tell how hard it was in those days to preach the Gospel to others when my own soul was in darkness. It was night ; there was no light in the railway carriage, and my face was pressed against the window, looking out into the faint, dying light in the sky. I do not know why I did so, or how, but almost unconsciously I found myself singing, in a soft whisper :

“ Jesus, Lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly.”

I was as surprised at my own singing as if another had begun to sing that song by my side. But I sang on, and had not finished the first stanza of that sweet hymn till the dark clouds which had enveloped my soul for months broke away, and my soul was at liberty again. This, to me, was one of God’s songs in the night.

“ Sing unto the Lord, O ye saints of His, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holiness.

“ For His anger endureth but a moment ; in His favour is life ; weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”¹

“ O come, let us sing unto the Lord ; let us make a joyful noise to the Rock of our salvation.

“ Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto Him with psalms.”²

“ Whoso offereth praise glorifieth Me.”³

¹ Ps. xxx. 4 5. ² Ps. xciv. 1, 2. ³ Ps. l. 23.

XI

THE LOVING-KINDNESS OF GOD

“For He that is mighty hath done to me great things.”—LUKE i. 49.

EVERY night is the womb of a new morning. The long night of Israel's distress was now past. The morning of the new and glorious day of God's loving-kindness to Israel and to all the world was springing. For five centuries the darkness had been settling down thicker and blacker upon the people of God. But God is behind every cloud, and though darkness may hide God from us, it does not hide us from God. The people that had long walked in darkness were now about to behold a great light; the dawn of that glorious day had already filled the souls of Elisabeth and Mary with its rosy hues, and all that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death would soon rise up and hail with joy the coming of the new era of Gospel grace. The shadows were already fleeing away, and the day was at hand. In Israel there were many pious and faithful souls who had not been destroyed by the false lights of Phariseeism, Sadduceeism, or Herodianism. They lived in the comfort of the Prophet's words: “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.”¹ Foremost among these were Mary and Elisabeth. The sorrows of their long night were now

¹ Isa. l. 10.

over, and the joy of the morning had come to them. Therefore they sang and magnified the Lord and rejoiced in God their Saviour.

The brief song of Elisabeth, sung under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Ghost—a song of benediction upon Mary and her unborn Child—was the swan song of the Old Testament. Elisabeth, Zacharias, and John were the last of the Old Testament prophets. The glory of the Old Covenant was past and paling away under the brighter glory of the New Covenant. “For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth. For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious.”¹ Elisabeth was a true prophetess, one of the three last links which bound together the old and the new dispensations. She had lived long in hope of the coming Messiah, and now, beholding His coming, she, like good old Simeon, was ready to depart in peace, and sang her death song. A worthy mother of a worthy son, she entertained no jealousy of her younger and socially inferior cousin, but bowed down before her and sang her praises—the Old Testament bowing before the New Testament, the mother of the forerunner of Christ bowing before the mother of Jesus. Thirty years later, John, that flaming meteor of prophecy, that expiring light of the Old Testament, said of Jesus: “Whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.”² “He must increase, but I must decrease.”³ So now, Elisabeth anticipated the greatness of Mary’s child, and for His sake humbled herself before His mother. In these great acts of humility neither John nor Elisabeth minimized their own greatness, but rather increased it; just as the exceeding glory of the New Testament sheds back upon the Old Testament a

¹ 2 Cor. iii. 10, 11.

² John i. 27.

³ John ii. 30.

brighter glory than that which it had in itself. Had not Christ come, the Old Testament and the ancient covenant people would long ago have perished, or, at least, remained but as a memory among men, as the peoples and religions contemporary with the Hebrews have perished. Moses and Elias were glorified in presence of the transfigured glory of Christ on the mount ; so were Elisabeth and John magnified in their humility before Mary and Jesus.

Turning from Elisabeth's song of beatitude to Mary and her song, we note the fact that it is not said that Mary was filled with the Holy Ghost as Elisabeth was ; but we gather that since the Holy Ghost came upon her and the power of the Highest overshadowed her, she was now living and moving, thinking and speaking under the continued influence of the Holy Spirit, while Elisabeth's inspiration was momentary and passing. Her song was in response to the salutation of Elisabeth, it was less excited than the elder woman's beatitude, but there reigns "throughout this canticle a majesty truly regal." It is the song of the first gospel lark springing from her humble nest and soaring away heavenward, singing as she mounted higher and higher until she reached the climax of her joy in a pæan of praise to the faithfulness of God.

Criticism has charged Mary with plagiarism, because there is a close resemblance in some parts of this song to that of Hannah.¹ It is true that there is a striking superficial similarity between these songs, but on closer examination there is a wide difference between them. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that Mary's song was unconsciously modelled on this pattern, and the contents of the song show more than one thought borrowed from the Psalms. If this be plagiarism, then

¹ 1 Sam. ii. 1-10.

make the best of it. God Himself plagiarized the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalm when He gave testimony to Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased ; hear ye Him."¹ Compare the second Psalm : "Thou art My Son ; this day have I begotten Thee,"² with Isaiah : "Behold My servant, whom I uphold ; Mine elect, in whom My soul delighteth,"³ and with Moses : "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto Me ; unto Him ye shall hearken."⁴ A comparison of these three passages, one from the Law, one from the Prophets, and one from the Psalms, with God's testimony to Jesus, will show that He has quoted the whole gist of the Old Testament and packed it into one sentence. Shall we put a slight upon Mary because she appealed to the word of God for material for her exquisite song ? Hers was a blessed plagiarism ! If I could so preach to you, from Sunday to Sunday, that you would go away from the church saying, "That sermon was just like the Bible ; it reminded me of Moses, and Isaiah, and David, and brought to my mind a hundred passages of Scripture," I should feel that God had given me great wisdom and power. The obligation to the Bible for great thoughts, for beautiful expressions and grandest inspiration is freely acknowledged by our master poets and great prose writers. Shakespeare reveals his immense knowledge of scripture in his peerless plays ; Hall Caine, one of our most strenuous writers of fiction, has recently said that he owed more to the Bible than to any other source, both for his plots and his powerful characters. Where would Milton or Dante, Young or Cowper or Pollock, have found material for their profound and lovely poems but for the Bible ?

¹ Matt. xvii. 5. ² Ps. ii. 7. ³ Isa. xlii. 1. ⁴ Deut. xviii. 15.

We should never have known Browning's most beautiful poem "Saul" but for his plagiarism of the Bible.

Again, criticism has asked with a sneer, "whether Mary sang with the leaves of the Old Testament spread upon her knees." We can answer that question. "No! she did not have the Old Testament upon her knees, but she had it in her heart, which is a better way to carry one's Bible." It must not be forgotten that every Israelite was taught from earliest childhood to memorize the songs of Deborah, Hannah, and David; just as in the homes of the Scottish people the children are all taught to memorize the metrical Psalms, so that their thought and language are native to their hearts, and spring to their lips in every moment of deep emotion or earnest thought. In the times of the Commonwealth and of the Covenanters, the Old Testament as well as the New were so constantly read, and the language of the common people was so closely modelled upon the language of the Bible, that the commonest thoughts about ordinary things were expressed in Bible language. It would do us no harm if our own conversation, both in society and in business, were more seasoned with this blessed salt.

There is yet another point of criticism which I think well to notice. Mary's song was not the less original because it borrowed phraseology from Hannah. The inflection and setting of Mary's song was vastly different from that of Hannah, even when she uses Hannah's words. Hannah's song was infused with the spirit of the Old Testament, while Mary's glowed with the fervour of the New Covenant. Hannah magnified the Lord for her own personal triumph, and broke forth with cries of indignation against her enemies. But Mary magnified the Lord, not for her personal triumphs over other women less favoured, but for the grace that

had come to her; and sang the mercy of God upon all who feared Him. Mary's song was full of evangelical love and hope. She rejoiced for herself and for others. If she borrowed Hannah's reference to the exaltation of the poor, she had no reference to herself, but to that salvation which God brings to all who are poor in spirit and hunger after righteousness. Mary quoted Old Testament language, but she gave to it a higher meaning than it seemed to be possessed of in the mouths of those who originally used it. This is characteristic of all Bible writers. A later prophet will quote from an earlier one, but he gives a higher turn and meaning to his predecessor's words. How many quotations from the Old Testament there are in the New Testament which, in their new setting and emphasis, give a glory of meaning to them not perceived in their original form and place. Surely Hannah's words on Mary's lips served to let out the concealed light there was in them. When God gave commandment that the ox that treadeth out the corn should not be muzzled, it was not thought that there was contained in this simple regulation for the benefit of cattle a commandment to take care of ministers; but Paul, in quoting that passage, has made the discovery of this truth.¹

I. THE CONTENTS OF MARY'S SONG. It is time now to look a little more closely into the substance of this beautiful canticle.

I. *She sings of her own mercies.* "He that is mighty hath done to me great things." We are reminded of the Psalmist's words, "The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad."² "He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden." In this expression she had no reference to her humility of mind, but to her

¹ Cf. Deut. xxv. 4; 1 Cor. ix. 9. ² Ps. cxxvi. 3.

humble state in life. Although she was of the house and lineage of David, from some cause or other her immediate family had fallen into very lowly circumstances. Her place in society and her lot in life were obscure and hard. Perhaps she had been made to feel, by some who were less nobly born than she, though better off in this world's goods and position, the sting of poverty and her decayed nobility. Perhaps she had often wondered how and why God had forgotten His covenant with David and *his house* (of which she was a member), and all the great promises to him and them to the latest generation. Perhaps she had suffered the taunt of the ungodly, saying, "Where now is thy God? Of what advantage is it to you that you are of the house of David? Of what worth to you are all these glorious promises?" Such thoughts often come into the mind of Christians left to obscurity, poverty, and trial. "Why hath God forgotten and forsaken me?" The ungodly suggest that there is no "profit" in godliness.¹ It seems very natural that Mary should begin her thanksgiving by recounting the great things God had done for her, in "regarding her low estate," and remembering His promises to so obscure a member of David's house. "He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden." Oh ye poor and lowly and obscure ones who love and serve the Lord, be sure of this, God has not forgotten His promises; He regards your low estate. He has never taken His eyes from off you, and never for a moment withdrawn His heart from you. Though *you* know it not, *He* knows and He cares. How little the poor Hebrew slaves in Egypt thought of all the great things God was planning for them! Hear what He said to Moses: "I have surely seen the affliction of My people which are in Egypt, and have heard

¹ Job xxi. 15; Mal. iii. 14.

their cry by reason of their taskmasters ; for I know their sorrows.”¹ Having come to redeem His covenant promises, God had chosen Mary to be the instrument of the Incarnation. Would she not have been less than pious and grateful had she not begun her song with thanksgiving for the great personal blessedness and honour which had come to her? If she seems for a moment to dwell upon the fact that henceforth all generations should call her blessed, this was more in praise of the goodness of God to her than in the indulgence of any pride on her own account. When a man sings to God, “He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock and established my goings ; and He hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God ; many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord,”² he is not boasting, or indulging in self-congratulation, but rejoicing in God his Saviour, and magnifying the Lord, and publishing the glad tidings of grace to others. When Jesus sent the healed demoniac back to his home to tell his friends how great things the Lord had done for his soul and had healed him, He did not send him on a mission of self-congratulation. And when he published it abroad, among the five cities where he lived, he was more intent on glorifying his Saviour than of boasting of his own good fortune. Let us all sing aloud—

“Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God ;
He to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood.”

If He has taken us from the dust and the dunghill, and set us among the princes, and made us to “inherit the throne of glory,”³ ought we not to value this great

¹ Exod. iii. 7.

² Ps. xl. 1-3.

³ 1 Sam. ii. 8.

grace and rejoice in these great things which have come to us? Surely He hath done great things for us, and we should be glad as Mary was glad, and sing aloud His praise.

2. *She sings of His mercy to others.* "And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation." There is no selfishness in salvation. No sooner does it come into a human heart than it begets a longing love and desire for others. The coming of Jesus not only brought salvation to *her*, but she recognised that in Him God had laid up mercy for others, and she made haste to proclaim this as well as her own great blessings. As soon as Andrew and Philip found (or were found of) the Lord, they went each their way according to the impulse of grace in them, the one to find his own brother Simon, and the other to search out his friend Nathanael; nor did they rest until they had told them the good news and brought them to Christ. It is this spirit which has made the gospel a blessing to thousands of millions in the generations that have passed since Jesus came, and which will make it a blessing to thousands yet unborn. It was this flaming desire that sent Paul over all Western Asia and Southern Europe preaching and teaching, day and night, in the synagogues of the Jews on the Sabbath days, and in the market-places where the Gentiles were congregated between the Sabbaths, and from house to house; for which cause he counted not his life dear to himself, so that he might finish his course with joy and the ministry which he had received from the Lord Jesus. This fellowship with God in His purpose of mercy to others is that which has sent forth in ages past, and is now sending forth with increased enthusiasm, hundreds of men and women to every part of the world to proclaim the grace of God to sinners still sitting in darkness and the shadow of death. I know of

no characteristic which marks more surely the child of God than this fellowship with Christ in His desire for the salvation of men. When a man finds a pot of treasure hid in a field, he re-buries it and keeps it secret until he can buy the field and possess himself of the treasure. When a prospector finds a diamond or gold mine, he does not proclaim it abroad, and invite all the world to come and share his wealth with him, but would fain keep his "find" a secret until he has exhausted its riches for himself. But when a sinner finds the grace of God, his first impulse is to declare it abroad and invite all the world to come and enjoy the same riches of grace which have filled his own heart and changed his life.

II. SHE SINGS THE GLORIOUS ATTRIBUTES OF GOD. Having rejoiced in the mercies which had come to herself and which she saw stored up in God for others, she naturally takes a higher note and sings of those glorious attributes of God which have wrought together for her salvation and that of the world.

1. *She sings of His Almightyness.* "For He that is mighty (Almighty) hath done to me great things." "He hath shown strength with His arm." Perhaps Mary was remembering at this moment the new name which God had proclaimed to Abraham when He promised him that he should have a son in his old age, in spite of what seemed to be the insuperable difficulties and human impossibilities of the case. "I am the Almighty God,"¹ was the answer to the patriarch's difficulties. "The power of the Highest shall overshadow thee," said the angel to Mary, and "With God nothing shall be impossible," were the words which gave assurance that the great mercy and grace promised her should not lack fulfilment. These thoughts were in her mind, and she now praised the Omnipotence of God. And well she might

¹ Gen. xvii. 1.

have done so ; for but for Omnipotence to perform what He had promised, of what avail were all His promises ? Her faith took hold on this, and she believed that " what God had promised He was able to perform." Elisabeth praised her for her faith, and by the Holy Ghost assured her that she should see " the performance of those things which were told her from the Lord." The heavens declare the glory of God's power, and the firmament sheweth His handiwork. No one can look abroad upon Nature in all its majesty and extent without being awed by a sense of God's power. God Himself often appealed to His power, as displayed in Nature, to encourage the failing hearts of His people in the midst of circumstances from which no human or earthly power could extricate them, and to assure them that He was able to perform His promises of grace. The world is full of the wonders of His power, but the highest display is seen in the Incarnation. To fold back His Godhead, as it were, into a little bud of human nature and become a babe in the virgin's womb, a tiny and helpless suckling lying on her breast, and give Himself over to the care of her hands and arms, is a reversion of power which surpasses all other manifestations. To do this all nature must have been docile to His word and plastic to His hand. The Almighty was her God—He is *our* God and Saviour. He does not simply exercise His handiwork—the work of His fingers—in our salvation, but He stirs up His strength ; He makes bare His mighty arm and comes and saves us. He is the Mighty to save. The Mighty God. Nothing is too hard for Him ! Oh, it is a comfort, when we think of our sin, its guilt, its power, and its indelible stain, when we think of our ruined characters, of death and hell, following in the wake of sin, to remember also the great promises of God, in which are forgiveness, regeneration, triumph over death,

and a glorious immortality of spirit, soul, and body, and that at the back of all these promises is the Almightyness of God. This awakes our song as it did Mary's.

"O, sing of His mighty Love ;
Sing of His Mighty Love ;
Sing of His Mighty Love—
Mighty to save."

The Almightyness of the Jehovah of the Old Testament hath all passed into the possession of the Jesus of the New Testament. "For all power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and preach the gospel ; and lo, I am with you."¹ Surely we have entered upon victory before we begin our work, and we count on success in every word spoken and every effort put forth in fellowship with Him who is mighty to do great things.

2. *She sings of His holiness.* "And holy is His name." The Almightyness of God is not mere power ; it is the Almightyness of One whose name and nature is Holiness. Holiness is the chief attribute of God. This attribute distinguishes God from all the false gods of the heathen. For "who is like unto Thee among the gods (mighty ones)? Who is like unto Thee, *glorious in holiness*, fearful in praises, doing wonders?"² Holiness is the attribute which separates God from all other beings. It is the moral glory of His being. It pervades all His attributes, and gives intense value to them all. It is God's holiness that makes it possible for mercy and truth to meet together and righteousness and peace to kiss each other. The holiness of His righteousness is not blemished by His mercy, and the holiness of His mercy is not impeached by His justice. What the effulgent light of the sun is to the sun, so is the holiness of God to God. In Him there is no darkness, no variableness, nor shadow

¹ Matt. xxviii. 18, 19. ² Exod. xv. 11.

of turning. Justice shall never accuse Mercy of too great tenderness to sinners, and Mercy shall never accuse Justice of too great severity, for the holiness of God reigns in both. It is just because He is of too pure eyes to behold iniquity, and because the very heavens are unclean in His sight, and because He cannot compromise or make allowance for sin, that we have such consolation in the divine forgiveness and mercy. For if the Holy God has found a way to save us, we may be sure that that way included the final destruction of sin, and guarantees to us, in the end, a holiness of character which shall enable *us* to behold *His* face without shame, and *Him* to look upon *us* without wrath.

“ Holy, Holy, Holy ; Lord God Almighty !
Early in the morning our songs shall rise to Thee ;
Holy, Holy, Holy, Merciful and Mighty !
God in three persons, Blessed Trinity ! ”

3. *She sings of His mercy.* She has already sung of the exercise of His mercy to them that fear Him, but now she extols His mercy as an attribute of His being. For all His great deeds and all the great grace which now tune her heart to sing were done in remembrance of His mercy. That is, in accordance with His mercy, true to His mercy. The resources for this strain in her song were boundless, for the whole Bible is coloured with the mercy of God. His mercy runs like a golden thread through the whole woof of its texture. Mercy characterizes His mind towards us.

(1) *He is merciful.* When Moses desired to see God's glory, it was not permitted him to do so, for he could not look upon God and live ; but God caused all His goodness to pass before him, and He proclaimed His name to Moses in these words, “ The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and

truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”¹ This is the glory of God, which we now with open face behold in the revelation which He had made of Himself in Jesus Christ, the express image of His character, the very brightness of His glory. In his great entreaty to sinners Isaiah says, “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.”² When Daniel came before God with his great prayer, after confessing his sins, his first great argument with God was that He was “the great and dreadful God keeping the covenant and mercy.”³

(2) *He keeps mercy.* That is, He has a store of mercy from which we sinners may draw continually; a store of mercy which flows evermore toward us. He keeps mercy for us against our need; as a bank keeps our treasure or money and holds it for our cheques; as a trustee keeps our inheritance and administers it to us according to our need. Rowland Hill was once put in trust with a considerable sum of money to be given to a poor clergyman in great need. Fearing that if he gave it to him all at once it might be more hurtful than helpful, he enclosed to him first of all a ten-pound note, with the simple words accompanying the envelope, “There is more to follow.” Then after awhile he sent another note, with the same message, “There is more to follow.” Again, after a time, the clergyman received a third, and a fourth, and a fifth remittance, each remittance being accompanied by the same message, “There is more to follow.” The poor man lived on the notes received and the promises of “more to follow.” It is so with God’s mercy. There is always more to follow. We read

¹ Exod. xxxiv. 6, 7. ² Isa. lv. 7. ³ Deut. ix. 4.

sometimes an interesting chapter in a magazine, and at the end, bracketed in smaller letters, but very distinct, this sentence, "To be continued." So it is with God's mercy; with each instalment there is an appended promise, "To be continued." Only this story of mercy will never come to an end. It will go on from generation to generation, and will still "be continued." *Finis* will never be written at the bottom of the revelation of God's mercy. His supply of mercy is inexhaustible. David makes the vast multitudes of mercies already received his warrant for coming for more. "According to Thy loving-kindness and according unto the *multitude* of Thy tender mercies, blot out my transgression."¹ The remembrance of the innumerable times we have come to God for mercies makes us ashamed to come for more, but David made that his plea and warrant. Each time we receive mercy from God it is as seed in the field; it springs up into a harvest of more mercy. If we seek little we get little, if we ask largely we get many mercies, and our joy is full. This is no warrant for the presumptuous abuse of God's mercy, but for the free use of it by those who fear Him.

(3) *He delights in mercy.* God never shows mercy grudgingly, nor with a reproach thrown back upon us for our sin. Judgment is His strange work, but He delighteth in mercy. Hear what the prophet says, "Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retaineth not His anger for ever, because *He delighteth in mercy.*"² Sum up all the serious occupations, the pleasures and pastimes in which you take the most delight, and then you cannot know how it delights God to bestow mercy upon them who fear Him. Do not fear to come to Him for mercy. He has plenty.

¹ Ps. li. 1.² Mic. vii. 18.

Do not fear that He will chide thee, for His mercies are ever tender. How tender He was with the poor outcast women, not only granting mercy, but healing their wounded spirits and cheering them with hope by His tender mercy.

(4) *His mercy is never-failing.* It continues from generation to generation. We are told by some astronomers that the sun is gradually consuming itself away, and that by-and-by, in a few million years, it will be a burnt-out, cold, lifeless cinder. But God's mercies endure from generation to generation. Flowing from an infinite source, they are inexhaustible. Think of the millions of sinners who have drawn on God's mercies in the past, who are living on them in the present. Well, there is as much mercy left in God as there was before He spoke to Adam of mercy and forgiveness.

4. *She sings of His Justice.* Let not the proud, haughty, and defiant sinner suppose that because "with the Lord there is mercy" He will thereby clear the guilty or pass by wilful and defiant sinners. His anger can burn as well as His mercy. And when mercy is despised and sin is chosen and persisted in, then He whets His "glittering sword" and bends His bow, and goes forth to war.¹ Alas for that sinner who rushes upon the bosses of Jehovah's buckler! Think you that your hand can be strong or your heart endure in the day that the Lord shall deal with you? I tell you nay; but you shall consume away as the dry stubble field before the fire. It is a precious thing to fall into the arms of His mercy; but it will be "a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,"² "for our God is a consuming fire."³ Oh, then, kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way of sin!

III. SHE SINGS OF HIS GREAT DEEDS. I can only

¹ Deut. xxxii. 41. ² Heb. x. 31. ³ Heb. xii. 29.

indicate these things. "He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts." All those vain and proud people, the raging heathen, the kings of the earth and the rulers of the people who took counsel together, saying, "Where is the God of the Old Testament, and where are all those wonderful promises of a coming Messiah? Let us rise up and cast off the bonds of this superstition, and free ourselves from these cords of Scripture. Israel is forgotten, and there is none to make us afraid. Let us possess ourselves of the kingdom, and exalt ourselves in the earth." Mary saw in the Incarnation the scattering of these proud and vain dreamers of the earth, and in their stead the reign of Messiah. She would have been no true daughter of David if she had not thought of Herod, that mighty Pagan king, sitting on the throne of her father, when she said, "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree." Nor was she thinking of herself or of poor outcast Israel alone, but she saw here also a new principle in the moral government of God. The proud and haughty possessors of this world have arrogated to themselves the right to rule and reign and lord it over the weak and the poor. But God will not suffer this. He hath *potentially* in the Incarnation, and He will *actually* in the outworking of His purpose, put down the rule of pride and might in this world and exalt them of low degree. Especially them who have lowly come to Him and taken refuge in His salvation. Let the triumph of the Christian Church over all the combined world powers testify to the truth of this prophetic song. It will be seen to be true in this world in a degree; it will be seen without degree in the world to come. "The meek *shall* inherit the earth."¹ It will be a rare sight when the world shall

¹ Ps. xxxvii. 11.

behold the poor out of the dust, and the beggars from the dunghill, among the princes, and seated upon the thrones of His glory, while the proud, imperious, and strong men of this world who have neither feared God nor regarded man are cast out and down. She carries this principle of spiritual and divine revolution further, and makes application of it to salvation. "He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away." The grace of God does not come to the poor because they are poor, nor is it withheld from the rich because they are rich; but poverty and hunger take self-confidence out of men, and lead them in their poverty and emptiness and hunger to come to God; and God fills every soul which hungers, and gives drink to every soul which is athirst. But the rich who "are increased with goods, and have need of nothing," He turns empty away. It is, alas! too often the case that those who are possessed of riches manage somehow to satisfy themselves without God. They seem not to have need of Him—they can buy what they want. The world bows down to them; society gives place to them. They do as they please, they go where they please, and say in their hearts, "We are rich, and increased with goods; we have much wealth laid up for many days; we will eat and drink and be merry. Let the poor and the hungry seek after God; as for us, we do not need Him—we can take care of ourselves." As long as the prodigal's money held out, he thought he did well enough without his father and his father's house; but when he had spent all his living, and famine came into the land, and he was hungry, then he thought on his father's house, and went to him, and he was received and fed and clothed and taken into the family with music and dancing. Trust not in uncertain and deceitful riches. They can never buy the real needs of the

soul ; they will not avail thee in the day of trial. But hunger and thirst after righteousness, and God will fill you and save you.

Mary concludes her song by magnifying and extolling God's faithfulness. "He hath holpen His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy." In herself she beheld all Israel. God's mercies to her were the sure pledge that all His promises to Israel would be fulfilled. After the long night of sorrow and almost hopelessness, she magnified God for that He had not forgotten ; but "in remembrance of His mercy, as He spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever," had done great things. Let us be sure, among other things and all things, that God does not forget His promises—His covenants with us—that He is faithful to the word which He has spoken, and that He is Almighty to fulfil everything He has purposed for us and promised to us. No apparent forgetfulness on God's part should cast us down ; no delay in the fulfilment of His promises should discourage us. For His word cannot be broken, and He who has promised cannot lie.

"Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God !
He whose word cannot be broken
Formed thee for His own abode ;
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose ?
With Salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes."

XII

THE DAY-SPRING FROM ON HIGH

“To give knowledge of salvation unto His people, by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God ; whereby the Day-Spring from on high hath visited us.”—LUKE i. 77, 78.

MARY of Nazareth abode with Elisabeth and Zacharias about three months, and then returned to her own house. The time of her departure synchronizes with the birth of John the Baptist. Though we are not expressly told that Mary remained with her cousin until that important and long-looked-for event had taken place, we can scarcely think otherwise. There are many unwritten features of interest in the gospel narratives, especially in connection with the early days and years of our Lord, and we are left to our imaginations to fill up these gaps, though we need not run to the wild extremes of the early Christians, who invented all sorts of foolish and improbable stories concerning John the Baptist and Jesus. We can scarcely help wondering what took place in that quiet priestly home in the hill country of Judæa during these three months, a period begun and concluded by wonderful outbursts of inspired and prophetic song. We fancy these three, Mary, Elisabeth, and Zacharias, living together in daily communion, holding sweet and holy converse concerning these two expected children ; the one to be the Forerunner, and the other the long-expected Messiah and Saviour of men. During this time Zacharias was still dumb, and, it would appear,

deaf as well ; but he would be a party to all that went on, for he had become familiar with the signs made to him, and was an expert with his "writing table." What searching of the scriptures, what re-examination and careful study of the prophets, what holy speculations concerning the great events soon to be ushered in with the birth of their respective heaven-sent sons, what enlargement of ideas and thought, must have taken place in their minds under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They were naturally still intensely Jewish and national in their thoughts and conceptions of the promises, but it is evident that they had taken a much wider view of the great salvation than was customary. Mary had in her song spoken of the mercy of God upon them that fear Him from generation to generation, and in the conclusion of his song Zacharias saw the light of the Sunrising from on high, visiting the distant Gentiles who sat in darkness and the shadow of death, and seemed to unite himself and his people with them, in the grace that should guide their feet into the way of peace.

How insignificant this hill-country home was in comparison with the palaces of Herod, the High Priest, the Scribes and Pharisees, and rulers of the nation ! how unimportant were Elisabeth, Mary, and Zacharias in the eyes of the world, as compared with the all-powerful Herod, the rich and grasping rulers, corrupted by political power, greedy and avaricious, enervated by luxury and secularized by earthly ambitions, seeking "honour one of another" ! How impotent compared with the rampant and haughty Romans who held the land and the people in their iron grip, and trampled them beneath their remorseless power ! And yet in all the world there was not such another family ennobled by Heaven, entrusted with the secrets of the

Most High God, and the chosen instruments of God for the redemption of the world ! How true it is that real greatness, either in events or persons, is seldom found among the great and powerful ones of the earth. God hides Himself and His chosen ones away from the eyes and the power of man. He confounds the wisdom of the wise, and overthrows the mighty from their seats, and exalts them of low degree. It is strange that we are so slow to learn this great lesson, but still struggle with one another to pay court to the rich and mighty ones, as though they were the chosen of heaven. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him ; and He will show them His covenant."¹

We must pass over the birth of John the Baptist, and the extraordinary events in connection with the naming of the child, and come directly to the inspired song of Zacharias. For nine long months he had been speechless because of his unbelief. We can well hope that this unbelief had, if not entirely, yet in a large measure, passed away. When he was asked to settle the domestic controversy over the name to be given to his son, his faith asserted itself in full strength, and he declared, "His name is John,"² for he was "the prophet of the Highest," and his name as well as his career was not one to be bound by mere family tradition. He had no sooner freed his soul from the last vestige of unbelief than he was filled with the Holy Ghost ; his tongue, so long tied, was loosed, and he broke forth into a hymn of praise to the grace, power, faithfulness, and mercy of God, as manifested in the person of "the Day-Spring from on high," whose advent was already heralded by the birth of the Forerunner. Let us take a somewhat comprehensive view of this great song. As it was the utterance of faith, strengthened and enlightened by the

¹ Ps. xxv. 14.

² Luke i. 63.

immediate power of the Spirit, it cannot but communicate enlightenment and strength to our own faith.

I. THE APOLOGETIC VALUE OF ZACHARIAS' SONG. There is a great apologetic value in this utterance of Zacharias, for the reason that it sets before us in an intelligible manner the foundations upon which the Christian faith rests. We are now living in an age of unbelief and criticism. The traditional faith of our fathers is rejected by the mass of people with whom we have to do, especially by the educated and half-educated portion of the community. Creeds and confessions of faith are of no value to the sceptical and critical inquirer, in so far as the question concerns the certainty of the things set forth in these holy documents. The modern critic who calls in question all the received facts of history, and insists on hunting every supposed fact up to its fountain-head, and puts every independent witness up for critical cross-examination, has not hesitated to attack in the same way the sacred documents of Christianity, and put them to the rigid test of criticism. Nothing is now received, either as fact or doctrine, because it is in the Bible. Indeed, the historical portion of the Bible is that which has had to withstand the chief assaults of the critics. Old Testament history is questioned, and the New Testament records are impeached. One of the results of this modern spirit of investigation and criticism is that many people are left without (as they say) any certain foundation for faith; and as they cannot accept Christianity as a speculative truth, they add that they are compelled to remain, if not hostile, at least indifferent to the call of the gospel. It is even true that a certain class of presumably devout Christians are saying that in the midst of all this confusion and doubt we ought to look for and expect some new revelation from God, so clear and conclusive that all reasonable

doubt shall be dissipated. These anxious souls say, "We are too far away from the historic foundations of our faith, and we need fresh facts and further and mighty manifestations from God." All this seems to me to be both unphilosophical and somewhat absurd. A fact in history, no matter how far back in the past, loses none of its truth and value because of the lapse of time. Waterloo is no less true as a fact to-day, nearly a century after that memorable struggle took place, and victory was won, than it was the day after the battle. At the time it was the great factor which entered into the almost universal change of the national geography of Europe, and the effect of it is with us as powerfully at the end of this century as it was in the beginning. History loses nothing of truth and force because it was enacted centuries ago. If our Lord came in the world, lived His life, accomplished His ministry, died His death, and rose again from the dead, neither the importance nor the truth of the fact is diminished because it occurred two thousand years ago. Would the revelation be any clearer or truer if it were all re-enacted in our own day? If those who are crying out for further revelation could have their wish, what could they suggest as more complete and powerful than that which came by Jesus Christ? Could our Lord's Incarnation, His unique personality, His heavenly ministry, His sublime death and glorious resurrection be improved upon? The only question is, whether the gospel record is true. The mere date of the facts recorded is without importance. They may have occurred yesterday, or ten thousand years ago, for that matter. The value of the coals which I burn in my grates, and with which my food is daily cooked, does not depend upon whether they were deposited in the heart of the earth ten or ten thousand years ago. It would be madness for me to

reject the coals my tradesmen bring me because they are of such ancient formation, and to demand that they bring me coals of more modern formation. If our Lord Jesus Christ is alive from the dead, then, however remote His Incarnation may have been, the fact is still a present one. Divine history is never ancient history, because He who made the history is still living. The Incarnation, and all that proceeded from the Incarnation, is contemporaneous with all time. There is no dead past in connection with the revelation of God.

Revelation is cumulative, whether we look for it in material works of God or in the inspired utterances or supernatural events which have transpired in the course of human history. The truth of geological science does not rest on the *last* events which have taken place in the course of the earth's history, but upon *all* the facts which underlie the latest formations and developments of the earth's bulk. The testimony of the rocks is not invalidated because the rocks are so old. We are told by the readers of the rocks and the fossil remains of both the animal and vegetable creations, that this world of ours has been millions of years in building; that it has passed through many crises; that it has been overwhelmed again and again with tremendous cataclysms which would apparently make an end of all things; but that out of each of these great epochs or ages the earth has risen into higher order and perfection. Reading the geological story of the earth backward, we can see the hints of all its later perfection; though, if we had to read it forward, we could not have prophesied the last geological age from the observed facts of the earliest ages. The past is in the present, not only as the foundation, but as a part of the present. In Canada and the Lake regions of the United States there are visible in and through the upper crust of our present earth the

formations of long past geological ages. The great hills and mountains were not born in our day, they were not formed in our geological age, yet they are with us to remind us of the past travail of the creation. Clothed, as many of them are, with the living verdure of the present age, they belong to us as really as if they had been formed but yesterday.

It is so with God's revelation in connection with His spiritual world. It has been going on for ages. The knowledge of God has come to us little by little—each new epoch of special revelation resting on the past and carrying our knowledge forward and higher. The earliest revelations, like the mountain tops, pierce the crust of latest revelations. Take, for instance, the one thousand quotations from and palpable allusion to Old Testament revelations which appear in the New Testament, clothed with the verdure of New Testament times and infused with the power and life of the Holy Spirit, the ever-present agent in revelation, and we have not a dead past, but a past living in full fellowship with our present. To go back to the times of the earlier revelation of God in order to live our life as in the presence of revelation but newly given, would be impossible. We have outgrown the past, and can never go back to it except with loss to ourselves. Fancy the people of the nineteenth century living in the glacial period, or in the time of the cave-dwellers! Yet we would be nearer to our geological foundations than we are now. Do you think Abraham had an advantage over you because to him came direct revelation; or that Isaac and Jacob were better off because they dreamed dreams, saw visions, and wrestled with angels? Were the children of Israel more free from doubts and disobedience because they *saw* the wonders of God in Egypt? Or do you suppose that the earliest Christians were better off

than we? How many of our modern doubters, who complain that we are so far removed from our historic foundations, would elect to go back to the first century of Christianity? Those early believers were nearer to the great facts which underlie our faith, but were they any surer than we? Had they any more to go on than we have? Was the present life of the Spirit more real to them than to us? Even then there were doubters and heretics, schismatics and scientists (falsely so-called), and philosophers who made void the faith of some by their vain reasonings. Were people of the world more disposed to accept the testimony of Paul and five hundred other living witnesses who had seen Christ alive after the resurrection than they are to accept the testimony of the same witnesses to-day, after two thousand years? Read the apostolic epistles, and then answer whether you gather from them that believers of the first century were better, more certain, more spiritual, more developed in everything or anything that makes for the best in Christian character, than believers are to-day? The cumulative and progressive testimony of nineteen centuries of Christian experience has immensely strengthened the testimony to the truth of the historic foundations. No; we do not want to go back, except historically, for the facts of the past. Given these facts, with the living Christ in heaven and the Holy Spirit on earth and in our hearts taking the things of Christ and showing them to us every day, we prefer to go on, to go forward. We would no more choose to go back in time in order to get nearer to the foundations, than Abraham would have cared to go back to his own country from whence he came out in order to be nearer to the first revelation he received from God. Would you care to sacrifice the years of your Christian experience since you believed in order to have again the first sensations

of the new life? No more than you would care to go back to your youth, to boyhood, or girlhood, or even to babyhood, in order to get nearer to the first experience of your being! No! we look for a city and a country and a life before us. Physically we do not live *in* the past geological ages, but we do not live *without* them. So neither do we live *in* the past spiritually, but we do not live *without* the past.

Let me repeat a single illustration. We draw our wealth from past geological ages—our coal, our iron, our gold and silver and tin and copper, and all our precious metals and stones. The very soil in which we sow our corn and wheat is a product of the past. Yet we would not care to go back to the ages in which God stored these things up for our use in the present. Revelation and essential spiritual life have progressed, and we have better things now than the early Christians had, than the prophets had, than David or Moses or Abraham or Noah or Enoch or Adam had. If we are further from primitive revelation, we are nearer to the consummation of which these primitive revelations were the promises. Then we had promise; now we have fulfilment. Then we had prophecy; now we have history. Then we had law; now we have gospel. Then we were bound to external statutes and external ceremonials, with only dim hints of life and immortality; now we have a free spiritual life, serving not in oldness of the letter, but in the newness of the Spirit. Then life and blessing were predicated on obedience; now we obey God from the heart, because He hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. Then we had miracles wrought in material nature and in human bodies—water was turned into wine, the sick were healed, the blind were made to see, the deaf to hear, and the lame to walk; but now we have daily miracles of grace by which men and women

shapen in iniquity and conceived in sin are born from above, and changed into the image of Christ. Drunkards are made sober; thieves cease to steal, and learn how to labour with their hands, that they may have to give to them who have need; the liar is converted to the truth; the profane changed into praying men and women; in many cases the rich are made kind and generous to the poor, and avarice is corrected by Christian beneficence; adulterers and adulteresses are changed into virtuous and pure men and women; the dead in trespasses and sin are made alive in Christ. Surely these are the miracles in which God is revealing Himself day by day; greater in fact and more powerful in testimony than the miracles which Christ Himself wrought—works greater than His which He told us we should do, because of His going to the Father and the coming of the Holy Spirit of God—the Spirit of Holiness and of Power.¹

In the beginning God made man in His own image and likeness. After all, what a baby Adam must have been—compared with his descendants of to-day—as to knowledge and experience and all that enters into the essentials of manhood! Yet Adam was nearer to God in time and in primitive experience than we are; but who would rather be Adam in the year one of Creation, with Eden into the bargain, than his Christian self in the year 1896 of the Christian era? Not I, for one!

Having created man in His own image, the next step in progressive development was his moral training. Not to be tedious, we pass to the dispensation of the Hebrew race. In them God undertook to develop their ethical nature. To this end came law and commandments. They were taught the great lessons of obedience, and right and wrong. "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not"

¹ John xiv. 12.

were constantly in their ears. Temporal blessings were the rewards of obedience, and temporal curses were visited upon their disobedience. God, the Moral Governor of the universe, was revealed to them, who had hitherto only known Him as Creator and Providence. Then came the dispensation of the prophets, through whom the spiritual life of the people was more particularly developed. Personal communion with God was inaugurated in a way unknown to the teaching and discipline of the law. Not offerings and burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin, but a broken and contrite heart was brought to God. The prophets widen the horizon of faith, in regard to the Messiah as Mediator and Sin-bearer, as well as in the extent and spiritual character of His kingdom. The dispensation of the prophets closes with the coming of John the Baptist, who appears for a moment on the new horizon, just long enough to announce the bright dawn by the Sunrising from on high, in the person of Christ; then to disappear and leave us face to face with the Eternal and Incarnate Word of God, who came with God's last full and life-giving revelation, by whom God and man are united, He taking us into union with Himself and making us to be partakers of His divine nature. Is not all this progress? Is not the new far better than the old? Would you choose old bottles for this new wine?

II. THE FOUNDATIONS OF OUR FAITH. Some of you may be wondering how Zacharias' song introduces us to such a line of thought as I have suggested to you. Well, just in this, that, inspired by the Holy Ghost, he gathers the old things and unites them all with the new, weaving the old revelation of God and the new into one beautiful progressive whole. We shall now take a look at these testimonies, and I hope to be able to show you that, instead of being far away from them,

they are not only close to us, but always with us. There is no hiatus between the Christian's faith and the foundations of that faith. We are able to give a reason for the faith that is in us. Our faith does not rest on the relics of the past, but upon the eternal and contemporary truths of God, both in word and in fact.

1. *Zacharias' faith was energized by the Holy Ghost.* He, being filled with the Holy Ghost, prophesied, saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people; and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David." Physical scientists tell us that behind and pervading all physical phenomena there is an all and ever present energy. They call it force. It differentiates itself in a thousand ways. It is energy; it is motion; it is attraction; it is law or the strength of law; it is colour or the result of it; it is heat. It is, in fact, the creative and preserving energy of the universe. It has been in the past, is now, and shall be for evermore. It is not old or worn out. It did not exist for a time at the beginning of things. It was, and is, and shall be. The scientist calls it force or energy. Suppose we call it the Spirit of God; or, not to confuse things, suppose we accept the doctrine of energy as the foundation of the material universe, and from that pass to the consideration of the Holy Spirit of God, who, in the beginning, brooded over the abyss and brought the world into existence; was present in the creation of man, breathing into his nostrils the breath of life; striving with him in his earlier development; inspiring and teaching him, even to the training of his mind and hands in the useful arts; speaking to man and through man; communing with him for his own profit, and communicating to him messages for the whole world; moving holy men of old to speak concerning the things of God. That Holy Spirit is the

energy of our faith. The prophecies and works which He has wrought in the past may be considered by us to be far away, too far back in time to be a foundation for present faith; but *He* is not in the past; He is in the present. He who was present in the creation, who inspired the prophets, overshadowed the Virgin Mary, filled Zacharias with His blessed presence, rested upon and dwelt without measure in Jesus during His earthly ministry, enabled Him to offer Himself up a sacrifice to God, accomplished in Him the resurrection from the dead, and in Jesus breathed upon the disciples after the resurrection, fell upon and filled the disciples on the day of Pentecost, accomplished the new birth in Nicodemus, and every soul since who has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, *is with us to-day*; accompanying the word preached with power sent down from heaven; dwelling in believers as the Comforter; strengthening them for righteousness; energizing them for service; inspiring their prayers and songs; loving and guiding them in life. How, then, can any one say that we are too far removed from the foundations of our faith? His holy presence and power converts all the facts of past revelation into present realities. He was, and He is, and He shall be for evermore; and by Him God and Christ are always with us. Evermore He makes old things new, and keeps the past in the present. I *can* understand how a mere formalist in religion, one who only dwells in creeds, confessions, ceremonies, and ecclesiasticisms, should feel himself separated by long centuries from the foundations of faith; but I *cannot* understand any one who knows the indwelling of the Spirit, or who has ever been the subject of His life-giving grace, looking back with longing eyes to things which happened long ago as though they too were in the dead past, and not in the living present. I cannot understand a man who has really

been born of the Spirit saying, "We must have new and fresh and up-to-date revelation from God in order to support faith." The Holy Spirit is present in the world, every day and hour, convincing men of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment, and opening their eyes to see Jesus and the unseen things of God. Critics who deal with dead literature, or with the mere letter of revelation, with the ecclesiastical history of the *Church* of Jesus Christ, and not with the *life* of the Church, may feel that they are far away from foundation truth and fact; but living Christians feel no such hiatus, and know no such lack in their faith. If you say you have not this evidence, then get it, for it is within your reach. For "Your Heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him."¹ Be sure of this, the Holy Spirit will take the things of Christ and show them to you, if you are really in earnest to know the truth and get close to God's heart.

2. *Zacharias next refers us to covenant promises of God as the living and present ground of faith.* Whoever does not, or in his day did not, regard the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament as having reference to Jesus Christ and the "salvation of God by the remission of sin," Zacharias and Mary believed them, and in them found a sure resting-place for their faith. Centuries before, God began to speak by holy men of old of the coming of One who should redeem them, and deliver them, and "perform the mercy promised to our fathers." These promises and covenants of God, bound by His oath, were no dead words, but spirit and life. No doubt Zacharias had in his mind God's words to Abraham: "By Myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand

¹ Luke xi. 13.

which is upon the sea shore ; *and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.*"¹ Now this promise after long centuries had come true, and Zacharias saw the fulfilment of it in its all-comprehensive and far-reaching meaning ; so that before he closes his song he rejoices in the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles "sitting in darkness and the shadow of death."

3. *The performance of God's covenant promises was to Zacharias a warrant and foundation for his faith.* The same performance is the warrant of our faith. He tells us how these promises were fulfilled, "He hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of David, to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of sins, through the tender mercy of our God, whereby the Day-Spring from on high hath visited us." The coming of Christ was the Sunrising of a new and glorious day, in which every promise of scripture should flower and fruit. Zacharias sang in the dawn of that day ; we sing and rejoice in the midday splendour. The coming of Christ, His miraculous conception, His heavenly ministry, His sacrificial death, and His glorious resurrection are the historical facts in which all the past is gathered together and brought into present time. Every Christian builds his faith, not on the *history*, but on the *person* of Christ. He is not a dead Christ. We do not have to seek Him in the land of Judæa, or in Galilee ; we do not have to go back twenty centuries to find Him. He was dead, but, behold, He is alive for evermore ; near to them that seek Him, and in the midst of them who are gathered together in His name. How say some among you that Jesus Christ is too far away in the past ? He is not far from any one of you. Seek Him, and you shall find Him.

How beautiful is Zacharias' characterization of the

¹ Gen. xxii. 16-18.

advent of our Lord! He is the Day-Spring from on high. These words are evidently suggested by the last prophecy concerning the coming of the Lord, recorded by the prophet Malachi, "But unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise, with healing in His wings; and ye shall go forth and grow up as calves of the stall."¹ We usually speak of the sun as rising from *below* the horizon, but He speaks of Him as from on high. In this mixed metaphor we have the two great truths concerning Jesus wonderfully set forth. He came from on high to us, but His rising was from below. He descended from heaven, and hid Himself in the womb of the virgin, and rose upon the world out of the stable at Bethlehem. Oh, blessed descent of the Sun of Righteousness to the earth, to rise upon us with healing in Thy wings! The *sunrise* came in their time, but *the full meridian strength* of the Sun of Righteousness is shining upon us now. We would not have it otherwise. If our Lord had merely risen on the margin of time, life could not have come to the world. The sunrise ushers in the day; but the dawn is not enough; if the earth only had the pale light of the dawning day it could not live. It was expedient that Christ should go to the Father; and so He has ascended into the mid-heaven of God's presence, and from hence shines down upon us in all the strength of the Holy Spirit, "to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ."² Had our Lord remained upon the earth, the full day of grace and power could not have come. Should He come again as He came two thousand years ago, He could bring us no new revelation, and the world would be turned back to day-dawn, instead of progressing in the power of noontide light and life.

¹ Mal. iv. 2² 2 Cor. iv. 6.

There is much of beauty and sweet suggestiveness in the expression of Zacharias, "The Day-Spring from on high *hath visited us*." It reminds us of how the Lord "visited" Sarah at the set time, to fulfil His promise to Abraham; how He "visited" His afflicted people in Egypt, to deliver them from their long and bitter bondage; how He "visited" Hannah, to fulfil her prayer; how He "visits" the sons of men for their salvation. Now, after a long time (filled up by the vain endeavours of men to save themselves, and with the wickedness of the world which had cast off God), the Day-Spring hath visited us. He has come with good will; He has come full of grace and truth; He has come to abide with us for ever; to make His home in our nature and to dwell in our hearts; to be for us and to us an All-gracious and All-powerful Saviour; "to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant; to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of sin."¹ Blessed visitation! May all hearts fly open to receive Him.

He is the Horn of our Salvation. Some refer this to the horns of the altar, of which, if a fleeing transgressor took hold, he was safe from the vengeance of pursuit. Matthew Henry suggests the "horn of plenty," from which there is poured out upon us all the "fulness of grace and truth, for in Him all fulness dwells." Others suggest the strong horn which mounted the shield of the ancient warrior, and which sometimes was used to push against an adversary. But it seems most consistent to refer the figure to the strong horn of the ox, always the symbol of strength and power. Power to forgive sins; power to give life; power to keep us from falling, to deliver us out of temptation, and to save

¹ Luke i. 72, 77.

to the uttermost ; power to sanctify ; power to make us perfect unto every good work, to do His will, to raise us from the dead and present us faultless before the presence of God's glory with great joy. All our salvation is wrought according to the mighty power that worketh in us by Jesus Christ. Blessed be God for raising up unto us the Ho of Salvation.

4. *Christian experience is the fourth fact which enters into the foundations for our faith.* "That He would grant unto us that we, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness, all the days of our life."¹ It has been well said that Christianity consists of three things—a fact, a doctrine, and a life. The fact is Christ, the doctrine is the gospel of salvation through Christ, and the life is the new spiritual experience communicated to men through the fact and the doctrine of Christ. Zacharias testified to the fact, proclaimed the doctrine, and embraced the experience. It is in the living experience of believers that the vital facts of Christianity are always present in the world. Wherever there is a living experience there is a present Christ ; for, as Paul says, "*For to me to live is Christ*"² ; and again, "I am crucified with Christ ; nevertheless I live ; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me ; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of Christ, who loved me, and gave Himself for me."³ Astronomers tell us that light is still falling upon the earth from stars that have been burned out centuries ago ; but the life of the Christian is ministered from the living Christ, who is Eternal Life—whose infinite energy never ceases. Zacharias breaks up or describes this inward life of the Christian under various heads. *It manifests itself in serving God.* Wherever there is real spiritual life, there will be found not only an impulse,

¹ Luke i. 74.

² Phil. i. 21.

³ Gal. ii. 20.

but a steady purpose to serve Him. No sooner were the Thessalonians turned from their idols by the incoming of Christ's life than they began to serve the living and true God. The service of sin gives place to the service of God. No sooner are we purged from dead works, by being delivered from sin and death, our great and hereditary enemies, than we yield our rightful and free service to God, who hath delivered us by His Son Jesus Christ. Service characterizes the saints on earth, and in eternity they continue to "serve Him day and night in His temple."¹ If there is no spirit of service in thee, then thou art not Christ's.

This service is attended with an inward peace and confidence. It is without fear. "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption."² The terror of God, which must be ever present in a wicked man's conscience, is removed; the servile fear of a mere formalist is replaced by an inward peace resting upon the finished work of Christ and the free forgiveness and justification which comes to us through His blood. He hath delivered them "who, through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage."³ Even the fear of sin is taken away from us, for He has promised us that "sin shall not have dominion over you."⁴ He has made peace for us; He has spoken peace to us; He has appointed His peace to garrison our hearts, and so keep us free from fear. But the Christian life is more than this. *It is holiness and righteousness.* Holiness is the communication of that new life which we sometimes call the new birth or regeneration—the life of God in the soul, which constitutes us new creatures in Christ, and separates us from the dead in trespasses and sins. It is full of all impulses towards purity and real piety. It is the

¹ Rev. vii. 15. ² Rom. viii. 15. ³ Heb. ii. 15. ⁴ Rom. vi. 14.

inward bond between the soul and God ; the beginning of that sanctification of life and character which will, in the end, completely restore the image of God in us. Righteousness is the outward expression of the new life. It consists, not only in the rightening of our *relations with God*, but in the *rightening of our conduct*, both toward God and man. It is the core of all the fruits of the Spirit. Righteousness and true holiness go hand in hand. Any profession of faith in Christ which is not justified by a righteous life is a vain profession. All true believers "yield themselves unto God as those who are alive from the dead"¹ ; and all their members, powers, and possessions "as instruments of righteousness unto God." Paul beautifully characterizes real Christians as those who "*were* the servants of sin," but who "have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you," who, "being made free from sin, have become servants to God."² The final proof and test of Christianity is to be found not in the past, not in creeds and confessions, not in ecclesiastical order, not in an unbroken succession of ordained priests ; but in the inward holiness and the practical righteousness of those who have come to an experimental knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. This Christian life is lived and energized in righteousness "before God all the days of of our life." Christianity is not an emotional spasm ; it is not a speculative philosophy ; it is not an elaborate ritual ; but "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost"³ ; not for a few days or weeks, but for all time. We do not look for it in the superheated evangelistic meeting or on a death-bed, but in a daily walk with God through all the days of our life. Such a Christianity will never fail to satisfy the intelligence, the reason, and the conscience of the world. Let us make it

¹ Rom. vi. 13.² *Ibid.* vi. 17-22.³ *Ibid.* xiv. 17.

the end and aim of our lives to join with Zacharias in giving this testimony to the faithfulness of God.

5. *The preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles is proof of the living presence of Christ in the world.* Lifting his thoughts from himself and his own nation, Zacharias saw a distant prospect of salvation among those who were seated in darkness and the shadow of death. His faith burst the bonds of a narrow nationalism and embraced the whole world, and was eager in hope for those far-off Gentiles, and confident that God would guide our feet in the pathway of peace to them. "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the Gospel of peace and bring glad tidings of good things."¹ Nothing to my mind is a stronger proof of the divine origin of Christianity and of the living presence of Christ among men than the persistency with which from the very beginning men and women have been impelled to go abroad to the heathen in every part of the world to preach to them the glad tidings. It is impossible to impute to missionaries as a class, motives of ambition, selfishness, or any form of earthly gain. "Necessity is laid upon them" from Christ, and they must needs go and deliver the message. Neither do they go reluctantly, but joyfully, not counting their lives dear to themselves. Of this Divine hymn, Augustine says, "O, blessed hymn of joy and praise! Divinely inspired by the Holy Ghost, and divinely pronounced by the venerable priest, and daily sung in the Church of God; O, may thy words be often in my mouth, and the sweetness of them always in my heart. The expressions thou usest are the comfort of my life, and the subject thou treatest of is the hope of the world."

¹ Isa. lii. 7.

XIII

JOY OVER THE CHILD

“Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”—LUKE ii. 10, 11.

WHEN the royal Augustus sent forth his decree that all the world should be taxed, he little knew or thought how God was using him as an instrument for the fulfilment of the important prophecy concerning the Messiah, who must be born in Bethlehem. But for that decree we can hardly conceive that Joseph would have taken his espoused wife Mary to the city of David, in order to fulfil the prophecy. Such is the way God still works, bringing to pass His purposes, and using His instruments in a natural and unconscious way. His hands are upon all the springs of human action throughout the whole world.

“God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform.”

We have already seen how our Lord's Incarnation was associated with the humblest conditions of domestic life, in the home of Mary of Nazareth, in the home of Zacharias and Elisabeth, and again in the home of the humble carpenter of Nazareth. Now we behold Him born in the midst of a great political gathering, in accordance with the decree of the greatest potentate

then on the earth. Jesus is the Saviour of all people and all classes of people ; His religion was destined to affect every phase of society, from the lowest to the highest ; therefore we find Him everywhere, from the manger in which He was laid, to the throne of Empire. Little did Cæsar Augustus dream that in that far-off and despised province there was born in a stable One in the power of whose name the hoary paganism of Greece and Rome should fall down, and the very empire itself give place to Him upon the throne. In the birth of Jesus, the prophecy of Mary, that God would put down the mighty from their seats, and exalt them of low degree, began to have its fulfilment.

Once more, in connection with the birth of Jesus, we come into the presence of angels, those holy ministers of God, "sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation."¹ I often think far too little thought or attention is given to the ministry of these holy ones. It is true they are not now visible to our dull eyes or present to our senses, but we are assured that they are never far from any one who is the child of God. We may not see them, touch them, or talk with them, but we may have comfort in the thought of their guardianship and helpful presence. There is a beautiful and well-known painting by Albert Dürer, the subject of which is the Holy Family in Egypt. Joseph is at work in a carpenter's shop ; in the same room, Mary is busy with some kind of handiwork, and the Babe asleep in a little cot beside her. The most striking and singular feature of the picture is a number of little angels, down on the floor, engaged in picking up the chips, and gathering the shavings which fall from the carpenter's tools. The lesson of the picture seems to be that where work is being done quietly and faithfully, no matter how

¹ Heb. i. 14.

humble the circumstances, God sends His angels to help and minister. This is a sweet and comforting truth ; it should cheer and brighten all Christian workers, and all places where they serve. My fancy can see them accompanying the great man of business to his office ; the humble housemaid about her daily duties ; the mother with her children, guarding these little ones with their presence ; the minister in his study, or going before him on his pastoral rounds. The angel of the Lord came to Moses while he was tending his sheep in the wilderness ; to Gideon while he was thrashing wheat behind the barn ; to the wife of Manoah while she was in the field ; to Zacharias during his service in the Temple ; to Mary in her house, presumably about her humble duties there ; and now to the shepherds watching their flocks by night. It is in the place of service or suffering that the help of God may be looked for. It is our privilege to count on such help from Him, whether ministered by unseen angels or by the Holy Spirit.

I. THE BIRTH OF CHRIST ANNOUNCED. We celebrate the twenty-fifth day of December as the birthday of our Lord ; but it is certainly unlikely that He was born on that day, or even in that month. That date was fixed by Constantine in accordance with some political purpose, or to adjust it to some existing feast already observed by his heathen subjects. The birthday of our Lord was probably some time in the month of April. The accurate fixing of this date is, however, of no particular importance. It is not the *birth-day*, but the *fact* of the birth of the Son of God into this world which is of supreme moment to us. The question is not *when* our Lord was born, but that He *was* born. As there remains no reasonable doubt in the mind of any reasonable person that our Lord Jesus Christ is an

historical Personage and not a myth, we may pass over the question of the date of His birth and continue to celebrate His birth on the twenty-fifth of December, all the more as no one thinks of the *day*, but all hearts are taken up with the great fact.

1. *His birth announced to the shepherds.* These were obscure and very humble folk to whom the angel came and made his announcement. Indeed, shepherds were so mean in the eyes of men that they were excluded from many important social and political privileges. Does it not strike us as being very strange that so important a communication as this should first be made to the very poorest and obscurest of mankind? According to all our ideas, it should have been announced to the High Priest, or to some of the great doctors of the law, if not directly to the King. But God is consistent with Himself, and His ways are not our ways. The kingdom of God cometh not with observation. There was no need for the loud blare of the Temple trumpets, or any great public demonstrations of joy by the officials. He did not need to be so announced or patronized. God destined the kingdom of heaven to overturn all the ways and policies of this world, and to reverse all the methods of men. No human pomp or glory could add anything to Him. He was His own glory, and had no need to be patronized by man. Beside, we know well, from subsequent events, that the announcement of Christ's birth to the great ones of this earth would only have raised up about Him a host of enemies who would have been jealous of Him, hated and destroyed Him, if they could have done so, before His hour came. His obscure and humble cradle, and His yet more humble first friends, were His protection in His infant days. Though it was necessary that His birth be known from the beginning, it was safest, from this point of view, that

the announcement should first be made to common people, and the testimony to the fact first be given *by* them. Their testimony would not be believed by the great, worldly, and powerful. Even if it came to their ears, they would scarcely fear or be jealous of a Child born in a manger and wrapped in the swaddling-clothes of poverty ; for they would not credit Him, whose first friends and heralds were poor outcast shepherds, as the Christ and Saviour of the world. We find in this a great spiritual lesson. Jesus came into the world to save sinners and men of low degree ; He came to preach the gospel to the poor, and to bring healing and help to the despised and broken-hearted. Had He been born in a palace, and His birth announced to ministers of State, and His cradle been watched over by great lords and the representatives of kings, how would the poor people and the outcast sinners of the world ever be persuaded that this Jesus was for them ? Before Moses could deliver Israel from Egypt he had to flee the palace. They could not have gone to the King's palace to do Jesus honour and testify their faith and subjection to Him. It would, in time, be much easier for any of the rich or great, who might come to know their need, to go to a Saviour who had been born in a manger and announced to shepherds, than for these poor ones to have plucked up heart of grace to go in search of a Saviour who had been announced to the great ones of the earth and cradled amid the splendours of human vanity.

2. *The fear of the shepherds.* It would seem that the sudden appearance of the angel to these Bethlehem shepherds filled them with terror—and no wonder ! Therefore the first word of the angel to them was one calculated to allay their fears—"Fear not." It is a well-known fact that any appearance, real or imaginary, of the supernatural awakens fear in human beings. The

other world, filled with mysteries and pervaded by awful power, concerning which we know so little and dread so much, is calculated to fill mind and heart with terror. Moses was afraid to look upon the angel of the Lord who appeared in the burning bush ; Manoaah was afraid because he had seen the angel of the Lord ; Jacob was filled with fear at the vision of angels which he saw ; Isaiah was afraid he should die because he had "seen God." The first words of Gabriel to Zacharias and to Mary were "Fear not," in order that the terror naturally awakened by his coming might be allayed ; so now his first care is to calm the terror of the shepherds, likewise awakened by his sudden appearance out of heaven, surrounded by the glory of the Lord. I doubt not that, even with our better knowledge, we should be filled with a sudden fear should such a visitor appear to us. However much we may argue against the improbability of the appearance of departed spirits to mortals, I am afraid the world at large will never outgrow the terror of "ghosts," or any alleged apparitions from the other world. I fancy the reason death awakens in us such fear is that because it suggests to us unknown and possibly dreadful experiences in the mysterious realm beyond us. It seems worth while briefly to inquire into the reason of this fear. The first ground of fear is *ignorance*. We are even afraid of huge animals, or any creature, in fact, which we fancy has *power* to do us harm, until we are assured of its friendly disposition. Little children, not to speak of strong men, are afraid of *big* dogs until their disposition is ascertained. We are afraid of sudden and unknown sounds, because we do not know what they may import. This fear rises into terror when we have reason to believe that there is a power out from the other world approaching us, because we are more ignorant of it. Then there is that peculiar

something in our mental and spiritual constitution which we call *superstition*, that is quickly awakened at the first approach of anything which we regard as supernatural. The heathen religions are all based on superstition ; that is, a belief in the supernatural coupled with an ignorance of God and the powers of the world to come. Superstition may be thus defined—the belief in the existence of God without true knowledge of God—the ever-present testimony in the consciousness of man to the fact of God and another world. The only answer to superstition, the only remedy for our superstitious fears, is a certain revelation from God to us of His benevolent and gracious disposition. This, indeed, was the substance of the angel's communication to the shepherds. "Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy." So soon as we are assured of God's goodwill, and that with Him is all power, our fears are allayed. Why should we be afraid of God, if we are assured that He loves us and only purposes good for us, and that He has all power both to carry out His gracious design and to prevent evil from befalling us? It was this knowledge and assurance which gave David such sweet confidence in the thought of death. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou (who lovest me) art with me ; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me."¹ If God is the Sovereign of the other world, and He loves us, and has promised all good to us, why should we be afraid of anything which may come to us out of that other world, or why should we be afraid to go into that world by means of death or otherwise? If the gospel is true, there is nothing but good laid up for us there. There Jesus has gone to "prepare a place for us," and from thence He will come to bring us to Himself, that where He is there we may be also, not

¹ Ps. xxiii. 4.

only to behold His glory, but to share it with Him. There is nothing to harm us or to make us afraid in that world. There is no sorrow, sickness, nor death ; there all tears shall be wiped away. One of the great things which Jesus did by incarnation was to take part of flesh and blood, that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, and deliver us who all our lifetime were subject to this bondage of fear. Yet, in spite of the revelation of God, the communication of these good tidings, there is a dreadful fear of death and of God in the consciousness of many people. The third ground of fear is the most serious one. It is the fact of *sin*. Sin is the only real cause for fear we have. If we have no sin, why should we fear anything or anybody ? "And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good ?" ¹ A lady in ill-health, who supposed she was in immediate danger of death, wrote some time ago asking me to come and see her. In her note she said, "I am afraid to die—afraid of God." When I saw her, I asked her why she was afraid to die, why she was afraid of God. She told me frankly that as she lay in bed apprehending death, all her *sins* came up before her, and therefore she was afraid. Now that is most intelligible, and we can all understand such a fear.

"Conscience makes cowards of us all," says Shakespeare. Sin is the only thing in the universe that we need be afraid of—the only thing which need make us afraid of God. During our American war there was a private soldier, a man over forty years of age, who was known familiarly among his comrades as "Old Baggs." He was a notorious coward ; he had often run away from the battle ; habitually skulked in the presence of the enemy ; feigned sickness ; and resorted to every expedient to get to the rear whenever his regiment was

¹ 1 Pet. iii. 13.

in action. He had been rebuked, ridiculed, punished in every way known to the discipline of the army for cowardice, short of being cashiered or drummed out of the service. At the battle of Antitam, one of the most desperate and bloody battles fought during the rebellion, to the surprise of the whole regiment, "Old Baggs" was well to the front, fighting like a hero. He performed wonders of valour and bravery, and, alas! received his death-wound in a most exposed part of the field, and in front of all his comrades. After the battle, his captain knelt by his side, as he was dying. With a shining face he said to the captain, "I know I have been a coward, and a disgrace to the regiment and the army; but, captain, it was not the 'Johnnies' (the rebels) I was afraid of—I *was afraid of God*; but I am so no longer, for I have found the Lord Jesus, and He has forgiven all my sins. Since then I have wanted to get into the front of the battle and try and recover my lost reputation and do something for my country." Let us find Jesus, and in Him the forgiveness of our sins; let us be reconciled to God, and all fear will disappear out of our hearts. I do not say that no real Christians experience fear and awe at the approach of death, for I know that many do; but it is only when their thoughts are with their sins, and not on their Saviour, that they are afraid. "What time I am afraid I will trust in Thee. In God I will praise His word. In God I have put my trust."¹ The whole gospel is an encouragement to trust and not be afraid either of what man can do to us or what may come to us in the other world. Jesus has overcome all the dark powers of the under world, and made a safe highway for sinners to walk in, even through the valley of the shadow of death. An attentive consideration given to the good news brought by the angels, and

¹ Ps. lvi. 3, 4.

afterwards published in full by the Lord Himself, will, if they are cordially received, dissipate all our fears. Let us, then, consider the angel-message.

II. THE GLAD TIDINGS. "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." The giving of the law was accompanied with fire and blackness, and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words,—altogether so terrible a display of power that it made even Moses "exceedingly fear and quake."¹ This demonstration of terrible power was given with the law, because the law was a revelation of God's righteous anger against sin. But when the birth of Christ was announced, it was by angels saying, "Fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy," and singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will." These tidings are indicated in the contents of the angelic message.

I. *A Saviour*. "For unto you is born this day a Saviour." The angel applies to the Babe of Bethlehem three titles, "Saviour," "Christ," and "Lord." The last of these titles points Him out as the great Sovereign of the universe; the Lord of creation, of angels and men; and well identifies Him with "all people," to whom He had now come with light and life. His title "Christ" would identify Him as the Messiah of the covenant people, the long-looked-for Anointed One who should come and redeem Israel; the great Son of Abraham, and the final heir to the Throne of David. The title "Saviour" indicated Him in reference to His redemptive and spiritual work. "Thou shalt call His name JESUS, for He shall save His people from their sins."² So announced the angel of the Lord to Joseph when he bade him take Mary to him as his wife, when he was minded to put her away, on her return from her visit to the house

¹ Heb. xii. 21. ² Matt. i. 21.

of Elisabeth. I need scarcely detain you to point out who this Saviour was and is, beyond reminding you of the fact that the angel said to Mary, "He shall be called the Son of the Highest, and the Son of God." Not only *called* so, but He *was* the Son of God. He is that Seed of the woman announced and promised to Adam and Eve in the garden, whose mission it was to bruise the serpent's head. He was and is that Seed of Abraham "in whom all the nations of the earth are blessed"; of whom Balaam prophesied and said, "I shall see Him, but not now; I shall behold Him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel."¹ He was and is the One whose day Abraham saw and was glad. He was and is that Wonderful Counsellor of whom Isaiah prophesied, the root out of a dry ground, "with visage so marred more than any man"²; who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, on whom the Lord caused all our iniquities to meet; the "prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren,"³ whom Moses foresaw and whom he bade all Israel hear; the Stem of Jesse; the Branch of Zechariah; the Messenger of the Covenant and the Sun of Righteousness, arising with healing in His wings, whom Malachi foretold as being nigh. He is the sum and substance of all the ceremonial sacrifices and feasts of the Jews; in a word, He is that One of whom Moses in the law and all the prophets did speak and all the Psalmists sang. All prophecy, type, and song meet together to testify of Him, and say, "This is He who has filled all our thoughts, inspired our words, and been 'our help in ages past, our hope for years to come'"; the fulfilment of all the promises made to the fathers, and the proof of the faithfulness and loving-kindness of God. But oh! you

¹ Num. xxiv. 17. ² Isa. lii. 14. ³ Deut. xviii. 15.

know who He is ! Jesus who saved *you*, and whom you love and trust and rejoice in to-day ; you have received Him, and from Him power to become sons of God. I leave you, out of your full knowledge of the scriptures, and your own most real and precious experience, to fill up the picture.

(1) *He is within reach of sinners.* The angel indicated to the shepherds that this Saviour was to be found in Bethlehem, not far from where they were watching their flocks. Passing the significance of our Lord's birth in Bethlehem as a most striking fulfilment of the prophecy of Micah, uttered five hundred years before the event, that "out of Bethlehem shall He come forth unto me, that is to be ruler in Israel ; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting,"¹ (the blessed lesson of the fact is that Jesus was born the Saviour of sinners,) and is so accessible. Had He been born in Jerusalem, and especially in one of the palaces, He would not have been easily found by the shepherds. But in this little village, where at the most there was but one public inn, and where the few houses were open to the entrance even of poor shepherds, they might easily find Him. This is the joyful truth ; (Jesus is always near, and easily found.) No palace doors or conventionality prevent the humblest and most needy from seeking and finding Him. This very truth is one of the divinest circumstances in connection with our Lord's life and ministry. He never once put Himself beyond the easy reach of the common people ; He never secluded Himself amid the higher walks of society, or among the great and inaccessible people of the land. He lived level to the circumstances of the poor. If the rich and great wanted Him, they must come to Him where He lived among the common people. As I have before said, it is much easier for a

¹ Mic. v. 2.

rich man to come to where Jesus always was, and where He abides to-day, than it would have been for poor men to make their way to Him, had His associations and abode been among the great ones of the earth. Once a poor sinner made her way to His feet in the house of a rich Pharisee; but it is evident that she did not enter Simon's house by reason of *his* hospitality, who gave but cold welcome to the Son of God Himself, and felt himself outraged by the presence of the sinner whom He so lovingly received and so freely forgave. "Master, where dwellest Thou?" "In the city of David; even in little Bethlehem, where poor shepherds and others as poor and humble may easily find Me. Come and see!"¹

(2) *For whom was He born?* Passing another point, "For what was He born?" it is interesting to note this question. He was born the Messiah of Israel. To them He came fulfilling all the ancient covenant promises, and bringing with Him the "tender mercies of our God." But Jesus was more than Messiah: He was the Saviour. He came for others besides the children of Israel. The announcement of the angel seemed to lift the curtain which had for centuries hung between Israel and all the rest of the world, and with a single sentence included "*all people*" in the merciful and gracious purpose of His visitation. "Good tidings of great joy, which shall be unto all people." The middle wall of partition has been broken down, and the Saviour is no longer the Messiah of Israel, but Saviour of *men*. Messiah to the Israelites, indeed, if they will receive Him, but in any case Saviour of sinners of all races. Even if an Israelite receives Him as a Saviour, he must receive Him as a world's Saviour, and not a Jewish Saviour. He was God's gift to *the world*; He, by the grace of God, tasted death for *every man*. As Son of

¹ John i. 38, 39.

David He could not receive the Syrophenician woman ; but when she appealed to Him as Lord (Lord and Saviour of all men), He commended this large and enlightened faith, and gave her all her desire. Therefore is His name and His gospel published abroad to the ends of the earth ; and so we have this modern wonder, that the Messiah, whom the Jews rejected, is become the Saviour of the world, and Gentile Christians are now preaching the gospel of salvation to the Jews.

2. *A Sign.* Having told the shepherds who the Babe of Bethlehem was, and where He might be found, the angel proceeded to give them a sign : " And this shall be a sign unto you ; ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling-clothes, and lying in a manger." ¹ This indicated more than a simple outward sign by which He might be identified in their search after Him. It is not likely that many children were born in Bethlehem that night, and it is less probable that another babe was laid, after birth, in a manger. The manger or stable of the village inn was probably the one to which the shepherds would first resort, and there they found the Babe. The higher and deeper meaning of that "sign" is, that it has pleased God, in accomplishing man's salvation, to approach and carry forward that divine work in circumstances of voluntary poverty on the part of the Redeemer. "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor." ² God passes by human riches and greatness, and accepts poverty as the means to the end of His grace. Jesus never departed from this plan, and the *sign of poverty* was ever that by which the world was guided to Him. When God incarnated Himself in our nature, He put an honour and glory upon humanity above that conferred upon any other order of intelligent

¹ Luke ii. 12.

² 2 Cor viii. 9.

beings, even above that which He has given to the holy angels, who never sinned, and who are His blessed ministers and messengers. When He took upon Himself the condition of poverty, and persevered in this estate during His entire ministry, and perpetuated it in His chosen apostles and first disciples, and emphasizing this great principle by leading the few rich ones among the first disciples voluntarily to lay their wealth down at the feet of the apostles to be used for the common weal, He ratified that sign, it is worth our while to consider it well. Do not misunderstand me; much rather, do not misunderstand the sign. When I say that God has glorified poverty, and chosen it as a means in the ministry of salvation, I do not for a moment mean to convey the idea that God approves and glorifies the wretched poverty and misery which we see all around us—that poverty which is the fruit of vice, of drink, of idleness, of vagrancy, of shiftlessness and laziness. *Such poverty is a crime*; and with such poverty, I believe I may say with all reverence, God Himself has no sympathy; and the Church is making a vast mistake in patronizing it, and systematically encouraging it by a well-meant but mischievous charity. “If a man will not work, neither shall he eat.”¹ This is God’s decree in respect of the shiftless, the vicious, the drunken, and the lazy. “He filleth the *hungry* with good things, and the *rich* He hath sent empty away.” According to the economy of this world, it is the rich who are filled with good things, and the poor who are sent empty away. God’s poor are those who, in the honest struggle for life, have been cast out, passed by, oppressed and robbed by the rich; or those who have set their hearts on heavenly riches and are content with “food and raiment,” not struggling and putting all their powers into the strife after ambitious

¹ 2 Thess. iii. 10.

and self-gratifying wealth, to be spent and squandered upon pride and vain display.

Greedy, avaricious, and ambitious wealth was the sin of the day and of the people in Christ's time; it was the main cause of the downfall of Israel, because it sapped Israel's spiritual hopes and concentrated their desire upon this present world; *it is also the sin of our day*. The Church is burdened with no greater curse than that of selfish and greedy wealth; whereby the vast power for the kingdom of God and His righteousness is diverted by the selfish ambition of rich men, who patronize God and the kingdom of God with a miserable modicum of their wealth, throwing it down oftentimes grudgingly or ostentatiously as a kind of "corban" into the Church's treasury. This is not true of all Christians who have inherited or won wealth, but it is true of many of them, and is always true of the *spirit* of "riches," of that "love of money which is the root of all evil."¹ To the rich man all earthly and worldly things are accessible. In this world gold is omnipotent. God will have us consider His sign, which is set forth in a Saviour born in a stable; in men and women wedded to the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and content to accept such needful things as God may add to them. God's sign teaches us that there is no grace of salvation which is beyond the reach of the poor man, that riches have nothing whatever to do with grace. A poor man does not have to be rich in order to be saved. On the other hand, a rich man must become poor in spirit, and, if need be, part with all his wealth, before he can be God's poor man. The story of the rich young man is one which many, young and old, need to study with care. The command that bids us work is not that we might *have* for ourselves, but

¹ 1 Tim. iii. 10.

that we might "have *to give*." I know of no greater peril to a soul than unconsecrated wealth, be it large or small. I beg you, my brothers and sisters, to put the question to yourselves honestly, searchingly, and in the sight of God: "What is my motive in seeking after riches? What is my motive in accumulating wealth and hoarding it up in greater or smaller heaps?" Is it that you may selfishly enjoy it, or in pride pass it on to your children, that they may be placed in circumstances which may excuse them from labouring with their own hands, as you or your fathers before you have done? Have you now riches unconsecrated and held not in trust for God and His kingdom? Then see to it that "you abound in *this* grace (the grace of beneficence) also," for otherwise "weep for your miseries that shall come upon you; your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered, and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire."¹ "Hath not God chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom,"² is the sign of the true Church, as it was the sign of the Saviour of the world. May God give us the grace to recognise and manifest forth this sign, so that, whether possessed of much or little we may hold and use it as stewards of His grace, and not consume it or hoard it selfishly either for ourselves or our children.

3. *A Song.* Having delivered this message to the shepherds, there was suddenly with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill among men." Here is the high key-note of the spirit of the gospel, and the line of conduct for men on the earth. To give glory to God in the highest

¹ Jas. v. 1-3.

² *Ibid.* ii. 5.

measure, in the highest places—not in words only, but in the whole trend and tenor of our lives—is the essence of true piety. Every Christian life should be a song of praise to God, a tribute and offering to His glory. On earth the chief end of life is *peace*, and among men of peace, goodwill. Who does not see at once, that if we gave ourselves to this great business of glorifying God, and making, keeping, and cultivating peace and goodwill among men, the kingdom of God would soon come? Until we put the glory of God before every earthly and selfish ambition, and our neighbour's good (if not above our own, at least on a level with our own), the kingdom of God has not come in us.

III. THE SHEPHERDS' FAITH. It is interesting and profitable to note the quick and rapid development and growth of the faith of these simple folk, to whom the birth of the Saviour was announced. Left alone by the angels, they did not sit down and waste time in vain speculation, but with an *implicit faith* they said, "Let us now go and see this thing which *is* come to pass." They did not say one to another, "I wonder if there is any truth in this story"; but they said implicitly the thing "*is come to pass*." No man will ever come to Christ until he says to himself, "Jesus *is* come to this world, and He *is* the Saviour of sinners." A speculative, philosophizing faith, much less a rationalizing, critical questioning and balancing of probabilities as to the truth of the gospel testimony, will never move the soul of man to seek Jesus in Bethlehem. Then their faith was characterized by *immediateness*. "Come, let us *now* go." They did not postpone their going till the morrow—till a more convenient season; they did not discuss the question of who would take care of the sheep. Their first desire and duty was to obey the heavenly vision, and go *at once* to Jesus. That is not a

true faith which postpones going to Christ and following Him until something else is attended to. Even the most sacred ties and duties must not supersede our immediate obedience to Him. "Let the dead bury their dead," said Jesus to him who, in response to His summons, said, "Suffer me first to go and bury my father."¹ "He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me."² The three thousand who were convicted in their hearts on the day of Pentecost were added to the Church by baptism that very day. As soon as the eunuch came to know Jesus, whom Philip preached to him, he stopped his chariot, got down, and was baptized; the Philippian jailor was baptized in the same hour of the night in which he was converted to Christ. "Behold, *now* is the accepted time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation."³ "*To-day*, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts."⁴ Again, their faith was an *active* one. "Let us now go." No man has really believed God's testimony until he is started into action toward God. Faith, as I have said, is not a speculation or a mere intellectual conviction that certain propositions and doctrines are true. It is the movement of the soul toward God. It has not to do finally with *propositions*, but with *the person of Christ*. A belief in the true doctrine will no more save the soul than a belief in a bill of fare will feed the body. We read over our bill of fare, and then proceed at once to order and take our dinner; so it is with faith, it hearkens to the things which the Lord hath made known to us, and then immediately goes to Christ. Theirs was an *urgent* faith, for "they came with haste." True faith makes no delay. "The king's business required haste,"⁵ said David to the priest at Nob, in excuse

¹ Luke ix. 60.² Matt. x. 37.³ 2 Cor. vi. 2.⁴ Heb. iii. 15.⁵ 1 Sam. xxi. 8.

for being unarmed. It is no less true that the soul's business, under command of faith, demands haste. He who deliberately postpones his salvation to a more convenient season will probably postpone it for ever. The old saying that "the road of By-and-by leads to the town of Never" is a true one. Do not, I beg of you, put your foot in that delusive path. Dr. Chalmers once advised a young man, with whom he had been talking for an hour about his soul, to go home, read a certain chapter in the Bible, and then pray to God on his knees for salvation. Having left the Doctor's house with the purpose of complying with the advice given, he returned in course of a few minutes with the anxious inquiry, "But suppose I should die before I get home and have time to read and pray, what then?" "True," said the astonished Doctor, standing at the open door with the young man. "Get down on your knees at once and give yourself to Christ." Oh, did men know what sin means, what wrath means, what the loss of the soul involves, they would regard the call of God as an urgent one, and obey it with haste! We note, also, that their faith was *rewarded*; for, having come to Bethlehem, they "*found* the Babe lying in the manger." So, my dear brother, you will find the Saviour if, like the shepherds, you implicitly believe the testimony which God has given to His Son, and immediately and with haste come to Him. Jesus bade the ruler, with no other warrant for his faith than His bare word, to go home, assuring him that his "son lived."¹ The ruler went his way, walked back over the long and dusty road with nothing to cheer him but the assured word of Christ; but when he came to his house he found his son healed. He who takes God at His word, and immediately and faithfully obeys it, will find in his own heart and life

¹ John iv. 50.

the experimental proof of the truth of the testimony upon which he has acted. Do not wait for experience before exercising faith, for experience is the result, and not the cause or ground of faith. Finally, *their faith was turned into testimony*. "And when they had seen, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning the Child." No man ever yet found Christ and kept the secret to himself. It is as much a part of faith to testify as it is to believe, and he who has no testimony, who does not make known abroad, by word of mouth or by co-operation with others who are testifying the gospel of the grace of God, has no faith. A real Christian can no more keep his faith to himself than a rose-tree can keep its roses from blooming. What is in us by faith must come out of us by testimony.

XIV

GOLD AND FRANKINCENSE AND MYRRH

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him ; and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts : gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”—MATT. ii. 11.

HITHERTO we have observed, among other things, the fact that all the surroundings and circumstances connected with the Incarnation of our Lord were in association with obscure, poor, and lowly people. Elisabeth and Zacharias, though belonging to the priestly family of Aaron, were undoubtedly poor people. Mary, the mother of our Lord, was a poor young woman ; Joseph, the carpenter, was a poor man ; the shepherds of Bethlehem were the poorest of the poor ; the stable in which our Lord was born was a poor place even for a child of poverty to be born in, not to speak of it as the birthplace of the Son of the Highest. Certainly these circumstances do not in themselves presage any great things for the Child so circumstanced. But now the scene changes, and we behold wise men, great, noble, distinguished, and rich, coming to Jesus, and falling down and worshipping Him, and pouring out great and costly treasure at His feet. We cannot but be glad that this was so ; for had Jesus had nothing to do with any but the poor, the gospel would have been a class gospel, and not a real gospel of God, for all the world, and for whosoever will. It is true that God passes by the rich

who seek riches in place of His grace, and on the grounds of them declare themselves independent of God ; but the rich man who comes to God with a humble and contrite heart is as readily accepted of Him as if he were Lazarus himself. The poor have the gospel preached unto them, and so have the rich. We rejoice in the salvation of the publicans and sinners ; but no less do we rejoice in the conversion of such men as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. We are glad that Jesus chose such men as Peter, James, and John to be His apostles ; but we are no less glad that He also chose Saul of Tarsus. Let us rejoice that the gospel is, in all its fulness, for the poor ; but let us not grudge the wealth of the grace of God to the rich, nor fail to rejoice when we see them coming with their hearts' homage, and laying down at His feet their rich gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The Incarnation of our Lord seemed to set the whole universe into a ferment of activity. We first see the angelic hierarchy in great movement : angels passing down and up from heaven to earth ; not once, but many times, appearing to the priest of the Temple, to the maid of Nazareth, to Joseph the carpenter, to the Bethlehem shepherds. The dry bones of David's decayed family are stirred again with the hope of the great promises made centuries ago to him and his house ; the dead and formal service of the Temple is quickened into new life by the coming of Gabriel ; the routine life of the land is broken up by the decree of Augustus, who was used to bring about the birth of our Lord in Bethlehem ; wise men from the East, hundreds of miles away, are awakened out of old superstitions, and possibly from the worship of the heavens, to come in search of Him who was "born King of the Jews."¹ Herod, the pagan

¹ Matt. iii. 2.

king, and usurper of David's throne, is startled into miserable anxiety and wicked fear; the priests and scribes are awakened for a moment from the consideration of their ambitious and worldly schemes, to search the scripture with reference to the birthplace of Messiah; and all Jerusalem was troubled with a strange and portentous fear. The very heavens were sympathetic, and sent forth a new and strange star in the East to guide the wise men to the cradle-throne of the world's Redeemer. Nor was the earth behind; for from her rich storehouse and treasure-caskets she sends gifts to the young Child—gold from the earth; and the trees and shrubs of the field contribute their portion of sweet perfumes and potent medicaments. It was meet that it should have been so, for He is Lord of heaven and earth, the Owner of all treasures and the Sovereign of men and angels.

I. THE WISE MEN AND THEIR STAR. Who these wise men were and whence they came has been the subject of endless speculation and controversy. Tradition declares that there were three of them, and has gone so far as to assign names to them: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. They have been clothed with the dignity of princes and kings, and have been assigned to Egypt, India, Persia, Arabia, Mesopotamia, and even Greece. Of these particulars we can know nothing certainly. That they came from the East and belonged to a class of scholars and learned men who held high place in the courts of Eastern kings, we know. They were the "magi," or "astrologers," or "magicians," of the countries in which they lived, and belonged to a sacred caste of scholars, who made the heavens their chief study, and pretended to educe from the heavenly bodies the wisdom of God in regard to the destinies of men. The Egyptian and Babylonian kings consulted them to solve their

difficulties, read their dreams, and foretell their destinies. While, without doubt, many of these wise men were mere charlatans, trading on the superstition and ignorance of the kings and the people, such as Jannes and Jambres, who contended with Moses in Egypt, and the wise men who failed to read to Belshazzar the meaning of the handwriting on the wall, and Simon Magus, who bewitched the people of Samaria and was finally exposed by Peter ; still there were, no doubt, many devout souls among them, who, from the habit of constantly beholding and studying the heavens, had come to read in them a testimony to the glory of God, whom they believed and feared. I myself have seen and conversed with some of these wise men in the far East ; and though they were ignorant of God, as we know Him through revelation, yet did they know God and were His devout worshippers. All night long they studied the heavens, and all day long they meditated upon the supposed revelations. I do not see any reason to doubt that these wise men were men upon whom the Spirit of God had come, and who, though they did not know Him as such, were guided by His inward impulses. In every nation there have been those who have feared God, wrought righteousness, and been accepted with Him.¹ I can conceive that these wise men were of the same caste as that of Job and his three friends. There is no reason to doubt that they were princes as well as scholars.

How they came to know of the expectation entertained by the Jews, of the birth of One who, in a peculiar and divine sense, should be their King, has also been a question of speculative inquiry. We should remember that, at this time, the whole East was more or less acquainted with the religion of Israel, either from commercial contact with them, or through their

¹ Acts x. 35.

dispersion among the nations, or as a result of their long captivity in Babylon and the wide scattering of the ten tribes, who until this day are a lost people. I have noted with surprise how many tenets and teachings among the Hindus would seem to suggest that their wise men were not altogether ignorant of divine revelation. It is not impossible that these wise men may even have possessed a copy of the scriptures, and that in the course of their study they had discovered the promises of God concerning Messiah. One prophecy especially would interest them : that of Balaam, one of their own class and caste,—“ I shall see Him, but not now ; I shall behold Him, but not nigh. There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel. Out of Jacob shall come He that shall have dominion.”¹ Pondering these prophecies, and longing for the coming of the “ Desire of all nations,”² they continued their heavenly studies, until they were surprised by the appearance of a new phenomenon in the heavens. There appeared a star, burning low in the heavens and propelled by some extraordinary power, either internal or external. This strange sight (like the burning bush in the wilderness which attracted Moses’ attention) naturally arrested the attention of these ancient astronomers ; and as they wondered what this strange appearance could portend, there came to them the prophecy we have suggested, or some other one, and they associated the star with the advent of the long-expected Christ. I cannot doubt but that, in this connection, the Holy Spirit of God gave them some illumination of mind, or perhaps even communicated to them by word, as the Angel of the Bush spoke to Moses. Of this at least I am sure, God reveals Himself to men along the line of their own occupations an

¹ Num. xxiv. 17, 19.² Hag. ii. 7.

thoughts, and in a way suitable to their conditions and surroundings. Moses lived in the wilderness tending sheep, and there God came to him in the Fiery Bush; Joshua was a man of war, and Jehovah appeared to him on the eve of the siege of Jericho, with a drawn sword in His hand. The angels came to the shepherds on the Bethlehem hills; to Zacharias as he ministered in the temple; to these wise men as they were studying the heavens, according to their use and wont. I am sure that the devout student will find God in the line of his studies, if he is really seeking Him. The philosopher, the scientist, and the sociologist will certainly find God at the end of their studies, if they have devout minds. For Jesus is the treasure-house of all wisdom and knowledge, and so wisdom and knowledge must ultimately lead to Him, even as they originally came from Him.

As for this famous star, which has been both the artist's and the poet's theme—*What was it?* Astronomers have in vain tried to identify it with some one of the known astronomical phenomena of that date. When we remember that even the nearest star is so infinitely distant from our earth, we must at once dismiss from our minds the thought of any ordinary heavenly body. The star does not seem to have actually guided them to Jerusalem from the East, but only to have appeared to them in the heavens. With this portent they interpreted some prophecy concerning the long-expected King, which led them to undertake their journey to Judæa. When they arrived in Jerusalem, and from thence had been directed to Bethlehem, they were overjoyed by the reappearance of the star which they had seen while in the East, and especially because, hanging low in the heavens, it moved mysteriously before them, guiding them even to the house where

the Child was. A star is a point of light in the heavens, but we need not suppose that the star which they saw was one of the familiar heavenly bodies. On the contrary, everything is against such a supposition. May it not have been the shining of the Shekinah glory, as it shone in the wilderness to Moses, and appeared alternately as a pillar of cloud and fire to the Israelites? When the Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples at Pentecost, there appeared tongues of fire, which lighted upon their heads. We know that fire came down out of heaven to burn up the sacrifice which Elijah offered. I venture another suggestion. The whole sphere of the divine activity at this time was full of supernatural wonders. May not this mysterious point of light, large and glorious as it probably was, have been the Angel of God Himself, even as it was the Angel of the Lord which appeared in the Bush which burned with fire? I am inclined to think that that which seemed to the wise men a star was none other than the same Angel messenger.

Speaking a moment longer of these wise men, I would note that *they were Gentiles*. At any rate, here we have the first fulfilment of many prophecies, to the effect that kings and Gentiles should come unto Him and worship Him. They were the advance guard of the mighty host of Gentiles, both kings and commoners, who have followed in their footsteps. It is a strange commentary on the degenerate and absolutely carnal and worldly state into which the whole Jewish nation had fallen, that it was left to these foreigners to learn of the Lord's coming, while the high priests, scribes, and doctors were left in ignorance. *They came a very long way to find Jesus*. The journey was tedious, fatiguing, and costly; but it mattered not. They sought the King, and to find Him was of more importance than anything else.

How different it is with many among us ! To them, Jesus is of little moment ; they take no journey, long or short, to find Him, though He be not far from any one of them. Though the star of God's word shines day and night, hanging low in the heavens, yet will they not follow it, even though wise men declare its vast import. Like Herod, they may for a moment be awakened by some superstitious fear of God, and are troubled, like the people of Jerusalem ; yet will they not seek for Jesus. These wise men are a standing rebuke to the lukewarm indifference and lazy inactivity of the multitude who care not to seek or even to inquire concerning Him, though His star has been seen in the heavens all the days of their lives. These wise men will rise up in judgment against them.

II. THE WISE MEN FIND AND WORSHIP JESUS. When the wise men arrived at Jerusalem, where they naturally looked for the new-born King, and could hear nothing of Him, but found the whole city indifferent to their inquiry, they were at their wits' end, but not at their faith's end. Their persistent inquiries, perhaps even from house to house, and the story they had undoubtedly told the people of Jerusalem concerning the star, at last, through common fame, reached the king's ears, and he summoned them before him. The chief priests and scribes, who most likely had mocked these Eastern strangers, now had to make answer to the king's questions. In this way, they got their clue again : no sooner had they started for Bethlehem than their star reappeared, and guided them to the very house where Jesus was. Thus was their simple and persistent faith rewarded. Oh, it is a good thing for us that wits' end is not faith's end ! Faith can and will persevere where wit fails and breaks down. Let us follow the light we have, still going on, through good and evil report, whether

men will encourage or discourage us. God will not forsake us, nor leave us to be hopelessly lost in the maze of difficulties in which we may find ourselves. "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord."¹

They worshipped Jesus. Having found the young Child, they forthwith fell down before Him and worshipped Him. There was nothing royal in the appearance of the Child, and certainly nothing kingly in His surroundings. It is true He was not, when these wise men came, still in a manger; for probably, after His birth, some kind and hospitable woman had taken the Holy Family into her house, where they were living or abiding when the wise men came. But even though He were housed in a proper building, and not in a stable, still His surroundings were humble, and there was nothing to suggest that He "was the Son of the Highest." Nevertheless, the wise men immediately fell down and worshipped Him. We do not know what they said in connection with that act of worship; but I am content to believe that they did much as Thomas did when he first truly recognised Jesus, and fell at His feet, saying, "My Lord and my God."²

The simplicity of their faith is something worth remarking. We noted in last sermon how implicit was the faith of the shepherds, who, after the Angel had departed from them, said one to another, "Come, now, let us go and see the thing which *is come to pass*." Not for a moment did they doubt the fact which the Angel had communicated to them. So, now, here are wise men, scholars, princes, possibly kings, at least men of thought and science, men who were accustomed to the magnificent displays of Oriental sovereignty—who, if they were inclined to doubt, might be expected to question the

¹ Hos. vi. 3.

² John xx. 28.

reasonableness of the whole situation. Accepting implicitly the conclusions which they had reached by the concurrent testimony of the scriptures, which promised the birth of this King, and the "sign" in the heavens which, working with the Holy Spirit, led them to Him, they made haste to confess Him. No doubt some of our modern critics would say that such faith was not worthy of scientific men. True, faith makes little children of wise men, and it makes little children, whether children in years or men of childlike spirit, to be wise. "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes."¹

It is also worthy of note that these wise men came alone. One would have thought, after all that had passed at Jerusalem on account of their advent, their many inquiries, their testimony, and the interest the king had taken in the matter, all Jerusalem would have followed them to Bethlehem. But neither high priests, doctors, nor common people went to see. The wise men, who believed, went alone to Bethlehem. The pathway of faith is always a lonely one; the world walks not in it. They want sight, sense, popularity, applause, and self-gratification. They wonder and are troubled, but they reject Christ. Only men of faith take up the solitary journey which will bring them to the Lord. Sometimes two or three walk together; but, for the most part, coming to Christ and following Christ is a lonely matter. I do not mean that it is dreary; but lonely, except for the occasional companionship of a fellow-pilgrim. Let not, then, your hearts be troubled because the multitude, or even they of your own household, do not sympathize with you in your search after the "young Child." Go thy way to Him; follow thy star; and when thou shalt

¹ Luke x. 21.

come into the house where He is, fall down and worship Him, though all the world be indifferent.

III. THEY GAVE TO JESUS GIFTS. It was meet that these great and rich men should have ratified their faith and sanctified their worship by laying at the feet of Jesus rich and costly gifts. It was the custom among Orientals, when they visited a king or made allegiance to a sovereign, to bring gifts in token of their subjection and of their readiness to support, with all their possessions, the cause of the king at whose feet they bowed. Much more should they bring great gifts to Jesus. The sincerity of their worship would have been impeached had they not done so. It is at this point that many of the modern disciples of Jesus fail to give real evidence of the genuineness of their professed worship. The reason they give *gifts* to Jesus may be found in the fact that they, like the Macedonian Christians, had first given *themselves* unto the Lord. I was once sent for by a lady who had recently been converted. She wished to tell me about this, and get further instruction in the way of life. She said to me, "Pastor, I have given myself to Jesus, body, soul, and spirit; now tell me what I am to do with my money—how to use it for Him." This was true worship. I venture to say that whosoever has not raised and answered that question, "What shall I do with my money?" has never been truly at the feet of Jesus. How can one give himself to the Lord and withhold from Him any portion of his possessions? The thing is impossible. *Giving is worship* in one of the highest and best senses of the word. "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits unto me?" It is true that the Psalmist answers his own question thus: "I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord."¹ But we must not suppose that

¹ Ps. cxvi. 13.

that act of worship was the full discharge of the debt of gratitude which David owed and recognised. At another time we behold him buying a yoke of oxen, to offer sacrifice to the Lord. The farmer, of whom he took the cattle, declined any payment from the king, saying, "Let my lord take and offer up what seemeth good unto him: behold, here be oxen for burnt sacrifice, and threshing instruments and other instruments of the oxen for wood. And the king said unto Araunah, Nay; but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: *neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God of that which doth cost me nothing.* So David brought the threshing-floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.¹ Now, this is true worship! He who worships God without cost to himself, or at the cost of another—so long as he has aught to offer unto the Lord—is no true worshipper. I am afraid there are many worshippers (?), nowadays, who are quite content to worship at other people's expense, and reserve to themselves their substance for purely selfish gratification, or at least for their own personal ends. The *ground* of our acceptance with God is never that which we offer, but that which our God Himself hath offered for us—even His only begotten Son, whom He did not spare to give for the remission of our sins; but the *proof* of our sincerity in worship is found in the measure of our willingness to give to the Lord of such things as we have. Nor is this an Old Testament conception of worship; it runs all through the New Testament as well. God took notice of the genuineness and sincerity of the worship of Cornelius in that his prayers and alms came up together. The Corinthian Christians were apparently opulent, both in spiritual gifts and in temporal wealth, but they were not disposed to make free use of their

¹ 2 Sam. xxiv. 22, 24.

wealth for God ; so Paul, in order to correct this grave mistake on their part, wrote to them, reminding them of their rich gifts and of their parsimony. "As ye abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, *see that ye abound in this grace also.*"¹ "This grace" was the grace of beneficence, or the conscientious and liberal use of money for the kingdom of God. I do not understand how any sincere man can sit in God's house, or come up to worship, to pray and praise, and to be instructed out of God's word, and yet not bring with him an offering—according as God has prospered him—for the benefit of God's treasury. I do not understand how a man can honestly profess to have given himself to God while withholding from God the due proportion of his property which God's cause may require. The meagre, erratic, and oftentimes reluctant gifts which are wrung from many worshippers, only after much pleading and "begging," I am afraid, do not represent the worship of either grateful or consecrated hearts.

The wise men prepared their gifts before they started on their journey to find the Christ. I cannot conceive of them looking over their treasures and selecting anything but the best they had. They came in the spirit of the exhortation : "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him."² If Christians, before they come up to the house of God on the Sabbath, would pray for God's blessing upon them, and then take—as a matter of worship and thanksgiving—from their large or little store, whether the accumulation of past years or the fruits of their last week's labour, an offering for the Lord, and lay it upon His altar as they present their prayers before the Throne of Grace, how differently would things be with us both

¹ 2 Cor. viii. 7. ² 1 Cor. xvi. 2.

in temporal and spiritual matters ! I fear a large portion of the gold, silver, and copper which is offered in the house of God is offered rather in deference to custom, or for decency's sake, than as an act of worship to God. If offerers would only set the Lord before their faces, many a piece of copper would be exchanged for silver, many a piece of gold would be substituted for the silver piece, and in many cases bank-notes would fall into the basket instead of the single shining sovereign.

The motive of their gifts is worthy of consideration. These gifts were a testimony of *homage to the King*. "We must *honour* Him," says good Matthew Henry, "with that with which He *favours* us." This is in accordance with the word of God, which enjoins us to "honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first-fruits of all thine increase."¹ No amount of sophistry will allow us to escape the full force of this divine injunction. It has pleased God to tell us that He is honoured by our gifts ; and since He deigns to accept honour at our hands in these things, it becomes us to honour Him with liberal and willing gifts.

Then our gifts are an acknowledgment that our wealth, be it large or small, comes from God. He is the giver of every good gift. He it is that sends to us the latter and the early rains. He it is that has preserved our health and given us strength for labour. He it is that has given us wit and wisdom by which we earn that which we have ; and it is He who has shaped the providences which have placed wealth, by way of inheritance, in some of our hands. A truly grateful heart will never overlook God's grace in his substance, nor forget that the silver and gold, and all the other wealth of the world, is His ; and that He has reminded us that He retains, in a perpetual covenant, a tenth of all for Himself, leaving

¹ Prov. iii. 12.

us free to add to that tenth "free will offerings," according to the gratitude and thankfulness of our hearts.

There is yet another reason for giving gifts to Jesus. Our gifts are to supply His need. This may seem a strange thing to say of Him. Surely God and His Son cannot be in need of money or any other gift. Are not the gold and the silver His, and the cattle on a thousand hills? Can our giving enrich, or our withholding impoverish, Him? Yet the Lord has need of our gifts. In this case, for instance: It was needful for Joseph to take "the young Child and His mother," and flee into Egypt, and there find an asylum for Him from the wicked wrath and jealous hatred of Herod. But Joseph was only a poor carpenter, and such a journey and sojourn in a strange country must have been quite impossible for him. The gifts of the wise men supplied this need, and put money into Joseph's purse for the care of the "young Child." So now God needs our gifts to supply the necessities of His house and the means for maintaining public worship. He needs our gifts in order that His poor be fed and clothed and warmed in time of need. He needs our gifts to send His messengers abroad, to the uttermost parts of the earth, with the good tidings of His love to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. The enlightened and loving heart does not need an argument to prove that God has many needs, and that in His plan of salvation He has made Himself dependent upon His people to supply these needs. He accepts the smallest gifts which the poor bring to Him, and He expects large gifts from the rich. These gifts He estimates according to the ability of the givers. The two mites of the poor widow were, in His sight, far more than the broad gold pieces which the Pharisee ostentatiously dropped into the treasury. I received by the same post recently two

gifts towards a cause for which not long ago I had asked the offerings of the people. One was a crisp five-pound note from a rich man, and the other a postal order for twenty shillings from one who said she was "only an ordinary servant-girl," and lamented that she had not more to give to God, who had so wonderfully blessed her.

The quality of their gifts is also suggestive. In the first place, I note there was variety. "Gold, frankincense, and myrrh"—money and money's worth. These may stand for the various ways in which we may serve the Lord. Gold alone is not what God wants. He wants of *all* that we have ; not prayer alone, not praise alone, not observance of ceremonies alone, or devotion to our religious cult, but offerings of all kinds ; worship, work and gifts of our substance—gifts of such things as we have. Some have more time than money ; some more money than time ; some more ability to work unseen ; and some the gifts of utterance and organization. It is accepted according to what a man hath, and not what he hath not. *These wise men brought of the products of their own country*, of the property which they had. We are often very generous in our thoughts of another's wealth. "If I only had brother A.'s wealth, how bountifully would I give," we say ; or, "If I had the ability to speak and pray that brother B. possesses, how gladly would I be found in the place of prayer and testimony, or teaching in the Sunday School, or serving in the Mission Hall." God does not require you to bring brother A.'s or B.'s gifts, but to offer such things as *you* have. Do not distress yourself about your *neighbour's* ability ; only be faithful in the things which God has given *you*. Never mind what this or that man shall do, or ought to do, but follow thou Christ. *Then they gave the best of every kind which they possessed.* Gold was the

best and most precious of the metals ; frankincense was the most valuable of the perfumes ; and myrrh the most valuable of the medicinal herbs. God complained of His people in olden times, that though they brought in kind what He asked them, they brought the lame, the lean, and the maimed of the flock,—that which was least valuable to them they thought would be good enough for God ; but He rejected these gifts indignantly. Alas ! that, in this gospel day, so many of us should kneel at the feet of Jesus, open our chests and select with much care and pains that which is of least value to give to Him, or, if of good value, as little as we possibly can and keep a fair pretence of conscientiousness in connection with the gift.

There is, no doubt, a certain symbolism in these gifts. Many strained and foolish things have been said by various Christian writers. Though we cannot dogmatize when looking for symbolical meanings, we may reverently seek for suggestions. Some of the early Christian writers found in the three things offered a symbol of the Trinity ; others, a symbol of the triple nature of man. Thus the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were honoured in the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh ; the spirit, soul, and body of man were represented in the same way. Others have seen in these three kinds of gifts a tribute to the personality and office of Christ. The gold was a tribute to Him as King ; the frankincense was a tribute to His divinity, for frankincense was the peculiar incense used to burn upon the altar of praise ; the myrrh was an offering to Him as man—an herb used both for medicine and, especially, for the embalming of the body. Mary offered her perfume, her spikenard, as an anointing for His burial. Again, some have spiritualized these gifts, making them stand for the three great graces of the Christian life. Gold represents our faith, which, being

tried, is said to be "more precious than gold, though it be tried with fire"¹; frankincense, being a costly perfume such as Mary poured out upon the head of her Lord, in no utilitarian spirit, but just because she loved Him much and wanted to testify that to Him, may represent the offering of love which we are ever bringing to Him; while the myrrh, used so much for the embalming of the dead bodies of loved ones, may stand for hope—that is, as they embalmed the body in the hope of immortality, so we bring to our Lord the profession of hope, since He has brought life and immortality to life in the resurrection. But I cannot pursue these thoughts and suggestions further; they are not the main truth to be drawn from the offerings of the wise men.

IV. THE PLACE OF GIFTS IN THE DIVINE ECONOMY. The importance of gifts and offerings to the Lord may be judged of somewhat by the large place they occupy in the inspired record. I can only now allude to a few instances:—

1. The earliest records show man bringing offerings to the Lord: Abel from the flock, and Cain of the fruit of the ground. The one was accepted because it was the best, and in accordance with God's command; the other was rejected because it was less than the best, and according to man's own choice and judgment. But especially would I call your attention to the meeting of Abraham and Melchisedek four hundred years before the giving of the law, at which meeting Abraham paid tithes (a tenth of all) to the priest of the Most High God. This act of worship was the foundation of the law of the tenth, under the old economy, and it is the underlying principle of all the voluntary gifts of New Testament times.

2. It is a remarkable fact that, in going out of Egypt,

¹ 1 Pet. i. 7.

Moses insisted : " Our cattle also shall go with us ; there shall not an hoof be left behind ; for therefore must we take to serve the Lord our God ; and we know not with what we must serve the Lord, until we come thither." ¹ Pharaoh had given them leave to go, with their wives and little ones, but insisted that they should leave their flocks and herds ; but Moses said they could not worship God without substance to offer to Him, and that they must take *all* they had, for they did not know how much the Lord would require of them. At the taking of Jericho, *all* the gold and silver, and the most valuable of the spoil, was consecrated to God, as a testimony to the people, and a reminder that God expected His people to consecrate their treasures and possessions to His service. The first great act of the Christian Church was seen in the consecration of all their property to God, to be drawn upon for the common weal.

3. Ceremonially. In the Mosaic Code we find it laid down that a tenth of all possessions and increase is reserved as being the Lord's portion. " The tenth shall be holy into the Lord." ² In addition to the tenth, which was paid at least three times in each year, there came the voluntary free-will offerings, the expression of thankfulness and gratitude from a grateful people.

4. Prophetically. We find this worship by gifts mentioned in Psalm lxxii., which speaks of the coming Messiah. The prophet says, " The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents ; the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. And He shall live (*i.e.*, be raised from the dead), and to Him shall be given of the gold of Sheba ; prayer also shall be made for Him continually ; and daily shall He be praised." ³ That would be a bold Christian who should elect to pray for Christ's cause, and render praise to Him personally, but refuse

¹ Exod. x. 26.

² Lev. xxvii. 32.

³ Ps. lxxii. 10, 15.

to give gold to Him. Isaiah tells us that the merchandise and hire of the nations shall be holiness to the Lord, and shall not be measured nor laid up, except for the service of God; that her sons, who have dwelt in far countries, shall return with their silver and gold, and offer it unto the name of the Lord their God.¹

5. In connection with spiritual blessings. The well-known passage records God's complaints against His people for robbing Him of tithes and offerings; and also a great promise, on the basis of the resumption of their payment of tithes and the renewal of their free-will offerings, may be cited: "Prove Me now herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."² Will any Christian dare take his penknife and cut that passage out of the Bible, saying that that exhortation and promise was for Jews, but not for Christians? I would not lift either my hand or thought to such sacrilege. Neither can we pray for the opening of the windows of heaven, and for a blessing upon our own souls or upon our Church, if we withhold tithes and offerings from the Lord.

V. THE BLESSING OF LIBERALITY. Let no one suppose that God is robbing us when He asks for tithes and offerings from us—for gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh—when He bids us "abound" in the grace of liberality. Far from it; He designs blessings for us. I need only remind you of two or three promises to this effect. "*The Lord loveth a cheerful giver.*"³ Now, that is something which I wish above all things, that the Lord should love me, or rather make me to know His love. Then we are told that "*the liberal soul shall be made*

¹ Isa. xxiii. 18; lx. 9. ² Mal. iii. 10.

³ 2 Cor. ix. 7.

fat."¹ There is a peculiar connection between liberality in temporal things and the inflow of grace and spiritual life upon the soul. Then again, *liberality is the only corrective of that worst and meanest of all evils, the love of money.* Generous giving corrects the tendency to avarice, the pride of life, self-indulgence, and many other hurtful lusts which come along with the love of money and the ambition to hoard it up. Finally, *a large liberality will hasten the evangelization of the world and the coming of Christ.* But for the parsimony of the Christian Church, the gospel would long ago have been preached to every creature under heaven. Even now, the final triumph of missionary enterprise over heathendom awaits only the loosing of the purse-strings of Christendom. Men and women are ready to go, taking their lives in their hands, if only their brethren will supply their need out of their abundance.

Whenever we come to understand that this is not a sordid but a highly spiritual subject, *we shall have joy in giving, and the Lord will have honour.* In one of the rural churches of England there is a beautifully-carved statue in wood, standing over the Offertory, which represents our Lord with an outstretched and pierced hand. The gifts of the people are placed in this pierced hand, and through it make their way into the Offertory. Oh, could we see that outstretched and pierced hand standing over and by us always, how joyfully would we put our gifts into it, and how abundant would those gifts be!

"And I have brought to thee,
Down from My home above,
Salvation full and free,
My pardon and My love ;

¹ Prov. xi. 25.

Great gifts I brought to thee,
What hast thou brought to Me?

Oh, let thy life be given,
Thy years for Me be spent ;
World fetters all be riven,
And joy with suffering blent.
I gave Myself for thee,
Give thou thyself to Me !”

XV

"GOOD OLD SIMEON"

"And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Ghost was upon him . . ."
—LUKE ii. 25-35.

GOD has never left Himself without a witness in the earth, even in the darkest times. From Abel to Simeon and Anna, there have always been those who have had faith, and have waited for Him and testified to His faithfulness. They have often been hidden from the eyes of men, and even from each other, as were the seven thousand in Israel, in the days of her great apostasy, who had not bowed the knee to Baal, but were unknown to Elijah, who thought he alone was left to uphold the true faith of Jehovah. Jerusalem was well nigh as apostate at this time as Israel in the days of Ahab. There was, indeed, a great pretence of religion on the part, particularly, of the Pharisees; but they were whited sepulchres—hypocrites, who for pretence made long prayers, robbed widows, and oppressed the people; who were punctilious in tithing mint, anise, and cummin, while systematically neglecting the weightier matters of the law, judgment and charity. So estranged were they from all spiritual life and true knowledge of God, that, when their Messiah came, they knew Him not, received Him not, and never rested till they had slain Him. Nevertheless, God had His witnesses in Jerusalem: men

and women, such as Zacharias and Elisabeth, Simeon and Anna. These were of the common people, utterly unknown in the "higher circles" of ecclesiastical and social life, or, if known at all, were doubtless held in contempt by the scribes and rulers, who had long since made void the commandments of God by their traditions. But the Day Spring from on high had arisen, and into His light the hidden ones of God were coming, one by one, to hail and greet Him. We should never despair of true religion in the earth, however dark and apostate the times may be ; for we are sure that God will always have some true hearts among the children of men who love and fear Him. I once knew of a very old and poor woman, who lived in one of our depopulated little New England towns. All the young people had emigrated, until there were none left in the town but a few old men and women—too old to follow their children into the far west, and to the gold and silver fields of the Rocky mountains and the Pacific coast. The little meeting-house, which used to be crowded with devout worshippers, was long since abandoned and fallen into disrepair. An evangelist chanced to go that way, and stopped overnight with this poor woman, and he spoke to her of the deserted meeting-house, asking the cause of its abandonment. She told him that all the young people were gone, and there were none left to maintain public worship ; that there had been no preaching in the town for five years, and no assembly for prayer. "Then," said the evangelist, "I suppose the Church is quite dead." At which the old woman rose from her chair, and, in some excitement and indignation of spirit, exclaimed "Dead!—no, sir! The Church is not dead ; the Church can never die. I am here." She, at least, was left alive to testify for God and His salvation. So it was in Jerusalem at this time. There were, at least, Simeon

and the aged Anna, in whose hearts the holy fire of God's love burned brightly, and the faith, which waited for the consolation, ready to recognise and receive Him when He came "suddenly to His temple."¹

The little Court of the infant King of Israel was growing apace and extending. From Nazareth to Bethlehem, from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, the King made His progress. He had already been worshipped by the shepherds; eastern princes had come to His rising, and worshipped Him with devout faith and generous gifts; and now, in His own capital city, though the rulers knew Him not, these obscure disciples, who had been waiting for Him with devout expectation, hailed Him and gave in their glad allegiance, proclaiming Him King and Saviour! How interesting and cheering it is to note the gradual development of the Kingdom of God about the "young Child"; and wondrous it is to call to mind how that Kingdom has waxed great and mighty during all these long centuries since He was taken, an unconscious Babe, into the arms of "good old Simeon."

I. SIMEON AND HIS CHARACTER. We do not know who this old man was; he appears but for a moment in the temple to welcome the Son of God, and confess and rejoice in God's salvation, and then goes back to his home, and departs in peace to the glory-land from whence came the Messiah to him. Tradition has attempted to identify Simeon with Rabbi Simeon, son of the famous Hillel, the father of Gamaliel; but there is no truth in this tradition. Simeon was a most common name in Judæa, and there is no doubt that our Simeon was just an obscure old man of the common people, unknown entirely out of his own little circle, who for years had been a devout but unofficial student of those

¹ Mal. iii. 1.

prophetic scriptures which had kindled in his heart, and kept burning for many years, the fire of faith and expectation ; who, hoping against hope, had at last been rewarded by a revelation from God "that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ."¹ Many a great man has striven after an immortality of memory amongst men, only to die and be forgotten, even in the place where he lived and wrought what he fondly hoped would be immortal deeds ; yet this obscure old man, who was a lover of God and a believer in His Son Jesus Christ, has attained an immortality which shall endure while the world stands, and in the world of glory shall live and shine among the greatest of the servants of God. True immortality comes only to those who associate themselves with the Lord's Christ. Not all who believe and receive Jesus shall be known in this world, and have their name preserved in the records of time ; but none are too obscure to have their names written in the Lamb's book of life and live and shine for ever among the great unnumbered and numberless host of God's redeemed ones.

1. *He was just and devout.* His character was summed up in these two words. They were enough, for they tell the whole story of his walk before God and man. It does not take many words to delineate character, for the reason that all true character is concentrated in one or two chief virtues, which form, as it were, the backbone for the lesser ones. A just man and devout is certain to be a good man, in the broad sense of the word ; a kind, merciful, generous, and benevolent man. The Holy Spirit draws Enoch's character in a single brief sentence of four words, "He walked with God," and so doing, obtained "this testimony, that he pleased God."² What more need be said of a man than that he walks

¹ Luke ii. 26.

² Heb. xi. 5.

with God. Job was "a perfect and an upright man ; one that feareth God and escheweth evil."¹ What more could have been said of him to set him before us in perfect picture? "Abraham believed in the Lord," and He accounted it to him for righteousness."² Moses, great man as he was, has his portrait drawn also in these few words, "He endured as seeing Him who is invisible."³ In that single line we get at the secret of all Moses' power. Of Barnabas it is said, "He was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith."⁴ Nothing more need be said to enable us to admire and trust this companion of the Apostle Paul. Zacharias and Elisabeth have their portraits drawn together, "they were both righteous before God ; walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."⁵ It is said of one unnamed woman, whom Jesus forgave, that "she loved much"⁶ ; this was her character ; we can easily take all the rest for granted. Now, of this good old witness and friend of God, it is simply said, "he was just and devout." The ingenuity of scholars is sometimes taxed to compose a memorial for the tombstone of some great and good man ; and we read epitaphs, that run into sentences of many words, in which the composers have endeavoured to set before the world the many virtues of the deceased. If I could be sure of having this written on my tombstone with truth, "He was just and devout and waited for the coming of the Son of God," I should want nothing higher or better said of me. It may be of some service to us if we can fairly analyze these two great virtues which made up the sum of Simeon's character.

The just man of the scripture is a man who is both right with God and man. First of all, the just man is

¹ Job i. 8.² Gen. xv. 6.³ Heb. xi. 27.⁴ Acts xi. 24.⁵ Luke i. 6.⁶ *Ibid.* vii. 47.

a justified man. "The just shall live by faith."¹ This term is almost always used to describe men who, having put their trust in God, have become righteous in His sight. The just, or the justified, man is he who has been set, or made, right with God : the *rightened* man. No man is by nature just with God. "How should a man be just with God?"² cries Job. That is, how shall a man demonstrate himself to be righteous in God's sight? Not by works which he has done, nor by any ceremonial performed. A sinful man can only be justified with God by faith in Him. Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness ; or, he was thereby rightened, or made right, with God. The scripture speaks of the resurrection of the just ; that is, of those who have been justified by the death and resurrection of Christ, "who was delivered for our offences, and raised again for our justification."³ To be just with God is to have been set free from all obligations, to suffer for our sins under the broken law, or to be declared by the judgment of God to be without offence, or to be discharged from all obligations to the law. I have read in English, especially in Scotch, history of certain men, who had been convicted of treason and put to death, as having thus been justified. That is, the law was satisfied with them or upon them. Now, the law of God has claims *upon* every man, not only for original obedience, but *against* him, on account of every transgression. He must either be justified by suffering the penalty of the law, or by faith in Christ, who died for him. Thus it is proclaimed by the gospel, "Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins, and by Him all that believe are justified from all things from which ye could not be justified by

¹ Hab. ii. 4.

² Job ix. 2.

³ Rom. iv. 25.

the law of Moses."¹ In this sense, then, Simeon was a just man, a man who had believed in God, who "justifieth the ungodly." But justification is not alone the *imputation* of righteousness through faith in Christ; it is also the *impartation* of righteousness by the Holy Ghost through regeneration. Every truly justified or just man is also a regenerated man; and thus righteousness is not only a matter of standing with God, but also a matter of state as well. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature."² It is this which saves Christianity from being a mere theoretical faith. It is a religion of faith, truly, but of character as well. Not with God only was Simeon just; he was also just with men; that is, he was righteous as to his standing and state before God, and just and righteous in all his relations and dealings with men. Righteousness of character and actions, or practical holiness, is the final test of Christian character. "Being now made free from sin by justification, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life."³ It is most important that this great truth be always insisted upon. "The grace of God, that bringeth salvation, hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously (or justly) and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope (as Simeon did) and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."⁴ This beautiful passage may serve as a commentary upon the life of Simeon, both in regard to his relations to God and man. In the broadest and truest sense of the word, no man can be just with his fellow-man until he has been justified or

¹ Acts xiii. 38, 39. ² 2 Cor. v. 17. ³ Rom. vi. 22.

⁴ Tit. ii. 11-13.

made right with God, for only hence are the springs and motives of justice.

Simeon was devout as well as just. Now, devoutness is that which describes our attitude towards God, without respect to law. It is the characteristic of personal relation. The devout man is the pious man, who loves and adores God for Himself. He is taken up with admiration for all His glorious attributes; loving His holiness, His goodness, His mercy, and His truth, he seeks to imitate them in his own life. He walks with God in holy admiration and adoration all the days of his life, as did Enoch. He beholds and admires His glory in all His works, and especially in all the manifestations of His grace toward men. He is a man of humility, prayer, and praise. He loves His law, lays up His precepts and commandments in his heart, and seeks ever to illustrate them in his life, simply for the purpose of glorifying God's holy name among men. Devoutness is not a mere religious sentiment; it is a whole-hearted consecration or devotion to God and His glory. I have little confidence in that form of piety which expends itself in holy ejaculations, in the rolling of the eyes heavenward, and the recounting of spiritual ecstasies and experiences, but finds *no* room or time for downright service, and the adorning of the doctrine of God with every good work. The Pharisees were devout in their pretence of prayer and in ostentatious giving of alms; but theirs was the devotion or devoutness of the hollow hypocrite or dead formalist. In the midst of that crooked and perverse generation Simeon lived, a truly just and devout man, who in God's sight was a delight and a joy.

These two traits of character, righteousness and devoutness, must always go together. There can never be a divorce between them. They are like the two beautiful pillars

in the porch of Solomon's temple, Strength and Beauty ; upon them the superstructure of religious character rests. No man can hope to be truly just who is not a devout worshipper of God, and no man can be a true worshipper of God unless he is truly justified with God and just in all his relations and transactions with men.

2. *Simeon was a man of faith.* He not only believed in God, but he believed and expected the things which God promised and foretold. "Having seen them afar off, was persuaded of them and embraced them."¹ He "waited for the consolation of Israel." Being familiar with the scriptures, he had discovered that God had promised to visit and redeem His people by the coming of the Messiah. In that Messiah he saw all the good things which God had prepared for His people concentrated, and looked forward to His coming with all his heart and soul. All the consolations of a true Israelite are bound up in the Christ. If He come not, or be gone from the soul of man, his life goes down to the grave in sorrow and despair. "All the candles in a country cannot make a day," says the proverb. It is only the rising of the sun that can do that. "The greatest confluence of comforts that the whole creation affordeth cannot make a day of light and gladness to the heart of a believer." Only the rising of the Sun of Righteousness can do that for a soul. Simeon saw this great truth, and had set his heart upon the Lord's Christ that should come. He believed with all his soul that He would come, and he waited and hoped and longed day and night for His coming ; and had no consolation or comfort in this life, or hope for the life to come, but *in* His coming. It is so with the true man of faith to-day. He not only believes in God, and accepts Jesus as his salvation, and finds in Him his only true joy and com-

¹ Heb. xi. 13.

fort, but he looks for His future glorious appearing as the consummation of all his hope. Take away from the true believer the hope of Christ's second coming, and you leave him desolate at the grave of his loved ones, despairing at his own death, miserable in view of his present unsanctified character, and without comfort in his present trials. The true believer is one who waits and watches and expects the coming of Christ. This was the remarkable testimony which Paul gave to the Thessalonian Christians; they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven."¹ This was the consolation which Paul offered to these same Thessalonians in their great trials and bereavements. "The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort (console) one another with these words."² Jesus is *our* consolation as He was Simeon's; and if we have not the faith which anticipates His coming and longs for it, we have not yet the true and full faith of a real Israelite.

II. WHAT THE HOLY GHOST DID FOR SIMEON. The office of the Holy Spirit under the Old Testament dispensation was somewhat different from His office under the New Testament. No doubt the Holy Spirit was the author of regeneration in the olden time, just as He is now; but as the Comforter permanently abiding in us, He seems not to have been known by the saints of old. In this particular He was the special gift of the Father to those who believed on the Son. In olden times the Holy Spirit came upon certain of God's ser-

¹ 1 Thess. i. 9, 10.

² *Ibid.* iv. 16-18.

vants, for the purpose of inspiring them to prophesy, or to speak in the name of the Lord, or to do some mighty work for God, as in the case of the prophets and of king Saul, who also prophesied after the Spirit of God came upon him. It is also probable that, in a general way, the Spirit of God rested upon the priests during the time of their ministration in the Temple. We have already seen how the Spirit came upon Elisabeth, Mary, and Zacharias, and moved them to sing of the Lord and His faithfulness. In like manner, the Spirit of God was upon Simeon. It seems that, not only when he came up to the Temple, but previously to this, the Holy Spirit rested upon him in a peculiar way, inspiring him and giving him special leadings and assurances concerning the Christ and his relation to Him. In like manner, the Spirit, under the New Covenant, comes upon God's people, preparing and furnishing them for service, and leading them into special work, as on the day of Pentecost; and, as we are told, the Spirit interposed at times to direct the course and work of the apostles. The same office is exercised by Him now. When we are assembled in the house of God for prayer or public worship, especially for preaching and hearing the word of God, we are led to expect the Spirit of God sent down from heaven to give energy to the word and quicken every act of worship. This office, as I have said, is something different from the permanent indwelling of the Comforter in all believers. When the Spirit is thus given at times, and in extraordinary measure to believers, it is, even now, called a "baptism of the Holy Ghost."

In times of spiritual apostasy, when the accredited servants of God have become formal and perfunctory in the discharge of their duties, the Spirit retires from them, and chooses out for Himself some other, and perhaps

even obscure, agents to do God's work in their stead. The Spirit had long since departed from the high priests and rulers of Jerusalem, and left them high and dry amid the husks and dead forms of service. In the meantime He had come upon Simeon and the pious Anna, and now spake through them to the people, revealing to them the Child Jesus. Similar movements of the Spirit are of no unusual occurrence, even in the history of the Christian Church. How often has a spiritual degeneracy marked the public service of God in connection with the regularly constituted Churches and ministry! The ordination and orders may have been all regular, the services of church or cathedral stately, the preaching more or less true in word; but all without the Spirit, and therefore all dead and lifeless; "strange fire," instead of fire from heaven, being the only energy; that is, the natural energy of the flesh substituted for the power of the Spirit. The Church has often been startled by the rising up of some obscure man or woman, who has suddenly appeared, preaching the gospel and leading the people to prayer, altogether apart from the regular channels or appointed means of grace. A cold and dead clergy have made haste to denounce such proceedings as irregular and fanatical, and have exerted all their power and authority to put down such unauthorized proceedings. During the last century there was such a manifestation of the Spirit, when the Wesleys were called forth to lead a new spiritual movement, and rescue true religion from the dead hands of a formal and degenerate clergy and Church. In our day we have seen the Spirit resting upon obscure, uneducated, and untrained laymen, whom God called to preach the gospel and arouse the Churches into a new life and evangelical activity. No greater man has arisen in our generation than D. L. Moody, the New England farmer's

lad, who has, under God, awakened a sleeping Church, and called a dead world to repentance and faith. So, also, the Spirit of God came powerfully upon William and Catherine Booth, and, through them, the mighty Salvation Army has arisen to rebuke the indifference of Church and Chapel to the perishing masses for whose souls neither Church nor clergy cared. What the endowed Church and educated clergy failed to do in the performance of perfunctory duties, obscure and uneducated common people have done. God is not bound even to His own ordinances or to any regular order of ministry. It is certain that if we, who are the accredited ministers of the word of grace, and who have organized regular congregations and built stately houses of worship, have degenerated from spiritual life and power, God will set us aside, and call to His service and help men and women outside our guilds and organizations. Instead of opposing and denouncing the Spirit-taught and Spirit-endowed men, whether in university halls or from the shop or farm, we should bless God for them, accept the rebuke thus administered to us, and turn again to the Lord before we be utterly cast off. The present activity of the Church throughout Christendom is largely the result of the revival of spiritual religion, brought about by obscure men on whom the Spirit of God has rested, and who, coming into His Temple again, have recognised the Lord's Christ, embraced and proclaimed Him afresh to all the world.

The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him. "And it was revealed to him by the Holy Ghost that he should not see death till he had seen the Lord's Christ."¹ Already the Spirit had clearly shown to Simeon, out of the scriptures, that the consolation of Israel was coming, and that He was not to be looked for either in the

¹ Luke ii. 26.

Temple and its ordinances, or in the political liberation of the nation from the hands of the alien and dominant power of Rome, but in the coming of the long-promised personal Messiah. His mind was directed to a Person rather than to an event. This in itself was a great revelation, and one which we all might well covet. How many of us who are in trouble and distress, either in body or soul, are inclined to fix our hopes or desires upon some change in our circumstances, rather than upon the Lord's Christ. If we only, by some good fortune, could come by some money, our poverty or temporal circumstances would be relieved; if only health would return to our bodies, our physical sufferings would be over; if only our daughters could marry well, and be settled in their own homes, and our sons get well placed in business or professional life, our anxieties on their account would be over and ourselves consoled. I do not say that such things are not desirable, but they are not the consolation of Israel, nor are they our true consolation. Such things are but the candles which we fain would light to chase away our darkness; they are not the Sun of Righteousness which God has given us, with healing in His wings, to make for us a new and permanent day. A true spiritual knowledge of Christ is better than wealth, better than health, better than homes for our daughters, better than all advantageous places for our sons. When the Holy Ghost shows us that Christ is all and in all, that the Kingdom of God and His righteousness is the main and first need for ourselves and our children, then indeed has the consolation of Israel come to us; then may we wait with patient hope for all these things to be added to us. Then shall we learn in "whatsoever state we are, therewith to be content"¹—to be consoled. How sad it is to see all the world, and

¹ Phil. iv. 11.

more than half the Church, looking for *things* and *events* to supply them with happiness, instead of looking to Him who can ease us of our burdens, relieve us of our anxieties, comfort us in our sorrows, and make His grace to abound to us more and more, so that we can rejoice even in our tribulations. How the Holy Ghost revealed to Simeon "that he should not see death until his eyes had seen the Lord's Christ" we cannot tell. It is not necessary for us to know. In these things of the Kingdom of God we are moving and living in a world which "eye hath not seen nor ear heard," and which hath not (naturally or by reason) entered into the heart of man, but which "God has revealed to us by His Spirit."¹ To the just and devout believer who waits on God these revelations come. They are not made necessarily to ministerial training, to high ecclesiastical dignity, to intellectual culture, or to high, worldly, or social position, but to those who wait upon the Lord. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him."²

Simeon is led by the Spirit to Christ. "And he came by the Spirit into the Temple," where the Child Christ was brought by His parents. Whether Simeon was in the daily habit of visiting the Temple or not does not appear; but on this day, and at this hour, moved by the Holy Spirit, he went up to the Temple, and there found the Christ for whom he had so long waited. We are not always conscious that it is the Spirit who is leading us. A strong persuasion of duty, or an impulse in a certain direction, or even the slightest desire, may be of the Spirit. Nor does the leading of the Spirit always come to us directly; He may lead us through another. In any case, we are not to look for mechanical operation in connection with this gracious work of God in our souls and upon our minds. In one passage Paul says, "I

¹ 1 Cor. ii. 9.² Ps. xxv. 14.

think also that I have the Spirit of God." ¹ The just and devout man may count upon the leading of the Spirit in his most ordinary affairs, without waiting to *feel* some extraordinary impulse which he shall be able to identify with the heavenly guidance. The Christian life is, or ought to be, a most natural one; that is, the Spirit does no violence to the natural and ordinary working of the mind. He leads us into all truth, and guides us along the lines of our own judgment and desires. I myself have no doubt, that in His ordinary operations, even upon worldly people, it is He who leads men and women to the house of God where Christ is preached. How came you here this morning, my friend? What led you to this place of worship? Was it habit? was it an impulse? was it some friend who suggested it to you? was it a notice in some paper of the services? was it the reading of one of the published sermons, which may have fallen into your hands, and awakened in you a desire to come and see and hear for yourself? These, or any one of these, motives may have been the guidings of the Spirit. It is quite possible that, not recognising the good hand of God upon you, you may not receive the heavenly benefit intended. On the other hand, should you say to yourself, "God, by His Spirit, has led me to the house of God this morning; I will therefore hear what the Lord will say to me," I have no doubt you will get a message for your own soul which will be beyond price; or you may, for the first time, have your eyes open to see the Lord's Christ. Whether believers or unbelievers, we are never left in blindness or darkness, or without a sufficient voice from God for our spiritual guidance; if we have not that guidance, we may be sure it is from our failure to attend to the leading of the Spirit. Were we always careful to remember that God's

¹ 1 Cor. vii. 40.

Holy Spirit is His gift to the world to convince it of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment, and to His own believing children to lead them in a plain path, it would not be long before we became so intimately acquainted with His blessed personality and leading, that practically we would never go astray, and would live our life out in the earth as though we were in heaven.

The Lord's Christ is revealed to Simeon. Having led him into the Temple just at the right time, he saw Mary and Joseph and "the young Child." There was nothing in the parents or in the appearance of the Child Jesus distinguishing them from other parents and children. There was no nimbus about His head, no pompous or uplifted manner about Mary and Joseph, to call attention to them and their Infant. Nevertheless, Simeon recognised at once in the Child Jesus the long-hoped-for "consolation of Israel." How he recognised Him we are not told. No doubt this also was of the Spirit, speaking without word in his soul, saying, "That is He." When Moses was born, his parents "saw that he was a proper child"¹; that is, by some spiritual intuition, they recognised in their son an instrument chosen of God, and were led to conceal him for three months in the river, so preserving the future deliverer of Israel from Egypt. It is said that they perceived this by faith; that is only another way of saying that they were led of the Spirit. When Mary visited Elisabeth in the hill country, Elisabeth had no knowledge that the Angel had visited Mary and revealed to her that she should be the mother of the Incarnate Lord; yet the moment Mary came into Elisabeth's presence, the elder woman recognised Mary as the "mother of her Lord," and immediately broke out into holy, spiritual, and prophetic song. She knew Mary by the Spirit. How is it that Christ, who is

¹ Heb. xi. 23.

preached here regularly, is *not* recognised by many and *is* recognised by some? In the one case the voice or revelation of the Spirit is attended to, and in another case God's Spirit is resisted or quenched! "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost."¹ Flesh and blood do not reveal Jesus to men. I have no doubt that the revealing Spirit is present with all to whom Jesus is preached; yet that many, who have eyes to see and ears to hear, will not see and will not hear. They are not seeking Jesus—they do not desire Him; and so they resist the Spirit's gracious revelation, and fail to see in Jesus their Saviour. Oh! it is a serious thing to resist even the faintest conviction wrought in the soul by the Spirit of God. I beseech you open your eyes, yield to the Spirit to-day, and "behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world."²

"The Spirit calls to-day,
Yield to His power :
Oh ! grieve Him not away ;
'Tis mercy's hour."

Simeon embraces the Saviour. This good old man, who had so long waited for the consolation of Israel, who yielded himself to the guidance of the Spirit of God and longed for God's salvation, no sooner recognised in Jesus that salvation, than he reached out his arms and embraced Him. I am sure that the same Spirit who led Simeon to reach out his arms to embrace the Christ also led Mary to yield her Babe up to this devout and just man. No man stretches out his arms in vain to Christ, nor calls unto Him and is not heard, nor seeks Him who does not find Him. Jesus came into this world to be sought after, and to give Himself to those who come after Him. I wonder that all do

¹ 1 Cor. xii. 3.

² John i. 29.

not embrace Him, for to have Him in one's arms, or in one's heart, which is the same thing, is to have life and salvation. The sweet thing about Simeon was that he no sooner saw Him than he embraced Him. Like the shepherds of Bethlehem, he did not wait to think the matter over, to discuss all the possibilities of the case, to make sceptical inquiries concerning Him of his mother or Joseph, to solve the mystery of the Incarnation, or to inquire if others had believed on Him. How different in this matter is the attitude of many of you! Jesus is set forth evidently crucified before your eyes. You know the story of His Incarnation and life, death, and resurrection. You are thoroughly persuaded of the historical truth of the things upon which the faith of the Christian rests. You confess a great admiration for the wonderful beauty and perfection of God's plan of salvation; you scorn the idea of being infidels, you even patronize the church; you go up to the temple Sunday after Sunday, and there behold the Christ of God, and yet you reach out no arm to receive Him; you find no place in your hearts for Him. On the other hand, you make all possible excuses for not doing so. You tell us of your difficulties, how you cannot understand this and that; you are ready to admire Christ as a good man, as the best man the world ever produced, for that matter; you are even willing to acknowledge that He is in some sort even more than a man; but you will not receive Him as God's salvation. Alas! how perverse is the human heart, how stubborn the human will, how deep the alienation which sin has wrought in man! Jesus has come from heaven; He has taken our human nature; He is born in Bethlehem, within the reach of the poorest and the most sinful; He is brought to the temple where men and women resort; He will not resist any outstretched arms of faith and

love ; He is willing to be received by any and by all sinners, and, when He is so received, He bestows life and light, joy and peace ; yet will not men receive Him. Turning from these cavillers, these theoretical admirers of Christ, who say, "Lord, Lord," but will not embrace Him, to Simeon, I find great delight in beholding the simplicity and boldness of his faith. If I were not privileged myself to receive Christ as he received Him, I should envy him the joy of holding Christ in his arms, and saying to himself, "He is mine ; God has given Him to me. He has come and given Himself to me."

Simeon blessed God. Having taken Christ in his arms, the good old man opened his mouth and blessed God. This, being interpreted, is, he thanked God for the gift of His Son, in whom he found his salvation ; and he confessed God and Christ, and proclaimed them to all the world as his Saviour. Simeon was not ashamed of his religion ; much less was he ashamed of his God and Saviour. He opened his mouth wide to confess and declare Him to others. I have occasion often to speak of this matter of confession. It is the very first duty of the Christian ; and I think it is the first natural impulse of the converted man to speak forth the praise of God and Christ. How can we receive so great salvation and not tell it to others ? More than that, there is a sense in which one is not saved until he confesses Christ. "If thou shalt *confess* with thy mouth the Lord Jesus Christ, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."¹ There is no record in the Bible of silent believers ; faith is vocal with the praises of

¹ Rom. x. 9, 10.

God always. If Christ is in the heart, He will, by the very force of the joy He creates there, open the lips to speak and sing of His salvation. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."¹ It is a sure sign of decadence of spiritual life in the Church when the congregation leaves all the preaching to the minister; when, for the lack of confessors, the mid-week service has to be turned into a lecture. Of course, there is a hypocritical, pharisaical, and ostentatious profession of Christ, which must be as hateful to Him as it is disgusting to the world; but there is no difficulty in discriminating one type of confession from the other; there is a different ring in the words which a believer utters out of a true, warm, and loyal heart, from the cold, metallic words of the mere formal professor or sectarian. We owe it to God that we confess Him before men; we owe it to our brethren and fellow-confessors that we keep not silent; we owe it to the world, which waits on our testimony for knowledge of Christ; we owe it to ourselves, for no soul can be truly happy so long as it is dumb.

¹ Matt. xii. 34.

XVI

SIMEON'S TESTIMONY TO JESUS

"Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word ; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people ; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel."—LUKE ii. 29-32.

OUR Lord Jesus Christ humbled Himself to be born of a maiden of Nazareth, to be cradled in a stable, to be cared for and protected in his youth by a poor carpenter, to be brought to the temple and presented before the Lord amidst a crowd of other children, in nothing distinguished so far as outward appearance from the very poorest of the children of the poor who were probably that day presented. It is almost impossible not to have in mind the contrast offered in this scene with the gorgeous and ostentatious ceremonies recently performed in the eyes of the world in connection with the baptism of the poor little princelet of a little principality in the south-east of Europe.¹ In the case of Jesus there was no demonstration from either political or social powers, yet was He not without recognition. At His birth angels had sung, shepherds and wise men had worshipped, and now, in the Temple, two good people had come to sing His praise as the world's salvation, to encourage His parents, to give hope to a Gentile world, and through Him to prophesy the return of a long-lost glory to the people of Israel.

¹ Bulgaria.

Matthew Henry well says that in this public recognition of Jesus by Simeon and Anna there might have been a happy introduction of the priests into acquaintance with the Saviour, had not those watchmen been blind. We might take these pregnant words of the good commentator and pass them on to some of you, and intimate that, in the event which we are considering, there is a like opportunity for you to learn of the salvation of God, unless you also are determined to remain blind to the fact which "God hath prepared before the face of all people."

Our English Bible does not intimate that the testimony of Simeon was given in the form of a beautiful song, short as to the number of its measures, but weighty and beautiful in expression and contents. Simeon's song was genuinely Israelitish, at the same time genuinely evangelical and universal, in its glad proclamation. In it we have the same theme which characterizes alike the songs of Elisabeth, Mary, Zacharias, and the angels. All these announced the fulfilment of Israel's hopes in the birth of the Messiah, and also the great mercy of God to "all people." There is no one who truly recognises in Jesus a Saviour for himself, but also rejoices and proclaims Him a Saviour for others. The coming of Jesus made all the world kin, introducing a new brotherhood among men, uniting the rich and the poor, the far off and the near, in the love and salvation of a common Redeemer. Oh! let us whose eyes have seen God's salvation, who have received Jesus into our hearts as Simeon received Him into his arms, give glory to Him, and joy to those who shall hereafter believe on His name through our testimony. In these words of Simeon, brief as they are, we have a great body of truth concerning Jesus and the salvation of God, both for the world and for His ancient people.

I. JESUS IS GOD'S SALVATION. In a former sentence we read that Simeon had long been waiting for "the consolation of Israel," and that it had been revealed to him that he "should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ." In this testimony we have a greatly enlarged view of Him, in the title by which He is now designated. If to the hope of Simeon He had stood forth as the consolation of Israel, now to his sight He was the salvation of God, both to Gentile and to Jew. God's promises are always great, but in their fulfilment they are still greater. However great our faith and hope may be, based on God's word, yet when we shall come to see Him face to face, and enter upon our inheritance, the end of faith and the fruition of hope will be more glorious. "Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation." Ordinarily we attach to the word "salvation" a significance which sets before us some benefit which we receive through faith in Christ; and this is a quite correct application of the word, for it *is* commonly used to indicate the *benefits* of God's grace to us, such as forgiveness, justification, sanctification, eternal life, and the place and condition of glory into which God has promised to bring us. In the passage before us we have a yet fuller meaning. It carries with it not only the idea of a benefit conferred, but the means by which the benefit is conferred; and I fancy, also, the further thought, that both the substance and the means of salvation are alike in Him who is called "Thy salvation."

I am afraid there is too common an idea prevalent that salvation is a mere gift which God bestows upon us through Jesus; that it passes over to us, and may be held and enjoyed quite independently, *after* we have received it, and apart from Christ. Take the matter of forgiveness. How many Christians think of forgiveness

as a something which they have received in themselves, coming, indeed, through Christ, but yet held apart from Him. Sometimes they lose the sense of it, and are ignorant how to regain this lost feeling. Now, as a matter of fact, forgiveness is not something in us, but something in Him; and we have no forgiveness apart from having Him. "In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins." ¹ He is our forgiveness, just as He is our hope. If we have not Him in our hearts, then we have neither forgiveness nor hope. So in the matter of eternal life. "And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, *and this life is in the Son*. He that *hath the Son* hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life." ² Or take another striking notification of this great truth, that salvation is in Christ, not apart from Him—that He is both the instrument *and the substance of salvation*. When Martha replied to Jesus' statement that her brother Lazarus should live again, she said, "I know that he shall rise again, in the resurrection at the last day." ³ Now, her thought was, that at the last day a great event would take place, in which her brother and all other faithful Israelites would be raised again. The resurrection, *as an event*, was the object of her hope; but Jesus at once corrected her on this point, and said, I can almost imagine somewhat sharply, though tenderly, "*I am the resurrection and the life*." ⁴ "There is no resurrection apart from ME. He that hath Me hath resurrection, and he that hath not Me hath not resurrection. He that believeth on Me (that is, he that receiveth Me) shall never die; and though his body may die, yet shall that also live again." Nor is this great truth a later statement of the New Covenant; it was known to the spiritually-minded believers of the Old Testament.

¹ Eph. i. 7. ² 1 John v. 11, 12. ³ John xi. 24. ⁴ *Ibid.* xi. 25.

"Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid; for the Lord JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; He also is become my salvation." ¹ Now, in this beautiful passage from Isaiah, it is clearly seen that it is no blessing from Jehovah, no mere communication of grace, not even forgiveness and regeneration, which enters so largely into our salvation, but Jehovah Himself. If only we could get this great and important truth clearly into our heads, and deeply into our hearts, we would be delivered from all those fluctuations of experience, those dreadful alternations of hope and fear, of peace and unrest, which so many Christians suffer, because they are for ever looking within themselves to find some experience of spiritual blessing, which they regard as the sign or the substance of salvation. The eye of a true believer, then, is always fixed upon Him; the faith of a true believer always embraces Him; for in Him, and in Him only, have we salvation. For this reason we preach not forgiveness of sins, but "we preach Christ," and "*in Him* the forgiveness of sins" ² and all other blessings. The real question is not, Have you received the forgiveness of sins? or, have you received the new birth? but have you received Christ—God's salvation? for He, "of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." ³ I beseech you, do not fail to grasp this great truth; it will save you much spiritual distress, and make your life infinitely more happy and strong. He who is always looking internally for evidence of salvation will always be more or less in doubt and fear; but he who is ever beholding Christ and embracing Him will always be full of assurance and strength.

1. *This salvation God has prepared before the face of all people.* It is true, at that moment of time, Jesus

¹ Isa. xii. 2. ² Eph. i. 7; Luke xxiv. 47. ³ 1 Cor. i. 30.

had not been set before all people ; but Simeon saw in Him the salvation to be set before all people. He was prepared for that end. "Behold," said the angel to the shepherds, "I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be unto all people." This was the far-reaching purpose and preparation of God, in sending His Son into the world. "The grace of God," said the Apostle Paul, "which bringeth salvation unto all men, hath appeared." ¹ "And I, if I be lifted up," saith Jesus, "will draw all men unto Me." ² "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature," ³ was His last command to His disciples ; for He knew Himself to be the Saviour of all men. Is not this a most blessed truth? "God our Saviour, who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." ⁴ Simeon grasped this world-wide gospel the moment he beheld Christ, the Holy Ghost being upon him. The very sight of Christ burst off all the bonds of narrow and selfish Judaism from his mind and heart, and in embracing Jesus he embraced the whole world in his arms. Whom Christ loved, he loved ; whom Christ came to save, he instantly rejoiced over and rejoiced with. No religion can be true which does not comprehend all people in its privileges and provisions. I used often to urge this truth upon the Brahmins of India, to whom I preached so much and often a few years ago. They were much impressed by this statement, and much perplexed by the fact that in their faith there was no hint of enlargement beyond the bounds of their own caste, and there could be no enlargement without destroying the very foundations upon which their faith rested. With the faith of Israel it was different ; for, from the beginning the blessings promised

¹ Tit. ii. 11. ² John xii. 32. ³ Mark xvi. 15. ⁴ 1 Tim. ii. 4.

to Abraham were also promised to all nations of the earth.

There is yet another thought here. Not only is the salvation of God come for all people, but it "*is prepared before the face of all people.*" By this we understand that the great fact of our Lord's coming was not a concealed one, or one revealed to a select few alone. It is true that His incarnation, birth, and early childhood were known to but few at the time, but His whole ministry, the great manifestation of the grace of God to men, and especially the great consummation of His redemptive work on the cross, was public and before the face of the world. Jesus was no hidden Saviour. Publicly baptized, He forthwith began and continued His ministry in all the highways of life, in the synagogues, in the public ways, in the Temple, and in all the cities and villages of the country. He did not hide Himself, He did not do His mighty works "in a corner,"¹ but "manifested forth His glory"² to men. Theosophists tell us that in the heart of Thibet are a company of "Masters" who never manifest themselves to the world, nor allow the world to come to them; all we hear of them is some mysterious rumour of their esoteric wisdom and occult powers. But for centuries God had been preparing Jesus, and preparing all people for His coming, by prophecy, by types and shadows, and now by making His advent public before the eyes of all people. If any man shall ask, "Where dwellest Thou?" the answer is prompt and frank, "Come and see."³ It is the business of every preacher to "show Him forth." Who He is, whence He came, whither He is gone, and how He shall come again, is an open secret which all who will may read and understand.

2. *He is a light to the Gentiles, and the glory of Israel.*

¹ Acts xxvi. 26.

² John ii. 11.

³ *Ibid.* i. 39.

It is a remarkable fact that Simeon, a devout Israelite, should first see in Christ a light to the Gentiles. We might at best have thought he would have seen in Him first the glory of His people Israel, and after that a light to the Gentiles. This generous old man, trained in all the exclusiveness of his nation, yet saw by the Holy Spirit, and was prompt to proclaim, that to the Gentiles first the Light should come, and after that His glory promised to Israel. Guided by the Holy Spirit, he seems to have caught the full meaning of all Isaiah's prophecies concerning Him, both as to Jews and Gentiles, and to have perceived that the glory could not come to the ancient people of God until after He had lightened the Gentile world, and through their means. He may in this relation also have foreseen that He would first be rejected by His own people, and only after the calling in of the Gentiles recognised as their Messiah. It is wonderful how a sight of Jesus enables us to understand the scripture, and, as it were, to foresee the processes and method of God's grace to the world! In any case, Simeon pledges Jesus, the salvation of God, to the Gentile world, according to the word of God, which says, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined."¹ Not only is Jesus so promised to the Gentiles, but we who receive Him are likewise pledged in Him to the heathen world. Let this be for ever understood by us, that we cannot receive Jesus as our salvation without consecrating ourselves to carry the light of the gospel of the grace of God to the uttermost parts of the earth, for God hath said of Him, "I will also give Thee for a light to the Gentiles, that Thou mayest be My salvation unto the ends of the earth."²

¹ Isa. ix. 2.² *Ibid.* xlix. 6.

On the other hand, even though Simeon foresaw the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews, and the first early dawn of the Light to the Gentile world, and was generous enough to concede and proclaim that great fact, he did not, therefore, forget that God's covenant with His ancient people was one which could never be broken; and though for a time they must take a second place, yet in due course would He become "their glory." The history of Israel is a tragic one, full of romance and pathos. For two thousand years they have been "scattered and peeled,"¹ a by-word and a hissing among all nations, hated, persecuted, oppressed, and hunted down almost as wild beasts; yet have they been marvellously and miraculously preserved: broken off in their unbelief, still God has not forsaken them, but has ever kept them intact and unmixed among the nations where they have been fugitives; and He will graft them in again. It is a shame that we Christians have not been as generous toward Israel as Simeon, the devout Israelite, was generous toward us at the time of our Lord's coming. I should as willingly be found setting myself against the preaching of the gospel to the heathen, as joining in the bitter, unscriptural, and unchristian persecution, or even neglect of Israel; for God shall yet be the glory of Israel, whom He hath called "Israel My glory,"² "beloved for the fathers' sake."³ It seems strange to me that Christian people, and to this day so-called Christian nations, such as Germany, Austria, and Russia, have never ceased to persecute Israel. Even here in England and in America, where there should exist more generous Christian feeling, it is the fashion to sneer at the Jews, and set them down as a forsaken and inferior race. Have we forgotten the teaching of the great apostle⁴ concerning Israel, whose fall from Christ and diminishment

¹ Isa. xviii. 2. ² *Ibid.* xlvi. 13. ³ Rom. xi. 28. ⁴ *Ibid.* xi. 17-20.

have been the means of our salvation and enrichment? and his warning that if through their unbelief they were broken off that we might be grafted into the olive tree, by faith they may and will be grafted in again? and by our unbelief we may in turn be broken off, even as they were? Let us, then, take heed not to be high-minded against Israel; for God is able to graft them in again, and He will. Shall we, then, despise those whom God loves, and for whom He has prepared glory? Nay, rather shall not we, who have been made rich through their fall, be made still richer through their recovery? Our mission of love and salvation should go hand in hand to the far-away heathen, and to our Israelitish benefactors. Did Israel miss their glory by rejecting Christ and seeking after it in political supremacy and carnal greatness? Let us take warning from them, that we lose not ours in the same way. Is it not now true of many that they are turning away from Christ for the glory, wealth, and honours of this world? What is thy glory, my brother, my sister? Is it thy wealth, thy high social position, or thine earthly fulness, of whatever kind? Nay, but if thou hast any glory at all, it is that thou hast Christ for thy salvation. "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified to me, and I unto the world."¹ Hath the Holy Ghost revealed this to thee as He revealed it to Simeon of old? and if He has, art thou reluctant to accept the revelation, to embrace it and proclaim it, as did Simeon? Lord, open Thou our eyes that we may behold our true glory; save us from Israel's terrible mistake, and grant unto us Simeon's clear-sighted faith and warm-hearted, generous devotion to Thy Salvation. "In these brief, pregnant sentences (of Simeon's song of faith) is contained the substance of

¹ Gal. vi. 14.

the history of future ages. Neither the hackneyed inventions of legend, nor any preconceived dogmatic views, have any share in the composition of this joyous lyric."

II. SIMEON'S HAPPY DEPARTURE. No man is ready to die until he has seen and embraced God's salvation ; but as soon as he has seen and embraced that salvation he is ready and happy to die whenever God shall call him. Simeon was an old man, and there was nothing left him to live for ; therefore he was not only ready, but anxious to depart and be with God. It was his mission and work to keep faith alive in the world till Christ came ; now that work was finished, he wanted to be done with this world. Surely this is a just and happy view of life and of the value of this world. Even when he was still in the midst of his unfinished work, Paul saw and recognised the truth, that to depart and be with Christ was far better ; and only repressed his longing to be with Christ by the knowledge that his work was not yet done, and that it was more needful for him to live than to die. Fair and beautiful as the world is, much to live for and love in it as there is, it is still an intolerable world without God, in which life is not worth living, if Christ be not in our hearts our life and hope. To them who know not Christ, but to whom the world offers its choicest pleasures and gifts, life is but a fitful dream, from which they shall be awakened by the rude shock of death ; then whose shall all these things be for which unbelieving men and women have lived ? To those who know Christ, even if from them the world has withheld its gifts and pleasures, it is a glorious world in which to live and serve the Lord's Christ, and bring salvation to them who are lost, and light to them who sit in darkness. For this cause we choose life, and, for the time being, are content to postpone our departure "to be with Christ" in His glory. But this is our com-

pensation : Having seen and embraced the Lord's Christ, we are ready to depart in peace whenever He shall say, "Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world."¹

In Simeon's "nunc dimittis" we have several very beautiful and helpful suggestions concerning death. First, it is but a departure to be with Christ. To those who know not the mystery of death and life, as revealed in Christ, death must always be a catastrophe—an experience to be dreaded and striven against, or, at best, yielded to without hope. To many of the ancients in the heathen world, who sought to console themselves with a stoical philosophy, death was welcomed as an annihilation, and so an escape from the troubles, burdens, and disappointments of life ; but it is given to but a few to cultivate to such a point the philosophy of annihilation. To some in our own time, without God and Christ in the world, driven to desperation by sickness, pain, sorrow, despair, or dishonour, death is a refuge from a present evil, through which they take the chance of a better condition in whatever the hereafter may bring. This is the philosophy of despair, venturing on an unreasoning and desperate chance. Not many have the mad courage to face—not to say to court—death in this suicidal fashion. To the Christian, as I have said, death is the departure of the soul from the body to be with Christ—it is but a change in the conditions of life. It is neither extinction of being, nor a long and unconscious sleep, nor the absorption of our consciousness in the mysterious cause of consciousness. To those who are ready for it, it is an hour of departure to another and better country, where a crown of righteousness is already prepared, and waiting to be bestowed, as Paul conceived it. It is the leaving behind

¹ Matt. xxv. 34.

us of old age, if we have lived long ; of infirmities and of sickness, if we are so afflicted ; of troubles, anxieties, and burdens, of sorrows and disappointments, if these have been our lot ; and especially of sin, temptation, and those bitter spiritual conflicts which have been such a sorrow and strain upon us in this present evil world. It is the coming into the glorious sunlight of a perfect day and an eternal age ; where sorrow and sickness are no more ; where all tears are wiped away ; where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest ; and especially where there is no more sin ; where we shall see Jesus, and be like Him ; where the saints of all ages are gathered ; and where all the prophecies of great and good things in the constitution of our own being, and in the word of God, shall have perfect fulfilment. This is what death is to the Christian ; this was what departure meant to good old Simeon. May it be ours so to apprehend death, and to live rather in the anticipation than in the fear of it.

Second. *To Simeon death was a peaceful departure.* Simeon uttered his beautiful prayer while holding Christ in his arms. Jeremy Taylor has told us that "holy living makes happy dying." No doubt ; but it is not holy living that *is the ground* of peaceful dying. Simeon's eyes were beholding Jesus, his arms were embracing Him. This was what made death to him so peaceful and happy. With Christ in our hearts, and a hymn of praise to Him on our lips, death can in no wise terrify us, but rather lure us on to a better world. We are often told that many people die peacefully who are not Christians ; that men and women who have all their lifetime rejected Christ have died quietly and at peace ; nay, that men who have lived violently and wickedly have died without fear and in perfect repose. Even granting that such may be the case, there is a vast

difference between such negative peace and the joyous, triumphant gladness with which Simeon anticipated death. The wicked have "no bands in their death."¹ There is a vast difference between the dead conscience of an unbeliever and the purged conscience of a Christian; between the stolid indifference of confirmed unbelief and the joyous anticipation of faith. The unbelieving and wicked may die without fear, and in a peace which comes from ignorance or a delusive philosophy; but it has never yet been recorded of a wicked or unbelieving man that he died triumphing in the assured hope of a blessed immortality. During a recent storm, in which a ship was wrecked and many lives lost, a boat's crew, searching for possible survivors in the darkness of the night, on the face of the storm-tossed sea, were directed in their search by the sound of singing, which triumphed over the noise of "many waters." Following the strangely sweet strains, which came faintly to their ears over the angry sea, they came upon a woman clinging to a floating spar, not expecting rescue, who was yet singing in a sweet, strong voice:—

"Jesus, Lover of my soul, let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high;
Hide me, oh! my Saviour, hide, till the storm of life is past;
Safe into the haven guide, oh! receive my soul at last."

Did you ever hear of an unbelieving scientist or philosopher dying thus? Did you ever hear of a blaspheming infidel or a sneering scoffer passing thus joyously into eternity? "Do not pray with me," said a dying Christian to his minister, who had come to his death-bed, "but praise God with me. The time for praying is past, for God has answered all my prayers, and now the time for praising has come." Such is a Christian's

¹ Ps. lxxiii. 4.

death with Christ in his arms, a song of joy in his heart, and a glorious testimony to God's faithfulness on his tongue, and Heaven in his eyes. Who would not wish to die so?

III. SIMEON'S BENEDICTION AND PROPHECY. During the time which Simeon held the Child Jesus in his arms and sung his glorious lyric, Mary and Joseph stood by, doubtless in speechless wonder, at these things which were spoken of Him; for though they knew His divine origin, and had been told that He was the Son of the Highest, and that He should save His people from their sins; though they had heard from the shepherds of the communication of the angel concerning Him; and though they had but recently received and welcomed the wise men who had come to worship Him, they were yet more and more astonished at these things which Simeon spoke. The fulness of Jesus had not yet entered into their comprehension. Is it not so to-day with us? After all we know of Him, have we yet come to know all about Him? are we not daily finding out new and wondrous things concerning Him? shall the time ever come when there is not yet more glory to be revealed in Him and through Him to us? Beholding the wonder and amazement depicted on their faces and in their attitude, Simeon turned to them and blessed them, and prophesied to Mary of her divine Child, and of her coming sufferings because of Him. Is it not strange that he did not speak to Joseph? He knew that he was not the Child's father, but that Mary was His mother. This also he knew by the Holy Ghost, which was still upon him.

1. *Jesus is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel.* Undoubtedly Simeon, whose prophetic gifts were strengthened by his familiarity with the ancient scriptures, and now quickened by the Holy Ghost, simply

reproduces Isaiah's thought, that Jesus was a rock upon which believers take refuge, but whereon unbelievers are broken. This famous figure of Isaiah is frequently referred to in the New Testament, both in the gospels and epistles; this alone would mark the thought as an important one. Simeon foresaw that at first the Jews would stumble at Christ, reject Him, and so fall from the favour of God and all Messianic blessing; but looking further down the vista of time, he foresaw the coming again of the rejected people to Jesus, their Messiah, and that by faith in Him they would rise again. Apart from its strict Jewish application, it is equally true that Jesus is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence to many, who either reject Him by simple, contemptuous unbelief, or by hurling themselves against Him in pronounced and vicious opposition. All such will be ground to powder; they will be beaten back and broken as the waves of the sea, dashing themselves against some great rock in the midst of the waters. To those who are drawn to Him as a Saviour He becomes a gracious Sanctuary; but to those who are full of hatred and opposition He becomes swift and terrible doom. Behold the poor sinful and penitent thief on the cross beside Him, appealing to Him for salvation, and being graciously and instantly accepted! On the other hand, behold Jewish rulers leading the multitude of the nation against Him, crying, "Away with Him; away with Him; crucify Him!" They indeed put Him to death, but the recoil upon themselves of their own attack upon the Son of the Highest, "this rock of offence," was so great that, until this day, they have not recovered from the shock. If past history may be any guide to us, apart from the declaration of the scriptures, he is a fool or a madman who sets himself in open and hostile opposition to Jesus, the Son of God. But those who appeal to His mercy

and grace, however low and undeserving they may be, shall be lifted up and saved. Truly, the gospel, as well as the Saviour Himself, is a savour of life to some, and death to others, according as they reject or accept Him. Long ages ago, the writer of the second Psalm set forth to Israel, and to all the world, the vanity of attempting, either singly or by combination, to oppose the Lord's Christ. "Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?"¹ God has set His Son on His Holy Hill, and no powers of earth or hell can unseat Him. Jehovah has published His decree, and it cannot be broken. He laughs at all the vain and puny attacks of men against His Christ; He forewarns them that continued resistance is not only useless, but that it will end in their being broken to pieces as a bit of potter's clay smitten by an iron rod, or dashed upon the ground! Yet His compassion entreats them to be wise and be reconciled to the Son, lest they perish by the way. In the same spirit, the great apostle warns his hearers against despising the Lord, for by so doing they shall "wonder and perish," for whom Christ died, and the grace of God was expended. All these things are as true for us in this nineteenth century as for the Jews two thousand years ago.

2. *Jesus is a sign spoken against.* Lasting neutrality in regard to the Lord's Christ is an impossibility. "He that is not with Me is against Me."² What a strange power there is in Jesus: drawn to Him, either in hate or love, all men are; meet Him, in some way and in some spirit, all men must. He still is a sign spoken against! Men cannot reject Him with impunity. What has not been said against Jesus? He has been called impostor, devil, wine-bibber and glutton, deceiver, disturber of the peace; His holy incarnation has been

¹ Ps. ii. 1.

² Matt. xii. 30.

made the occasion of scandal against the purity of His mother; He was betrayed and mocked, clothed with garments of false royalty, scourged, derided, spat upon, scorned, and crucified. Nor were the Jews alone in their speech against Him. Gentiles made a sport of His gospel, and even crucified an ass in mockery of Him, and, holding it forth to the people, exhorted them to believe. He has been spoken against by the cold sneering patronage of so-called cultured and scientific unbelief; written down as a dreamer of dreams, a well-meaning enthusiast, gifted with some rare and beautiful qualities of mind and heart, but guilty, either in ignorance or wickedness, of suffering Himself to be imposed upon the credulous as the Son of God. Common and coarse profanity of wicked men couple His holy name and cross with their vulgar and indecent speech. He is, indeed, even now "a rock of offence and a stone of stumbling"¹ to many. Born in a stable, this Holy Child became a "sign" of poverty and reversal of the whole worldly policy of men. To follow Him in principle and in fact is to bring reproach upon any man or woman. To despise the world, to lay up treasure in heaven rather than on earth, to seek out and save the poor and the outcast, to give the fellowship of love to the lowly and the sinful, to sacrifice pleasure and ambition to the kingdom of God, and to seek righteousness rather than self-interest, is often to expose oneself to the uncharitable sneers of the world. Thus, even in His disciples, faintly as they set forth the virtues of His character, He is still a sign spoken against. "Marvel not," He said, "if the world hate you."² It hated Christ before it hated His disciples, it has spoken against Christ and His disciples from the beginning until now. So notorious was this, that our Lord has

¹ Isa. viii. 14.² 1 John iii. 13.

pronounced a woe upon His followers when all men speak well of them ; for, if they do, it is apt to be a sure sign that we are not in close fellowship with Him.

3. *He is the revealer of the thoughts of many hearts.* It is easy to ascertain the attitude of any man toward God by bringing to him the test of his relation to Jesus. He who is appointed to be judge of the secrets of men's thoughts acts as a revealer of their thoughts even before the judgment is set. Simeon seemed to see under the vain and ostentatious pretence of religion kept up by the Pharisees,—their boasted devotion to God, and all their loud-sounding professions,—their true thoughts, ambitions, avarice, pride, love of praise, and utter worldliness. He saw also when Jesus came, meek and lowly, preaching the Kingdom of God, with its inner purity of heart, its outward charity, and its utter self-denial, that both He and His teaching would bring to light the true inwardness of the pretentious religionists of His day. In this sense He was a revealer or exposé of their inward life. He demonstrated to them over and over again that God was not their Father ; but that, under pretence of worshipping God, they were doing the very works of the evil one. No wonder they raged against Him, and thus manifested their true character ! Jesus did not make the evil, but He revealed it.

4. *He divides His sufferings with those whom He loves and who love Him.* In parenthesis, Simeon tells Mary that she also shall suffer ; that a sword shall pierce through her own heart when she shall see her Son everywhere spoken against and hated by those whom He came to save. He no doubt meant that, as time went on, and the conflict about Jesus increased and intensified, her mother-heart would be wounded, as if pierced by a sword, at all that He must suffer. How

proudly Mary bade the people at the marriage at Cana to look on Him and His power! How utterly broken-hearted she was at last when led away from the cross by John! And long before the end came there is evidence that Mary had become a great sufferer on His account. We see her pathetically trying to get Him out of the crowds and away to some quiet place. How she must have suffered through hearing all the evil and hateful things said about Him by the Jews; the light and idle scoffs of the vulgar, common people; how her heart must have shuddered when she heard of the attempt of the Nazarene mob to hurl Him over the cliff! Her mother's heart was pierced by the false charges brought against Him by the Jews; by the awful treason of Judas, one of His friends; even by His own apparent coldness on one or two occasions—coldness toward her, not in fact, but in appearance, because she did not understand. Well, dear friends, it is given unto us also not only to believe on Him, but to suffer for Him; and all those who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. All of us know something of this, though not much, because we are not close enough to Him in spiritual kinship and fellowship. Yet we have felt something of it. We have suffered in beholding our own children, and others dear to us, slighting and rejecting Him, sometimes even joining in the bitter word of His enemies against Him; we are grieved to see so great a part of the world turn away from Him; to see many who should, by education, parentage, and training, be His friends, turning their abilities and learning, their position, and all against Him. We grieve to see His professed friends so cold and heartless in His service; we grieve for His sake at the meagre support and sympathy His own Church gives to the great interests of His kingdom, to the

spread of His gospel, to that benevolence in connection with His whole mission to man which He has enjoined upon us. Truly the sword which pierced Mary's soul is almost a universal one—it has come down through the ages ; but we should rejoice, not indeed at the cause of the suffering, but that, since the sword must pierce, the Lord has “counted us worthy” to bear a portion of the pain.

XVII

LOSING AND FINDING JESUS

"Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast. And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the Child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem ; and Joseph and His mother knew not of it. But they, supposing Him to have been in the company, went a day's journey ; and they sought Him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance. And when they found Him not they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking Him. And it came to pass, that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions."—LUKE ii. 41-46.

WE are indebted to Luke for this beautiful glimpse into the childhood of Jesus. It is difficult to imagine any one writing a spurious account of Jesus, leaving out all details of His child-life and characteristics ; but in these few graphic lines Luke tells us all that we know. From the time He returned from Egypt, till this visit to Jerusalem with His parents, we only know that He "grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom ; and the grace of God was upon Him."¹ That He was a lovable and obedient Child we cannot for a moment doubt. That He was tenderly loved, carefully taught in the scriptures, and anxiously watched over by both Mary and Joseph, must be equally true. It is difficult not to try to fill up the gap of twelve years with imaginings concerning Him. The second-century Christians did

¹ Luke ii. 40.

undertake, in their spurious accounts of the Lord's infancy and childhood, to supply us with details, which are wholly wanting in the inspired records. The stories they invented of His precocity, power, and wonderful works ; of His healing the sick, and even raising the dead ; of puerile miracles performed in connection with His intercourse and sports with other children, are all too absurd and incongruous to deserve any serious attention. Their only possible use to us is, by contrast, to bring out the strong and simple lines with which Luke has drawn the story of Jesus' child-life, which, though it is so meagre, yet seems to give us a very vivid impression of it. The characteristics intimated are so strong and beautiful, that we may well say in His case that the Child Jesus was the Father of the Man Jesus.

So far as we know, Jesus was never out of the lovely valley of Nazareth from the time He was about two years of age until this visit to Jerusalem, on the attainment of His twelfth year, when, according to the custom of the Jews, He was taken to Jerusalem, there to be offered and confirmed as a "son of the law." There were three great yearly feasts held at Jerusalem, at which all the males of the land above twelve years old were required to attend, except the very old, and the bodily and mentally infirm. The old men, the women, and the children stayed at home whilst the men went up to the feasts. Sometimes the women accompanied their husbands, but it was not compulsory, nor even usual, for it was necessary that they should remain and look after home matters whilst the men were absent. It seems, however, that Mary was in the habit of accompanying Joseph, if not to all, at least to one or two of the annual feasts. She would, of course, go on this occasion, when her Son was to be presented to God, and formally received as a "son of the law" into the adult

community of the Jews. We can well imagine with what keen delight such a boy as Jesus must have been would anticipate this visit. From His earliest childhood He had been taught the scriptures ; He knew the history of His people well, though He had never seen the temple, or witnessed its solemn ceremonial. He was doubtless familiar with the description of it all, for His mother would have instructed Him in these things, and filled His young mind with every detail of worship, expounding to Him all the significance of the ceremonies, the spiritual, as well as the ceremonial, meaning of the feasts—what they celebrated and what they pointed to—until His heart, patriotic and thoughtful, would be full of all these things. Now the time had come for Him to go up and Himself take part in it all. Who can tell what swelling thoughts were even now arising in the mind and heart of this wonderful Child? The consciousness of His Divine Sonship, though far back in the bud, was yet arising, and His heart was wondering, longing, and expecting great things when He should stand in the "House of the Lord." All along the way, as the Nazareth party of acquaintance and kinsfolk, some hundreds in number, journeyed toward the Holy City, their talk would be of the gathering of the people, the feast to be celebrated in commemoration of God's mighty deliverance of His ancient people from "the house of bondage" in Egypt ; the slaying of the paschal lamb and the sprinkling of the blood ; the passing of the death angel through the land, and the wonderful preservation of the children of Israel from the awful stroke that fell upon Pharaoh and every family in Egypt. No doubt the present condition of Israel would also be discussed, and the much-longed-for coming of the Messiah would form the subject of conversation among the party to which Mary and Joseph belonged. That the Child

Jesus would be interested in all this talk, who can doubt? and that from day to day on the journey His interest would quicken, and His imagination take fire? How He must have enjoyed the first glimpse of Mount Zion, crowned with the glorious temple, as they drew near to the city; and with what intense joy and gladness must He have entered the precincts of that holy house of God for the first time—"My Father's house," which He came to know and love so well in later days; over which He wept when He thought and spoke of its coming destruction, with the downfall and scattering of "His own," who should reject Him. For seven days Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were daily in the temple. He had been taken to the doctors to be instructed in the law, and prepared for His confirmation; the sacrifices had been offered; the ceremonials had been observed, and Jesus was now formally introduced into the political economy of Israel. The eighth day had come, and the party from Nazareth had been for the last time in the temple, and were on their way back to their northern highland homes, when, at the close of the day, Mary and Joseph were suddenly awakened to the distressing fact that Jesus was nowhere to be found.

I. LOSING JESUS. How they came to lose Jesus from their company is not related; but it is not difficult to imagine how it might come about. We may suppose the company all travelling by themselves, making their final visit to the temple; Jesus, likely, with the other boys of the party; and, without too carefully watching His every movement, Mary took it for granted that He would keep with them. He was such a Son as might be fully trusted to do nothing imprudent, or voluntarily to pursue any course of action which would give trouble; so trusting Him fully, they were not anxious about Him. He may have stayed behind out of intense interest, and

so got separated from His party ; or He may have gone once more to the court where He had such delightful talks with the doctors, just to bid them "good-bye," and returning, found His party gone ; or, starting with them, He may have been moved by some impulse of the Spirit to return to the temple. It may have been at this very point when the consciousness of His divine relationship to His Father first took place, and, setting aside all lower or subordinate relations, He may have said to Himself, "My place is in My Father's house." With this impulse and consciousness, it is not unlikely that He would seek out the doctors again, to hear more, and to ask them some questions of His own. There seems to have been no blame attached to Mary, unless it was in a kind of over-confidence in Jesus, which led her to be less watchful than usual. In any case, the fact remains that she lost her Son, as we often now lose our Saviour. From this circumstance we may draw several suggestive and, I hope, profitable lessons.

1. *They lost Him, and "knew it not."* For a whole day they journeyed back toward Nazareth, unconscious of the absence of Jesus from their company. That He was not actually under their observation all the day long was not a matter of moment, for they supposed Him to be somewhere in the company, most likely with the other boys, and were not troubled ; indeed, they probably took no thought of the matter of His absence. Now, in this we have a hint of one of the commonest and most distressing Christian experiences. We lose Jesus out of our lives and out of our thoughts, and are unconscious of the loss. We not only do not know that He is not with us, but we do not know how or when He parted company with us, or rather, when we parted company with Him ; for had Mary been steadfast not to go up to Nazareth without Jesus, she would not have

left the temple until He was with her! It was she and Joseph who parted company with Jesus, rather than He who parted from them. Have we never been in this case? Awakened to the fact, at the end of a day's journey, that Jesus is not with us; that we have left Him behind, and have been going on all day long, or, perhaps, for a much longer period, not knowing that we were walking alone. Were I to put the question to all and each of you this morning: Is Jesus with you? Has He been with you all the days of the past week? Was He with you in your business, or in your pleasures; in your journeys and your home comings? Has He come up with you to the House of God this morning? or have you come up alone, not knowing that Jesus is absent from your heart and life? Did you make inquiry before you left home this morning whether the Lord was with you? Did you say to Him, as Moses said to the Lord in the wilderness, "If Thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence"?¹ Is it your habit daily, before leaving home for business, or before entering on the occupations of each day, at home or abroad, to make sure that Jesus *is* with you? Or, on the other hand, have you fallen into the habit of going on "not knowing," and perhaps not caring, whether the Lord is with you or not?—I fancy, if close inquiry should be made for Jesus in our hearts to-day, many of us would be surprised to find that He is not with us, and that we did not even know that He was not. In any case, I pray God for you, and for myself, that this day may not come to an end until we have ascertained whether the Lord is with us. I pray God that as a congregation we may not take another day's journey without assuring ourselves of His presence in our midst. Oh, the Christless Christian lives! Oh, the Christless

¹ Exod. xxxiii. 15.

Christian Churches ! Going about our private business, or carrying forward the externals of our congregational life and work, and yet without Jesus in our midst ; and, worse still, without knowing that He is not with us. Lord, bring us quickly to know our misfortune and loss !

2. *They took it for granted that Jesus was in the midst.* "They supposing Him to be in the company," went on their way without making sure. There is a sense in which it is lawful for us to take for granted the presence of the Lord with us, at home or abroad ; for He hath said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee"¹ ; "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world"² ; "Fear thou not ; for I am with thee : be not dismayed ; for I am thy God."³ But these assurances may all be verified, and *yet* it may be true that we have lost Jesus—at least, the consciousness or glad *assurance* of His presence—lost touch with Him ; dropped out of communion with Him ; and this we have suffered by *carelessly* taking it for granted that He is with us. Now, spiritual life *is not to be taken for granted*, and daily walk cannot be made in the Spirit by simply assuming that we have the Spirit. We ought not to be content with *supposing* that God is with us. We ought to know and make sure of it. No doubt many of us have often satisfied some anxious thought concerning our spiritual life by "taking it for granted" that we are "all right" with God, and that He is with us. We have gone to sleep taking it for granted that all was well with us ; we have awakened in the morning, and gone to business, or taken up daily duties and pleasures, "taking it for granted" that Jesus is with us. This is the fatal way in which so many have fallen out of real communion with God, even when not abandoning the formalities of

¹ Heb. xiii. 5.

² Matt. xxviii. 20.

³ Isa. xli. 10.

private religion or public worship ! It is neither safe nor wise to "suppose" that Jesus is with us, even when we "say our prayers" or read the Bible ; we should pause long enough to *make sure* that He is with us. This kind of carelessness, too common among Christians, leads to backsliding in heart, and even to the shipwreck of much faith. When we start on a journey, even for a day, we do not take it for granted that we have money enough to pay our fare and expenses while away ; but we make sure that there is money in our purses. Should we be more careless in the matter of making sure that we have Christ with us in our daily journeys through life ? Surely not. Oh, beware of taking too much for granted in Christian life ! Make sure ! Make sure !

How the Laodicean Christians lost Jesus out of their lives we are left to infer. Yet, no doubt, if any of those professors who were "rich and increased in goods, having need of nothing,"¹ had been charged with having lost Jesus, they would probably have resented it. At least, if they had lost *the Christ* they had preserved *Christianity* ! Their churches were well built, their attendance regular, and, perhaps, all their services well conducted. But how did they lose Jesus ? Surely the story is too graphically told to need much exposition. They lost Him in their too eager pursuit of "riches and goods." They took it for granted that all was well, and in their eagerness to get on, they lost Him, and fell into that most deplorable of all spiritual conditions : They were "neither cold nor hot," but "lukewarm," and ready to be spued out of God's mouth in disgust. Are any of you, my dear hearers, in similar danger ? Are you eagerly following your business and professional interests, intent on increasing your store of riches and pleasures, and in the meantime taking it for granted

¹ Rev. iii. 17.

that Jesus is with you, yet living without Him? Better call a halt and take a look about you, and into your own hearts, and see if Jesus is there. You have not, perhaps, purposely left Him behind, but are you sure that your way in the world is one in which He could walk with you? Perhaps a subtle consciousness that He could not go your way has led you to close your eyes to the fact of His absence. If He is not in your own heart and life, you may have comforted yourself with the thought that at least He is "in the company," among your spiritual "kinsfolk and acquaintance," or in the Church; and you count that as equivalent to being with you. But is this safe? Surely not! No doubt, as we sit at the Lord's table, Jesus is "in the midst," and many are rejoicing in fellowship with Him; but it does not follow that He is with *every one* who partakes of the elements. It is possible that He may be in a *company* and yet not with each individual of that company. In any case, let us not take His presence too easily "for granted."

3. *They lost Him while full of conversation about most holy things.* Going back from the feast, the conversation of the little caravan would doubtless be taken up with all they had seen and heard in Jerusalem. We may assume that it was interesting and profitable conversation; and yet it was while thus engaged they lost Jesus. Have not many others lost Him in the same way? We can become perfunctory in religious service and work, and lose Jesus out of all the work and forms of religion, and so lose Him out of our lives, even while we are most eagerly discussing religious matters. We may be so taken up with religious *things* and conversation that we forget Jesus altogether. How often we "say our prayers," read our Bibles, go to church, and do religious duties without so much as a touch or a breath

of His presence ! All has become dry and cold and formal. We go our way and talk on, and forget *Him* ! How much vehement religious controversy and theological discussion there is, in which Jesus is not ! We may know this by the dryness of the discussion, by the acrimony of the debate ; and yet we may be upholding orthodoxy right valiantly all the time ! We may be so interested and absorbed, even in sermons, that we have taken no thought to make sure that Jesus is with us, and so it comes to pass that our gospel has come to you (sometimes) “in word” only, and not “in power.” I have known some Christians so taken up and absorbed in their own experiences that they could talk of nothing else—telling of the life of faith they have attained to, the second blessing which has come to them ; the baptism of power which has fallen on them ;—and all the time it has seemed that there was but very little manifestation of Jesus. There is grave danger along these lines. The one thing I wish to urge upon you, and upon myself as well, is that, whether journeying or abiding, whether engaged in what we call secular business, or in religious service, whether our conversation be religious, social, or political, whether we be immersed in “affairs,” or deeply engaged in the outward things of the kingdom of God, we must not take it for granted that Jesus is with us, but make sure of it. Do not leave it till night to see if He is near ; and especially do not start for the day till we are sure that Jesus goes with us. Joseph and Mary’s great mistake was in starting, that sad and memorable day, “not knowing” that Jesus had tarried behind. Do not close your Bible in the morning until you are sure that God the Lord has spoken some word of peace, comfort, and strength to your soul ; do not cease to pray until the spirit of prayer has stirred your hearts as well as the form of prayer moved your

lips. Say, if you are not sure, as Jacob said to the Angel, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me."¹ Had Mary known that Jesus was left behind, do you suppose she would have gone without Him? Certainly not. Make haste and look about you, and make certain that Jesus is with you.

II. SEEKING JESUS. When the close of the day came, and preparations were being made for the night encampment, Mary began to wonder where Jesus was, and perhaps for the first time seriously remembered that she had not seen Him all the day long. Perhaps she reproached herself for this apparent neglect, and yet excusing herself that she supposed all the time He was somewhere in the company. In any case, she now seriously bethought herself of Him, and began to look, hoping she might find Him near at hand. It is at the even-time, after the business or pleasure of the day is over, and the shades of night begin to fall around us—when the company is dispersed, the excitement of the day is past, and the time comes to retire—that the soul looks for Jesus. It is when we kneel at our bedsides, or retire for the evening worship, either alone, or with the family, that we want our Lord. We want to ask His protection during the night, to rehearse to Him the doings of the day, and to confess to Him the errors and mistakes, if not the sins, of the day. If at such a time we become conscious that we are not in spiritual touch with Him, anxiety and distress seize us, and we become alarmed at His absence, or rather, our departure and absence from Him. I can hardly conceive of a real Christian closing the day without making inquiry for the Lord; of going to sleep, like a mere animal, without a thought or a prayer. I *can* understand how many Christians have grown cold and formal, and have been

¹ Gen. xxxii. 26.

content with going through the form of prayer, and afterwards falling asleep, not knowing that they had had no interview with Jesus; but I know more about coming to the end of the day, and being by that very fact suddenly awakened to the thought that all the day long, even though engaged in religious work, I have had no real intercourse with Jesus. If the thought of Him has been with me at all, I have taken it for granted that He was near by, and so passed on, until night came, and prayer time came with it, and then there has been an absence which I have felt—and I have known that somewhere between the beginning and the end of the day I have lost Him. Has it ever been so with you? Was He with you last night, at the close of the day, and of the week? Are you sure He was with you? Or did you let the night pass without inquiring or satisfying yourself as to His presence? Did you have any real intercourse with Him? Did you sleep with the benediction of His presence upon you? Perhaps it did not occur to you that He *was not* present. This, indeed, would be a sorrowful confession. Can you conceive Mary, even though she took it for granted all through the day that Jesus was in the company, letting the night close in finally without satisfying herself that her Son was with her? Is He less dear to you than to her? Has He not said of us, of you and me, "Whosoever shall do the will of My Father in heaven, the same is My brother, and My sister, and My mother"?¹ How then shall we allow a night to pass without making such inquiry for the presence of Jesus, as Mary did, unless indeed we are not really His, and He is indifferent to us?

1. *They were thoroughly alarmed when they failed to find Him.* This we can readily understand. All through

¹ Mark iii. 35.

the day they had been at peace, not knowing their loss ; but now alarm seized upon them when they found Him not where and when they expected Him. And well they might be, for to them Jesus was more than a Son : He was the Son of the Highest committed to their care —He was God their Saviour ; for, though I do not suppose they fully understood even then the whole mystery of their relation to Him, yet they knew that He was God's Son, and the Saviour of men. More than that, they loved Him tenderly and truly, and the thought of having lost Him filled their souls with grief and fear. Is He not all this to us ? It is possible for us to go on from day to day in comparative peace, so long as we "suppose Jesus to be in the company," and not far from us in any case ; but to be awakened to the fact that we have lost Him is so alarming and distressing that I can think of no other calamity so great. Have you never, upon some need arising, turned to your purse for some money and found that you had lost it, or, at least, could not find it ? Were you not distressed and alarmed, especially if it happened to contain your all, or, in any case, a large sum of money ? Did you say to yourself, " Oh, never mind ; no doubt it will turn up ; I will not trouble about it now " ? Have you never, upon need arising, turned to your desk to get some important paper and found it missing ? and were you not distressed and alarmed over the revelation of that sudden loss ? Did you go on quietly about your business, and treat it as a matter of no moment ? Not many months ago I gave my housekeeper—a most careful and systematic woman—two cheques for housekeeping purposes. Several days passed, when she came to me in greatest distress, saying, " Oh, Doctor Pentecost, I have lost your cheques—I have not an idea where they are ; I had them in my bag yesterday, but to-day, when I went to

get them cashed, to pay some bills, I could not find them—what shall I do?” and tears of vexation, distress, and sense of loss were in her eyes. Do you suppose that either she or I pooh-poohed the matter, or said, “Never mind : they will no doubt turn up in due time.” Not a bit of it. Search was at once made for the lost cheques ; every possible consideration was given to all the incidents of the last two days and to each detail, if by any inquiry we might discover how the money might have been lost ; nor was the search given up until, after some days, the lost cheques were found—and then there was rejoicing ! Shall we lose our Lord’s presence for one day, and not be alarmed and unhappy ?

2. *They search for Him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance.* This was naturally their first thought. They did not keep their loss to themselves, saying, “This is our affair, it is not worth while making a commotion about it ; we will say nothing—wait and inquire privately until, perchance, we shall find Him.” No ; immediately they began to inquire and search among all their company, and spread abroad their anxiety. But, alas ! they found Him not in the company ! No one had seen Him that day ; perhaps each had supposed, like Mary, that He was somewhere near. This brings to my mind the story of the fair and beloved spouse of the Song of Solomon, who lost her beloved, and went about the streets of the city inquiring of the daughters of Jerusalem and the watchmen for Him, and charging them, if they found Him, to let her know. Naturally, if we fail to find our Lord when we have lost Him out of our lives or communion, we turn to those of our own company and make known our distress, if haply they may be able to tell us where He is. But how distressing it was to Mary and Joseph to find that none of the company could tell them of Jesus ! They had all

lost Him. Surely nothing is more disappointing than to apply to some brother Christian for spiritual help, and find that he can give us none ; that he, too, is living without personal communion with Christ ;—and yet this is often so—those whom we most trust are perhaps in the same case of religious and spiritual declension. What a picture this presents ! The possibility of a whole Church or congregation being without Christ in the midst ; and yet it is a possibility. It was so at Laodicea. The whole congregation had gone on without Christ in their worship and work. Did He not come knocking at the door ? And they scarcely knew that He was not within. Oh ! my friends, if you have lost the Saviour from your life, do not delay, even though you may be disappointed in your search among other believers ; seek for Him everywhere ; do not be ashamed to confess your loss, or to acknowledge your fault and carelessness in losing your Lord, and if you find Him not among your own company, then go further and seek for Him till you do find Him, though you have far to turn back.

3. *They went back again to Jerusalem, seeking Him.* The story gives the impression that they did not wait till the morning, but turned back at once ; and I should think that was likely to be the case, for I can hardly conceive of Mary and Joseph being in any condition of mind to tarry for sleep. In any case, they turned back ; no doubt sad and sorrowful enough, besides all their anxiety. Their love was aroused, and their Son never seemed so precious to them as now that they had lost Him. This turning back was the right thing to do. To go forward without Jesus, especially when we have become aware of our loss, would be madness, not to say the crowning act of impiety. How is it with you, my brother, my sister ? Having become conscious of loss

of spiritual life and fellowship with God, have you gone on your way, not turning back again to find that which you have lost? Do you suppose you will find Jesus by going forward without Him? Surely not! You must turn back upon the way you have come without Him, even though you forfeit your journey, or hinder your business! Better never make a journey than to make it without Jesus; better never do another day's business than to do it without Jesus. Any pleasure pursued in the way without Him, especially if you know that He is not with you, will turn to apples of Sodom in your mouth, and the journey will end in disaster; any money gained without Him will be a curse to you. Hear the word of the Lord, "Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto Thee; for Thou art the Lord our God."¹ "Return unto Me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts."² "If thou wilt return, saith the Lord, return unto Me; then shalt thou not remove."³ I might multiply these exhortations of the Scriptures to those who have lost their way, or departed from the Lord—but these are enough. Oh, thou wanderer from Christ! Oh, thou backslidden one! Oh, thou self-deceived Christian, who thinkest Christ is with thee when He is not, Awake out of thy fatal dream, and return to Him whom thou hast left behind. Follow in the footsteps of Mary and Joseph, who, anxious and sorrowing, retraced their steps. They did not set store by their rest, or their affairs; they did not count the cost of lost days—to them the one thing imperatively needful was to find Jesus; like Judah and Israel they returned "going and weeping"⁴ to seek the Lord whom they had left.

III. FINDING JESUS. The third day after they had lost Him, they found Him in the temple, where they

¹ Jer. iii. 22. ² *Ibid.* iv. 1. ³ *Ibid.* iv. 1. ⁴ *Ibid.* l. 4.

had left Him. One day they travelled from Jerusalem and away from Jesus, not knowing that He was not with them; the second day they spent in returning; the third day they joyfully found Him whom they had lost and sought sorrowing. Those two days must have been heavy days of sorrow for Mary and Joseph. No days are so heavy as those in which we are consciously without the Lord, while desiring Him with all our hearts; especially when we are conscious that we have lost Him through our own fault or carelessness. How heavy the penalty we have to pay, oftentimes, for a day's carelessness. That one day without Jesus cost them two days of distress! It is always much easier to lose conscious communion with God than it is to regain that lost fellowship. One sin, one day of self-indulgence, one outbreak into mere worldly pleasure, one false transaction with men for selfish gain, one deliberate or even thoughtless neglect of duty, oftentimes causes us days and even weeks of sorrow and trouble, before we find ourselves once more in the old loving standing with God. Will it be too pointed a question if I ask you whether you are on the way from Jerusalem without Jesus? whether you are sacrificing His fellowship for some pleasure or profit; for some self-indulgence in that which you know to be wrong? I have known a man to lose Jesus for the sake of indulging bitter and unloving thoughts toward a brother; I have known a man to lose Jesus for the sake of getting gain, by the practice of some method in which he could not hope for Jesus' presence with him; I have known more than one Christian to lose Jesus for the sake of some indulgence of appetite, or some pleasure of the flesh which was, at least, doubtful—giving *themselves* the favour of the doubt rather than giving it to God, and making inquiry of Him before committing themselves to their desires.

I do not here speak of those who deliberately forsake the Lord, but of those who do so carelessly, or with half-closed eyes "go their way," not anxious to be sure of the Lord's presence and approval. When they have awakened, they have found the way back long and weary enough; but better had it been for them, a thousand times, that they had returned and sought for Jesus till they found Him, than to have accepted their loss and gone on their way without Him.

They found Jesus where they lost Him. They had without doubt last seen Him in the temple, with the rest of their company, when they went up, on the morning of their departure, for a last look or a last act of worship. Thither they returned, and there they found Him. Where shall we who may have lost Jesus be most likely to find Him? Why, just where we last were with Him. Do you know when you were last in full communion with Him? Was it when you were in earnest prayer? when daily in the habit of communing with Him before the Mercy-Seat? How long ago has that been? I do not mean how long ago since you "*said* your prayers"; you may not have ceased to do that at all, and yet it is possible to continue saying prayers long after we have ceased to have true communion with God and Christ—the forms of religion and spiritual life may survive, long after the Spirit has departed. I have often seen an empty chestnut burr hanging on the tree long months after the nut has dropped to the ground. Many leaves hang green upon the trees long after the sap of life has ceased to flow into them; and they flutter and make pretence of life for a while, only at last to wither and die, fluttering to the ground to be trodden under foot. Oh, let us be alarmed if, when we pray, we have no consciousness of His presence with us; or, at least, no consciousness of

our own spirits rising in love and gladness to God! Better wrestle as Jacob did, till the break of day, than to give over praying, till the blessing comes. Jacob had been a wanderer, but when he returned and began to pray again, he said, "I will not let thee go till thou bless me." Then he found the Lord again, though he went halting and lame all the rest of his life. But that was a blessed lameness; it was the lameness of that proud, self-conscious strength in which he had held his own with Laban his father-in-law. Perhaps you lost Him when you ceased that daily and devotional reading of the Bible, which at first was such a charm and joy to you. You may not have entirely ceased to read the Bible—you may even read it daily—but you have ceased to read it with the spirit and the understanding. The Bible no longer speaks to you and reveals things to you, "wondrous things out of the law,"¹ as it did formerly. You lost speech with God in prayer, and God has lost speech with you in Bible reading; and yet you have gone on your way, saying prayers, and reading chapters, and the Lord is not with you. Well, there you will find the Lord—just where you left Him. Return to your closet, and cease not your supplications till you get speech with Him; return to your Bible, and cease not to read and study it until it glows again before your eyes, and its words burn and glow in your heart as the Urim and Thummim. You may have lost Him just where you laid aside some spiritual service, because it took too much time away from your business, or left you too little time for social pleasures. Seek Him where you lost Him. You may have lost Him, by the way, when you indulged some misunderstanding, or quarrelled with your brother, and have gone on with an unforgiving spirit. Is it so?

¹ Ps. cxix. 18.

Well, go quickly and "first be reconciled to thy brother,"¹ and then and there thou shalt find Him. Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple—in God's house—about His Father's business. No doubt that is the place in general where the lost Jesus may be found. Hear what David says: "My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God? When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me; for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday."² Had David neglected the house of God, and so lost the joy of fellowship with God? Then, when he returned to the habits of spiritual worship, he found Him again. So will you. They found Him engaged in His Father's business. There also will you find Him. They left the temple and the Father's business, to go down to Nazareth; He stayed behind because He must be still about it. Return to Jerusalem, to the house of God, to your Father's business, and there will you again find Jesus.

How they found Him we have already intimated; but, again, it may be helpful to note that they sought Him anxiously and sorrowingly; they sought Him confessing their loss, and inquiring concerning Him everywhere, till they found Him. If we have lost Jesus, and would find Him again, then must we seek Him where He is where we left Him; and seek Him with all our hearts, confessing our sins and inquiring diligently for Him "Ye shall seek Me and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart; and I will be found of you, saith the Lord."³

¹ Matt. v. 24.

² Ps. xlii. 3, 4.

³ Jer. xxix. 13, 14.

XVIII

THE BOY JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

"And it came to pass, that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions."—LUKE ii. 46.

IN the picture before us we must be careful to discriminate between the incident recorded and the Person who is the centre of the incident. It is not the temple which we have to contemplate, nor the doctors, nor even the happy issue of the search after their missing Son by Mary and Joseph. Indeed, this is a true canon to hold ever before us in reading the New Testament. It is never the incident, when Jesus is concerned, but always the Person. Interesting as are the angels, Nazareth, Mary, Bethlehem, the wise men, the temple, and the doctors, yet it is always Jesus Himself whom we are to behold. In all the miracles which He wrought, He is the point of interest : His power, His grace, His patient love, and His salvation. All the rest is but background and drapery to the revelation of the Father in Him. The people who gathered to Bethany came to see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead ; but that which interests and inspires *us* is the Resurrection and the Life, by whom Lazarus was raised up from the grave. Even His wonderful words have no living significance except as they are *His* words. He is the substance of all His teachings, the centre of all His ministry. With this caution in our minds, we turn with thrilling interest

to the scene, which Luke brings before our minds and hearts, in this significant incident in the boy-life of Jesus, the only one recorded of Him from His birth till His thirtieth year, when He entered upon His public ministry.

I. JESUS IN THE TEMPLE. After three days, His sorrowing and anxious parents found Jesus, whom they had lost, sitting in the midst of the doctors in the temple, hearing and asking them questions. We must not understand that Mary and Joseph had been searching Jerusalem over for three days before they found Him. One day must be counted up to the time they missed Him from their company ; one day occupied in the return to Jerusalem ; and on the morning of the third day, the first morning after their return, they went direct to the temple, and there they found Him. It was the most natural place for them to look for Him. No doubt He had been for several days, if not all the days of the feast, in that same place, if not actually in conversation with the doctors, at least listening to them. He had been there with other boys previous to His formal induction, or confirmation as "a son of the law," in order to be catechized and instructed, as was the custom. After the people had all gone back to their homes, He, remaining behind, would naturally stay in the temple, and, with His awakening mind, seek out the doctors and instructors in the law ; and we can well believe that such a Child as Jesus would be warmly welcomed by these wise men. His manners and bearing, His wisdom and beauty, would attract them, and He would not want for hospitality for a couple of nights, even if He did not remain in some one of the cloisters or priests' apartments in the temple.

The temple was the most natural place for Jesus to be in, for whether He was conscious or not of His relation

to His Father's house, there must have been in His sub-consciousness, at least, a strong attraction toward and for the building which had its only interpretation in Him. He was the antitype of the temple ; He was the true Temple of which that made with stones was but the shadow. Of old, God met His people and communed with them from above the Mercy Seat in the tabernacle, and when Solomon built the temple God continued to meet with His people there. It was the centre of the nation and of the whole religious life of the people. There the priests and the high priest ministered ; there the sacrifices and offerings were made ; there the great feasts were celebrated ; and there the Shekinah dwelt. In all the ceremonies and offerings Jesus was the true point of sight. The people may not have fully understood this, but this was God's meaning, as is fully expounded to us in the Epistle to the Hebrews and other New Testament writings. Jesus was the true Immanuel—God with us ; He was the true meeting-place for God and man ; He alike the true High Priest and the true Sacrifice. Whether He fully understood this at the time is very doubtful ; but the truth of it all must have been in His undeveloped consciousness, and so have drawn Him with irresistible power to the wonderful building and all its ceremonials. In His early ministry He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ¹ "This He spake of His body," which should rise from the dead, after the Jews had put Him to death ; but they understood it of the building of the temple. The saying is sufficient to show the close identity between Jesus and the temple, and may serve further to demonstrate the sympathy between Him and it.

1. *He was the true glory of the temple.* Speaking of the new temple, after Solomon's had been destroyed, the

¹ John ii. 19.

prophet Haggai said, "The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former."¹ As a matter of fact, we know that neither the second temple nor the one which Herod had restored could compare with the glory of the temple of Solomon, either in extent or magnificence—in its furniture or its service. Out of this second and restored temple the Ark of the Covenant was gone, the very Mercy Seat had been lost, and all the trophies of the Exodus, such as the pot of manna and the rod of Aaron that budded, had disappeared; but above all, the great Shekinah-cloud had disappeared from it. Nevertheless, the prophecy of Haggai was now fulfilled, for the true glory of the temple had come into it in the Person of Jesus, its great antitype and the real glory of God. Unconscious of the true reasons for His close affinity for the temple, Jesus must have loved and venerated the building which incarnated and preserved all the traditions of His people and of God's grace and providence. He was in the temple naturally and of right; and Mary and Joseph did well to seek Him there, even though they did not perhaps comprehend its real attraction for Jesus. They may probably have been led to the temple by the Spirit of God, even as souls who have lost Jesus, and have turned back to find Him, are surely guided by the Holy Spirit to the very place where He is.

2. *He was seated in the midst of the doctors.* This was not surprising either, for it was customary for the doctors to sit in one of the open courts to deliver their lectures on the law, and teach all who came to them; and young boys of Jesus' age were encouraged to seek them out. Josephus tells us how, when a boy, he had thus sat at the feet of the doctors, and been so instructed. The particular point in this scene is that

¹ Hag. ii. 9.

Jesus not only was catechized Himself, but He catechized them; at least, while He answered their questions, He also put questions in turn. We do not think of Him as being bold and irreverent, or otherwise than most gentle and respectful, in His intercourse with these grave and learned men; but simply as answering their questions with wondrous insight and spiritual power, and asking them questions which astonished them because of their penetrating knowledge and surprising depth of thought. In His interview with them there was no chopping of old straw, but a direct going back to fundamental truth. In this categorical interview between Jesus and the doctors, if I may say it reverently, "the boy was father to the man," and the doctors got a taste of that spiritual medicine which Jesus administered to them so copiously in after years, when He confounded them again with His questions and answers. The more we read the New Testament, and study the method and wisdom of Jesus in dealing controversially with the Jews, the more we are astonished at His mastery of what we know as the Socratic method of teaching, and the surprising way in which He cut up by the roots, in a single question or answer, the false philosophy and traditional unwisdom of these "blind leaders of the blind," who had "made void the commandments by their traditions." Jesus was in form a young student in the theological college of His nation; He was, in fact, the new and divine Head Master of that college, and the old professors found themselves being taught as they had never been taught before. As I contemplate this scene I cannot help wishing that Jesus might again come into the theological temples and schools of our Churches, and put our learned men through a course of questions concerning God's word; that He might be installed as our Head Master, and give our

young men the benefit of His direct teaching. I would be glad to see the German and the English scientists and philosophers turned out, by calling Him to the chief seat—and all our young men gathered closely about Him. Oh, for the presence of Jesus in our theological centres; for direct contact with His wisdom and spiritual understanding! Is it a dream unwarranted, and never to be realized, that He may be so exalted in our seats of sacred learning, that even our professors may be awakened and astonished at His wisdom? for, after all, is it not Himself that we need to come in contact with, rather than all the learned foolishness of the Mishnas and Gemaras, either ancient or modern?

3. *They were astonished at His understanding and answers.* And well they might be, for even as a boy, when hearing and asking questions, He taught not as the scribes, but as one having knowledge from on high. Even then He spoke out of His own consciousness of truth, and not as one crammed with the subtleties and dry-as-dust speculations of mere scholarship and human learning. In after years, these same doctors, or their successors, encountered the wonderful wisdom of the Christ, and could not understand whence He received it, since He was not of the schools. "How knoweth this Man letters, having never learned?"¹ they cry. They supposed, in their pride and vanity, because He was "the carpenter's son," and had never been the disciple of a Gamaliel, or some other great master of the school of the law, that therefore it was impossible for Him to have wisdom. Wisdom in the things of God does not come of the schools, but of the scriptures, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, and a mind and heart filled with all the fulness of God. It may be right and well to make an art education and a regular theo-

¹ John vii. 15.

logical training a qualifying condition to entering upon the ministry of our Churches. I do not say it is well to make it a *sine quâ non*. May it not just be possible that by so doing we exclude some heaven-taught men from the ministry of the word, whilst admitting some wise fools who know little or nothing of the scriptures or the power of God? John Owen was a great and learned scholar and theologian, but he said that he would gladly sacrifice all his human learning and culture, if he could but preach and write like John Bunyan, who "never learned," yet somehow succeeded in opening the scriptures and preaching the gospel in such a way that thousands, two and a half centuries after his departure, read his allegories and sermons, and rejoice in God's salvation, where scarce a dozen ever open the learned pages of John Owen. "Wisdom and understanding" are gifts infinitely greater than learning and culture. These may, and often do, go together; but wisdom and understanding are rather the direct gifts of God to the souls that wait upon Him and search the scriptures, while learning and culture are the products of mere human teaching and training. Jesus certainly did not have these latter, in the technical sense, though He was not without learning of the highest and best kind. It is not wonderful that the doctors, and those who heard Him, were "astonished at His understanding and answers." They dealt in the letter of the law, He dealt with the spirit of the word. This they had lost, else they would not have rejected Him. Nay, had they had *understanding*, they would have perceived that a heaven-sent Child was even then in their midst. Later, He rebuked these doctors, and their disciples and followers, for "searching the scriptures," supposing that in them they had eternal life; while He explained to them that they were but the testifiers to Him. Had

they, the doctors, understood the scriptures, they would not have rejected Him. Are we not often guilty of the same mistaken folly? If we can construct a logical system of theology, and in a masterful and scientific way demonstrate our dogmas, we are often satisfied with ourselves, even if we never catch a glimpse of Christ in the whole proceeding.

But how was it that Jesus had such "wisdom and understanding"? We need not be left long in the dark upon this point, for even as a Boy He had the mind of His Father. We are told that when He was taken down from the temple (where He had been carried as an infant, to be presented to the Lord, according to the Law of the Lord) to His home in Nazareth, "the Child grew, waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him." Here is the first source of His understanding. Even as a Child the divine consciousness within Him was beginning to swell in the bud of His human intelligence, though we must conclude from all we read of Him that this unfolding was very gradual; and perhaps it was not fully understood by Himself at the time; yet it was there, and to a certain extent dominated His human thinking. His spiritual nature was daily expanding, and also His perceptions of all things about Him in nature, which must have been a constant delight. All the traditions of God's people, and the wondrous stories of the Bible concerning their origin and history, were spiritual rather than merely material and historical. The way in which He turned all nature, later on, into parables shows how His mind must, from His childhood, have spiritualized all creation. The birds of the air, the seeds of the harvest, the soil, the rocks and the thorns, even the seedsmen who sowed the fields, were to Him just open books, out of which He read and understood God's

truth. All the relations and occupations of men were to Him objects teaching divine truth; for He did not appeal to nature merely for illustrations—nature was more than that to Him. Nature, and all human relations and occupations, were the incarnation of great spiritual truths which in the fulness of His ministry He opened and read aloud to the people. All these things He hid in His heart, as we know His mother was accustomed to do, and, later on, He understood them in the light of the Spirit which was with and in Him. In a lesser degree, it is also given to us thus to learn and understand, even to those who have not been to colleges. Jesus, the “Word” by whom “all things were made, and without whom was not anything made that was made,”¹ had divine understanding, or the dawning of it, in His human mind from the beginning, so that He could not think at all except under the influence of that dominating power of wisdom and truth.

Then, we must not forget that He was carefully trained from a child by His mother, who was a most devout and thoughtful woman, herself full of the knowledge of the scriptures, as we know from her exquisite canticle, sung in the hour of our Lord’s incarnation. How carefully she would teach and train Him in the scriptures we can well conceive. In all His after life and ministry there is abundant proof that the Jewish scriptures were deeply and exhaustively interwoven in His consciousness. The Bible was the one book of our Lord. There is not in the whole story of His life and ministry a hint that He ever knew another book. Not once did He ever allude to any human composition. The scriptures and nature and man were His library. No human poetry, science, or philosophy were textbooks to Him. With the word of God He comforted

¹ John i. 3.

His disciples, confounded His enemies, and overcame the devil ; with the word of God He communed with His Father, and with it also the Father testified to Him. The doctors with whom He sat, answering and asking questions, were full of human knowledge with which their predecessors had overlaid and veiled the scriptures, and were astonished at His understanding, because they had drifted far away from the original source of spiritual knowledge, and had put aside the only possible interpreter of the scriptures—the Holy Spirit, whom Stephen said they had always resisted,¹ even to the point of bringing upon themselves spiritual blindness ; and Paul said that “even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their hearts.”² He, who had never learned except out of the scriptures, confounded and astonished these men, who spent all their days studying, not so much the scriptures themselves, but the commentaries of other learned men upon the scriptures, until they had lost the true and spiritual sense of God’s words. Jesus brought to them light and knowledge direct from the original sources. I often feel that we are in the same danger ourselves, in our study of God’s word. On this point I would here venture a word of warning, both to you and to myself.

I am thankful, indeed, to many learned and spiritual writers and commentators for a deeper insight into the wonderful meaning of scripture than I have been able to get myself ; but I am also conscious that when I depend too much upon the learning of the wise for the understanding of the word of God, I begin to lose the sense of its power and freshness ; and, if I continue the process too long, I lose the sense of its being God’s word at all—especially in pulpit preparation. It is easy to fall into the habit of depending upon the thoughts and in-

¹ Acts vii. 51.

² 2 Cor. iii. 15.

sight of other men, until all freshness soon goes out of the word, and sermon-making becomes a dry and heavy task. Now and again I put aside all books and commentaries and confine myself to the reading and study of the bare word itself, seeking the illumination of the Holy Spirit for interpretation and suggestion. I am sure the best and most refreshing thoughts I have ever had of God's truth have been at those times when I have shut myself up to its own power; for the word itself is "sharper than any two-edged sword," being full of life and energy, "and piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart."¹ "Is not my word like a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock."² The Psalmist tells us that "while I mused (on God's word) the fire burned."³ This is verily true. Sometimes, when earnestly and prayerfully studying God's word, there are passages which seem to stand out before the mind in raised letters, glowing with an inward light—we feel that God Himself is speaking to us, as it were, face to face. It is told of a great commentator that he once gave a copy of the New Testament, with his notes appended, to an uneducated but deeply spiritual old man who lived in his parish, and after some months asked him how he had enjoyed reading it. To which the good old man replied, that he had always enjoyed reading his Bible, and he liked this copy very much, but that he could neither make head nor tail of the wee notes at the bottom of the pages. I do not say this to despise or disparage either learning or the help of the learned in the study of God's precious truth, but to warn against a too great dependence upon mere human comment, no matter how wise and good. It is not so much man's

¹ Heb. iv. 12.² Jer. xxiii. 29.³ Ps. xxxix. 3.

thoughts upon God's word, as God's thought communicated to us directly through His word. If this be so with ourselves, how much more true of Jesus, who got His understanding of the scriptures by the direct study and contemplation of them, with the Holy Ghost constantly illuminating both them and His own mind and heart.

II. SOME LESSONS. I venture now to suggest to you some general lessons to be drawn from the beautiful story of Jesus sitting amidst the doctors, lessons which, I am sure, have before now suggested themselves to you, but not for that reason unworthy of mention.

I. *A lesson to parents.* Mary gently reproached her Son for preferring to tarry behind, talking with learned men of the things of God, to following her and Joseph to their home in Nazareth. There was in that reproach something more of human selfishness than of divine wisdom ; for Jesus, in His own sweet way, answered, in a sentence which must have gone to the very heart of His mother, "Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?" Perhaps Mary thought Jesus was too forward and precocious, and that He was transgressing to some extent the proprieties of childhood in thus presuming to ask questions of these wise men. She had, no doubt, herself a great and even reverent admiration for His wisdom and understanding, but would still remind Him that He was but a child, and that He should keep a child's place. The question arises, What is a child's place in respect to answering and asking questions? We all know how severe the parental canon has been upon us in our childhood—how we have been told times without number that "children should be seen and not heard"; how we have been forbidden to interpose in the conversation of our elders, and sent away from the company of grown people, and told that

we were too young to understand ; and, especially, that we must not "trouble" older people with questions. Of course, children should not be allowed to indulge in forward pertness in conversation ; but, on the other hand, we should be careful not to repress too much the eager keenness of their young minds, especially when they are all alive to learn something of the things of God. We try, indeed, to catechize our children, and at set times allow them to question us concerning the deep things of God, in which they seem particularly interested ; but we are not fond of having our own quiet minds disturbed by inopportune questions, as we judge them to be, of children. We too often answer by telling them that they are "too young to understand" ; that these are matters for older people ; that they will come to understand when *they* get older ; and thus we repress and close up many an opening child-mind by rebuke, however gentle and well meant, and deliver their thoughts and inquiries over to other matters which come between them and God. I am quite sure that we under-rate both the native intellectual and spiritual ability of children. I am sure, also, that the grace which came upon the Child Jesus, by which He grew in spirit and wisdom, comes upon, and is in a measure given to, every child ; which, if fostered and encouraged, would lead multitudes of them into an early spiritual knowledge of God and His salvation ; while, by denial and repression, we destroy our own best hopes concerning them.

There are two passages of scripture which always come to me when confronted by some child with a question concerning God and the things of God : "Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" ;¹ and that other saying of Jesus, "Except ye be converted,

¹ Matt. xi. 25.

and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”¹ Now, if God reveals the deep things of the kingdom to babes, whether in years or understanding, it should be far from us to discourage the eager inquiry of little children concerning these things, even though their questions be hard and give us trouble to answer. Indeed, this often lies at the root of our unwise disposition to repress these little inquirers; for we all know, to our cost, how difficult their questions often are, and how we are rebuked by them, because we, ourselves, have not taken the trouble to know. If we must become little children in the simplicity of our minds before we can enter into the kingdom of heaven, why should we not eagerly seize upon the child-mind to lead it directly to God, before it grows hard and callous? I have said that I am sure we greatly underrate the spiritual ability of children to understand the scriptures. During my ministry, and especially in my evangelistic work, I had much to do with children, and this I have noticed, that in every unusual work of grace children are, as a rule, the first to be moved by the Word of God, and the first to come forward and confess Him.

I remember a little girl seven years old coming forward with a large number of young people and adults to confess Christ, and be instructed in the way of salvation. I supposed she had come with her parents, and so passed her by, until, one by one, all the others left, and she remained behind alone. Speaking to her, I asked why she had come forward. She said, in her sweet, patient, childish way, that she wanted to be Jesus’ child, and that she had come to confess Him as her Saviour. Her mother and father were behind in the congregation, and had allowed her to come! Wise parents. I then asked her a number of questions, and found her wonderfully

¹ Matt. xviii. 3.

intelligent in spiritual matters, and that she had been evidently well taught, though the parents were but working people. I put a little inquirer's card into her hand, and told her to get her mother to read it to her. "I can read it quite well myself," was the simple reply. "Then," I said, "get your mother to explain these things to you" (referring to the matter printed on the card). "But," was the quick and eager reply, "I understand them quite well myself; I have been hearing you preach about this and explaining it to the people every night for a week or two, and I want to take God for my Father, and Jesus Christ for my Saviour, and be His disciple." Nor did she go until I had allowed her to make confession of her faith as the others had, by standing before the congregation and declaring her acceptance of Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

On another occasion, a little fair-haired boy of, perhaps, eight years, came with a great number of youths and maidens and older people to confess Christ. It was the last night of a series of evangelistic meetings in Aberdeen. The meeting was full of interest, and there were, perhaps, two thousand people in the hall, who had remained to the after-meeting on this last night. Sixty or seventy persons had come to the front benches for the purpose of openly confessing Christ; this little boy was seated in the midst. I supposed he also had come along with his father and mother, and gave him no thought until toward the close, when most had stood and made their confession. As if fearing he would be overlooked, the little fellow rose to his feet, turned about, facing the congregation, and, in a sweet child's voice, that was heard all over the hall, said, "I have been a Christian for a *great many years*, but did not know that I ought to make a public confession, and so have come to say that I love Jesus and want to be His disciple." This child's

confession of faith sent a thrill of power through the audience, and set strong men and women to weeping before God, and brought others to decision and confession. I talked with the little fellow afterwards, and found him simply, yet profoundly, intelligent as to Jesus and His salvation. I do not suppose he could have given me clear views on election, predestination, and the decrees of God ; I do not suppose he could have reconciled the doctrine of the divine sovereignty with the free will of man ; but then, for that matter, I have never found a doctor of divinity who could ! *We* understand many things which we cannot explain ; why should we not allow to children the same privilege ? Oh, let us be careful not to nip the budding life of God in the souls of children by the killing frosts of our own indifference, neglect, or, worse still, contempt of their ability, and conceit of our own !

2. *To teachers.* Our Lord appears to us in this incident as a child among teachers ; He afterwards revealed Himself as teacher among children. He was, indeed, the first great teacher who seriously and lovingly took upon Himself the teaching of children ; who honoured them and stood as their protector and defender. He encouraged parents to bring them to Him ; He took them in His arms and blessed them ; He warned His disciples and all others against putting stumbling-blocks in their way, or offending or hindering them ; by implication He taught us that we were to pay great attention to them, and teach them the way of life, "for of such is the kingdom of heaven." We are not unmindful, in our times, of their intellectual training, and employ the best teachers for the purpose of instructing them in every branch of human knowledge. We recognise the importance of taking possession of their minds in their tenderest youth, that by *first* impressions we may make

fast impressions. The child's mind is plastic as the rocks were before they cooled from the furnace heat in which they were smelted. Then a drop of rain, or the lightest footprint of tiniest bird, made impressions which long ages have not effaced. So should we do with our children. The first and best teachers should be the child's parents ; but, since it is impossible for parents entirely to superintend the education of their children, we call to our aid teachers whom we suppose qualified for this high task. Next to parenthood, I know no higher calling in this world than teacherhood, if I may use that term. Among the earliest commandments of God to His people was that which enjoined the careful teaching and training of the child-mind. If we select with care the physician to whom we commit the health and well-being of our bodies, how much more should we be careful in the choice of the man or woman to whom we commit the care of our children's minds and souls. We send our children away from home, in these days of divided responsibility, for their education ; and sometimes I fear we are more anxious to find the teacher who is expert in bringing them on in Latin, Greek, mathematics, and the fundamentals of human knowledge, than we are to find one who will respect their spiritual natures, and train, cultivate, and educate their souls. It is a thousand pities that the exigencies of sectarian strife and the arrogance of religious bigotry should have largely forced the religious education of children from our common and board schools ; but, since it is so, it only makes our responsibility the greater. The wise men who propounded to and heard questions from Jesus were at least reverent and gentle ; and they seemed to realize that they had something to learn from Jesus as well as to impart to Him. This is a point which I fear many teachers, both in our secular and Sunday schools, are prone to forget.

I remember two or three things in connection with my own early schooling ; one was the patient and tender love with which a wise woman-teacher would always stop to consider my questions, and listen to all I had to say on any subject under discussion or the subject of the lesson, and how sometimes she used to say to me, "You are quite right, my child," and then proceed further to unfold my childish thought and help me to understand myself. To this good woman I owe some of the best things which I have brought with me to manhood. Another teacher I had was a very great man, a lawyer and a statesman, who had the Sunday class in which I was a scholar. To this day, though more than forty years ago, that good man's loving, patient, and simple yet profound teaching cleaves to me, and often during the dangerous period of youthful sin and folly, before my conversion, his words, and especially his loving manner and interest in me, served as a check, and even turned my thoughts to higher and better things, long after I was under his direct influence. But I have the remembrance of another teacher, and he was said to be the best teacher our school ever had. He taught with a rod in his hand. He was stern, imperious, and inordinately confident of his own superior knowledge ; he repressed all independent inquiry on our part, especially if it were upon some subject apart from the lesson in hand, even though suggested by it, and used often to tell us, with an emphasis which warned us against a repetition of the offence against his majesty, that he was there to teach us, and not to be taught or catechized by us. Sometimes teachers have this idea, that they only have knowledge, and that children have no wisdom. It is a great mistake. I have learned many things from my own children, even in their earliest childhood ; and I believe that every wise

teacher will be ever on the alert to learn something from his pupils. No man, who is not willing and anxious to learn something from the children he is set to teach, is fit to be their teacher. Alas! there are many learned fools in the world; and, thanks be to God, there are many wise children. It should be our care not to put these together. On the other hand, thousands of our best and ablest men and women owe almost everything, in the way of spiritual and intellectual developments, to those great masters who, in obscure country and parish schools, have discovered and brought forth with patient care the gifts they have discerned in their pupils, of whom dear old "Domsie" of "Drumtochty" (celebrated by Ian Maclaren) is a type.¹

Then there are children of older years, with whom we public teachers have to do. I mean among the poor, the humble, and uneducated, who form so large a part of our congregations. The most precious lessons I have ever learned are those which I have received in the course of pastoral visitation. I, who have gone to them to teach and comfort, have often, very often, come away with my heart aglow and my soul softened and instructed by what I have learned from God's poor, who have drunk deeply out of His word, and been taught still more deeply by His Spirit. Dr. Chalmers used to say that he endeavoured to preach on Sundays what he learned from his parishioners during the week. "I preach to my people on the Sabbath what they have preached to me on week-days." He was a great teacher, and they were happy people who had such a pastor. Indeed, the meaning of the word "educate" is "to draw out"; but so many teachers think it means "to cram in." I would speak most earnestly to you teachers—of board schools, of private schools, and of Sunday schools

¹ "Days of Auld Lang Syne" (Hodder & Stoughton).

—Cultivate a most profound respect for your pupils, and be not afraid to learn from them, for oftentimes the secret of the Lord is with children. I can almost hope that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were among those doctors who that day sat with Jesus asking questions of Him, and listening with wonder to His answers, and the questions He asked.

3. *A word to the children.* I speak to these boys on my right and left, and to several children whom I see in the congregation before me. Remember that Jesus was once a child as you are ; that He once sat among the doctors and listened to their questions, and was not afraid or ashamed to ask questions in turn. Surely, if boys and girls are questioned, they may have the right to question in return ; but let them be as Jesus was, not pert or conceited, as I have known some clever children to be ; not asking puzzling questions for the purpose of showing forth their cleverness, but reverent, modest, and earnest in their desire to learn. There is nothing in all the world more to be loved than children of this kind ; nothing more detestable or disagreeable than priggish, forward children, who refuse instruction, and show no reverence or respect for those older and wiser, who desire to instruct them. Then, again, I would have you think of this : If Jesus, the Son of God, in whom was all the wisdom of God, though at this time it was just budding, would sit for hours and days with the doctors, seeking for knowledge, and needing to be taught, how much more do you need to sit with the doctors, whether they be old men or young women, who have undertaken the hard task of giving instruction ; and how should you follow His example in this, both in patience and courtesy. And, finally, I would suggest to you that Jesus was much wiser in seeking knowledge, and learning of the doctors in the temple, than if He

had been with the other boys, who, hurrying through their lessons, were glad to escape from school and be on the streets. Not that I would curtail your play, but I would remind you that play is not the first thing to be sought after. I have no doubt that Jesus played as other boys play, but above play and everything else He sought first the knowledge of God, and was determined to be about His Father's business. The best part of your manhood or womanhood will depend upon what you lay up for foundations of character in childhood. Samuel in the tabernacle, and Jesus in the temple, are two good examples for all children to study and imitate. May God bless you, and make you early to be His disciples.

XIX

JESUS' GREAT CONFESSION

“And when they saw Him, they were amazed : and His mother said unto Him, Son, why hast Thou thus dealt with us ? behold, Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing. And He said unto them, How is it that ye sought Me ? wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s business ?”—LUKE ii. 48, 49.

ON the morning of the third day after their departure from Jerusalem on their homeward journey, let us suppose Mary and Joseph returning to the temple, where they had last seen Jesus, and, led by some instinct, or guided by the Holy Spirit, finding Him seated there among the doctors, commanding their interested attention and respect, certainly their astonishment, on account of the wisdom and understanding displayed in His answers to *their* questions, and the profound spiritual insight indicated by *His* questions. We are not surprised that Mary was astonished at finding Jesus thus seated among these grave and reverend teachers, and still more so, at hearing portions of the conversation carried on between them, and noting not only Jesus’ wisdom, but the marked respect which the doctors paid to Him.

We can hardly believe that Mary broke in upon the conversation between Jesus and the doctors with her complaint ; but rather that she listened until the conference was concluded, and then, taking Him aside, asked Him the reproachful question recorded in our text.

I. MARY REBUKES JESUS. Let us make ourselves one of this little group—at least, so far as to become on-lookers and listeners—not for the sake of mere curiosity, but that we may get at the heart of this matter, all so beautiful, pathetic, and full of instruction for us. Having reached Jerusalem the night before, on their return from that sad day's journey without Jesus, early the next morning, as soon at least as it was customary for the people to gather for the morning sacrifice—led by a strong and reasonable instinct, perhaps directly by the Holy Ghost—they repaired directly to the temple.

Where else would they be so likely to find Him? Following their leading, they came at once to the cloister or porch where the doctors sat daily giving instruction to those who sought it at their lips. There, in the midst of them, they found Jesus, seated with quiet, childlike dignity—neither forward in manner nor unduly shy or embarrassed. Their surprise was great—"they were amazed" not only to find Him "seated in the midst of the doctors," but engaged in conversation with them, listening to their discourse, answering their questions, and in turn asking questions of His own. It was not the mere fact that He, a child, was thus engaged in conversation with these grave and learned men, but that He was so conversing with them that they were astonished at His wisdom and understanding. The conversation, debate, or interchange of questions (whatever form the interview was taking), had attracted a considerable company, who were listening also with eager and surprised interest. "And all they that heard Him were astonished at His understanding and His answers."¹

Drawn into the group of listeners, Mary and Joseph were at first too amazed to speak; indeed, we can scarcely believe that they would impetuously break in

¹ Luke ii. 47.

upon such an august company, even to lay hold of Jesus, whom they had so sorrowfully missed and anxiously sought. We see them amazed, and in a measure awe-stricken, so much so that for the moment these emotions overpowered all others. Waiting quietly and listening, till the conversation between Jesus and the doctors was over, they either approached Jesus or were discovered by Him. Then Mary took Him by the hand and led Him away. It was not in this public place that the words of her gentle rebuke fell upon His ears. Was there no tender embrace, no glad outburst of mother-joy, before this serious and reproachful question? Surely; though, as I have before said, it is no part of the Evangelist's plan to introduce into his narrative anything beyond what is necessary to reveal Jesus to us. Joseph seems to have been a mere passive witness of this little drama. Perhaps at this moment he remembered with greater seriousness than did Mary, who the child was, and, realizing that it was not for him to interfere here, he left the whole matter to His mother.

Our first inquiry is to find out, if possible, just what Mary intended by her question to Jesus, "Son, why hast Thou thus dealt with us?" Was the question asked from *her* point of view, or from *His*? That is, was it a question asked simply for the sake of finding out His reason for lingering behind, whilst they and their company had proceeded on their homeward journey, or was it her way of setting before Him all the trouble and anxiety His conduct had caused them in thus staying behind? Was it inquiry, or was it rebuke? There seems to be little doubt here. It was a question in which she put Jesus upon His defence. We who are parents see in this inquiry, perhaps, a too faithful portraiture of some of our own hasty though not unloving rebukes, delivered to our children out of a sense of

having been wronged or injured by some action of theirs ; rebukes in the form of questions, in which we express our judgment and condemnation of their conduct, without having given them first a fair opportunity of putting us in possession of the motives or reasons which led to their conduct. I am afraid there are as many hasty parents as thoughtless children. At any rate, Jesus understood His mother's question to be in the nature of a reproof, and in His matchless answer at once explained and justified His conduct in remaining behind ; and, at the same time, conveyed to her His surprise that she had not anticipated for herself the reasons for His being found in the temple.

The lesson this incident teaches is the extraordinary readiness there is in us to stand upon what we seem to think *our rights*, and to impute blame unfairly to others. Mary's question or reproof was the expression of one, for the moment, self-centred, and thinking of what *she* had suffered ; of one who, perhaps, sought to hide from her own conscience a fault by imputing wrong-doing to another. That is, she would justify her own carelessness—if it was carelessness—in leaving Jesus behind, by bringing up, as a wrong done to her and Joseph, the anxiety and sorrow which they had suffered on account of His absence from them. Calvin has remarked that “the Blessed Virgin would rather have died than have imputed wrong to God, yet, in a moment of selfish exaggeration of her own suffering, she openly charged fault upon her divine Son.” What in this incident interests us is that there is in it a revelation of a habit of our sinful human nature to impute fault to God because of sufferings which we have most likely brought upon ourselves. “Why hast Thou thus dealt with us ?” is a question, or rather a reproach, which is often in our hearts, if not on our lips—a reproach directed against

God. "Why does God afflict me with this needless and long-continued illness, which does nobody any good, prevents me from enjoying anything in life, and hinders me from doing any service I might otherwise do for Him?" Such was a question put to me the other day by a lady who has suffered, and is still suffering, from a long-standing and most distressing illness, an illness which she has, perhaps, rather inherited than brought upon herself by any folly of her own. The tone in which the question was asked showed plainly that it was not a question of humble inquiry, but of bitter reproach, in which she declared her wrongs and called upon God to justify Himself. This is not an uncommon state of mind. "Why has God afflicted me?" "Why did He take away my child, or my husband, or my parents?" "Why has He allowed misfortune to fall upon me until I have been deprived of all my living? Why does He send or allow such things?" Sometimes we are bolder, and even openly charge injustice upon Him. The whole story of Job is an outcry of this kind, "Why hast Thou thus dealt with me? Vindicate Thyself." It is not for me to answer the general question involved in such reproaches of God for His providential dealings with us; rather it is for me to confess my own sin in this respect, and to seek for grace to "trust God in the dark"; to trust Him even though He slay me; to avoid doing those things which bring trouble upon myself, and in all things to believe that God has a reason for all that He does or suffers to be done; a reason the roots of which are deep in His eternal love for me and for all men. Yet in the matchless answer of Jesus to His mother there is a hint which we may be glad to avail ourselves of: "Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?"

God's business covers a much wider field than my life.

There is more in it than appertains to my selfish and narrow interests or pleasures. If, in ordering the well-being of the whole universe, He judges it necessary that I should share in the ministry of suffering, even though the immediate fault be not mine, shall I complain of God and impute evil to Him? Oh, that we might, all of us, enlarge our understanding and fellowship, and move out of the little narrow world of self-interest in which we too habitually live! Then, again, is it not possible that our troubles and sorrows come to us on account of parting company with Jesus, as Mary's came to her on this occasion? At least this is true, that when trouble or affliction comes to those who are walking in close fellowship with God, we hear of no complaint, no reproaches, no "Why hast Thou thus dealt with us?" It is true that Jesus was in the boat with the disciples when the winds and the waves were like to overwhelm them, and there arose a cry from their lips full of reproach, "Carest Thou not that we perish?"¹ Now why should they have reproached Him? True, He was *asleep* in the hinder part of the boat; but still He was there. No evil could have befallen them which would not have also overwhelmed Him. They might have trusted Him, and been willing if needs be, to have gone down forty fathoms under the sea with Him, but they had parted company with Him, not indeed physically, for He was with them in the boat, but they had left Him out of their hearts and faith, and hence complaint and fear came in. On the other hand, I see the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace. They were there for no fault of their own, nay, rather because of their loyalty to God, and yet we hear no complaint out of their lips, no "Why hast Thou forsaken us?" Behold, there were seen "four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire . . . and the

¹ Mark iv. 38.

form of the fourth is like the Son of God.”¹ What cared they for the flames? they did not hurt them, but only burnt off the binding cords which men had put upon them. Daniel did not complain of God’s treatment when he was cast into the lion’s den. He was not afraid; he did not mistrust God, but was ready with a cheerful, happy and confident reply to the lamentable inquiry of the king, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions? Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live for ever. My God hath sent His angel, and hath shut the lions’ mouths, that they have not hurt me.”² Here is a wonderful secret. The innocent may suffer, but if they be those who *serve God continually*, though they be cast into the fire or into the lion’s den, their God will walk with them, or send His angel to deliver them, or prevent the danger from overwhelming them. Paul had also learned how to suffer for Jesus’ sake and not complain—to be content to suffer without reason, and even to rejoice in afflictions. He had learned to accept suffering and expect grace. Once the Psalmist cried out, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”³ and Jesus took up this cry upon the cross in the hour of His bitterest agony. In neither case was the question one of complaint or rebuke, but rather of amazed and trustful inquiry—not the complaint of unbelief, but the cry of faith. May our God help us to avoid the self-centred habit of rebuking Him for our troubles, and to learn the secret of innocency and continuous service, that we may walk in the fire and lie down with lions without fear—even with joy.

II. JESUS JUSTIFIES HIMSELF. “Wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s business?” Here we have the first recorded words of Jesus. How interesting!

¹ Dan. iii. 25. ² *Ibid.* vi. 20–22. ³ Ps. xxii. 1.

We cherish *last* words, but here we have *first* words, and words so full of wisdom that we can well understand how it was in later years that no man could withstand His teachings. In this answer of Jesus to His mother we have a sample of that wisdom which astonished the doctors. He answers His mother's question by putting one to her in return ; a question which at once justifies Himself and gently lays bare the fact of her own forgetfulness and want of understanding of His mission. It is not without deep significance that Mary had included Joseph with herself in her rebuke. His answer seems entirely to have ignored Joseph, as He addressed His remarks to His mother alone.

He hints to her His surprise at her lack of knowledge or understanding in reference both to His person and His mission. He seems to say "How is it that you reproach Me for being in the temple, for forsaking the home-journey, to abide here in the house of God? Wist ye not, or have you forgotten, who I am, or for what cause I came into the world?" He seems surprised that she did not understand. Many years later, in like manner, Jesus thus gently rebuked a learned master in Israel ; perhaps one of the very doctors with whom He had conversed in His youth, "Art thou a master in Israel and knowest not these things?"¹ If we only knew more of the Scriptures, and the power and purpose of God as revealed in them, we should not be in so much perplexity as to God's dealings ; and the question, "How can these things be?" or "Why hast Thou thus dealt with us?" would be found less frequently in our hearts. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him," and the wonderful things of God's purpose are all hidden in His law ; we need only open eyes to see them.

Only twelve years before, God had given to Mary this

¹ John iii. 10.

wonderful Son under such extraordinary circumstances, followed up by such extraordinary signs and wonders, that we should have thought she would have been on the watch ever afterwards for further extraordinary developments. Had Mary been fully alive to the supernatural character of her Son, and had she remembered the great mission He came into the world to accomplish (all which had been told her by the angel), she would have been on the constant lookout for wonderful developments in the Child and in His doings. We should have supposed that, on bringing Him to the temple for the first time, she would have expected some further manifestation of God's will, either in some act of Jesus or some further revelation from heaven. But years had passed since the angels sang to the shepherds, since the wise men departed to their own homes, since Simeon and Anna had prophesied, and yet nothing extraordinary had happened. Life in the little Galilean city had gone on in its quiet, humdrum way, and in Joseph's home the ordinary common-places of his daily work, and Mary's daily household occupations, were undisturbed by any further sign or wonder. It is true that "the Child grew and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him"; but these were not outward or supernatural signs, and they had become accustomed to the quiet and grave habits of the Boy. In all these past ten or twelve years nothing had happened. The early revelation had grown dim; Mary had dropped into the monotonous routine of every-day life, and her great secret had faded a little out of her thoughts. Not that she had forgotten it, or ceased to attach highest importance to it, but the supernatural in connection with both herself and Jesus had somehow merged into and become obscured in the natural; the extraordinary had become overlaid with the ordinary, until she had ceased

to expect any further great thing, or, at least, had postponed the expectation until some far distant day.

All this we can readily fancy ; but what has it to do with us ? Is there any lesson in it for us ? Yes, surely. Has not God done an extraordinary thing for and to us who are Christians ? Has not the Holy Spirit visited us ? Have we not been born again from above and been adopted into the family of God ? Familiar as these terms are in our theological language and literature, they stand for tremendous spiritual realities, realities as great in their way as the incarnation itself was in its unique way. To have passed from death into life, to have become new creatures in Christ, are blessings so great that no tongue can tell them, no pen write them ; and yet these things have come to us. Some of us at least remember with what wonder, gratitude, and love we received this great grace. How holy was the hour in which we first came to know our regeneration in Christ ; how delicious and ecstatic the joy of that time. The whole world seemed to have been recreated for our benefit, and we were new creatures in a new world. I doubt if Mary could have had a more bewildering delight in the announcement which the angel made to her than we had when the Holy Spirit made known to us through the word of God that our sins were forgiven, and that we were become children of God, "not of blood, nor of the will of flesh, nor of the will of man,¹ but of God." Our whole relations to heaven and earth were changed. Henceforth earth became a place of pilgrimage in which to bear our testimony and do the will of God ; heaven became our home, all men became our brethren, the redeemed inheritance of Christ ; our citizenship was there, and there we looked for our treasure. Not that we were released from earthly duties

¹ John i. 13.

and relations, but that they were all changed and sanctified. We, too, returned to our homes, to our shops, to our various callings, public, private, domestic, and official, according as we were placed in the world, and took up our daily tasks, just as Mary did after her return to Nazareth from the house of Elisabeth ; but we did so as the children of God. In those early days of our supernatural experiences we would not have been surprised at any fresh demonstration, nay, we looked for signs and wonders as a natural result of our heavenly experience ; for to us this old world of ours was already a new world—a supernatural world. But then, as the days and weeks and years went by, and the natural and ordinary duties and affairs of life claimed our care and attention, the freshness of the supernatural faded a little from our consciousness ; the natural gradually gained the ascendancy over the spiritual, at least in our thoughts and feelings, and we ceased to expect further developments. Society, business, domestic life, and common occupations—all right and proper—absorbed our attention. We went, indeed, at the appointed times to the temple, and sometimes we returned “supposing Jesus to be in the company,” and were surprised at the close of the day to find that He was not ; and we had our days of sorrow and anxiety before finding Him again, and, like Mary, we sought to lay the blame rather upon Him than to take it upon ourselves, for we “wist not that He must be about His Father’s business,” and had forgotten that our life was identified with His, and that *we* must be about our Father’s business too. But, oh ! did God save us only that we might go back to the old world of trade, traffic, house-keeping, doctoring, society, and a thousand other things that absorb us ? Ought we not to have expected other developments to have followed upon our regeneration ? To some the call came, “go preach,” to

some other especial calls came ; but to all the great call came, "be about My business" ; only, some have not heeded, and the supernatural has taken a subordinate place in our lives. Even the preaching of the gospel has degenerated into one of the learned professions with some of us.

It was to recall Mary to the great fact of the incarnation, and the mission of love and salvation with which it was identified, that Jesus made answer to her as He did ; an answer that must have stirred her whole soul and set her to thinking again as she had not done for years before. It is to recall you and myself to the fact that God has incarnated Himself in us by the regeneration, for the purpose of carrying forward His great work in the world, and not merely to be shopkeepers, housekeepers, social leaders, lawyers and doctors, worldly masters or servants, that I apply this incident to ourselves. May He who first aroused us to a sense of sin, and sent His Holy Spirit upon us, re-awaken us by this question of Jesus to Mary. Oh, that we may henceforth be on the look-out for some new development in the life of our Lord, and in our own lives ; some new movement of the Spirit of God in connection with the kingdom of heaven ; that we may be ever at His side, not rebuking Him for supposed neglect of us, but watching and waiting and ready to be used by Him !

If we rightly read our Bibles, we shall never fall into the error of the scoffers who say, "Where is the promise of His coming, for all things continue as they were from the foundation of the world ?" ¹ The Bible is constantly warning and teaching us to be on the look-out for some new thing to come to pass. "The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple ; but who may be ready for and abide His coming ?" The Jews were not

¹ 2 Peter iii. 4.

ready when He came ; Mary was not ready for His sudden awakening to the consciousness of His mission in connection with His Father's business ; alas ! I fear many of us will not be ready for His coming again, which is the next great imminent event for the world and the Church. Almost His last words to us were, " Watch : for ye know not the day nor the hour in which your Lord shall come." Do we not miss many fresh blessings because we are expecting nothing more to come to us ; because we have settled down to the conviction that what we have already received, what we have already learned of Him, is all there is for us ? Therefore we miss many new joys and revelations of His will and ways, and many opportunities for great service. This word of Jesus sounds a reproach in *my* ears, at least. He seems to me to be saying this morning, " Wist ye not ? " " How is it that ye do not understand ? " To be thus on the watch always for what our Lord will next do for us or the world, either by the work of the Holy Spirit or by His own coming again, we need not abandon our present occupations and callings, but only remember that we are His, and be ready for whatsoever He may reveal to us.

Jesus confesses and declares God to be His Father Mary, in her words of reproach, had said, " Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing." It was most natural that she should thus associate Joseph with herself and Him, even though she well knew that Joseph was not His father, except in name and in all the parental offices which he had discharged toward Him. I have already said that it is most unlikely that Mary had ever told Jesus of His supernatural origin. She was too wise a woman to have done that. Laying this secret up in her heart, she would reverently wait for God to make that known to Him, even as He had at first made His

purpose of grace known to her. She spoke to her Son from the standpoint of the common and usual parental relations ; but Jesus had been awakened to a new knowledge of things, and had in some mysterious way discovered His eternal and divine relation to His Father in heaven. He does not speak disrespectfully of Joseph ; He repudiates none of his kind offices to Him during all these years ; but straight to the truth, His startling words to Mary must have awakened her too long sleeping mind to the fact that *her* Son was *God's* Son. "Wist ye not that I must be about *My Father's* business?" "You have reproached Me for not returning with you and Joseph to Nazareth ; you speak to Me now of him as My father, but he is not My father, *God* is My father ; you have forgotten or ignored that ; now I remind you of it, and declare it to you, who have not declared it to Me." How Jesus came to know this great fact has been the occasion of much speculation ; but it seems very simple, if only we seek not to find riddles in our questions concerning the development of the divine-human consciousness of Jesus. During these twelve years the Child had been growing in stature, in wisdom, understanding, and grace. I was recently walking in the park, and to my eyes the buds on the trees gave no hint or prophecy of coming spring. They were brown and dirty with the grime of winter fogs and soot ; outwardly there was no sign of the wonderful things within. I plucked off one of those common-looking buds of life, and with my thumb and finger-nail opened it, and there, hidden away out of sight of human eyes, was a mass of tightly-folded leaves, which had been for months pressing their way up through the sap into form and life, all ready to burst forth into leaf and flower and fruit. To-day those buds are filling the park with variegated beauty. So I fancy it must have been with Jesus.

He was, as a human child, a bud of divinity. That divine personality was rolled and folded back in Mary's Son ; but, little by little, during these quiet years of growth in Nazareth, the Godhead in Him was pressing and struggling to the surface ; and on that day in the temple, under some touch of the Spirit of God, some sudden unfolding of the meaning of scripture, as He talked with the doctors, the consciousness of His relation to God, always present with Him in the bud, suddenly burst forth, and He knew that *God was His Father*. This, truly, is a mystery, but not a staggering one. When and how does the infant-child come to the consciousness of personality, or to its relation to its mother ? That little babe, lying on its mother's bosom, sucking life from her generous breast, has no consciousness that she is its mother ; for the present it is but a little animal obeying the instinct of life ; yet there is rolled up in that little brain and heart a filial relation which will presently burst into consciousness, and that consciousness will by-and-bye express itself in one word, "mamma," and the little thing will no longer be an animal, but consciously a human child. So it is even with the youth and maiden ; some crisis of love or responsibility, of sorrow or disappointment, will suddenly reveal to them that they are no longer children, but men and women. The conscious child is in the unconscious infant, the man and woman are in the boy and girl ; it only needs a crisis to burst these hidden buds into full self-knowledge.

After all, this mysterious power of knowing divine things in ourselves, without the intervention of human communication, is not an unknown truth to us. There is a knowledge of God that comes to us, as it came to Jesus, by the Holy Spirit—a spiritual knowledge, as real and as sure as the knowledge of human things communi-

cated by the testimony of facts through our senses or the intellectual faculty. When Moses was born, his parents saw that he was a "proper child,"¹ marked in some way for God's special service. When Jesus asked His disciples who He was, Peter promptly answered that He was "the Christ, the Son of the Living God"² This was not a human knowledge of Jesus: "For flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven."³ The Father in heaven, who at the proper moment revealed the truth of His divine origin to Jesus, in like manner reveals it to us. All the theological study in the world will not enable us to know either God or His Christ. No one can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Spirit. Has this spiritual knowledge of our relation to God come to us, or are we merely intellectual Christians, accepting Christ on the authority of the Creed, or the mere letter of the word of God? It is true that we do not become children of God *by* consciousness, but we do come *to* personal consciousness of that glorious fact apart from the mere external testimony of the word of God. Having obtained in ourselves the knowledge that God is our Father, that knowledge abides, even though we may lose for the moment the supporting testimony of the word, just as a building stands on its own foundation, and is supported by its own framework, long after the scaffolding used in its erection is taken down and the instruments of its construction removed. I know that this personal consciousness of God and our regeneration is not accepted by the world as valid testimony. It may not be valid testimony to them, but it is to us. We cannot tell *how* we know, but we *know* that we know. "He that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth

¹ Exod. ii. 2. ² Matt. xvi. 16. ³ *Ibid.* xvi. 17.

us not.”¹ Here the controversy must end. There is a spiritual knowledge of things spiritual known by those who are spiritually enlightened, which the world cannot know, for God manifests Himself to us as He does not to the world, and the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God.

Mary only had the positive knowledge that Jesus was incarnate in her body; she could not prove it to any living soul in the world; she could not have convinced Joseph of the truth of her testimony; it was only after an angel from God had showed the truth to Joseph that he was convinced, and abandoned his former purpose of “putting her away privately.” Mary knew who Jesus was. She had never communicated the story of His incarnation to Him; but now He came to know it Himself with a knowledge He received from God. Mary had not forgotten the great secret of His incarnation, but in the course of years, since she had come to abide in the midst of more natural relations with Him and with Joseph, the importance, the freshness, the overwhelming significance of the incarnation had faded somewhat from her thought. Joseph had been allowed to take the place of God to some extent in her mind, and she had accustomed herself to think and speak to Jesus of Joseph as His father, as in a domestic sense he was; and thus the divine was pushed from the foreground into the background of his thought. Though Mary had never forgotten the real source of Jesus’ being, she had suffered that knowledge to lose power with her: the human side of Jesus’ life and relation had usurped the place of the divine. Not that Mary ever intended or deliberately ignored the true state of the case, but that she had drifted into this way of thinking and feeling. Just as we forget—oh! I am

¹ 1 John iv. 6.

afraid too often, and for too long a time—that we are God's sons and daughters. Not that we forget it altogether, and never refer in thought to this glorious fact, but that we allow human relations to take the first place with us, and drift into the habit of giving the Heavenly Father a second place. We are the sons of God and citizens of heaven by adoption and new birth. We are stout to affirm and defend this as a matter of creed or faith; but, practically, we so often subordinate the divine relation to the human, the heavenly citizenship to the earthly, we yield the claims of God and the sweet other world to those of this world. Jesus' words must have been a kind of shock to Mary, must have awakened her, as it were, out of a sleep in which the past great realities in connection with Him were rather as dreams than facts. Would God that this word of His to His mother might reach our hearts and consciences, and arouse us to a new sense of our relation to our Heavenly Father! From the moment the knowledge of God as His Father was made known to Jesus, He never again lost the deep and blessed sense of it. By this title He always addressed and spoke of Him. This term is repeated over and over again, especially in John's gospel, "My Father," "My Father," "My Father." It was the deep secret of all His wonderful life.

Now, it was part of the mission of Jesus to reveal this Fatherhood of God to us, that we also might come to know Him as such. It was His first message to His disciples after His resurrection. "Go," He said to Mary, "to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend to *My* Father and to *your* Father, and to *My* God and to *your* God."¹ How unspeakably precious it is to be taken thus into the Brotherhood of Christ and the

¹ John xx. 17.

Fatherhood of God! Did we fully, or even measurably, realize this great fact, it would fill us constantly with joy and delight; it would give us new confidence and courage in the world; it would stimulate us to every high and holy endeavour; it would dignify us beyond and above every misfortune or reproach which the world could put upon us; and especially would it sinew us, body and mind, to be about our Father's business in the world. Paul tells us that "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God; for ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, *Abba, Father.*"¹ Standing and living in this holy and high relation to God and our Lord Jesus Christ, there can be no place for mere formalism. We are children in our Father's house; our dealings with Him are not those of ceremony or mere religious courtesy, but of love, liberty, filial freedom, and without fear. Our service is not the service of hirelings, but of sons. Our pride and our joys are those which come from Him; our possessions and our inheritance are such as are derived from our Father. From Him comes our daily bread; and since we have Him to appeal to, we need not be troubled with anxious care about the things of this world. With Him there is full and free forgiveness of offences, of mistakes, even of sins; the law does not come between us and Him, for we are no longer under law, but under grace. With Him there is all power to deliver from temptation, and to save us from the uttermost peril. What is there in all the world, either by way of possession or relation, that can compare with this relation to God? I am sure that it was this knowledge that God was His Father that supported Him through all His ministry, and made it possible for Him to fulfil it to the

¹ Rom. viii. 14, 15.

end. And I am sure it is only as we come to know and appreciate the fact that He is *our* Father too, that we can live a really Christian life, inwardly and outwardly. May the Holy Spirit *intensify* this knowledge in us if we have it, and *breathe* it into us if we have it not, for Jesus' sake.

XX

"MY FATHER'S BUSINESS"

"Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?"—
LUKE ii. 49.

THE mother of Jesus was displeased with her Son because He tarried behind in the temple while they pursued their journey home, thus causing them some anxiety and trouble. She assumed that the whole duty of a child is to please his parents; at least, Mary seemed to express this thought in her complaint against Jesus. It is quite true that the first duty of children in all earthly relations is to obey and please their parents. "Children, obey your parents," is the first commandment of God with promise, but there is a qualification attached to this commandment: "Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*." ¹ The Lord also has claims upon children; nay His claims are paramount, and must have the first consideration. Jesus certainly was not actuated by any spirit of disobedience when He tarried behind in the temple; no thought of displeasing His parents was present in His mind. Indeed, it must be supposed that He had considered the question of the anxiety which His absence from the home-bound company would occasion them; yet His duty to His Father in heaven controlled His actions, and He attended to that higher call even at the expense of causing anxiety to His human mother and to Joseph, His good and kind

¹ Eph. vi. 1.

foster-father. With the coming of the full consciousness of His relation to His Father in heaven came also a divine call to be interested in all the affairs of that Father, and the desire as well as the necessity of at once consecrating Himself to His service.

Jesus expressed surprise that His mother did not recognise this obligation resting upon Him, for though He had but awakened to the fact of His divine relationship, He seemed surprised that Mary, who knew all the facts, should be unprepared for the new phase of life and duty opening to Him, and especially that there should be even a trace of displeasure in her words or manner toward Him for thus obeying God when the call came. I am sure, did we parents fully understand that our children are God's children before they are ours, and that He has some business for them in the world, we would be more careful to encourage them concerning God and His business, and specially careful never to discourage, much less to rebuke, them when we find them turning with interest to the affairs of their Father in heaven.

I. JESUS AND HIS FATHER'S BUSINESS. With the dawning consciousness of His relation to God as a Son to a Father, came also the sense that He had something to do for His Father; that He had a mission in the world—that it was henceforth His business to attend to His Father's affairs.

Whether or not He fully realized the stupendous nature of His mission—whether at this time He saw right through to the end—are questions which have been often raised and debated. It seems to me that to suppose such to have been the case would be out of harmony with the whole story of His intellectual and spiritual development, and contrary to the natural, as well as to the super-natural, personality which belonged

to Him. We must always think of Jesus as being as fully identified and one with our human nature and its limitations, as with the Godhead that was in Him with its unlimited being. Whatever of transcendent qualities belonged to His mind and soul, they did not denaturalize Him as the Child and Son of Man. From the time He entered fully upon His public ministry He seems to have understood that He must die, and be raised again from the dead ; that the fruit of His death would be the grace of forgiveness and life to those who believed. But even this knowledge of Himself and of His mission seems to have come upon Him not, as it were, by a single "afflatus" of knowledge, but as the dawn of the day gradually reaches noontide strength. But we have not to do with this larger and later question at present, We have only to note that the Child Jesus, at the age of twelve years, came to know that He was the Son of God. and that henceforth all His relations and life must be regulated by that great fact. With this knowledge came also the conviction that His first opportunity of obedience to His Father was now before Him, and that it must be instantly attended to, without reference to any other claims upon Him, such, for instance, as returning to Nazareth with His parents. Hitherto, in His quiet Nazareth home, neither such knowledge nor opportunity had presented themselves. To do His mother's will and to please Joseph, His foster-father, was the full extent of His will and duty. That He did these well and truly goes without saying. Since coming to Jerusalem to attend the feast of Passover, a new crisis had come to Him, and He did not suffer that opportunity to recede from His obedient heart, but embraced it at once, and gave Himself up with calm and determined enthusiasm to attend to it. Doubtless this was what made Him so interested in the conversation with the doctors. He was

looking into His Father's business at that time, finding out by their instruction and His own questions what was expected of Him, and how He was to do it. This for the moment seemed to be the only thing for Him to do ; to get acquainted with His Father's business.

As we have already seen in a former comment upon this incident, Jesus is the great prototype of all the children of God. If He speaks of God as His Father, He also has taught us that God is our Father as well. "*My* Father and *your* Father ; *My* God and *your* God." Here, and in later years, He emphasized the obligation He was under to be "about His Father's business." He has also made it plain that the same obligation rests upon us : "As *My* Father hath sent *Me*, even so send I *you*."¹ This is both high honour and high responsibility. God has saved and called us, not for ourselves alone, but that we might be "workers together with Him";² that we might be "instant in season, out of season"³ about our Father's business. God has no sons who are not His servants. He does not call us to Jesus only that we might find rest, but that we might take His yoke and burden upon us, and *thus* find rest in service. God does not show us at once all that we are to Him, and all that He has for us to do ; but with the first consciousness of sonship there does come to us, too, the conviction that we must henceforth serve Him. The universal testimony of young converts is, that with the knowledge of sins forgiven comes an impulse to do something for God. That impulse would become permanent if, like Jesus, we yielded to it at once, and held steadfastly to consecrated service as being a part of our sonship. Neither does God show us all at once the whole mystery of our life—what it is to be, and what we are to do. It is step by step in the pathway of obedience, and by keeping our

¹ John xx. 21.² 2 Cor. vi. 1.³ 2 Tim. iv. 2.

minds and hearts open to Him, and our hands free to serve when the opportunity presents itself, that we are led on from grace to grace, and from good work to good work ; from the opening consciousness of divine life in God to full consciousness of sonship in Christ.

How little you and I knew what our lives would be when we first began to obey God's call to service. Within two minutes after my own conversion I was led to speak to a young friend of the way of salvation, and explain to her that, since Jesus had died and God had raised Him up, *He* was satisfied with that settlement for our sins, and that *we*, therefore, ought to be satisfied. It came to me to deliver this little gospel message to a number of young people of my own age during the first half-hour of my new life. I did not know then that henceforth God would have me devote my whole life to the work of preaching the glad tidings of His love. With my conversion came my first opportunity to be about my Father's business. It was by promptly embracing that opportunity that the whole course of my life was determined. A few days after this, my employer rebuked me for some apparent neglect of duty, in order that I might go after another friend, in whom I became deeply interested, and seek to lead him to Christ. He was a Christian man, though not a very earnest one and I at once told him how God had converted my soul, and had put it into my heart to show the way of life to some others, and that I felt that I ought to obey this impulse, even though I seemed to fall short in the discharge of some other and lower duty. He looked at me for a moment steadily in the face, and then said, with something of a tremor in his voice, "Go to your meeting ; go to your young friend — win him to Christ if you can. Would to God that *I* could do something for my God ; but it is too late for me to serve Him in

this way—I have had my opportunities, but have neglected or lost them." Later, when I gave myself to the ministry of the word, how little I knew to what that would lead. A little country church was my first charge ; and there, amidst a few poor and uncultured people, I expected to spend my days, thinking of no wider field of work. But what has thirty years of service brought me? From town to town, and from city to city, from my own to your country, and from here more than half around the world, I have gone preaching this glorious gospel, and sharing in the blessing of God which the good news has brought to multitudes. To God be all the glory! Had I faltered at the first, as once I was strongly tempted to do, because of a sense of unfitness and unpreparedness for so great a work, I should have been turned aside to some secular business, not wrong or unfit for a son of God to engage in, yet certainly not so high a calling as that which God now permits me to exercise ; or I might (by disobedience to the "heavenly vision") have lost consciousness of my sonship and made shipwreck of faith ; or, at least, sunk into mere formal and miserable nominal Christianity, as so many have done who have not been prompt to enter upon their Father's business at His first call.

Many Christians tell me that they have no vocation to service ; that they do not know what to do ; that they would be glad to serve God, if only they knew *how* and *where*! These are they who were not on the alert, when first they knew the Lord, to set themselves at once about their Father's business ; or who have fallen from their first love and zeal ; or have separated service from the consciousness of salvation ; and, I fear, in many cases, with the abandonment or the neglect of service, have lost the blessed consciousness of sonship. I am more and more satisfied, as I come to know

myself and my surroundings better, and those of other Christians as well, that we do not so much need to *make* opportunities as to *embrace* them when they are presented to us. The majority of life's failures, especially in Christian life, grow out of not promptly embracing opportunities for service. Shakespeare tells us that "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune." It is equally true that there are spiritual instincts and promptings which, if yielded to, lead on to most blessed and useful Christian life; but which, if neglected, leave the Christian to comparative shipwreck.

Jesus, when a child of twelve, embraced the first opportunity which came to set Himself about His Father's business. For this He gave up His homeward journey, subordinated His relations to His parents, and attended to God's call. What would have been the effect upon His future ministry, what the result to the world, had He faltered then? is a thought which we dare not contemplate. What darkness and misery have come to thousands of Christian lives; what the world has lost in service; what (we may reverently say) God has lost in souls, and what souls have lost in God, through the indifference and negligence of God's people, is a too palpable demonstration. How long do you suppose it would require to evangelize the world if Christians were, with whole-hearted devotion, saying to each other, "We must be about our Father's business"; and not only *saying* it, but *doing* it? India, China, and Africa are more than ripe for the Gospel. The few who have gone out to those lands have, under God, wrought wonders almost beyond belief. Where there is one missionary, there should be a hundred; where there is one pound consecrated to God for that glorious service, there should be a thousand; and this could easily be

if only we were more in earnest "about our Father's business." Oh, if, with Jesus, we could all say, "I have meat to eat that ye know not of. My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work"!¹ Alas! that we are so easily turned aside from His business; that we find our pleasure and profit in things which do not contribute except to our momentary advantage, if, indeed, they do not make for our ultimate loss. To be about the "Father's business," or not to be about it, makes all the difference in the world to the Christian. Oh, the difference between a real out-and-out child and servant of God, and a poor, half-hearted professor, who is of no use to the world or the Church, and has in himself no well-spring of joy and gladness! I know that some will answer me that there are other claims than those of God and His work upon us. Our families, our businesses, our duties to society and to the state, make demands upon us which we may not neglect, and which cannot be denied. Yes, so said Mary to Jesus, "You have neglected us; you have caused us much anxiety, trouble, and sorrow; how is it that you have thus entreated us?" To which Jesus made reply, "How is it that ye sought Me; that you should be in doubt where I was, and what I was about? wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?" We must either set ourselves and all others aside, or we must set God aside. There can be no middle ground or way. We need not fear that our families, businesses, society, or the state will suffer if we put God first, and steadfastly set ourselves to "be about our Father's business." I have often said that God's temple is everywhere, and His business touches every institution, occupation and interest in the world. Jesus was still about His Father's business when He

¹ John iv. 32-34

went back to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph, and "was subject to them." Who amongst us has a doubt that those eighteen years in which we hear not another word from His lips, and know not another thing that occupied His hands, were, nevertheless, all filled with God's service, even though that service were performed in connection with the commonest domestic and mechanical occupations? I once saw a picture of Jesus at work with Joseph in his carpenter's shop. He was driving a plane across a piece of plank, and the plane in His hands was glowing with a heavenly light, and the shaving which curled from the foot of it gave forth the same kind of sheen. This is the true version of work. When we make our common or ordinary occupations our Father's business, they cease to be common and secular, and become sacred and heavenly. Forgive me if I seem to press this thought upon your attention with what may seem to you to be too frequent reiteration.

1. *The Father's business is paramount in this world.* The words of Jesus, touching this and other matters, have become too common-place with us. Familiarity with them, if it has not bred contempt, has, I fear, bred indifference. If some of them were heard by us for the first time they would startle us. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness"¹ is one of the sayings of Jesus which should never cease to have a place in our thoughts day and night. Now, nothing in this world ought to take precedence with us over that command; for command, and imperative command, it is. Jesus, in this instance, put His heavenly Father before His earthly mother; His Father's business before His mother's anxiety and sorrow. Mary, in her momentary forgetfulness of who her Son was, and what He

¹ Matt. vi. 33.

was sent into the world to do, sought to put her claims first, and chid Him for not having done so. Do we not often set the claims of our families and personal interest before those of God? Quaint old John Trapp says, "Men, or ourselves—be they or we pleased or displeased—God must be obeyed and served." We all agree that no unsaved man is justified in allowing any earthly interest to come before his salvation, or stand for a moment between him and the duty of immediately seeking the kingdom of God. Well, being saved, we have no more right to delay our undivided service of God than we had the right to delay seeking the salvation of our own souls. For what were we saved, but that we might serve? "To-day, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts,"¹ is God's word to the unsaved. On one occasion, a man intimated his desire to follow Jesus, but pleaded that he might first go and bury his father. To which Jesus replied, with some sternness, "Let the dead bury their dead; but go thou and preach the kingdom of God."² Now, Jesus does not in this teach that we are to neglect these most sacred filial duties, but that no duty is sacred, or to be attended to before the paramount claims of the kingdom of God. Another also said, "Lord, I will follow Thee; but let me first go and bid them farewell which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."³ This imperative rule of discipleship and service may seem to some harsh and severe; if carried out literally, it would, you say, entail loss to yourselves and unkindness to others. I will not argue the point, but only bid you look these words of Jesus fairly in the face, and then, in the light of your present walk and work, answer the question, "Judged

¹ Heb. iii. 15. ² Luke ix. 60. ³ *Ibid.* ix. 61, 62.

by the words of Jesus, are you His disciple?" A certain scribe once said to Jesus, "Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head."¹ We do not read whether that apparently eager man accepted the conditions of discipleship, whether he was willing to follow Jesus at the cost of becoming a homeless and houseless wanderer; but the inference is that he did not follow Him. How many among us profess a desire to be His disciples, but hesitate to follow either in the way of faith or service at the cost of personal loss, either in that which we must leave behind us, or part with, for the kingdom of God; or at the cost of giving up some personal or social duty not immediately connected with the kingdom of God! That young ruler who came so eagerly to Jesus to know what he must do to inherit eternal life, cooled and turned back when he found out that the kingdom of God was to be given the first place in his affections. The test in that case was on the point of parting with his worldly wealth. Did he wish eternal life more than wealth? One would have thought so; but no, at this point his desire failed him, and "he went away sorrowful because he had great possessions."² I do not say that the ordinary business of our Father calls us to abandon our houses and become homeless wanderers in the earth; that it demands that we shall turn our backs upon our friends, and never so much as say farewell to them; that we shall be so engrossed in religious work that we shall leave our dead unburied; or that we shall immediately sell all that we have and give to the poor: but that we shall have so thoroughly chosen Christ and His kingdom, so thoroughly devoted ourselves to the Father's business,

¹ Luke ix. 57, 58. ² Matt. xix. 22.

that *if the crisis comes* we will gladly accept all these conditions of discipleship. He who does not see his way to such paramount loyalty to Jesus and the Father's business, cannot be a disciple, or a true member of the kingdom of God. John and James left their nets to become fishers of men, because Jesus called them to that work. They did not haggle about the loss to themselves and to their father, or the necessity of continuing their fishing trade in order to support their families, but immediately left all to follow Jesus in this service, trusting Him to supply all their need according to the riches of His grace and abundance. Levi, sitting at the receipt of custom, when Jesus called him, at once resigned his lucrative trade to become a disciple. When Saul of Tarsus was called, he immediately turned his back upon all that in the past had been dear to him, in order that he might without delay obey the "heavenly vision."¹

As Jesus understood His obligations to His Father, the second table of the law gave way to the first. That He loved and honoured His saintly mother none can doubt, but when His Father called Him He did not hesitate, and was surprised that His mother should chide Him for giving God the first place in His love and duty. Even so our obligation to God supersedes obligation to every earthly relation. Parents, husbands, wives, children, masters, society and country must give way to God's paramount claims upon us. This is a solemn matter. How many wives stand between their husbands and their obligations to the Father and His business; how many husbands interpose between their wives and God in like manner. Masters very frequently make such demands upon their servants that they have no time to serve God—reducing them to a kind of human slavery, for their personal comfort and worldly interests.

¹ Acts xxvi. 19.

The state sometimes demands of its servants such exclusive service as gives them no time to worship God, even on the Sabbath Day ; unless it be that they can do so in their own hearts and without the aid of ordinances. I have known parents make such demands upon their children that they have withdrawn them from the house of God, and the direct service of the Church, to which their youthful enthusiasm had attached them. I have in my mind now a mother who said to me not very long ago, " I have brought up my sons with pain and toil, and I want them with me on Sundays and during the week evenings. I have the first claim upon them, and am unwilling that they should be so often and so much at the church—*surely their mother has the first claim!*" The result was, and is, that these young men, from becoming active and useful in large measure, have already dropped into the most commonplace Christians. " My husband is away from me all the week ; I want him at home on Sundays. You must find somebody else to take that class of his." " My business is so exacting, and takes so much of my strength, that I must reserve the Sunday for rest at home, or I should be unfit to go to my office again on Monday." " Sunday is the only day I have for visiting my friends ; surely you would not have me give up all my social acquaintances for the Church ? " Thus, and with such arguments, I am constantly met when I ask service of many who are professing Christians. Now, what does it all mean ? It means that they put themselves and their personal interests first, and God and the kingdom of heaven second. It means that they have made their business so exclusively their own, and not God's, that they have robbed God even of His Sabbath day, and the kingdom of God of all personal service on their part. Many of these do not even so far regard their business as belonging to

God as to give the work of God even a fair portion of their profits, but spend their gains (except a small dole) upon themselves. A young Christian girl lately made promise, out of a full heart, of a pound towards one of the many causes which call for money. She earned the money herself, and felt that she would have pleasure in giving it, as it was to her also a duty. Her mother, a Christian woman, hearing of this, forbade her daughter, on the ground that she should save it for herself, and not spend it upon the Church, saying, "There are plenty of rich people to supply the cause of Christ with funds." So the selfish robbery of God goes on among both rich and poor. If any one is found in the temple, being about the Father's business, in the true spirit of consecration, putting God's claims first, some mother or wife, husband or master, steps in and says, "Why hast thou so dealt with us? We have sought thee diligently, for your absence has put us to inconvenience; has hindered our profit or pleasure"; thrusting their claims before God's, if not in their selfishness, in utter forgetfulness of God.

2. *The Father's business demands our incessant attention.* In His service there are no holidays. It is so urgent, so imperative—the time is so short in which it is to be done, and our time so uncertain—that Jesus bids us "work while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work."¹ "In season, *out of season*,"² is the apostolic injunction. There are times of refreshing from on high when all real Christians seem to awaken out of sleep and idleness, and go and bring forth fruit; but the real servant of God finds it a seasonable time to serve God *out of season*. To bear fruit in summer-time is no more than ordinary expectation might demand; but to see a tree bearing fruit in winter-time, *out of season*, is

¹ John ix. 4. ² 2 Tim. iv. 2.

something more than natural. Well, Jesus would have us thus supernatural in respect of service: diligent *in season, out of season*. Even in our holiday times, when we turn aside for rest, as is needful, there is still opportunity for service in God's temple. Jesus wrought many of His most precious works by the wayside: as the healing of blind Bartimæus, and the woman with an issue of blood. It was when He had retired to "the desert place apart,"¹ near Capernaum, for a season of rest, that being thronged with a multitude, He fed the five thousand; it was while He "sat thus upon Jacob's well"² that He saved the Samaritan woman, finding more refreshment in that service than in the meat which the disciples brought Him from the village hard by Oh, the tirelessness of Jesus in the service of His Father! I do not for a moment suppose that we can approach that ideal service in degree, but we can keep it before us as our model and example, and strive to be true disciples of such a Master. That we are expected in some measure to follow in His footsteps we might gather from the great apostle's exhortation: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not vain in the Lord."³

3. *The Father's business must be done.* In attending to our Father's business we have no option. Jesus said to His mother, "Wist ye not that I **MUST** be about my Father's business?" At twelve years of age the eternal obligation to His mission came upon our Lord Jesus Christ. If there was implied in Mary's complaint that Jesus had, through thoughtlessness or mere personal whim, remained behind in the temple, He now takes pains to assure her that in this matter He had no option, and this she ought to have known. "I *must* be about

¹ Luke ix. 10-17.

² John iv. 1-42.

³ 1 Cor. xv. 58.

my Father's business." The most superficial reading of the gospel reveals this fact to us—that while Jesus was a voluntary Servant, and came to do His Father's will, and work most willingly and gladly—nay, that "He delighted to do His will"—He was nevertheless always mindful that, having voluntarily given Himself up for the world's redemption, He was under a constant and ever-increasing obligation to carry his work through to the end. He did nothing without the sense of "oughtness" being upon Him. In His conversation with Nicodemus He set forth this great truth. If sinful men *must* be born again before seeing or entering into the kingdom of God, "the Son of Man **MUST** be lifted up."¹ For the bitten Israelites there was no remedy except in the uplifted serpent; and for this sin-smitten world there is no remedy but in the uplifted Son of God. We speak it with great reverence, but God Himself could save us in no other way. Granting the eternal purpose of grace toward the world, we must also grant the eternal *necessity* there was for Christ to come and suffer for our sins. This *must* faced Him all through His ministry. As I have already said, it came upon Him from the moment He consciously grasped the fact that He was the Son of God, and that He had His Father's work to do. Nor did it ever leave Him. "Let us go into the next towns that I may preach: for therefore came I forth."² So again, on an occasion, when conversing with His disciples, He showed them "how that He *must* go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day."³ Peter remonstrated with Him for thus tamely, as it seemed to him, delivering Himself up to His enemies. But He told Peter plainly that any dissuasion from that obligation was a temptation and suggestion as from the

¹ John iii. 14. ² Mark i. 38. ³ Matt. xvi. 21.

devil. Other passages might be quoted to show how constantly Jesus worked under this rule of "must." "I *must* work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day."¹ When He was hanging on the cross His enemies taunted Him with being an impostor and a false Christ, and challenged Him to prove His divine Sonship by coming down from the cross. What was it that held Him there? It was neither the nails that pierced His hands and feet, nor the thongs which bound Him to the cross. It was that eternal and blessed MUST. The Son of Man *must* suffer, or we *must* be lost. That He had power to come down from the cross there is no doubt. Until His hour came He frequently escaped out of the hands of His enemies. When He was sought by the guard of soldiers who came to arrest Him, the night before His crucifixion, He easily demonstrated how powerless they were to take Him by force; even as He told Pilate that he had no power over His life, but that it was in His own power to lay it down and to take it again. I do not think we appreciate how completely Jesus gave Himself up, from His very youth, to the *duty* of His mission. That there was freedom in this duty is of course as manifest as that there was obligation; nay, more, there was an inconceivable "joy set before Him"² in all that He did for us according to the will of God, which enabled Him to endure the cross and despise the shame; but the mainspring of all is found in the word *must*. Love and duty with Him were the same. He loved His Father even as He knew His Father loved Him; and He loved us even as the Father loved us; and so He gave Himself both to the Father to do His will and be about His business, and to us that He might, through life, death, and resurrection, redeem us to God. Blessed Servant of God, who was bound to the Father's

¹ John ix. 4.

² Heb. xii. 2.

business by that divine *must*! May we learn both the secret and the blessedness of it in our work for God and souls.

I am aware that there is a school of teachers, which has considerable vogue at present, who teach that service ought never to be a matter of *duty*, but entirely a matter of *love*; just as though there could be any duty where there is no love, or any real love which involves no duty. Duty is the yoke which love puts upon the neck of Christ's disciples; by it we are enabled to serve God in fellowship with our Lord, who took the same yoke upon Himself, even when He was yet a Boy, and never laid it aside until He rose triumphant from the grave; nor has He yet laid it aside in heaven, where He ever lives to watch over and make intercession for us. For one thing, at least, I thank God—that He has laid His *must* upon me; that the great word "ought" comes frequently to my mind when flesh and spirit are both weak. If I were left only to inclination, I fear I should still more often fail in my work than I already do. Many a time, I fear, I should find even the most blessed work grow monotonous, if it were not for the whispered word of God's Spirit, "You ought to do it." Sometimes the immediate subject of service is not particularly pleasant; then the mind and heart rises higher, and fastens upon our Lord Himself, and we are enabled to do it unto Him, when otherwise we would not do it at all. I am sure it is no dishonour to the Lord to think that there were times in His ministry among men when even He had to say to Himself, "I must be about My Father's business." It was His Father's business which carried Him over the dusty roads of Judæa and up the hills of Galilee; that enabled Him to bear the loneliness, the weariness, the provocation of enemies, the dulness and selfishness of His disciples

and "to endure to the end." It is the Father's business which requires us to be kind when we would be cross ; to be patient and gentle when we are provoked to anger and roughness ; to be generous when we would be selfish and parsimonious ; to be large-hearted, tender and forgiving when we would be small, mean and revengeful. Believe me, dear friends, there is no word in the English language larger or more full of meaning and blessedness than these words, which were often on the lips of our Lord, as explaining why He "steadfastly set His face" ¹ to suffer for us and for the world.

The sacred narrative tells us that "they understood not the saying which He spake unto them." ² His apprehension of His own mission and work transcended even Mary's knowledge of it, though the angel of God had given her full teaching on that point, and which God emphasized when, under the power of the Holy Ghost, she sang her sweet canticle of praise to God and her Saviour-Son. Yet we can in some measure enter into their strange embarrassment in presence of the Divine Child, and His deeper insight into the will and work of His Father. Every one must find out for himself what the Father's business is, so far as himself is concerned. We may explain it to others, and wonder why they do not understand ; but we need not be surprised if we are not understood even by those who are nearest and dearest to us. The husband oftentimes is perplexed and fails to understand why his own wife is moved to this or that service for God. Parents cannot understand how their children should be "driven by the Spirit" into the wilderness of foreign mission work, or service among the poor. Ambitious fathers fail to see how it is that a favourite son, whom they had designed for business, parliamentary life, or the bar, should declare

¹ Luke ix. 51.

² *Ibid.* ii. 50.

themselves called to preach the gospel. The secret of God is with those who fear Him; and though they declare what God would have them to do, they are not understood, but are often stigmatized as being moved by some eccentric whim, fanaticism or religious madness, which does not appeal to the "common sense" of their parents and friends, though they be wise in the wisdom of this world. If any man will honestly say to the Lord, "What wilt Thou have me to do?"¹ he must expect to be misunderstood, or to lose the active sympathy of those who stand nearest to him in human relations.

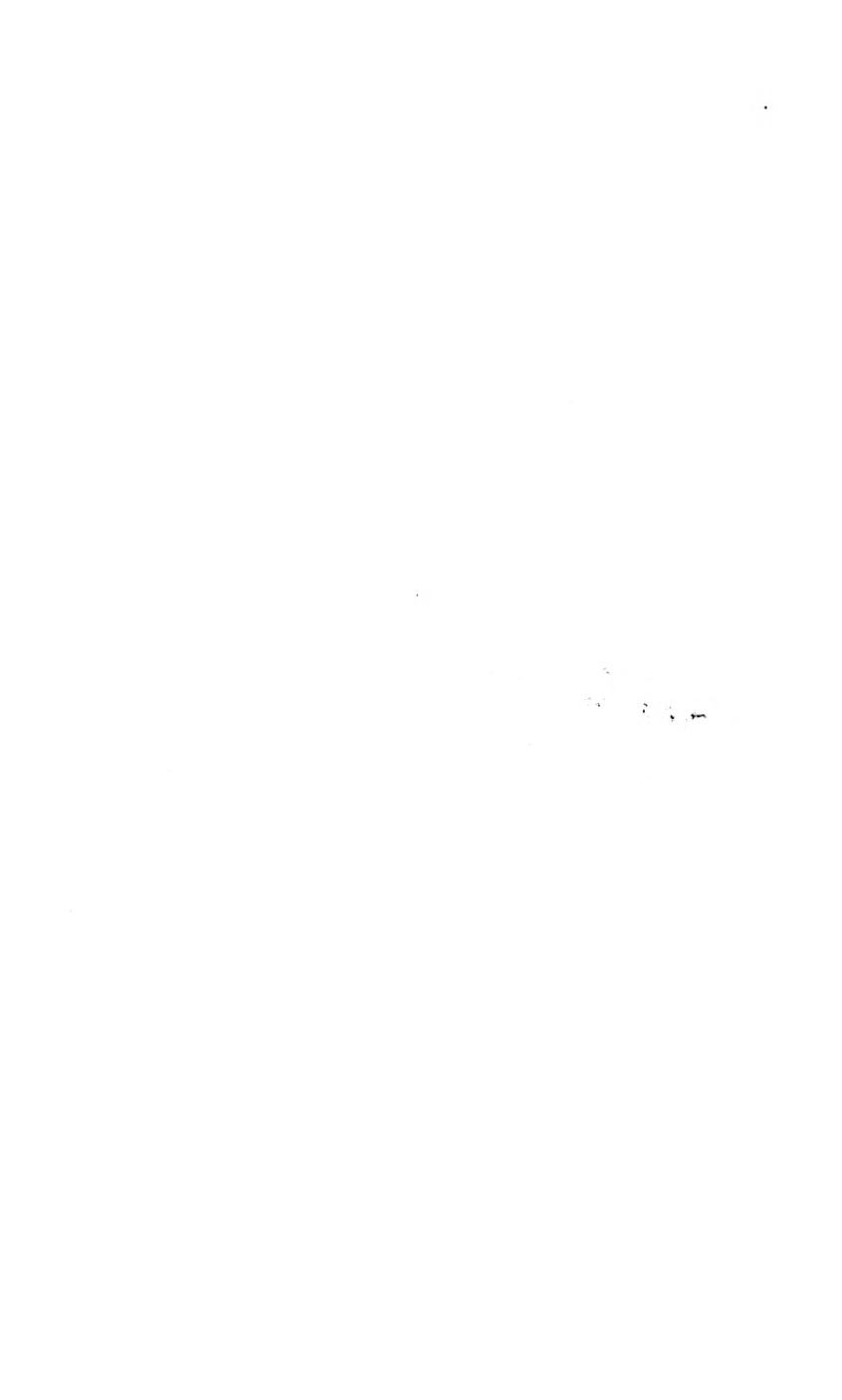
II. JESUS RETURNS TO NAZARETH. "And He went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them." This also was a part of His Father's business. Having declared Himself to His mother, and finished the first bit of business which was given Him to do in His Father's house, He returned to His human parents, and became the simple and obedient Child He had ever been to them. In this we find an illustration of the fact that the Father's business does not necessarily involve us in the breach of domestic ties, and the common and ordinary obligations of home life. Jesus was doing His Father's business, in thus subjecting Himself to Mary and Joseph, as really as when He was seated in the midst of the doctors of the law discussing divine things with them; just as David was doing God's business when, after having been anointed by Samuel to be king in Saul's place, he returned to the care of his "few sheep in the wilderness." Paul as really pursued his heavenly calling when he turned aside to earn his own living at tent-making, as when he was preaching to the wise men of Athens on Mars' Hill. Let no one despise the lowly duties of the home, as though the Father's business were not there as well as in the temple or in

¹ Acts ix. 6.

other public places. What a beautiful transition this was! Jesus, the Son of God, who knew Himself to be so, returns quietly and contentedly to that poor little home in Nazareth, and remains there, subject to Mary and Joseph, for another eighteen years. Those eighteen years of quiet retirement in Nazareth were not wasted; but a time in which all physical, mental, moral, and spiritual strength was maturing under the favour of God. Almost all God's servants have been sent to their Nazareths for a time of quiet self-discipline, after public call to service. Moses had the wilderness; Joseph had the Egyptian prison; David his retirement with the sheep; John the Baptist (as Elijah before him) was hidden for a long time from the people; Paul had his desert life for three years in Arabia, and, later on, in Roman prisons. I sometimes feel that it would be a good thing for all preachers to get away for a considerable time from the public life which their calling demands, and seek quiet communion with God, away from the bustle and confusion of the world, that they might come forth again not only refreshed in body, but invigorated in mind, and enlarged in spiritual understanding and wisdom.

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